

Passing On the Journals
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There was a young woman who inherited her mother's journals. This woman had grown up in a culture where every woman, once she was married, began a new journal every year, writing in that one book exclusively until the start of the following year. Each year she was given a new blank book for Christmas which she began to write in on January first. In this journal she wrote about her hopes and dreams as well as recording the family stories: births, deaths, marriages, celebrations and ceremonies, all the milestones of the year.

Upon her death, a woman's journals would be given to her eldest daughter, and after reading them the eldest passed the books down to her next younger sister, who also read and passed them on. In this way the traditions of the mothers were continued as each daughter recorded in her own journals her wisdom, lore, and secrets for the next generation. Along with her own observations, a dutiful daughter recorded her mother's observations as well, often condensing stories into little grains of wisdom used to teach the children.

Every eldest daughter looked forward to that moment when her mother's journals would become her own. It was known to be a very special balm for the grief of one's mother dying and leaving her, the eldest, to become the new matriarch. It was a huge responsibility, and yet there were her mother's journals to guide her: a woman's wisdom and guidance written down for her daughter to follow — or not, if the whim took her. But most daughters followed, so if one were to fall out of line, her sisters would pick up the slack, and the wisdom of the mothers would continue down through the generations.

This young woman was about to embark on this journey with her own mother's wisdom as she sat down on the floor next to the long shelf of book after book, rainbow colors in a long line, numbering the 40 years of her mother's married life. Forty books which she would savor before passing them on to her sister for the same purpose. Both girls already had several journals of their own to which they were eager to add the wisdom of their female ancestors. Each sister already had a daughter to whom her own books would be passed.

It was the tradition that the youngest daughter, the last to receive and read the mother's books, would burn them after she finished reading and recording her mom's wisdom. The daughter seated before the shelf of rainbow books knew that her mother had been a youngest daughter. In fact, she was an only daughter, and our heroine had been just old enough to remember the great bonfire in the field out behind the barn where her grandmother's books had been eaten by the flames, the somber black covers turning a brilliant red-gold before dissolving into dust.

The book now in her hands, the first of the 40 books to be pulled off the shelf, is the same red-gold. She holds it in her lap for a moment, her hands caressing the cover touched so often by her mother's hands. As she does so, an image leaps to mind, herself as a young child looking up at her mother's face, animated by the flames reflecting off her wet cheeks, tears streaming down

her face. She wonders now what her mother might have been thinking as she burned the words of her own mother.

Was Mother weeping because no one else would read them? Because as an only daughter, she had no one else with whom to share the stories she had read, lest they be forgotten before she could write them all down?

She opens the red-gold book to the first page. Finding it blank, she turns to the next page and the next. Before long she had turned every page in the red-gold book and found everyone one of them to be blank. Not so much as a pencil mark. She pulls out the yellow-green book that had been next to the red-gold and quickly thumbs through the pages. This one is blank too. One by one she pulls the books from the shelves and thumbs through them. Her mother had not written a single word!

What does it mean? she wonders. Had her mother just freed her up to become her own person, without regard to the stories and traditions from the past? What had her grandmother recorded that set her mother so clearly on a different path from what was expected? What family secrets had her mother burned up in that fire behind the old red barn?

She thinks about what she had recorded in her own journals over the past seven years. All her angst and anger, her fears and frustrations, her tears and joy. She decides she will send the blank journals on to her sister and have a bonfire of her own, burning the first seven years of her marriage so she can start over with a fresh perspective, a new outlook on the world in which she isn't responsible for being the recorder of her family's history, which so far has been a tale of woe, the only bright spot being the child in the next room who will awaken soon from her afternoon nap.