

KATY'S SECRET

© 21 February, 1994
The Shinnery Review, 1995, Vol. 4

My mother and I were widows by the age of twenty-five. Memories of my father were few and by the time they mixed with mother's stories, I could not decipher fact from fabrication.

A week had passed since mother's funeral and I was holding onto my last nerve. Assuming some spring cleaning would clear the cobwebs, I pulled out every piece of furniture from the walls. I cleaned every sideboard, scrubbed every corner, mopped every tile, and hung out every rug. I opened the windows to let in the summer sun, to remind myself that it was still rising.

Mother and I lived in this house for almost nine years. My husband, Adam, died two days after we celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday and I moved in with her soon after. We adjusted easily to living together again because grief was the common thread that bound us. Now she was gone. And I was alone. But, the house was clean.

I was lying in the living room floor with a dust towel draped over my belly. Light from the window at the end of the hall shone directly upon me and I thought if I lie still enough, that some sun could eventually melt my heart and maybe I wouldn't have to live to watch it shine into my lonely living room again.

That's when I saw it. Lying on the floor, I could see directly into my mother's bedroom and underneath her bed. It was a suitcase I did not recognize. I rarely entered her room. It was her haven until her last day. I peeled my body from the bier upon which I envisioned myself and crawled to the mystery.

The name tag that dangled from the handle was in my mother's handwriting. *Matthew Turner*, it read. *Daddy*. My heart skipped a

KATY'S SECRET

beat. *Daddy! How long has this been here?* I held the tag between my fingers and turned it over several times before I noticed the date. It was the year he died. I sat silently for a half an hour before opening it, almost afraid I would find him there. And I did.

I brushed my hands across his neatly folded shirts and found his neckties rolled up inside his wing-tipped shoes. Two belts were coiled beside his socks and a black bag contained his shaving stock. There was a brown sack tucked away in the corner that protected tiny candies, hardened with age. I assumed they were for my brother and me. There was a young boy's baseball cap turned upside down and used as protection for a small cardboard box resting inside. I lifted the box and found my name scribbled on top. *Judy*, it read, *love you, honey.*

Suddenly, I was no longer thirty-four. I was just starting school and daddy was my hero. He walked me to the bus stop every day and took my fishing on Friday afternoons. His job took him out of town sometimes, but he always came back with a smile, a story and sometimes a gift. This must have been one of those times.

I lifted the lid to the tiny box. There, nestled in white tissue paper, was a porcelain figurine of a determined little girl trying to bait a fishing hook. A young man was sitting on a rock behind her with his hand on his chin and an admiring smile on his face. It was beautiful. It was perfect. And now, thirty or so years later, it was mine.

Before I closed the suitcase to tuck it back under the bed, I removed the envelope that read "*Katy.*" I smiled. They were so in love. Mother always made it sound as romantic as an old movie. The menagerie went immediately to the dresser, to rest between a photograph of Adam and one of my father.

KATY'S SECRET

I took the envelope to my desk and gently sliced it open with mother's antique letter opener. I wondered if it was the same one she might have used had she read the message inside. I smiled again.

The suitcase was no great revelation of the man. He was a young father returning from a trip. However, this particular trip I was quite sure was the one from which he never came back. Now the letter . . . this was real stuff.

When I unfolded the yellowed mystery my eyes scanned the lines in disbelief.

Dearest Katy, it read. I love you more than my life. That is why I cannot live knowing that you have loved another. Maybe I will see you on the other side. Maybe then you will love me again the way you did when we made Judy. But until then my love I am sure we will not meet. Matthew.

“Oh God . . .” I cried.

The letter fell to the floor and my watery eyes went to the mirror above my dresser. *God, I look like him.*