



Buck Dopp and his mother in 1955.

Mom's gift

By BUCK DOPP

The last time I saw my mother, she gave me a heating element for a popcorn popper. The element couldn't pop anything because it didn't have a kettle to hold the corn kernels and it didn't have a lid. Nevertheless, she insisted I take it, so I did. Neither of us knew at the time but she would be dead within 60 days.

That visit to see my mom was a spur-of-the-moment decision.

Back in the day, young people drove around in cars listening to the radio and talking. My friend John had a car, so one night after dinner we cruised around the Minnesota countryside with our girlfriends. I was an 18-year-old college freshman who lived at Saint John's University in Collegeville, only 36 miles from our family's two-bedroom, 650 square-foot cabin on Briggs Lake.

"My family doesn't live too far from here," I said.

John smiled. "I got an idea. Let's surprise your family and drop in on them."

"That'd be great," I said. "Mom hasn't been feeling well and would love to see me."

"Let's do it," John said.

"Road trip!" the girls shouted.

My friends were stunned when they walked in the front door and saw a hospital bed smack dab in the middle of the small living room with a smell of sickness in the air. Lying in the bed, an emaciated woman with yellow skin and dark circles under her eyes greeted us with a slow-motion smile.

Mom was happy to see us! Being with people energized her. I introduced John and Mercedes, and then my girlfriend Kitty. My only date in high school happened at a Sadie Hawkins dance and the girl who asked me out never met the family. Looking back, Mom must have had mixed emotions knowing there existed another woman in my life besides her. If it bothered her, though, she never let on.

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She told us to help ourselves to anything we wanted to eat or drink. Shirley Dopp, known by all as "hostess with the mostess," knew how to make people feel welcome. Never sitting down for long, she'd leap to her feet, serve drinks and snacks, offer cigarettes and distribute ashtrays to guests. Now, she couldn't even get out of bed to go to the bathroom.

My teenaged sister and brother and Dad also lived in the cabin, yet I have no memory of them that night-something I find puzzling.

I served soda pop to my friends, who soon ran out of things to say to Mom. They grew uncomfortable standing over her bed and drifted into the kitchen, which connected to the living room. We made small talk among ourselves, forgetting my mother was lying alone in the next room.

"Come in here so I can hear you," she said.

We returned to the living room and she asked us about our classes. Mom loved people. Her conversations consisted of probing questions designed to draw them out. She didn't like talking about herself. She wanted the other person to do all the talking. That was Mom.

After about 20 minutes, John looked at me and said, "We better get going." He and Mercedes told Mom how nice it was to meet her and went out to the car. Then Kitty and I approached the bed. Mom reached out her blotched, skinny arm and patted Kitty's hand saying, "Take good care of my Buckaroo for me. Okay?"

"Sure will, Mrs. Dopp," Kitty said. She headed for the door, leaving me alone with Mom.

"I know you like popcorn," she said. "I want to give you the popcorn popper."

She directed me to a lower kitchen cabinet. I looked at all the shelves and the only thing I could find was the heating element for the popcorn popper. I brought it to the living room and held it up for her to see. "This is all that's under there. I can't use this without the rest of the parts."

"Take it anyway."

"But, Mom, it won't work without the other parts."

"Go ahead and take it, please. I'll send you the rest later."

John honked his horn outside, which agitated me. Patience was never along suit for me anyway. Now, I was close to losing it.

"I've got to go. They're honking at me."

"Take the popcorn popper."

"It's not a popcorn popper. It's only the heating element."

"I want you to have it."

"Okay. I'll take it," I said as I made my getaway.

"Aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?"

"Mom!" I started to say something else, then just shook my head, turned around and marched back to her bedside and kissed her goodbye.

"I love you, son."

"I love you too, Mom."

Before I closed the front door behind me, I turned around to take a last look. Mom was lying on her side,



her head turned toward me, a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. That was the last time I saw her.

For the next 10 years or so, every time I moved, I schlepped that useless heating element - California, Ohio, Minnesota and South Dakota - maybe even Virginia. I never did get a kettle or lid for it, and it never popped a single kernel of corn. I kept it all those years because it reminded me of Mom and her last gift to me.

One day, I looked at it and teared up. It made me so sad, so I threw it away. I guess that's the day I realized that the heating element wasn't the last gift Mom gave me after all. It was a lesson. Give what you have to give. It's not the gift, it's the act of giving from a heart full of love that makes something valuable.

Thanks, Mom.

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