

Share a Smile

Simple joys and sweet memories from your home



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FROM THE HEART

Sorting Through Memories

A mother no longer remembers the well-lived life
her daughter-in-law never wants to forget.

BY TINA NEELEY SHELBYVILLE, TENNESSEE

“The Heart Remembers,” reads the sign outside. I pray it does, because Mammie forgets.

Her memory is being erased, like correction fluid spilled across her history—a few smudged words at first, then broader strokes erase entire chapters of her life’s story.

Looking at pictures of her great-granddaughter, she asks, “Now, who’s her mama?”

“Ashley,” we say at the same time, her son and I.

“That’s right,” she answers, not thoroughly convinced.

Surely her heart remembers her summer sidekick, the little girl with golden ringlets and the same blue eyes as hers. She’d helped her Mammie can her prized tomatoes. The garden was Mammie’s second pride and joy—her family was the first. We’re like the empty canning jars now covering the barn floor; she’s poured herself into each and every one of us.

She can no longer remember, and I never want to forget. Staring into her workshop in an outdoor shed, I see more than canning jars, paint cans and cobwebs. I see her crafting her country dolls in homespun dresses and tea-dyed bloomers, the air conditioner and sewing machine singing a two-part harmony to no one. The fragrance of her creativity is still pungent in this space.

Blinking, I pull open the door, on a mission—clearing a path and working my way to the rear wall shelves. Critter droppings dishonor the neatly folded stacks of fabric, and insects, dead and alive, share the space. Undaunted, I make multiple trips, stepping

carefully over my memories and carrying out full baskets for inspection.

I sort fabric and memories—outdated dressmaking material is discarded while pillow ticking and calico, though musty, are spared the fate of the dumpster. Ribbon, laces and notions join the survivors. Sitting in the spring sun, sweat runs down my back and tears down my face as I recall the times we spent together.

She was born with a green thumb. The weeds that always overtake my flower bed were absent from hers. Even her vegetable garden bloomed with zinnias and sunflowers—their dispositions as sunny as hers—in the old-fashioned cottage garden, an effortless extension of her heart.

In the early days of my

marriage to her only son, Mammie and I rocked on the front porch for hours as afternoon slipped into evening. She was my shopping buddy, usually coming home with bags of goodies purchased with change-purse coins.

I stitched my memories into a heart made of her pillow ticking for Christmas. She loved it, but made no connection, mentioning each time she saw it for the first time that it would make a nice pincushion. I underestimated the power of a cruel disease.

So I pray a Father that transcends time and dementia stands near and pulls her close in moments of confusion. And I know, when that same Father welcomes me home, our hearts will rush to embrace in timeless familiarity, Mammie and me. ■



Tina and Mike Neeley capture a moment with Mike’s mother, Louise Neeley, who the family calls Mammie.

Share Your Country Memories. Remember your little one’s first rodeo? Helping Grandpa on the farm? Going on family walks? Submit the story of your favorite memory at countrywomanmagazine.com/submit.