

1500 words

THE VISIONARY

Her mother's garage was filled with newspapers--stacks and stacks of them, real estate and automotive sections unopened—dating back at least a year.

“I'll get the Boy Scouts to come string these up for recycling,” Lynn said, assuming that her mother, now 86 and finally leaving her home of fifty-three years, had been too weak to drag even a week's worth to the curb for the regular Tuesday morning garbage pick up.

“You will not,” her mother said. “I'm saving them.”

“For what?” she asked, more forcefully than she intended.

“I want them.”

She wanted to say that anything her mother might want from an old newspaper could be readily had on line, but she was an inveterate clipper herself, sending cartoons, recipes, health tips and political editorials to friends and co-workers, both by mail and electronically, and so she had a certain sympathy for her mother's attachment to the *Chicago Tribune*. Still, they were a health hazard, a haven for field mice, frogs and salamanders, and worse.

“How would you ever find what you wanted?” she asked, aiming for a more conciliatory tone.

Her mother ignored her.

Lynn grabbed the top paper from the closest stack. November 27, 2007. “Why did you save this?” She didn’t want to badger the old woman, but she had limited time before her mother had to be out of the house, and they couldn’t possibly take all these papers to her mother’s new apartment. The assisted living facility wouldn't allow it.

She’d spent the past three Saturdays on the basement, the attic and the closets; finally she was tackling the garage. She'd thrown out broken table lamps and outdated board games, cheap florist's vases and yellowed paperbacks. It was all junk. She'd been ruthless and disciplined and had been making great progress. Her only stumble had been on her own kindergarten drawings and her sixth-grade report on Chile. "This is silly," Lynn had said. "Sweet, but silly. Time to go."

"Over my dead body," her mother had said, and she'd looked so thin and fragile that Lynn had agreed, packing them in an old Marshall Field’s dress box which she labeled "Lynn's Childhood."

Lynn's husband worked on Saturdays and her brother had his kids’ soccer games, and so this Saturday, the fourth in a row, she was alone, again. Part of her resented that; there were plenty of other things she could be doing, too.

“I’ve marked them,” her mother said indignantly. “What do you think, I’m stupid?”

Lynn leafed through the first section of the paper. Nothing was marked. She tried the Feature section--nothing--and then the Metro section, where, on the inside last

page, one of the obituaries had a yellow highlight in the corner. She didn't recognize the name, but she immediately felt selfish. How could she fault her mother for saving the obituary of a friend? Wasn't that in the same category as her own kindergarten drawing? She glanced at the marked headline, "Visionary turned knitting into art." The deceased's name was Mary Walker Phillips. The first sentence of the article claimed that she had taken knitting "out of the dresser drawers of America" and placed it in fine art galleries. Lynn looked up at her mother, a retired executive secretary who, Lynn was quite sure, had never sewn a button on a shirt let alone knit a winter scarf. "Did you know Mary Walker Phillips? she asked.

"Who?"

"The knitting visionary," she said. She read on while she waited for her mother's answer, then said, "Oh, I guess she was from California."

"I don't care about knitting," her mother said, as if Lynn wouldn't have known that. Lynn remembered the time she'd tugged too hard on the spaghetti strap of her prom dress and at the last minute her father tried to fix it with duct tape, but she'd cried so hard that her mother, embarrassed, called their next-door neighbor to make the few simple stitches.

"Then why did you save this?"

Her mother shrugged.

"It says here that knitting for her wasn't about socks and sweaters or passing the time. She did wall hangings," Lynn said. "It was art."

"Throw it out, then," her mother said in disgust.

"No," Lynn said, aware that she had invaded some private space. "We can clip it." She separated the marked page from the others and began a separate pile for the pages to be saved.

"I don't care," her mother said, pulling on the sleeves of the pink jogging suit Lynn had given her five years ago, now sagging at least two sizes too big. In the past month her mother had become particularly attached to it, wearing it almost every day. "What difference does it make," her mother said.

Lynn reached for the next paper in the pile. She couldn't stand to hear the bitterness in her mother's voice, that hint of blame, as if Lynn had failed to protect her from the insult of old age. She'd always thought her mother, having enjoyed generally good health, a good marriage, a good job, and adult kids who stayed in touch and were willing to spend Saturdays cleaning her garage, would age into a sweet old lady, cuddly in a white angora sweater, dispensing red and white peppermint candies and a serene smile to all who came to visit.

"What does it matter?" This time, her mother's question struck Lynn as almost profound.

Lynn leafed through the next newspaper, noticed briefly that it skipped a whole month ahead to December 30, found no markings, and put it quietly aside, to be discarded. She started to pick up the third paper, and then, looking at the towers around her, realized the impossibility of the task. She started to count down the number of folds in front of her to figure how many papers there were when she saw a hard board in the middle. Pulling it out, she found a painting--a seascape, with a white-capped sea below,

a light blue sky above, white clouds on the right, gray on the left. It was signed in the lower right-hand corner.

"What's this?"

Her mother ignored her. "I'm going in."

Lynn put the painting down and went to hold the door open for her. "I'll be there in a minute," she said.

As her mother climbed the one stair up into the house, Lynn noticed a small splotch of blue paint just below the left elbow of her jogging suit.

Painting! Lynn didn't know her mother had it in her. She remembered the unmarked paper dated December 30, another slow news day. She picked it up and turned again to the obituaries. Although not marked, there was another headline: "Prolific knitter kept busy." The story was about a downstate woman who "never went anywhere without her knitting." She'd been a knitter--not a gallery artist but a real knitter--of sweaters, stockings, mittens and blankets for each of her five children. Some of her patterns had been published, and she'd won awards.

Was that her mother's secret wish? To create something more permanent than herself? Whether art or craft, some physical reminder of her time on this earth? A knit blanket, a painting, a book of poetry which would headline her obituary. Is that what her mother sought in blue oils on canvas? Had she become embarrassed of her efforts and left the canvas with the dead newspapers? Had Lynn been meant to find it later, or to throw it out not knowing?

She'd had friends whose parents had died, and they'd found old love letters, stamp collections, a three-ring binder of poems. Others had elevated lumpy orange-and-

brown afghans and lopsided pottery to places of honor in their homes, no longer amateur but heirloom. Lynn felt a sudden panic. All these years, all these years of being the dutiful daughter, the helper who would clean garages and make arrangements, and her mother had had a private life, a secret desire--perhaps, even, a certain hidden talent--and Lynn hadn't known. She saw herself her mother's age, widowed and childless, and her palms went cold. Who would clean out her garage? Who would find her heirlooms? What difference would it make?

"Are you coming in?" Her mother stood at the doorway to the garage.

Lynn held up the canvas. "Pretty good, mom. You shouldn't throw this out."

Her mother sounded sheepish. "Just passing the time, dear. Just passing the time."

"Then can I have it?" Lynn asked.

Her mother straightened. "Whatever for?" she said.

"I like the colors," Lynn said.

"It's not very good," her mother said.

"Of course it's good," she said.

"I don't know, dear," her mother said, unsure, but apparently willing to entertain the possibility that it had merit. "Why would you want such a thing?"

Lynn thought for a minute. Her mother had saved the obituaries of strangers, and Lynn's own kindergarten drawings. Clutching the painting to her chest, she said softly, "I like art."