

Pearls from the past

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 01 December 2011 15:39 - Last Updated Monday, 12 December 2011 16:39



The day my grandmother Helen showed me a string of pearls I was surprised, since she knew my indifference to fancy and expensive jewelry.

Yet, I admired the iridescent luster of the bluish-grey orbs and how they diminished in size, from the front of the necklace to where they joined a silver clasp.

She told me how her father presented them to his only daughter on her 16th birthday and how special she thought they were.

“I want Betsy to have them when she turns 16,” my grandmother told me.

I wanted to hand them back and tell her she could give the necklace herself to her only great granddaughter.

But, at the age of 101, grandmother Helen knew better than to defy the age genes much longer.

During her funeral, two years later, I remembered the pearls—safely stored in a cloth container in the bottom of my jewelry box.

While planning Betsy’s birthday celebration earlier this month, I realized it was time.

The night before family was to gather, I retrieved the necklace, placed it on the kitchen counter and thought about what my grandmother would say to her great granddaughter.

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I didn't have to wait long.

First came tears. Then came her words, spilling out onto a birthday card.

I considered the age of the 90-year-old pearls, and imagined the gift, rising from the dusty hooves of the cattle my forbearers raised, rounded up and shipped east in box cars.

Because of his success in livestock markets, I could see my great grandfather, G.E. Stuckey, carefully selecting the jewelry and presenting it to Helen in a special box.

Perhaps he secured the clasp of the pearls while his daughter admired their color and handiwork through a hand-held mirror.

I wished I had asked her.

Betsy became misty-eyed when she pulled the pearls from a white bag and read how proud her great grandmother was of what she had become on her rite-of-passage birthday.

Later, after the party goers had gone home, Betsy's new kitten pounced on tissue paper strewn about the living room.

But my daughter's interest was elsewhere.

She had gone upstairs to place the pearls round her 16-year-old neck and gaze at her own reflection in a bathroom mirror.

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Somehow, somewhere, I sense that my grandmother Helen knows just how special a gift they are.