

Packing Up

It had to be done.

Maya set the box she was carrying down onto the driveway and straightened up with a groan. The sun was beating down strongly and she could feel prickles of sweat at her temples. She sighed.

“You okay?”

The voice of her husband, Sam, came from behind her. Maya didn’t turn around.

“Fine,” she lied.

She could almost feel the disbelief coming off Sam in waves. Still, he said nothing, simply putting down the box he was carrying and coming to stand beside her.

Maya glanced up at him, taking in the crinkles of concern rumpling his forehead. Concern for her.

Concern she couldn’t deal with right now. She had things to do, things she really didn’t want to do. But they had to be done nonetheless.

“C’mon,” she said. “Let’s keep going.”

Sam followed her back into the house. The air conditioner was off and it was even hotter inside than out. Maya could feel more sweat dripping down her face, her back, her armpits. She carefully made her way through the piles of boxes and furniture that filled the front rooms.

“This one has magazines,” Sam said, indicating a box by the staircase. “Magazines, books, and newspapers.”

“It can definitely go,” Maya said. Sam nodded and picked up the box.

Maya could hear his clomping footsteps as he carried the box through the hall and out onto the driveway. She looked at the next box. *Diaries, photo albums*, the label said in Maya's own spidery handwriting.

Maya froze. Almost against her will, her hands came out and opened the box. Inside lay dusty stacks of notebooks and albums. Maya's hands hesitated over them, finally settling on the topmost album, with a plain, white cover.

She opened it. Stared at the pictures on the first page, taking in the smiling faces of a bride and groom. She turned another page. Another. Her eyes were itching and she blinked.

"Who is that?" Sam said, over her shoulder.

Maya jumped. She hadn't noticed him enter the house again.

He stared down at the pictures in the album. "Hey, is that your mom?"

"Uh-huh," Maya said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "This is my parents' wedding."

"Wow, what a dress," Sam said. "It's really...poofy."

"Yeah, well, that's the eighties for you," Maya said.

Sam laughed. "And your dad's moustache! Wow."

Maya smiled. She turned another page.

"That's my mom's best friend, Vivian," she said, pointing. "They were best friends since second grade, when Vivian moved to my mom's school."

Sam didn't say anything, but he moved closer and put his hand on the small of her back.

Maya turned another page. “That’s me when I was born,” she said. “My mom said I wouldn’t stop crying at night and she’d have to rock me for hours until I’d go to sleep.”

Sam smiled. “You were a cute baby.”

Maya pointed at a different picture. “That’s us at the planetarium. My mom loves—loved it there. She thought space was so cool, so big and mysterious. She made me go with her to the planetarium all the time.” Maya cleared her throat. “It got pretty boring after the tenth time going, but not for my mom. She got so excited about all the stars and planets. Especially black holes. She thought they were fascinating.”

Maya cleared her throat again. Something plopped onto the plastic covering the pictures. “Oh.” She scrubbed at her face, which she realized was wet with tears. “Sorry.”

Sam rubbed her back a bit. “You okay? Do you need a tissue?”

Maya shook her head, wiping her eyes roughly. “It’s okay. Just...I miss her.”

Suddenly, she couldn’t stand to be in this overheated, dusty house, crowded with memories that were now painful. She slammed the album shut and shoved it back in the box. “Come on. We have lots more to do.”

Sam pressed a kiss to her hair and moved away. “This box says dish towels and utensils.”

“That can go,” Maya said, and moved onto the next box.

How to box up and throw out an entire life lived? Maya didn’t know. But Mom was gone and there was no point in keeping everything. Not when there was no Mom left to use it. Not when it hurt this much to remember it. It had to be done.