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YES, IT'S **THE MAKEOVER ISSUE!**

Everlasting mementos by Marcia DeSanctis

It was a sticky Friday night on campus. The stench of spilled beer was familiar, as was the bass guitar on *Brick House*. But many years had elapsed and we were no longer college students. We had all convened – the well-preserved and the pot-bellied, the triathletes and the cancer survivors – to reclaim something. In preparation, I'd had fresh highlights and a facial, which removed 'free radicals' that were apparently eroding my skin and with it, my youth. It's the conundrum of the march of time that, inside, I felt the same as I did 25 years ago.

When I spotted my freshman boyfriend, I started through the crowd and greeted him. I folded into his body by instinct, as if his arms and mine were aware of our former intimacy.

"You look the same," I said.

"So do you," he replied. "Come over and meet my wife."

It was not clear if she knew that, once, I loved her man or that, in truth, I still did. My memory of her husband, though obscured, was intact. I still have his letters.

High up in my wardrobe is a large, bland-looking box. It has moved seven times with us, and is as immutable a possession as my husband's boyhood collection of geodes, and equally impervious to the rubbish truck. It contains the archives of my love life – envelopes postmarked Boston, Tulsa, Dublin and Midland, Texas. A young man writing from a bar stool, three pints past rationing, who wondered if we would survive the summer apart. Letters on lined paper, bursting with the frustration of our poor timing. There are mementos, too – a box of matches with strike marks on the flint, left in my apartment by a smoker I adored. A receipt from a nightclub in Moscow where I fell hard, and fell hard for life.

For me, the past is best preserved in a container that I can uncover at will and tuck back away. My husband respects my conviction that once loved, always loved. How do you erase a name that was branded by passion onto the human heart? He believes that any woman worth her salt has a past, and whoever was in it figures largely

wince at the reminder of my thoughtlessness, or someone else's. The memory of love is thrilling and can be transporting. That's what this box affords me: the chance to experience that exquisite agony and then put it away.

But I admit, when there are twinges of sorrow for how the years have flown by, or when I spot another crow's foot, I can envy that girl in my letters, or the young journalist at a Moscow club poised for a heady romantic adventure.

My children will find my box one day and marvel (or cringe) at some of the tortured efforts in language every shade of purple. They might stumble upon a letter from Italy that reads, "Across the ocean I scream my love for you." The author and I were both glum that year, away from each other for too long. He was the sculptor who would one day be their father.

I wish that passion for them, beyond the zombie world of text messaging. I hope my daughter receives an air-mail letter stained with tears and bourbon. I want my son to yearn madly for someone, while separated by school,

summer or an interloper. Maybe they'll keep their own historical records of lives, well-loved.

There is a fading stack of letters from the man at the reunion, written from out west during holidays. I cannot forget the fervency of the exchanges.

Eventually, we split up and for a while, I did not draw a breath without thinking of him. Now I can reason: what good is anyone without a broken heart or two, and the wherewithal to heal it?

As I get older and my memory surely begins to falter, I predict that I'll access those letters from time to time. I hope I won't be stuck in the past, or haunted by mad desire for distant men. I hope, rather, that they will be emblems of a life marked by moments of abandon and episodes of profound emotion. Maybe that nightclub receipt will spark an image that will ground me closer to earth.

It can take a half a lifetime to realise the importance of having loved. This is something only hindsight can afford you, and why the act of keeping a clear head while growing older can bring a slew of revelations. It means, forget the facials, the nostalgic soundtrack and too much warm beer. A reunion reminds us that we are the sum total of who we've allowed into our lives. And if there is a letter hidden away, it's healthy to go home and read it. ➔

"I hope the letters will be emblems of a life marked by moments of abandon and emotion"

in who she is – as an adult, a partner, a friend, a wife. If I loved him, he reasons, he must have been worth loving.

It is rare that I'll wander into that thicket, but there is comfort there, where memories are encased but accessible, as if the lid creates a protective lock. The point is not to dwell on the past, but rather to appreciate how it built my emotional CV. Lovestruck hours spent pining away, or reliving an argument all night long, only to emerge into daylight stronger and wiser – it all made me more capable a woman.

Yes, I've wept over the box too, even drifted in on purpose to relish the taste of my own self pity. The heart can bend backwards, even briefly. Decades down the road, it's easy to unearth buried pain, or to

