THE TOP DRAWER

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TODAY I WANT to rearrange the contents of my top drawer. After my recent move, it has temporarily become a receptacle for everything-precious-that-hasn't-got-a-place-yet. I like to think there is more to a top drawer than that.

Top drawers have always been places of mystery to me. I recall rare glimpses of my mother's—its tiny handkerchiefs and silky things, its smell of linen and bedtime closed away, its own private, sealed-in sweetness. My father's top drawer was mysterious too in a musty, masculine way: cufflinks, old photographs, and other odd objects I would never have associated with him, from times when he was the beloved and confident eldest son, the number one son of his family.

This task will be made more difficult because I will refuse, as always, to pull the drawer all the way out and sit it on the bed. This is a superstitious and impractical refusal— certainly it would be easier to reach the contents if I pulled the drawer out—but it is a rule that I invented or inherited somehow, somewhere, and will not break. So the drawer will teeter, pulled far out, on the brink of balance, as I examine its treasures . . . transplanted treasures, some of which have come with me from as far away as childhood.

I shared a large and beautiful room with my two sisters for many years. It must have been my older sister Faye who moved out first. Severely tested by our interest in her high school love letters, Faye decided to sacrifice the features of our larger, communal room, for the attraction of more cramped but private quarters. I didn't mind; this meant I got to sleep in the bed I was born in—a beautiful bed with four carved posts ending in what looked like wooden pineapples. Later, as the house got more and more spacious (elder siblings left for college), my younger sister Merey took another vacant room. Thus I had this corner room—the best in the house with the most sunlight, the most moonlight—to myself, all through high school.

Later, when I went away to college, my younger sister moved back into it, and then the battles began. I recall the tightness of my chest as I argued long distance with my mother about the rights to that room, that bed. Surely Merey would move out—or over—at least while I was home for vacation. Well—I wouldn't come then. I *was* being reasonable.

Despite my adamant arguments and a few initial, placating wins, I was slowly edged out: my pictures were taken down, replaced with typical teen posters; my white vanity with its attached, carved mirror shuffled off to the attic; my desk emptied of its treasures, these dumped unceremoniously into a box, labeled JESS. Soon all that was left of my claim on that room remained in the top drawer of the dark wood dresser. It wasn't until after I had returned from living in England for a year that the crisis of the top drawer occurred.

I can't remember what prompted my sister to action, or how it was that I walked into that room and found the contents of the top drawer—my last fortress—dumped on the double bed. But I can remember the feelings still, as if I am just now coming into that room, coming suddenly upon that scene—my sister caught red-handed, not guiltily sifting through the things as she once was prone to do, but guilty instead of indifferent, lifting something lethargically in one hand, wondering what to do with all this *stuff.*

I believe Merey and my mother (who must have come up to see what all the thumping was about) were both truly astonished, and I believe I knew there was no way I could really reach through to them, make them see. Hopeless, I lay on the single bed in the room and wailed my anguish, forlornly and for a long time. I sobbed for all the times I hadn't cried as I had been subtracted, piece by piece, from that wonderful room. I sobbed for losing all that moonlight and view to a little sister who could put up a poster of Wayne Gretsky, hockey star, where my own Georgia O'Keefe imitation had been. Merey, meanwhile, began putting her tapes (James Taylor) neatly, matter-of-factly into the top drawer—now the entire dresser was hers, didn't that make sense after all—but at this point I stop remembering.

I wish, in a way, I could clean out my current top drawer instead of rearranging it, but the truth of the matter is, I cannot bear to look at most of what I keep. There are the letters that are such a sweet concentrate of emotion-long-ago that I can't *breathe* quite right, even after just looking at the handwriting on their envelopes. There are the objects I am obliged to, dressertop keepsakes (often broken) or jewelry (often unwearable), objects someone gave me, responsibilities. I have often thought if I just could bear to put the letters and the unusable objects into a box and throw them away without looking that I would

feel much lighter, but something in me always would lift the lid, and each object would sing out its specific, irrefutable claim.

The truth is, as much as I honor my top drawer do I fear it: like traps set in the dark corners, the clamp of sudden, vivid memory can snap shut on the hand, the arm; it can drag you down, pierce you through.

I have an image of myself stopped at the edge of my top drawer, as if holding my breath in the presence of a dangerous, invisible gas, a vapor which rises from it if left open too long. Too much sadness in the room is never a good thing—too many lost places, lost loves, lost selves. Myself so strongly in the presence of myself—beginning with the child who started to collect, and hoard and lay claim to the world, lay some part of its coolness next to the cheek.