“I cannot remember a time before the box. My father’s box. … The plain cardboard bottom has a cheerful red lid.”
J cannot remember a time before the box. My father’s box. I think it came from Eaton’s Department Store. The plain cardboard bottom has a cheerful red lid. Across its rectangular surface, glide pairs of skaters, children on toboggans, and a father pulling a sled with a Christmas tree. Scattered among the smiling people in bright scarves and mittens are little sprigs of holly, each with its own cluster of red berries.

Why did my father choose this particular box with its playful scenes to house the letters? Did the box represent for him the Canadian ideal of a jingle-bell family dashing through the snow and laughing all the way? Perhaps it reminded him of a childhood happiness forever left behind.

I was barely twenty-two in 1959 when he died. I had just left home for the first time to follow my dreams. For months, I had been immersed in travel, in books, in studies at the Sorbonne. One night in Paris, the telegram arrived. Father ill. Return immediately. I did, the next day, but it was too late.

Despite the shock of his death, my one thought was to rescue the box. I do not know what my mother did with my father’s other possessions. Perhaps she
buried him in his one good suit and gave his shirts to a needy neighbour. Perhaps she threw away his small collection of German books, thinking no one would ever read them. She did save the box.

My mother also saved the album. Real memories sometimes fade, but photos have a life of their own. The photo album contains pictures of people in a world that I do not remember. When I was a child, my mother would place the album on a clean tablecloth and leaf through the pages. Sometimes she seemed lost in a world of her own. At other times, speaking in that comfortable German dialect that was then our only language, she would identify the faces and tell me stories.

This is your father’s brother Arnold and his wife Vera on their wedding day. Such a beautiful woman! And so intelligent, just like your uncle Arnold. He was an engineer, but she studied medicine. Imagine how hard it was for a woman in those days to become a doctor!

This is Aunt Marthe, your father’s younger sister. Look at those dark curls. Such a beauty! She was still so young when she married Emil Fränkel. And this is their daughter, your cousin Ilserl. You two spent hours playing together. Too bad that we have no pictures of her baby sister Dorly. She was born just before we left Europe.

This is your father’s older sister Else. Your cousin Ilserl was named “Ilse” to honour Else who had been like a second mother to Martha. Here is Else on her wedding day. She married Emil Urbach, a renowned doctor whom people from all over Europe came to consult. Until the Nazis came. Here are the Urbach children, Marianne and Otto. They were a bit older, but they loved to play with you.

As an only child on an isolated farm, I was so lonely that I drank up these words. Living on a farm meant no nearby playmates and my parents had neither a car nor a telephone to bridge the distance. As soon as I turned five, I was finally allowed to go to school to learn my first English words. Until then, the photo album was the thread that linked me to others.

Sometimes even now, I listen enviously as my friends make plans for the holidays. “What’s important is that the whole family be together,” they explain. “Last year we were twenty-four,” says one. “My son is bringing his new girlfriend so we’ll be thirty-two at the table,” says another. “Do you seat all the cousins together or do you separate them into age groups?” asks a third.
Wedding, Vera Schick and Arnold Waldstein
Martha Waldstein

Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. I often wondered what it would be like to know your relatives. My known family was always three. For a while, it was five. That was on the farm when my mother’s only sister, Anny, and her husband Ludwig lived with us.

Anny and Ludwig never had children. It was rumoured that she couldn’t because she had worked as an X-ray technician in the early days when the effects of X-ray were not fully understood. I used to urge my parents to have another child. Their response never varied: “At first we were too scared. You were still a baby when we fled and became strangers in a strange land. We had no money, no skills, and no English. We were afraid. Now it’s too late.”
Why were we so few? Where were all those relatives in the album? My father was one of five children. Four of the siblings married. They danced at each other’s weddings, rejoiced in each other’s triumphs, and lent support when needed. Three of the siblings—Else, Martha, and my father—had children of their own, and had settled near the family home so that their own parents, Fanny and Josef, could enjoy the laughter of grandchildren.

There are no portraits of my father’s parents. I know my grandmother Fanny only as a black and white snapshot. She is an elderly woman in a lawn chair who gazes fondly at a young child playing in the garden, my cousin Ilse. The only photo of my grandfather Josef shows him in uniform.
It is World War I and he is serving in the army with all three of his sons, Arnold, Otto, and Edmund.

I often hear stories about the strong impact of grandparents. A grandparent who loved nature and revealed its secrets to a wide-eyed youngster. A grandfather who taught a little boy to love tools and take pride in the work of his hands. A grandmother who provided unconditional love along with the smell of fresh baking.

What is it like to have a grandparent? I do not remember having one. The words grandmother and grandfather have no reality for me beyond the pictures in the album. The stiff figure in a three-piece suit is my mother’s father Max. He has bushy eyebrows and a waxed handlebar moustache above unsmiling lips. The rather plain woman wearing a small, heart-shaped gold locket is my grandmother Resl.

Still, I collected stories about my grandparents as carefully as I collected thin bits of silver paper from cigarette packages to bring to school for the war effort. No teacher ever explained to me how the cigarette paper would help “our boys overseas.” I used to imagine huge stacks of silver paper being hammered together to make wings for airplanes.

So much was never spelled out. At some level, even as a child, I knew the photo album and the letters that my father kept in the cheerful red box were connected. Whenever a letter came, the postman would leave it in the tin box on a wooden post where our long driveway intersected with the highway. The letters were always written on blue airmail paper. Each letter meant that a firm hand on my backside would push me out the door, and that an adult voice would tell me to go and play.

In solitude, I would wander through the overgrown garden behind the henhouse, wondering about secrets discussed behind closed doors. If it had rained recently, I would float sticks in puddles in the driveway that snaked past the house. I would give each stick a push, pretending it was a ship on the ocean. Some ships reached shore safely, others did not.

The letters kept coming, even after the war began. Later, I learned that my father’s cousin in New York had forwarded them. When the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour propelled the Americans into the war, the letters stopped. By war’s end, I was almost nine, old enough to remember the
Josef Waldstein and his sons in their World War I uniforms
From left to right: Arnold, Edi, Otto, Josef
Letters from the Lost

impatience with which my parents waited for news.

When that longed-for letter arrived, my banishment from the house was lengthy. Did I hear, or do I only imagine I heard a wail whose memory still turns my guts to water?

Eventually my parents emerged and took up their chores, for cows must be fed and milked and mucked out twice daily no matter what. I watched my parents as if they were fish in a tank. Their shapes were somehow distorted, and an eerie silence encased them in a world I could not reach.

In a way, that silence was never broken. Although my parents gradually resumed their routine tasks, something was clearly different. I could not give it a name, but that letter marked a turning point in what could be spoken. I never asked about its contents, and I was never told.

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I am not sure when I first knew that my father kept all the letters, and that he had saved them in the red box. I am not even sure when I made the connection between the letters and his family. It was probably during the spring of 1946, when I was in Grade 6 and we moved to the city.

As soon as the war was over, my parents were free to leave the farm. Having proudly repaid what they saw as their debt to Canada, they were eager for some semblance of the circle of friends that had enriched their life in Europe. For them, moving to the city was a return to civilization, and they sold the farm to the first buyer who came their way. With the proceeds, they bought an old house in Hamilton. It meant living in a working class neighbourhood and sharing the house with another family in order to make mortgage payments, but anything was better than milking cows, slaughtering chickens, and the isolation of farm life.

My father went to work as a shipper in a warehouse, manually unloading heavy boxes and, a few days later, reloading them onto different trucks. My mother found employment as a pieceworker in a garment factory. I saw this as my father’s greatest source of anguish. In those post-war years, he never ceased to bemoan the fact that his wife had to work. Sometimes he spoke longingly of wanting to buy a little corner grocery store, a Mom and
Pop operation that would let them get an economic toehold, but this never happened.

Were they afraid to risk what little they had? Would their small nest egg not have stretched to even the most rundown of stores? For whatever reason, my parents never made the move to independence. To the very end, they remained under the thumb of bosses who knew that those with limited English and no special skills had little choice about pay or working conditions.

The warehouse where my father shuffled cartons was downtown, but my mother had farther to travel. Each morning, in summer light and in winter darkness, my father accompanied her to the bus stop where he waited until she had safely boarded. Then he would come back to finish his coffee while I gathered up my schoolbooks.

There was only an hour lag between my return from school and my mother’s arrival from work, but that hour was the longest of my day. It seemed to stretch endlessly. Sometimes I used it to poke about the house. One day I opened the drawer in my father’s night table and found his stash of pamphlets on lovemaking techniques. I read those pamphlets incessantly, trying to make the connection between the diagrams and the puzzling bits of what my parents called *Aufklärung*—enlightenment—a single embarrassing talk that constituted my only sex education.

It was probably during a late afternoon of poking about in my father’s night table that I first saw the box. I remember how my hands trembled when I untied the string and how I feared that my clumsy fingers would be unable to retie the bow. I also remember seeing the letters. Dozens of letters. And although I had read the sex manuals despite knowing that I shouldn’t, I did not read the letters. I knew instinctively that they were different. Very carefully, I retied the string and put the box back where I had found it.

I do not think I gave the box another thought until my father died. Then, with unsettled years ahead in makeshift accommodations as a graduate student, I asked my mother to keep it for me. I remember her saying that she had put it next to my old high school notes and team badges stored in the basement. In 1967, I moved to Vancouver. Here too, there
were unsettled years of moving from one apartment to another before I finally purchased a permanent home. When my mother brought the box on one of her visits, I saw it as her way of acknowledging that I was now an adult, and that her house in Hamilton was no longer my real home. I recall mumbling my thanks and placing it on the top shelf of the bedroom closet. There the box remained, year after year, deliberately ignored and largely forgotten.

It was not until 1996, the year of my sixtieth birthday, that I felt a need to open the box. That birthday told me that it was time to start a new chapter of my life. For years, I had been opening one door and closing another. My life felt very compartmentalized. Before graduation and after. Before marriage and after. Before children and after they left home. I longed to open all the doors at the same time, to move freely through the past as well as the present. That summer, I went to my cabin alone and brought the box with me. For the first time, I brought no books.

For a long time, I stared at the red lid. My hands were unsteady and my fingers fumbled with the old piece of string. Even after the bow yielded, I hesitated. The minutes ticked by as I sat in total stillness. Sunshine streamed through the window but my hands were frozen. Finally, I lifted the lid.

I saw carefully folded sheets of airmail paper. Some were in envelopes with red, white, and blue edges; others were pre-folded airmail letters with space for the address on the reverse side. The paper was so thin that I could see the handwriting right through it. Some sheets had writing on both sides; tiny German script that filled every inch of the page.

I picked up the top letter and felt the thinness of the transparent paper. Moments passed. Finally, I unfolded the sheet and looked for a signature. Emil. Right away, I knew that it was Emil Fränkel, husband of my father’s younger sister Martha and the man who had become my father’s best friend. I sat for a long time, remembering regular Sunday morning walks with my father after we moved to the city. I was lonely, but I think that my father was even lonelier. Together we would walk through the neighbourhood, just the two of us. Sometimes my father said how much he missed Emil and how lucky he had been to have a brother-in-law who became his
best friend. Sometimes, he would gaze into space and say, “If only Emil had come to Canada…”

Emil had insisted that we go to Canada. It had never occurred to my parents to emigrate. Why would anyone with a close-knit family, dear friends, and a modest but comfortable way of life want to cross an ocean? And why Canada, of all places? My parents often said that they had expected to be battling bears all summer long, then to be hunkering down in an igloo over an endless winter.

My parents were simple folk. Like his four siblings, my father Edmund had been born at home in the family bed in Strobnitz. In 1900, the year of his birth, Strobnitz was just a tiny village in a remote corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The village offered only primary schooling, so Edmund had gone off to study bookkeeping at the Handelsakademie in the nearby town of Gmünd before coming home to help his parents run the store that was their livelihood. He was introduced to my mother at a New Year’s Eve dance to which she wore the midnight blue ball gown she brought to Canada and that I still have. Both my mother and father claimed that it was love at first sight. The following June, they married, and a year later, in the summer of 1936, I was born.

Hitler had come to power in January 1933 when Hindenberg, president of the German Republic, asked him to be chancellor of a coalition government. Like others outside of Germany, my father’s family were not terribly concerned. Politics was for others to worry about, and their hometown of Strobnitz was a backwater in a democratic republic, a safe place in a safe country. My father’s family had lived there since the area was Bohemia and formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Seeking to ensure that World War I had been “the war to end all wars,” the Allies had redrawn the borders in 1918, stripping Bohemia and other strategic areas from Germany and Austria to create the new country called Czechoslovakia. Because it was a democratic nation established by the Allies and had treaties to guarantee its independence, there was nothing to fear.

According to my father, it was in the spring of 1938 that Emil Fränkel had come alone to Strobnitz for a serious talk. I imagine that their conversation went something like this:
—Canada! Emil, are you crazy?
—But Edi, we talked about it before.
—And I said “no.”
—No, Edi. You said you would think about it.
—Well I have, and the answer is “no.” I am just an ordinary fellow. I like it here, and I don’t want to be alone in a strange country.
—Edi, listen to me! You must do this. For all our sakes.
—It’s for all our sakes that I am refusing to go.
—Edi, you just don’t understand how important it is.
—What’s important is that I look after my family. My wife and child first, and then my parents.
—Looking after your family won’t be possible if Hitler crosses the border.
—But Emil, only last week, Hitler said that he has no interest in any other country.
—And you believe him? This week he says one thing, next week another. The Sudetenland is rich, it’s German speaking, and people here are no different from the Austrians. Last month, the citizens of my dear country voted 99.73% in favour of the Anschluss and annexation. Just like my fellow Austrians, voters in the Sudetenland will choose to join Germany.
—Emil, I know the newspapers are depressing. Bad news makes good headlines, but that is no reason to believe what they say. Reading the newspapers can make anybody crazy.
—Edi, I am not crazy. The reality is that Hitler is going to come to the Sudetenland. You must leave.
—But even if you’re right, I can’t leave. Who would run the store? Papa isn’t getting any younger. What would we live on? You are a businessperson, and a successful one at that. You started with nothing, yet you have done really well.
—Yes, I did well, but now, I may have lost everything. Jews have been warned to leave Austria, but I have nowhere to go. The world doesn’t want Jews, and I have no relatives elsewhere to sponsor me. Besides, we are expecting a baby, and the doctor has advised
Martha against travel.
—You could at least go to my brother Arnold in Prague. He’ll help you get established until this blows over.
—Blows over? Edi, Hitler’s just getting started. And much as I love your brother and his wife, I’m no longer so sure that Prague is a safe place.
—Prague not safe? The capital of Czechoslovakia? The Allies have guaranteed its independence.
—I fear that Hitler will come first to the Sudetenland, then to the rest of Czechoslovakia.
—But what will I do? I’ve invested every cent into the store. They can’t just take it away from me.
—They can and they will. Look at Gretl’s parents. They’ve come here with only the clothes on their backs. Do you think Hitler will pay them for their house or their store in Germany?
—But I have no savings. What will we live on?
—But that is why you must leave. Leave everything here, and just get out.
—No, of course not. You must all three go at once.
—Impossible. Gretl will not leave her parents. They are already upset because their other daughter is going to Canada. But Anny has always been the rebel.
—Gretl must go. I’ll look after her parents and send them to Canada on the next available ship. They’ll be right behind you. You must make Gretl see reason.
—See reason? I’m not sure that I do. Just because her sister Anny is crazy enough to leave...
—Not crazy. Smart. Anny and Ludwig are smart to leave.
—It’s easier to be smart if you have some skills. Ludwig is getting into Canada because he’s a country boy and Canada needs farmers.
With father in front of the store bearing the family name
—Then go as a farmer. You are young and Ludwig will teach you.
—Why don’t you go if you think it’s so easy?
—Edi, you know I’d go tomorrow if I could. You are the only one with a chance to get out. Because Gretl is Anny’s only sister, Anny may be able to sponsor the three of you as first-degree relatives. There’s no other way to get into Canada. They aren’t taking Jews. Once you get there, you must find a way to sponsor us. Don’t you see, Edi? You are our only hope. We are all depending on you. The future of the entire Waldstein family rests on your shoulders.