



the year of letting go

Adelaide Mestre thought that dealing with her late mother's possessions would be simple. As with many things regarding her mother, it was complicated.

BY STEVE FRIEDMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE BENTLEY

ACQUAINTANCES ASK IF YOU'RE OK. Those who knew neither you nor your mother well are mostly pro forma—the squeezed hand, the furrowed brow. Her friends ask if your daughter loves the handmade dollhouse from her grandmother's—your mother's—place, the dollhouse you had loved so much. If your mother's friends see you wince, they pretend not to notice. Your husband complains about the rose-and-vine-wrapped white porcelain lamps on either side of your bed—the lamps you inherited from your mother—and wonders aloud why you don't just sell them or give them away. Close friends tell you you're lucky to possess such a rich trove of beautiful objects, how it must connect you to your mother. None of them understand.

Barbara Bliss Moss Mestre died four years ago, two days after Christmas. She was 76, and you, Adelaide, her only daughter, were 45. It took you a year to empty your mother's apartment of her belongings. Sometimes you feel like you're still doing it.

SHE HAD TRIED TO PREPARE YOU, ever since you were in your twenties. She lived on 92nd and Park, where you had grown up. You lived a five-minute walk away. She had a son by her first husband, but Ambler was five years older and hadn't lived in New York City since you were 12.

You would stop by to pick up a piece of music because you were a singer and performer, like your mother. You would meet on Sunday afternoons to attend theater matinees. You would talk about lip trills and tongue flaps and other vocal exercises you each practiced (your mother taught voice too). Your mother would ask about who you were dating, and you would dodge, partly because you knew she disapproved of all of them. (You weren't crazy about her suitors either, and she had a number of them.) And each time, as you were finishing coffee or discussing what you liked about the play you had seen or talking about whatever man was in her life, near the end of the conversation your mother would tell you she needed to "go over where things were" in her apartment. She would muse about putting stickers on various objects. "It's important, Addy," she would say. She wanted you to know the monetary value of what you would inherit, just in case you would ever need to sell anything. More, she wanted you to appreciate the history behind what would one day be yours, to understand why everything was precious.

"Yeah," you would say, gathering your coat, edging toward the door, finishing your coffee. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Next time. I promise."

You can't remember how many times you promised.

It wasn't that you didn't appreciate your mother's taste or the value of her possessions. She owned a Queen Anne desk with a glass cabinet and an ornate finial, and on it were silver letter openers, a crystal inkwell, gold antique fountain pens, a leather-bound first edition of *Winnie the Pooh*.

On one wall hung a Gauguin. On a bookshelf was a 1910 score of *Madame Butterfly* signed by Puccini. Sitting on a table was a mahogany dollhouse with a working doorbell, a fireplace, and electric lights. Inside it were miniature silver candleholders, miniature figurines, and miniature place settings. At Christmas, your mother placed miniature skates and miniature skis on the porch, miniature gift boxes around the miniature Christmas tree. She covered the house with stretch cotton to approximate snow. At Easter, there were miniature bunnies, and Thanksgiving demanded a miniature turkey.

In her bedroom was a three-drawer vanity table, where you had watched her apply her makeup and brush her hair when you were a little girl. One of the small drawers on the side held hairbrushes and ribbons. The small drawer on the other side held her favorite jewelry. The middle drawer held her makeup. There was a brown velvet kidney-shaped



couch, a white-and-gold Venetian-glass mirror that you had to be careful not to get too close to, fur coats, cubic zirconia brooches, and a set of 20 cut-glass crystal finger bowls that had been passed down from your great-grandmother to your grandmother to your mother.

She had the contents of her apartment appraised, and she told you that if you sold everything—though she hoped you would never, ever want or need to—it would be worth half a million dollars. Knowing the objects would help you get fair value if, God forbid, you had to sell.

BUT YOU DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW. You didn't want to know because all the things felt heavy to you, and the more you knew, the heavier it all seemed. You didn't want to know because your mother had such strong taste that you had trouble deciding what you liked and didn't like. She treated even her rhinestone bracelets like the crown jewels. It sometimes felt as if what mattered was not how things were used but how they looked.

Even the dollhouse. Especially the dollhouse. When you were a little girl, your best friend, Jenny, would squeal when she arrived at your door, and the two of you would run into the parlor, where Jenny would empty the house of the candleholders and the figurines and flick the lights on and off, then rearrange everything. When she left, your mother would meticulously restore everything

to its correct position, then slide the plexiglass barrier she had specially ordered over the house to make sure no one touched it until you had another friend over.

Oftentimes your apartment felt more like a museum than a home.

You avoided the conversations about what your mother planned to leave you because you had spent too much of your childhood in thrall to and resentful of those things and because all the possessions seemed heavy and suffocating. You avoided the conversation because if you didn't, it would be admitting that your mother would die. You had experienced enough death.

You were 10 when your mother's maternal grandmother died, and your mother had to handle everything because her own mother was sick. You remember furniture being delivered to the apartment—"more brown stuff"—and listening to your mother sounding aggrieved as she talked to her girlfriends on the phone. You rifled through the Queen Anne desk and found paperwork with words like "irrevocable" and "trust" and "power of attorney" and wondered what the words meant. When you were 13, your father died, and your mother sold his piano, and there was more paperwork. The next year, your mother's mother died, and there was more furniture, more brown stuff, things moved. By the time you were 28, your mother had taken care of the possessions of her grandmother, her mother, your stepfather, and your father.

You owned the three-drawer brass-handled vanity by then, as well as the brown velvet couch. You never wore jewelry, because all you knew was that you didn't like gold, and you never bought furniture you liked, because you weren't sure what you did like, and even if you had known, there was no space for it.

You dropped out of college after a semester, started a singing career, and started seeing a therapist. You talked about your mother and your eating disorder and why you resented certain pieces of furniture so much, why anyone would resent any piece of furniture. You tried yoga and meditation. You traveled to India. Your mother didn't like talking about feelings. Sometimes it seemed she didn't know you at all. Even the things she wanted to give you didn't seem connected to anything that mattered, certainly nothing that mattered to you.

She wouldn't let up about the finger bowls. She'd always manage to mention the finger bowls, in between grilling you about your love life and opining about how flat the lead in the performance the previous night was

and insisting that you two sit down to discuss all the things she had, all the things she wanted you to have.

"Yeah," you would say. "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah."

When you were 38, at the urging of your then boyfriend—who knew all about your complicated relationship with your mother and who "lived in the Village," as your mother never neglected to point out in the same tone of voice in which she might say someone "ate canned soup"—you took the vanity your mother had given you to a beach in East Hampton, and late one moonless June night, as a gentle breeze was just kicking up to a strong wind, you doused the delicate piece of furniture with lighter fluid, then struck a match.

You remember how it lit up the beach. You remember the crackle of the fire and the lapping of waves. You thought you were free.

YOUR MOTHER WOULD TELL YOU SHE NEEDED TO "GO OVER WHERE THINGS WERE" IN HER APARTMENT. "YEAH," YOU WOULD SAY. "NEXT TIME. I PROMISE."

BARBARA BLISS MOSS MESTRE fainted in her apartment in October 2014 and was rushed to Lenox Hill Hospital. She was diagnosed with a blood infection. She had been tired and had been having trouble breathing. Doctors intubated her, and for four days, she wrote you notes. Former beaux visited, all well-dressed, all charming. When one tall, lanky one left, your mother scrawled something.

"Handsome, right?" the note said, and you both smiled.

Days later, she wrote you another note.

"You have to pay my bills," it said.

The next day, another one.

"Payments are due on one of my loans. Can you take care of it?"

You didn't think she was dying. She was sick, but she was strong. You don't know if you had ever met anyone stronger. She held piquant opinions, opinions so fierce she didn't even consider them opinions but merely accurate, plainspoken assessments of the world. You were recently married and had a baby girl, and even though your husband had been born in Queens, your mother loved him and your child. But she wasn't about to start parroting anyone's silly, sentimental notions about life.

Your mother was a great beauty, five-foot-seven, long-legged, dark, with a wide, strong jaw, lethal cheekbones, and black, uncompromising eyes. You bounced your little girl—curly-haired, chubby-cheeked, sticky-fingered Lucia—on your knee in the hospital, and Lucia laughed.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” you asked your mother.

“Well, I wouldn’t say beautiful, but she is remarkably cute!”

After seven weeks in the hospital, she moved to an assisted-living facility. On Christmas Eve, Wednesday night, her longtime accompanist played piano for seven of your mothers’ girlfriends, and you had a party. You all sang together. Your mother wore an oxygen mask, but she removed it for “Silent Night.” When the “mother and child” line came, you snuck glances at each other.

Three days later, Saturday morning, someone from the assisted-living facility called. You remember answering, but nothing else. A girlfriend who was visiting tells you that you screamed and slumped to the floor.

That afternoon, you arrived at her two-bedroom apartment. You found sable coats and mink stoles and racks of evening gowns. You found hand-embroidered table cloths, the Puccini score, and all the first editions.

You called your half-brother, who was in Myanmar. (He wouldn’t be back in New York City until the memorial service, two months later.)

“I don’t want any of that s—,” he said. “If I were you, I’d hire a couple guys, box it up, and send it to the dump.”

A girlfriend suggested you immediately make a written inventory. A distant cousin in California wrote you a letter suggesting that you contact an auctioneer he knew.

One of your mother’s best girlfriends asked if she could have the fur coats.

You listened politely, just as you had when your mother asked to discuss the future, and told them a version of what you had told her. You would get back to them. You would take care of it. There was no rush.

It took a visit from “Uncle Philip,” an experienced archivist and close friend of your mother’s who knew the ins and outs of your mother’s apartment, to change your thinking. He took your hand as you both sat beneath the hand-cut Venetian-glass mirror. “Sweetheart,” he said, “there’s a lot to deal with here. This is important stuff. This is your history. This is going to be a big job.”

You started with canceling the automatic monthly payments to her health club and her supplemental Medicare. That took a week. Then there were the credit cards, the

social security, and other financial matters. Those took months. After that, things got difficult.

You found every report card you and your half-brother had ever received, your father’s death certificate, another ex-husband’s death certificate, and her journals. Those first weeks, with 10-month-old Lucia on your knee frequently screaming, crying, laughing, or all three, you read how your mother had felt overwhelmed when you were a toddler, how she had despaired at the idea of singing again, how she had worried she was a bad mother and a bad musician and a bad wife, how she had worried that she would never be able to connect to her daughter, and you wept and vowed to delay further journal reading until later.

You tried on every single tube of lipstick she owned, every color. She had always tried to convince you that bright pink would look good on you. You looked in the mirror. She was wrong. You threw away 45 of the tubes and kept 60. You kept her pink leather wallet.

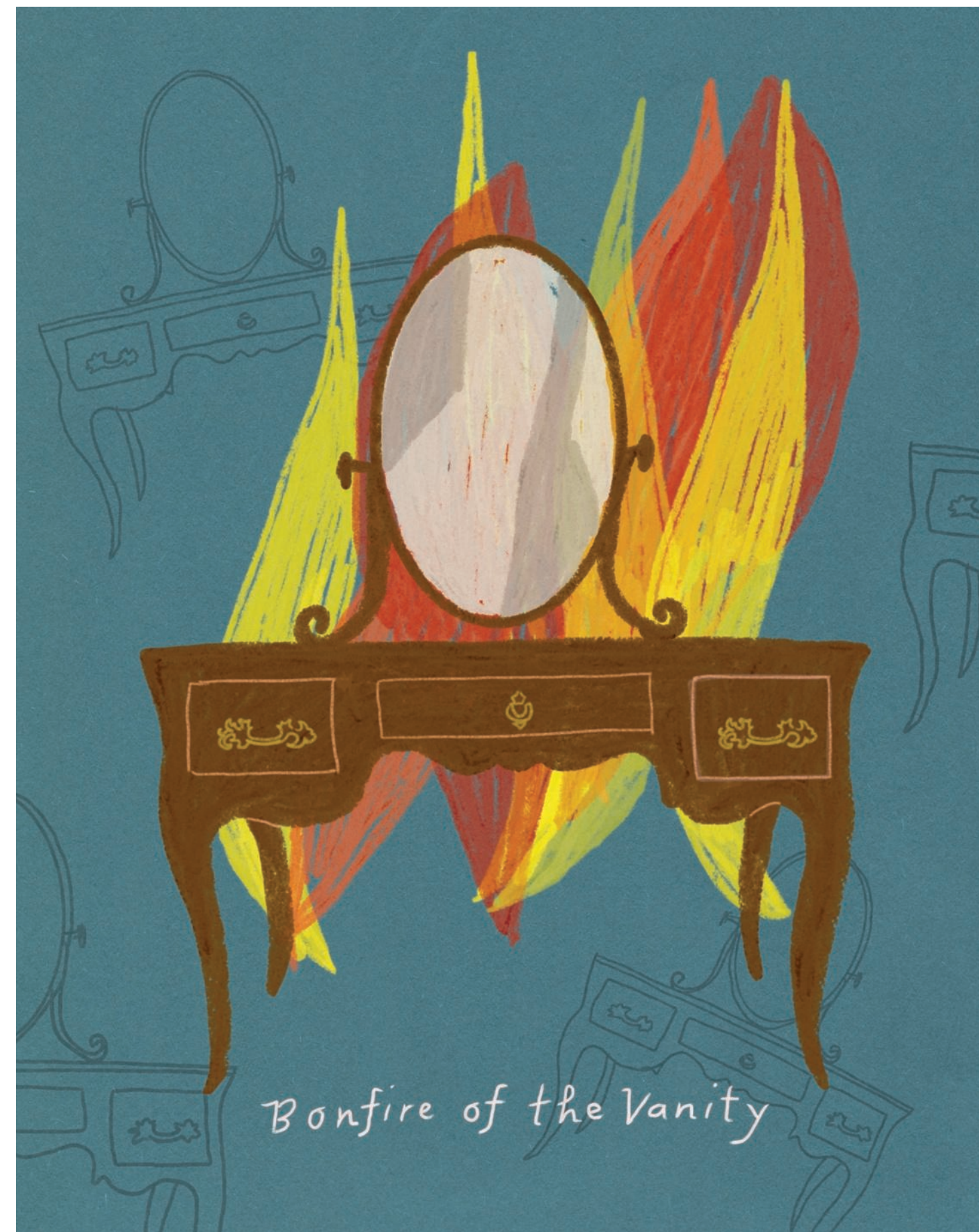
For the next year, you spent five days a week in taxis with Lucia, going to and from your mother’s apartment, searching, cleaning, organizing, often with Philip. One day you returned to your apartment with sweaters, another day with scarves, another day with hand-embroidered linens that had belonged to your maternal great-grandmother. You discovered more than 100 purses, Gucci knockoffs that vendors sold on the street. You discovered one big fake-leather purse filled with three other fake-leather purses. You found more than 50 “Gifts with Purchase,” Lancôme and Estée Lauder bags filled with makeup samples. You found bags of never-worn lingerie and underwear, bags of never-worn bras. You took most of it home, along with the porcelain lamps and the Venetian-glass mirror, and bags and bags of costume jewelry.

There was so much.

After a crying session over Skype with Helle, a girlfriend who lived in Norway, Helle flew to New York City, accompanying you to your mother’s apartment. Helle was strong, almost as no-nonsense as your mother had been. Keep these jewelery and clothes. Donate those.

You nodded. You nodded some more. That’s exactly what you would do. You separated things into piles: keep, donate, and sell.

The day Helle flew home, you called another girlfriend to review your piles. And after that girlfriend weighed in, you rearranged everything. You weren’t free at all.



THE PRICELESS VICTORIAN FURNITURE
APPARENTLY HAD A PRICE AFTER ALL.
THE ANTIQUE DESK WAS NEITHER AS OLD NOR
AS RARE AS YOUR MOTHER HAD THOUGHT.

The appraisers you hired taught you a few things. First, Puccini apparently signed lots of musical scores. *Madame Butterfly* fetched \$1,400. Also, the priceless Victorian furniture your mother loved apparently had a price after all. And while the antique desk with the glass cabinet and the ornate finial was technically an antique, it was neither as old nor as rare as your mother had thought.

The contents of your mother's apartment weren't worth half a million dollars. They were worth \$50,000.

You took the furs. You stored the dollhouse. You gave the finger bowls to charity. You filled up eight boxes of music and donated it to the music department at New York University; filled another box and sent it to your mother's favorite student, an opera singer in Germany; another box to her former accompanist in Florida.

And then the apartment was empty except for things you didn't want, and you doubted anyone else would. That's when you called a man Uncle Philip called "the broom-sweep guy," the man who comes in, looks at everything, offers you a price, and takes it all away. He came and offered you \$2,000 for your mother's last remaining possessions, and you said fine. An hour after he had left, you called him and begged him to return the sterling-silver postage-stamp dispenser. He did.



YOU CARRY YOUR CASH and credit cards in your mother's pink leather wallet. It's your wallet now. You wear the bras your mother never unwrapped. You think she would like that. You like it.

Lucia is 5, cute *and* beautiful. Also, a handful. Once, when she was running around late at night screaming, you told her she needed to settle down and suggested she take some deep breaths, and she replied, "Mom! I'm not a lie-still-and-take-deep-breaths kind of girl. I'm rock and roll!"

Like you and like your mother, Lucia is quite the singer. When she was 2½ years old, she had a repertoire of about 20 songs, including her favorite, "Let It Go," from *Frozen*, complete with dramatic cape flipping.

You used to love singing with her. But last year, when you were singing in the kitchen, she cried out, "Mommy, stop singing! Stop!" When you asked her why, she said, "Because I want to be the most beautiful singer!"

You organize your family's possessions once a year, sorting what you want to keep, what you want to donate or sell, and what you want to set aside for your daughter.

You took the Venetian-glass mirror that your mother cherished and that no one was supposed to get close to and you put it in Lucia's room. You took your mother's drawers full of cubic-zirconia bracelets and shiny metal tiaras and glass necklaces that she hoarded and guarded and you threw them in some plastic jewelry boxes you had bought at T.J. Maxx. They serve as Lucia's dress-up toys. She puts them on and looks at herself in the mirror. You tell her she should get as close as she wants; it's just a piece of glass. You tell her the mirror was Grandma's and so were the dress-up toys and so was the daybed that you fashioned from the headboard on Grandma's bed, and Grandma would be so happy if she could see how much fun Lucia was having with all of it. The dollhouse will stay in storage until you feel like Lucia is old enough not to destroy it, or you're relaxed enough to let her destroy it. Whichever comes first. You want your daughter to appreciate her inheritance, not to resent it.

The men in your life are supportive about that, just as they're supportive of your yearly inventories, your repurposing of the items that used to oppress you. Supportive, but not particularly empathetic. "Sure, honey," your husband says, then asks if you have thought about getting rid of the damn porcelain lamps. Your half-brother is more to

the point: "I would have just sold it all, and what I couldn't, I would have given away. Boom. Done. Easy."

There's one person who would understand exactly what you're going through, who felt the heavy, exquisite weight of family history, the joys and challenges of raising an independent, strong-willed daughter.

It was nearly half a year after you and your half-brother sold your mother's apartment before you could return to her journals. You wanted to better understand her because she was your mother, of course, but also because you had written a musical about her and your father. You wanted to explore how, and why, she had struggled to balance her artistic ambitions with the powerful need she felt to please others. You found lyrics of songs she had written; cabaret sets for shows she had wanted to perform but never did; grand, aching hopes about fame and creative success; and her worry that motherhood might get in the way of ever attaining either. You found short stories too.

One story was narrated by a 13-year-old girl on Christmas morning, a lonely child who was afraid of disappointing her parents, of breaking things, of expressing her opinions—a pretty, boy-crazy girl doing her best to be polite to everyone, especially her mother. The mother in the story was worried but didn't like to talk about her feelings, and the little girl in the story hoped no one noticed how she couldn't stop eating sticky buns, praying that no one would know she was planning to throw up right after she opened her presents.

All those years thinking your mother didn't understand you. What a waste.

There was another story about a mother struggling to connect with her polite, sensitive, sometimes difficult daughter, a young woman who bounced from boyfriend to boyfriend, just as her mother had, a woman who sought meaning in art, and beauty, and love, just as her mother had, and even in spiritual practices the mother wanted to understand but couldn't.

In the story, the young woman announces plans to travel to India, to study with a guru. The mother is alarmed but doesn't know what to do. The day before the daughter is to leave, the mother offers her, as a gift, her most prized possession. Her finger bowls. The daughter says she'll take them but never does.

HOW TO GET
ORGANIZED

We asked financial- and estate-planning experts for over-looked tips about how to prepare for a parent's end of life or your own. This is what they said.

Amy Pickard, president
and CEO, Good to Go!

"I tell my clients that you never see a U-Haul behind a hearse. It's important to help your parents clean out their home with them while they are alive. This creates memories and inspires conversations that will help clarify what to do when the time comes.

"If you don't know how to start the conversation with your parents, begin by telling them, 'I'm completing my advance planning paperwork, and I realized that you may not know my wishes. So I wanted to talk to you about what I want done in case of emergency or death. I also realize that I don't know what you want done, so let's talk about it so we're both prepared.'"

Mike Stanton, CFP,
managing director,
Alpine Private Capital

"Consider drafting a letter of wishes, which complements an estate plan as non-binding guidance to the executor or trustee. This could include things to be avoided [such as investments in tobacco or those that may threaten the environment] and explanations about gifts or how to handle complex assets."

Joseph K. Presley,
chairman, president
and CEO of
Cumberland Trust

"Know where key documents are. This could include everything from a last will and testament and trust documents to digital passwords for online bill paying, email, and social media accounts.

"Have an idea of your loved one's recurring expenses and set some cash aside to cover any of their bills while waiting for an estate to open. That process can take a month or more."

For more tips from Amy Pickard at Good to Go!, visit realsimple.com/goodtogo.