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Sunday Journal: Mother's Day gifts offer a lifetime of beauty

By Mary Ellen Collins, Special to the Times

I just mailed my traditional pre-Mother's Day note to my mom's hairdresser, requesting a gift certificate. As I wrote the check to Margaret's Beauty Salon, I thought back to the incarnation of this idea. When I was about 8, I decided that a collection of small presents would make more of an impact than a single gift. I chose "beauty and makeup" for my theme, and headed downtown to find the items that kept Mom looking as pretty as Loretta Young. It was the early '60s when the glamorous star used to open her TV show by sweeping through the curtains in a swirly gown. My housedress-wearing mother shared Loretta's heart-shaped mouth and side-parted curly hair; but Loretta probably had a fleet of experts who created her look and Mom achieved the effect on her own with Revlon's Paint the Town Pink lipstick and three deftly wound rows of pin curls.

I started at the five-and-dime, where I picked up a package of bobby pins and a new rattail comb. Continuing up the street to the Thrush Drugstore lipstick counter, I pointed out the correct shade and specified Mom's preference for "regular, not lustrous," with the certainty of a makeup veteran.

Although my mother didn't spend money on professional manicures, she never went to her job as a night shift nurse without having just applied a coat of clear polish to newly filed, white-tipped nails. Next on the shopping list: emery boards and a nail white pencil. And for busy hands that somehow remained silky despite cleaning, cooking, canning, planting, weeding and tending to four kids, a husband, a dog and a job - a little jar of pearlescent Paquin hand cream.

After amassing the gifts, I searched under beds and in closets until I found an empty shoe box, which I lined with a stack of gently crumpled Kleenex. I got wrapping paper and ribbon from Mom, who played along when I smiled mysteriously and said I couldn't tell her why I needed it. After wrapping each item and nestling them in the Kleenex, I wrapped the box, and waited.

When Mom opened her present, she threw up her hands in delight and made me feel like the most clever and practical gift giver on earth. I saw no sense in messing with success, so I kept up the beauty box tradition for years, tweaking it according to my finances. If babysitting had been particularly lucrative, I included the tiniest bottle of her signature Arpege cologne. And when cash was low, I strayed from the beauty theme and replaced a pricier item with a medium-point red Bic pen because the nurses on the 11-to-7 shift used red for their chart notes.

My gift tradition certainly lost its element of surprise, but Mom perfected the art of combining

feigned amazement with genuine gratitude, allowing me to experience the joy of giving over and over.

As I grew up I moved on to more traditional presents - jewelry, cookbooks, baking supplies, framed family pictures. But almost 50 years later, I've returned to my gift-giving roots. Mom still has perfectly applied lipstick, self-manicured hands and not a single wrinkle, but she does rely on a pro to take care of her hair now. Each time I send Margaret a check, I include a note reminding her to keep the secret. She mails back the gift certificate with a note that says, "You sure know how to make your mother smile."

Having moved beyond shoe boxes and Kleenex, I still try to be creative with the presentation - sometimes rolling the certificate up like a little diploma, other times tucking it into a picture frame or enhancing it with illustrations.

And this year, like every year, coming up with a clever wrapping connects me to the kid in the drugstore who still gets excited about "surprising" Mom with a practical gift that keeps her looking movie-star lovely.

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