

ALSO BY CHERYL STRAYED

Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail

Torch

TINY
BEAUTIFUL
THINGS

Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar

Cheryl Strayed



Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc. • New York

THE ORDINARY MIRACULOUS

Dear Sugar,

The general mystery of becoming seems like a key idea in many of your columns, of how you don't know what something will turn out to be until you've lived it. It's made me want to know more. Will you give us a specific example of how something has played out over years of your life, Sugar?

Thank you.

Big Fan

Dear Big Fan,

The summer I was eighteen I was driving down a country road with my mother. This was in the rural county where I grew up and all of the roads were country, the houses spread out over miles, hardly any of them in sight of a neighbor. Driving meant going past an endless stream of trees and fields and wildflowers. On this particular afternoon, my mother and I came upon a yard sale at a big house where a very old woman lived alone, her husband dead, her kids grown and gone.

"Let's look and see what she has," my mother said as we passed, so I turned the car around and pulled into the old woman's driveway and the two of us got out.

We were the only people there. Even the old woman whose sale it was didn't come out of the house, only waving to us from a window. It was August, the last stretch of time that I would live with my mother. I'd completed my first year of college by then and I'd returned home for the summer because I'd gotten a job in a nearby town. In a few weeks I'd go back to college and I'd never again live in the place I called home, though I didn't know that then.

There was nothing much of interest at the yard sale, I saw, as I made my way among the junk—old cooking pots and worn-out board games; incomplete sets of dishes in faded, unfashionable colors; and appalling polyester pants—but as I turned away, just before I was about to suggest that we should go, something caught my eye.

It was a red velvet dress trimmed with white lace, fit for a toddler.

"Look at this," I said and held it up to my mother, who said, *Oh, isn't that the sweetest thing*, and I agreed and then set the dress back down.

In a month I'd be nineteen. In a year I'd be married. In three years I'd be standing in a meadow not far from that old woman's yard holding the ashes of my mother's body in my palms. I was pretty certain at that moment that I would never be a mother myself. Children were cute, but ultimately annoying, I thought then. I wanted more out of life.

And yet, ridiculously, inexplicably, on that day the month before I turned nineteen, as my mother and I poked among the detritus of someone else's life, I kept returning to that red velvet dress fit for a toddler. I don't know why. I cannot explain it even now except to say something about it called powerfully to me. I wanted that dress. I tried to talk myself out of wanting

it as I smoothed my hands over the velvet. There was a small square of masking tape near its collar that said \$1.

"You want that dress?" my mother asked, glancing up nonchalantly from her own perusals.

"Why would I?" I snapped, perturbed with myself more than her.

"For someday," said my mother.

"But I'm not even going to have kids," I argued.

"You can put it in a box," she replied. "Then you'll have it, no matter what you do."

"I don't have a dollar," I said with finality.

"I do," my mother said and reached for the dress.

I put it in a box, in a cedar chest that belonged to my mother. I dragged it with me all the way along the scorching trail of my twenties and into my thirties. I had a son and then a daughter. The red dress was a secret only known by me, buried for years among my mother's best things. When I finally unearthed it and held it again it was like being slapped and kissed at the same time, like the volume was being turned way up and also way down. The two things that were true about its existence had an opposite effect and were yet the same single fact:

My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she'll never know.

My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she'll never know.

How beautiful. How ugly.

How little. How big.

How painful. How sweet.

It's almost never until later that we can draw a line between this and that. There was no force at work other than my own desire that compelled me to want that dress. Its meaning was

made only by my mother's death and my daughter's birth. And then it meant a lot. The red dress was the material evidence of my loss, but also of the way my mother's love had carried me forth beyond her, her life extending years into my own in ways I never could have imagined. It was a becoming that I would not have dreamed was mine the moment that red dress caught my eye.

My daughter doesn't connect me to my mother more than my son does. My mother lives as brightly in my boy child as she does in my girl. But seeing my daughter in that red dress on the second Christmas of her life gave me something beyond words. The feeling I got was like that original double whammy I'd had when I first pulled that dress from the box of my mother's best things, only now it was

My daughter is wearing a dress that her grandmother bought for her at a yard sale.

My daughter is wearing a dress that her grandmother bought for her at a yard sale.

It's so simple it breaks my heart. How unspecial that fact is to so many, how ordinary for a child to wear a dress her grandmother bought her, but how very extraordinary it was to me.

I suppose this is what I mean when I say we cannot possibly know what will manifest in our lives. We live and have experiences and leave people we love and get left by them. People we thought would be with us forever aren't and people we didn't know would come into our lives do. Our work here is to keep faith with that, to put it in a box and wait. To trust that someday we will know what it means, so that when the ordinary miraculous is revealed to us we will be there, standing before the baby girl in the pretty dress, grateful for the smallest things.

Yours,
Sugar