

## **The Shoebox**

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I kneel at the casket and gaze upon my Aunt. So beautiful even in death. Eighty eight years ago she was born prematurely in Astoria, Queens. In those days most preemies were not expected to live, but my Aunt had an inner strength that would carry her from birth to the grave. My Grandfather would put baby Edythe in a baby blanket and place her in a shoebox on top of the coal stove during those first few weeks of life during the cold New York winter evenings.

Edythe was always fragile – physically, at least. She made up for her physical fragility with a steel determination and an unbounded zest for life. As her life pressed on, she suffered from lung cancer, losing part of one lung. She also suffered from Thyroid disease and this in turn affected her eyesight. In 1995 she suffered a stroke the lingering effects of which eventually caused her death.

As I gaze upon my Aunt, I think of all the love and gentleness that she gave to those around her. She was the devoted wife of Bill for fifty years and the mother of two wonderful daughters who have been blessed with my Aunt's determination, compassion, and intelligence. Their devotion to their mother was instrumental, probably, in keeping her alive for so long after the stroke.

Aunt Edie's contribution to my family – and to me in particular – is almost beyond words. The memories that I carry in my heart represent the happiest and most pleasant from my childhood. The Christmases and Thanksgivings, and Easters as well as Birthday parties and summer barbecues were always filled with good food, song, and laughter. Always, much laughter.

With the death of my mother in 1999, Aunt Edie became the family matriarch and the last of an era. I gaze on her now not in grief nor in sorrow but in thanks and in happiness. She is where she wanted to be at the end, with Uncle Bill, and my mother, and all the rest of her departed friends and family. Her life was full, rich with friends and family and love and laughter and travel. When she died earlier this week, she had come a long way from the little shoebox on the stove.