

Weight

By Karen Lea Germain

I drove down to San Pedro, 120 miles round trip to pick up my aunt's cremains. As she was handed over, the *Trident Society* employee was sympathetic with a dash of corporate. My aunt rested in a purple and white tote bag with their company logo splashed across the front.

"It's unusual to have family members picking up," she said.

"I know it's not her in there, but I didn't like the idea of having her mailed."

I couldn't have her cooped up in a UPS box on our front porch, keeping company with our latest prime pantry purchase. The cloth tote handles dug into my fingers, as I used both hands to carry her to my car.

"You've gained some weight," I said to my aunt. "Good for you."

She was less than a hundred pounds when she died; but cremated, it felt like I was lugging gold bars. This little cube, half the size of a shoebox, was densely packed with her ash and bone. I shouldn't have been surprised by the weight: Six months earlier, I held my first box of cremains. My uncle wasn't a small man, so the weight didn't seem as shocking. I sat with my uncle's box on my lap during the entire drive to his service at Riverside National Cemetery, feeling his weight.

I reached my silver and black Smart Car. It was a car my aunt hated. She hated the compactness of it, the lack of heft. She hated that it wasn't a smooth ride, like her Lexus, which I was too nervous to drive. I set her down on the passenger seat. My curiosity got the better of me, and like a Christmas present I was trying to guess, I reached into the bag and gave her box a slight shake to see what would happen. Nothing moved.

I've thought about weight a lot in the last few years. Primarily, the heaviness my aunt could inflict with the right choice of words. I didn't grow up in a household where arguments were common. I can count the verbal fights I had with my mom on one hand. This left me completely unprepared to go into battle with my aunt. These fights escalated in the last two years, which coincided with me meeting my husband, and her taking higher doses of pain pills. I couldn't work out if it was the pain pills or her jealousy towards my husband that created the most friction. Now she's dead, I choose to focus on the pills. It's easier to bear.

Instead of focusing on my aunt's body, held together with rods and screws, marred with puckered scars from so many surgeries, I choose to remember her warm brown eyes and

frosted blonde hair. My aunt was a dead- ringer for actress Mitzi Gaynor. The resemblance was mentioned with nearly every phone call that I made to her friends in the days after she passed, followed with the assumption, due to the generation gap, that I had no idea who they were referencing. “South Pacific,” I would tell them, and the conversation would segue into the much easier topic of musical theatre. Relief was felt all around.

My aunt was gorgeous. She adored beauty products and was the first to jump on every trend. Her breasts were forever perky, owing to a 1970’s boob job and her face was wrinkle-free. Even as she was dying, nurses couldn’t help but comment on her perfect nails. As I contacted her friends and heard them speak of her physical beauty, I felt lighter. But yet, lighter still, when they mentioned her inner beauty. One friend talked about my aunt opening up her home to her, when she was going through a nasty divorce from a violent man. My aunt slept on the couch and gave her friend and her friend’s children her bed, so they could feel safe together. They stayed with her for months, until they got back on their feet. She cried as she told me this story.

When my mom died, I didn’t want to go to her funeral. Initially, when my aunt died, I felt the same way. Something shifted when I spoke with her friends and heard their stories. The voices of other people giving their truths about my aunt began to lift the weight. They reminded me of the person she had been, and not the person she became through the drugs and grief.

No, she wasn’t inside of that box, but I needed to hold her and acknowledge her weight.

When I set her into the ground, burying her next to my uncle, we were light again.

Karen Lea Germain is a Los Angeles native who relocated to Colorado with her British husband and two spoiled cats. She graduated from the UCLA Extension Writer’s Program and is working on her first novel. While at UCLA, her novel was nominated for The James Kirkwood Literary Prize, an award for outstanding works-in-progress. Germain spent over a decade in the theme park industry and several years working in behavioral research at a local zoo. Among other projects, she has spent over 2000 hours observing flamingos. Flamingos are no longer her favorite birds. See more of her work at alwayspackedforadventure.com

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