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LIFESTYLE | RELATIONSHIPS

The Seven Objects I'd Choose to Let Future Generations Know Who I Was

What do I want my children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren to understand about me? These items will tell them more than any photo album ever could.

By Robbie Shell

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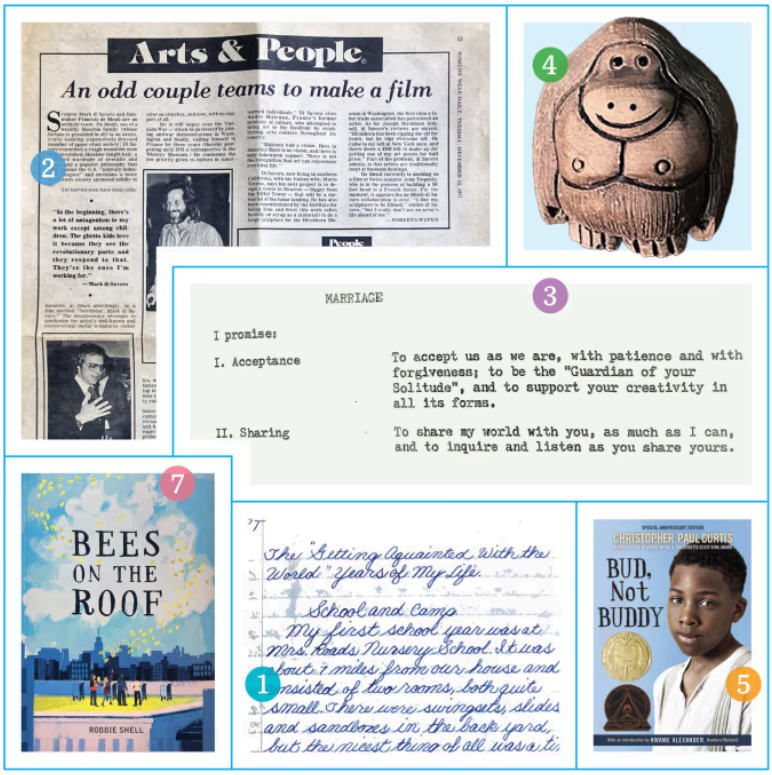


PHOTO: WSJ, ROBBIE SHELL, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, TUMBLEHOME INC

Among the many items stored in my basement was a box that my mother left me shortly before her death. It contained a number

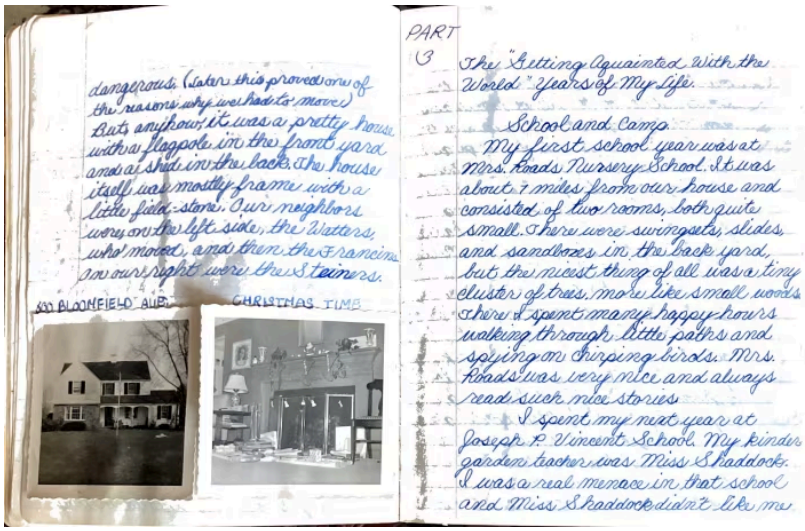
of seemingly random items, most of them passed on to her by her own mother.

Included was a small, decorative silver spoon often given as a christening present; a set of tiny silver and glass name cardholders suited for formal dinner parties; and some beautifully sequined, satin-lined purses.

I realized, during this latest round of basement archaeology, that I knew little about my grandmother. Because she and my grandfather lived 400 miles away, I saw them only once or twice a year, leaving little opportunity to develop meaningful relationships.

If the items in the box could talk, I wondered what I would learn about this distant figure in my life. Was there a story behind the spoon and why my grandmother chose to save it? Did she enjoy, or dread, the fancy dinner parties that the name holders and exquisite purses suggested?

I found myself imagining a box of my own, one that could give my children, grandchildren and maybe even great-grandchildren some insights into my life—not necessarily what I accomplished, but who I was as a person. What would I put in this box, and how would I describe the significance of each item?


dangerous. (Later this proved one of the reasons why we had to move.) But anyhow, it was a pretty house with a flagpole in the front yard and a shed in the back. The house itself was mostly frame with a little field stone. Our neighbors were on the left side, the Watters, who moved, and then the Francinis on our right were the Steiners.

100 BLOOMFIELD AVE.

CHRISTMAS TIME

PART 3

The "Getting Aquainted With the World" Years of My Life.

School and Camp

My first school year was at Mrs. Roads Nursery School. It was about 1 miles from our house and consisted of two rooms, both quite small. There were swingsets, slides, and sandboxes in the back yard, but the nicest thing of all was a tiny cluster of trees, more like small woods where I spent many happy hours walking through little paths and spying on chirping birds. Mrs. Roads was very nice and always read such nice stories.

I spent my next year at Joseph P. Vincent School. My kindergarden teacher was Miss S. Haddock. I was a real menace in that school and Miss S. Haddock didn't like me.

Pages from Robbie Shell's autobiography, written at age 11. PHOTO: ROBBIE SHELL

'All About Me'

I thought of seven objects, some reflecting a lifetime devoted to the power of words and others marking some deeply meaningful relationships, both joyful and sad.

First in the box would be an autobiography I wrote for school when I was 11 called "All About Me." Immediately evident is its beautiful penmanship and the carefully delineated chapter headings, subheads and picture captions—a nod to what I remember as my earnest approach to all homework assignments.

More important, "All About Me" referenced an early love of reading and writing: "What a thrill it was to know how to read and write!" was how I described my memory of second grade. "I had to read any book I could lay my hands on. I felt like a grown-up person [starting] a new chapter in my life." That chapter has never ended.

Arts & People

An odd couple teams to make a film

"In the beginning, there's a lot of antagonism to my work except among children. The ghetto kids love it because they see the revolutionary parts and they respond to that. They're the ones I'm working for."
—Mark di Suvero

People

as advertised in W

A Perfume named 1000

The Limited Edition Perfume by Jean Patou

An article, at the top of the page, from her early work as a journalist. PHOTO: ROBBIE SHELL

Second would be a copy of one of the first newspaper stories I wrote as a young journalist in Washington, D.C. It's a profile of artist/activist Mark di Suvero, whose huge, abstract steel sculptures are now on view at art centers around the world. During the eight years I spent working first for local and then national newspapers, it was the feature articles I most enjoyed writing—about unconventional people, but also about better-known Washington figures, from politicians and diplomats to scientists and society hostesses.

Beat reporting appealed to me as well: meeting deadlines, seeing my byline, getting the best quotes. Being a journalist can be like a horse race, and I love to win.

Marriage promises

Also in the box would be a simple, slightly smudged sheet of paper with six promises my husband and I made to each other shortly before our marriage. We had met in college, spent the summer after graduation together and then broke up for six years before reuniting. The promises include Sharing,

Acceptance, Fidelity, Caring and Compromise, but in retrospect, most important was our pledge to be "guardians of each other's solitude." We sensed even back then that our ability to take care of ourselves as separate people would make it possible for us to always be "there" for each other. We have never had to renegotiate our promises, and we are still married.

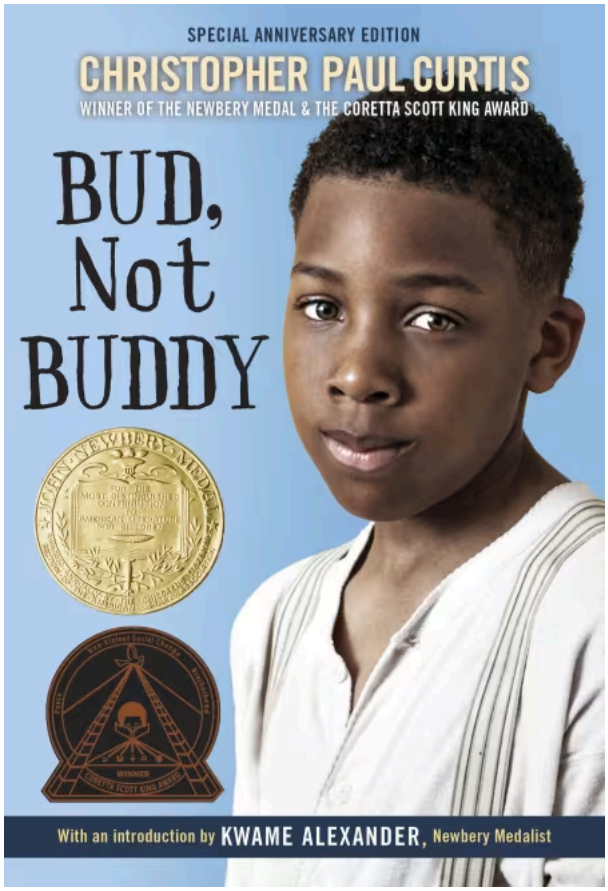
A smiling ape figurine Shell used as a "focal point" during the deliveries of her two sons. PHOTO: ROBBIE SHELL

The fourth item would be a 3-inch-high smiling ape—the "focal point" my instructor asked everyone in our birthing class to zone in on during labor and delivery. Our two sons were born under her watchful eye, and she was waiting for me when I returned from four days in the hospital following the birth of my second son. I had suffered a postpartum hemorrhage that drained three-fifths of my blood in a matter of minutes.

I recovered physically after two months of iron-rich foods, but emotionally I can't let go of that near-death experience. Every Valentine's Day, when we celebrate my son's birthday, I remember all over again how close I came to being absent from my family's life. Any sense of invincibility from the relatively charmed existence I had led up to that moment was gone,

replaced by enduring gratitude for those who surrounded me during those traumatic hours, and a sense of humility knowing how suddenly our lives can be upended.

In search of a father



A middle-school novel that Shell says made her reflect on her own family history. PHOTO: PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

No. 5: a middle-school novel titled "Bud, Not Buddy," recommended to my younger son by a friend when they were 12. The story it tells—of a young Black child during the Depression on a journey to find his father—played out in my own life when my father left our family for reasons none of us, possibly even him, fully understood. When he died from the cumulative effects of alcoholism at age 67, I regretted that I had never really known this man whom I had once loved so deeply. Part of his legacy to me is a constant, underlying worry that I will lose the people I care for most.

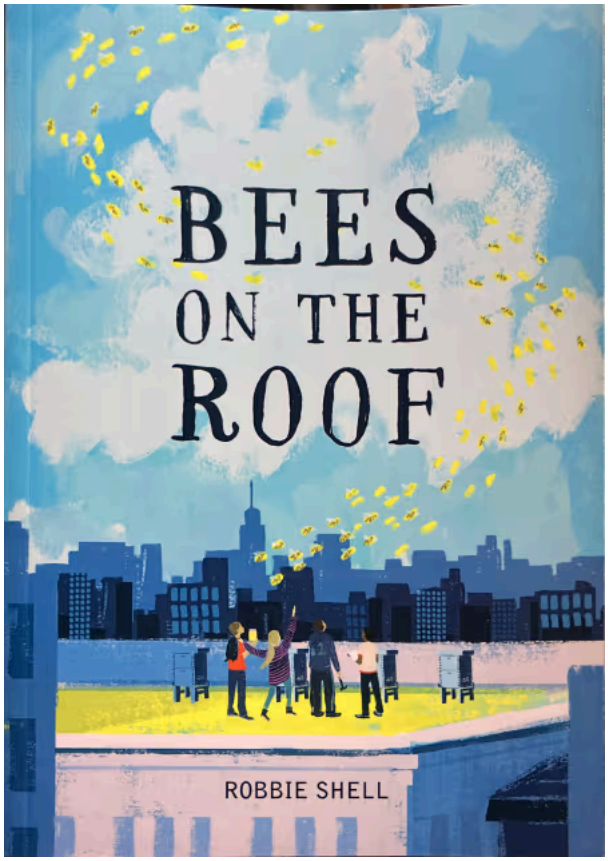
The redemption in the final section of "Bud Not Buddy" is an ending that's different from my own story. Rereading those pages, I realize how much I have missed having a father who was

a steady, vital part of my life, and how much I still envy others who did.

The second-to-last item in the box would be a poem I wrote 15 years ago for a 2-year-old child being treated for a brain tumor at a children's hospital near my office. The poem speaks to the volunteering I have done over the past few decades, focused primarily on individuals who are struggling: older people facing the loss of independence, veterans at a local VA hospital, adults with severe disabilities, and small children with life-threatening illnesses. These connections have been some of the most meaningful and enduring of my life. I wrote the poem as a way to remember this small child struggling for survival against difficult odds.

And finally, a copy of my novel about honeybees. Envisioning the freedom from constant deadlines that retirement would bring, I decided to launch an entirely new kind of writing project: a book. I fell in love with these tiny pollinators after watching a video of them exiting a postal-service crate and marching single file, no pushing or shoving, no butting in line, on their way to their beloved queen. They personified dedication, teamwork and efficiency—traits I tried to emulate throughout my career.

The end result was a 220-page middle-school novel about four seventh-graders who set up beehives on the roof of a hotel as part of a science project. I found a publisher that specialized in environmental books for children, and my work found its audience. It reminds me that in retirement, there is always the opportunity to discover, and follow through on, new passions.



A copy of Shell's novel, "Bees on the Roof," published in 2018. PHOTO: TUMBLEHOME INC

Seven small items plus a copy of this essay and a few family photos would make up my box. I hope that those who discover it will see these simple mementos as clues to my life, the "me" in my autobiography. Perhaps they will be encouraged to create boxes of their own, introducing themselves, telling their own stories, to the generations that follow.

Robbie Shell is a writer in Philadelphia. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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