

KEEPSAKE STORIES

A GUIDE

Your Keepsake Has a Story



Every keepsake holds more than an object.
It holds a piece of a life.

REMEMBER • REFLECT • REMIND

By Cindy Gum

Because Memories Matter.

Your Keepsake Has a Story

Most of us have objects we have chosen to keep.

They may not be valuable. They may not even look important to anyone else. A photograph tucked into a drawer. A piece of jewelry. A letter. A recipe card written in a familiar hand. A souvenir from a long-ago trip. Something that belonged to someone we loved.

Yet, for one reason or another, we have kept it.

And if we have kept it, it has a story.

A keepsake can be a doorway into more than the memory of what happened. It can help us remember **what the experience was like for us**—how we felt, who mattered, what we hoped for, what we lost, what made us laugh, and sometimes what we learned along the way.

These are our emotional memories, and they are an important part of the stories of our lives.

We often know the facts about people who came before us—where they lived, what they did, whom they married, when they died. What is so often missing is something more personal:

What was it like to be them?

What delighted them? What frightened them? Whom did they love? What did they treasure? What did they discover about life?

This can become a kind of missing inheritance, and unless it has been preserved, it will be lost.

Keepsake Stories offer one simple way to preserve some of that inheritance.

You don't need to be a writer. You don't need to remember everything. And you don't need to begin with your whole life.

Just begin with one object you've kept.

Then get curious about the story it has been quietly holding.

Choosing a Keepsake

You may already know which keepsake you want to begin with. If you do, trust that choice.

If you aren't sure, look around your home and notice what catches your attention. Open a drawer, look through a jewelry box, glance at the photographs on a shelf, or think about the things you would have difficulty giving away.

Your keepsake doesn't need to be old, beautiful, or valuable. It simply needs to matter to you.

It might be:

- A photograph
- A letter or postcard
- A piece of jewelry
- A family heirloom
- A favorite recipe
- A childhood treasure
- A travel souvenir
- Something handmade
- Something that belonged to someone you loved
- An ordinary object connected to an important time in your life

Sometimes we choose a keepsake because we already know the story we want to tell.

Other times, an object seems to choose us. We find ourselves drawn to it without quite knowing why. We have carried it through moves, tucked it safely away, or simply never been able to part with it.

If an object keeps calling your attention, get curious. As I like to say, *follow the juice*.

Why this one?

Don't worry yet about whether it holds a story worth telling.

The fact that you've kept it is enough reason to begin.

Discovering the Story Your Keepsake Holds

Hold your keepsake if possible, and spend a few moments considering what it means to you.

When you feel ready, simply tell your story, whether by writing it, recording it, or sharing it with another. Think of these questions as invitations. Follow the ones that seem to lead somewhere.

- What is this object, and how did it come into my life?
- Who belongs in the story of this keepsake?
- Where was I? What was happening in my life at the time?
- What do I remember most clearly?
- What small details come back to me—the place, the people, something someone said, a sound, a smell, a feeling?
- How did I feel then?
- Why do I think I have kept this particular object?

- What does it mean to me now that it might not have meant to me then?
- What might someone looking at this keepsake never know unless I told them?

Don't be surprised if one memory leads to another.

You may begin by remembering where an object came from and find yourself thinking about a person you haven't thought about in years. A small detail may suddenly return. You may even discover that the story you thought you were going to tell isn't the story that wants to be told.

Telling Your Keepsake Story

There is no one right way to tell a Keepsake Story. You can write it, record yourself telling it, or simply speak it aloud to someone you care about.

If you'd like a little structure, try thinking about your story in three simple ways:

REMEMBER — What happened?

Tell us about the keepsake. Where did it come from? Who was there? What do you remember?

REFLECT — Why does it matter?

What did you feel or experience? Why have you kept this object? What does the story mean to you now?

REMIND — What do you want to carry forward?

What does this keepsake remind you about a person, a time in your life, or perhaps something about yourself? What would you want someone else to know?

That's enough.

Your Keepsake Story doesn't need to be long or beautifully written. It needs to sound like you and preserve what matters to you.

Preserving Your Story

Once you've told your story, think about how you would like to preserve it.

You might:

- Write it and place it with the keepsake.
- Record yourself telling the story in your own voice.
- Take a photograph of the keepsake and add the story beside it.
- Create a small book or collection of Keepsake Stories.
- Share the story with someone you love and invite them to ask questions.

- Use AI to help you turn your memories or spoken words into a written story.

However you choose to preserve it, consider including a photograph of the keepsake whenever possible. Someday the photograph and the story together may mean as much as the object itself.

The important thing isn't how you preserve your story. **It's that you do.**

If You'd Like a Little Help From AI

AI can be a helpful tool for preserving your Keepsake Story, especially if writing doesn't come easily to you.

The memories, feelings, and meaning come from **you**. AI's job is simply to help you organize or polish what you already have.

You can begin by typing your memories into an AI program, or use the microphone and simply tell your story aloud.

Then try a prompt such as:

If you have told your story in your own words:

"Please turn what I've shared into a short Keepsake Story. Keep my voice and the details I've given you. Don't add anything that I haven't told you."

If you have already written your story:

"Please lightly polish this Keepsake Story for clarity and flow, but keep it sounding like me. Don't change the meaning or add information."

If you aren't sure what the story is yet:

"I'd like to tell the story of a keepsake that matters to me. Please ask me one question at a time to help me remember the story and why this object is important to me."

Read whatever AI gives you and make it yours again.

Change anything that doesn't sound like you. Put back a favorite expression. Correct a detail. Add something you suddenly remember. Take something out.

Add a Photograph of Your Keepsake

If your AI program allows you to upload photographs, you can also add a photo of your keepsake.

And this can be fun! Try uploading a photo of your keepsake and asking AI what it can tell you about its history, where it may have come from, or what else you might want to know about it. Just remember that AI can make mistakes, so double-check anything important.

Here are some prompts you might give to AI:

"I'd like to learn more about this keepsake. Please look closely at the photograph and tell me what you can about what it might be, when and where it may have been made, and anything interesting about its history. Please tell me what you're uncertain about and what I might want to research further."

"Look closely at this photograph of my keepsake. What details do you notice that might help me remember more about it? Please ask me a few questions that could help me discover more of the story it holds."

"This is the keepsake my story is about. Please help me create a Keepsake Story using this photograph and the memories I'm going to share with you."

The photograph can also become part of your finished story. Place it at the beginning or alongside your words so that the object and the story it holds stay together.

You might even add a short caption identifying the keepsake, its connection to you, and an approximate date.

AI can help with the words.

But the story—and the life behind it—belong to you.

Where Else Might a Keepsake Story Be Hiding?

Once you begin looking, you may discover keepsakes—and their stories—in unexpected places.

Think about the objects that connect you to:

- **Places that shaped you** — a childhood home, neighborhood, school, vacation place, or somewhere you once belonged.
- **People you have loved** — family, friends, teachers, mentors, neighbors, or someone who changed your life.
- **Times you lived through** — objects connected to the music, fashions, events, celebrations, or changes of your generation.
- **Turning points** — a marriage, birth, move, loss, new beginning, accomplishment, or unexpected change of direction.
- **Work and purpose** — something that represents what you did, created, contributed, or cared deeply about.
- **Traditions and everyday life** — recipes, holidays, hobbies, rituals, tools, or ordinary things that were simply part of how you lived.
- **What you came to value** — an object that reminds you of something life taught you or something you came to believe.

You may be surprised by how many stories have been waiting quietly around you.

A FEW KEEPSAKE STORIES

Every Keepsake Story is different. The following few stories show how ordinary objects can open very different doors into memory, meaning, and connection. There is no formula to follow. Let them simply offer possibilities for telling your own story.

Estee Lauder



A keepsake story shaped through scent and the body's memory of becoming

I remember Joseph Magnin and I. Magnin, and for reasons I can't fully explain, they sit in my mind right alongside Estee Lauder. These were the great department stores of downtown San Francisco, near Union Square — elegant, with polished marble and a world that felt both glamorous and just out of reach. This scent brings all of that back to me in an instant: the city, the excitement, the sense that something grown-up and shimmering was waiting just ahead.

It carries me to the years of first dates, awkward dates, and everything in between. My friend Les. Drive-in movies. That delicious mix of innocence and daring that defines the stretch between girlhood and young womanhood. I began wearing this fragrance at sixteen, and I still wear it now.

Estee Lauder's Youth Dew was the bridge — the scent that marked the in-between space when I was stepping out of adolescence and into myself. It was bold for a teenage girl, and I loved it. It made me feel just a little more alive, a little more confident, a little more ready for whatever might come next. It wasn't the perfume of childhood, and it wasn't yet the perfume of a woman fully grown. It lived in the liminal zone, the dew between youth and adulthood.

What amazes me is how scent can carry memory with such accuracy. Not all scents are kind — some transport us to places we'd rather not revisit. But this one is gentle. It holds the sweetness of my younger self, the girl who was trying on possibilities, experimenting with who she could become. I want this to help me remember... the power of scent to return us to a moment in time — and the grace of being able to look back with warmth at who I was becoming.

The Silver Mug

Winnie's Story

A keepsake story about belonging and a change of heart



This silver mug was given to me by my paternal grandfather, at my birth. In our family, objects like this were sometimes called “sniff-sniffs” — things we feel sentimentally drawn to, often without fully knowing why.

My grandfather was in the shipping business and traveled frequently to London. When each of his grandchildren was born, on one of his trips to London, he selected an antique silver mug for each of us. No two were exactly alike. Most were tankard-style. Each one was inscribed.

On the inside rim of mine, he wrote in script:

*June 18, 1939 from
Granddad.*

The hallmarks on the base show that it is sterling silver.

Years later, at a family reunion in 2012, two of my cousins created a small book documenting these mugs. Each surviving mug was photographed and its story recorded. The book also includes family photographs, including one that may show me with my grandfather, though it is mislabeled as another grandchild. In a letter written before I was two years old, my grandfather referred to me as “*a fine little girl.*”

That line matters because of what came before it.

After my parents’ second child was stillborn, they were told they should not have more children. Wanting a larger family, they asked relatives whether they would accept an adopted child. That child would be me. Everyone agreed — except my grandfather. He initially said no.

Over time, however, he changed his mind. While we did not have a particularly close relationship — distance and circumstance made that difficult — he fully accepted me. More importantly, he went on to accept all the children who came after me equally, both biological and adopted.

I was the oldest child in a very large family. In total, there were nine children, though loss was also part of our story: one child was stillborn, another died shortly after birth, and my brother died in an accident when he was almost ten years old. The adopted children did not share genetic heritage, making our family a true mix — held together by intention rather than DNA.

My grandfather lived in Atherton and had a formal, beautiful home filled with mementos from his life in shipping. He owned a steamship company and many of the objects I have kept over the years — now also shared with my daughter— come from that part of his life. They matter to me

because they connect me to him and to a larger family history, even if I don't know how they will be experienced by future generations.

When I hold this mug, I don't just see a piece of sterling silver. I see recognition. I see a shift. I see a man who reconsidered and chose inclusion.

That is what this mug holds.

A SON'S BABY CLOTHES

Carol's Story

Holding something special on behalf of another until its story can be passed on



These baby clothes belonged to my son Greg when he was very little, probably around three to six months old. I had professional photographs taken of him wearing these outfits, and I've kept the clothes all these years. They were tucked away because they represented a very early and precious time in his life.

I put those photographs into an album that I started from the day Greg was born. The album covered his whole first year — his milestones, his small moments, and the times he shared with his father. When his father died last August, I sent the album to Greg. I wanted him to have those memories of himself as a baby and of the moments he had with his dad during that first year.

These outfits remind me of how tiny and precious he was in those early months, and how important it felt to capture that time. They bring back the reality of how fast a baby grows, and how those first months form the beginning of a life. The clothes symbolize those tender beginnings and the connection between father and son that is held in those early photographs.

I've kept these baby clothes because they hold the story of Greg's beginning — a time he won't remember himself but that shaped who he became. By sending him the album, I hoped he would feel the presence of his father in those early moments. These clothes hold that memory for me, and for him they carry a part of his story that connects him to where he started.

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