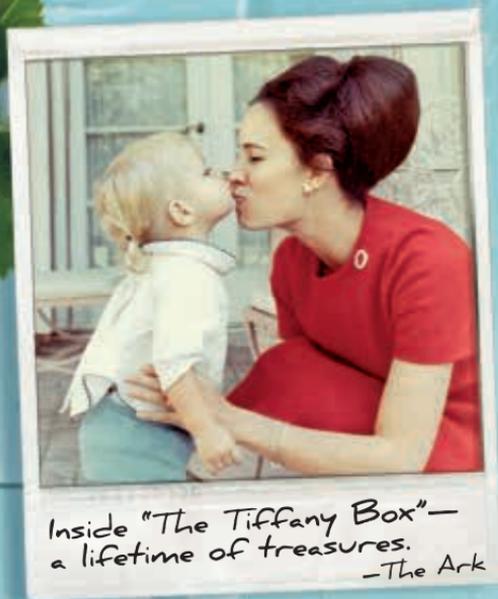


“A beautifully executed exploration of the human heart — its strength, resiliency and infinite capacity to love.”

—HAL CORLEY, *Emmy Award winning writer and playwright*

# The TIFFANY Box

a memoir



Inside “The Tiffany Box”—  
a lifetime of treasures.  
—The Ark

## Kathleen Buckstaff

Former humor columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*

Dear Francis  
man

your memories of  
& beautiful love from her  
you are young to have



# THE TIFFANY BOX

a memoir

Kathleen Buckstaff



TWO DOLPHIN PRODUCTIONS  
SAN FRANCISCO

The events described in this book are real.  
Some names of people have been changed.

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*dear reader*

I am going to imagine we're sitting down to have tea in my kitchen. I have a cupboard full of tea boxes. Let's see, I'll clear dishes off the kitchen table and put the whistle top down on the kettle. When the water boils, we'll hear it. And I'll need to know if you'd like milk or honey. While we wait, I'll tell you a story.

Last December, my friend Ali came to my house with a stack of papers in her arms. "I saved these for you," she said. "I thought you'd want to read them someday."

"What are they?" I asked.

"They're e-mails you wrote to me — from when your mom was sick," she said. "I don't know if you're ready yet, but you need to have them."

My thoughts were cast back in time — I was working as a humor columnist. I had three children under the age of eight. Dan, my husband, and I were living with my mom and dad in Arizona while we remodeled a house across the street. And then my mom was diagnosed with

cancer. I was learning how to be a mother to my own children when overnight, it seemed, I had to learn how to be a mother to my own mom. The women in my mom's family live to be in their 80s and 90s. My mother's own mother had only recently passed away. My mom was 59 when she died.

I took the e-mails. When I was ready, I read them, and then I went to my garage and started looking for more. In one box, I found an old computer of mine. In another box, I found a diary. I went through many boxes, but there was one box I avoided. It was a bright blue Tiffany box, from the jewelry store on Fifth Avenue in New York.

This was the largest Tiffany box I'd ever seen. All Tiffany boxes are good — the big ones and the little ones. This one had contained a wedding present for Dan and me — a Waterford crystal vase. My mom and I agreed it was the prettiest vase we'd ever seen. The crystal catches sunlight and sends bits of color all over the walls.

I kept the empty Tiffany box on a shelf in my garage. After my mom died, I put her correspondences there. I put other things there too and with an indelible, black marker I wrote "FRANCIE" on the side. As an afterthought, I wrote, "SAVE." For years, whenever I saw the box on the shelf in my garage, I read, "SAVE FRANCIE," and the words broke my heart.

The hard part about grief is that you forget. You miss the person so much — so very, very much that the sadness is overwhelming and you forget. I forgot. I forgot what my mother had shown me — in how she lived and how she died. Any time I saw that box on the shelf in my garage, I associated it only with her death.

I finally opened the Tiffany box. Inside, I found photographs of grandchildren my mom had taped to her hospital room wall. I found letters friends had sent to her. I found copies of more e-mails I had written. I found my mother's collection of my columns. Every time I published one, my mom would buy five copies.

"You'll want these someday," she'd say and saved one for herself.

I found sympathy cards sent to me that I'd never opened. I finally read them. People's words felt soothing and kind. For years, I thought I would find death inside the Tiffany box. Instead, I found life. I don't have all of my e-mails or letters from those years, but what I realized as I read through them is that I have enough. The story was there in the Tiffany box.

This is when the kettle whistles and I stop to make us tea.

I took the e-mails and letters and shared them with a few close friends. "You have to do something with these," each woman said to me. Eventually, I decided to create a book using e-mails, letters, humor columns and diary entries. I corrected spelling and grammar, added nicknames for my children, removed personal information about my friends and changed most of my friends' names.

Most of my early e-mails were written to Lisel. Lisel is an artist and lives in New York City. Lisel has class, the real kind, not because she's snobby, but because she isn't. Years ago Lisel was my roommate. She begged me to say tomahto instead of tomato and showed me how to walk with confidence. We reconnected after I had my second baby and she had her first. We were both trying to figure out how to be mothers and artists. During the years Lisel and I wrote

# *Part I*



lavender roses

THE TIFFANY BOX

To: Lisel  
From: Kathleen  
Date: May 23, 1996  
Subj: Listen to this...

Yesterday Sunshine said to me that we needed to go to the ranch. She said it with great urgency. I told her she was going soon with my parents, but she insisted I needed to go too because in her words, "God lives near the ranch and Mama Forest is with God. God lives in the mountains and if you want to see her, there is a very big door and if you open the door you can see all the people who live with God."

This from a girl who isn't four yet.

xxoo

To: Lisel  
From: Kathleen  
Date: June 17, 1996  
Subj: Happy Fathers' Day!

We had a great weekend at the ranch. Did I tell you Sweetness is horse-crazy? We only have one horse now and his name is Blue. Sweetness runs around screaming, "Blue, Blue, Blue," and then he goes to the fridge and gets carrots to feed Blue. Later we had a picnic in the tree house.

I'll talk with you soon.

xxoo

P.S. I have a piece on my grandmother that I wrote and I'll send it to you.

Written 1996

Published Tuesday, June 8, 1999

*The Arizona Republic*

## *Men, Chocolate and Roses*

We thought my grandmother Forest was going to die many times. One time, we even thought she was dead. Three handsome paramedics arrived at her home, transferred her to a flat bed and wheeled her down the walkway. They were almost to the ambulance when Forest whispered to my mother in a soft, Georgia accent, “Get my lipstick.” That’s when we knew she’d live.

Another day arrived when we were certain it was her last. Forest lay in bed at home, not eating, breathing rapidly as her lungs filled with fluid. “In the freezer,” she instructed. A few minutes passed, as she garnered energy. “A shoe box... Mexico... on it.” Under frozen bacon and coffee beans, we found a shoebox tied shut with the word “Mexico” scrawled in her free-flowing hand. She had traveled in Mexico years ago. Perhaps this was some illegal drug, a way to make dying easier. We untied the string and removed the lid. Inside we found six bars of dark, Godiva chocolate. “It will help,” she said and held open her mouth.

One day, I went to go say good-bye to Forest. She had fallen, no broken hip, but she was bruised and hadn’t spoken in a week. My daughter, Sunshine, who was 2 at the time,

came with me. I placed lavender roses on Forest's bedside table. Sunshine reached to grab the petals. "Don't touch," I cautioned.

And then Forest spoke. "But how will she learn to love them? You've got to touch to love. It's all right, you may touch the flowers," Forest said. With a nod from my grandmother, Sunshine touched one petal and then smelled the flower. When Sunshine smiled, Forest exclaimed, "Oh, she likes them!" Forest had something to talk about. She was alive again.

The day I knew my grandmother was truly intimate with death, I sat at her side and I could hear my mother on the phone in the kitchen talking to the caterer. "We'll be expecting 80 people," my mother said, making plans for my grandmother's memorial service.

When my mother hung up the phone, she turned to my aunt and said, "If the caterer calls back, tell him he can reach me at home in an hour."

I pictured the caterer telephoning my grandmother's house and my grandmother answering her phone. "Yes," she'd say.

"I'm calling from Continental Catering regarding the memorial service for Forest Burgess." There'd be a long pause.

"I'm still alive," she'd say. The anger would add at least another week to her life.

But the caterer didn't call back, and my grandmother died the next day. We were there, her two daughters, a nurse and I. Before her hand lost its warmth, I tucked a rose petal in her palm and closed her fingers around it. I have speculated that Forest died in front of us just so that we would believe she had died.

To: Lisel

From: Kathleen

Date: July 18, 1996

Subj: happy July 18

I've been in a weird state recently. What I've figured out is that two things are going on inside. The first is that I'm slowly realizing that my grandmother died. The realization that this is what is — is getting to me. And none of this seems to help because there is nothing I can do to change the situation.

The other thing that is really hard right now is that I am deeply missing having close girlfriends here. My closest friends don't live here and it's tough. What I would give to have a playgroup with you once a week. What this means is that I need to get out more and make an effort to meet more mothers here.

Dan is under a lot of stress at work and I'm trying to be supportive. It's tough talking about work all the time. I know this is a critical, very critical period in his life and ours for that matter, but some lightness and playfulness would be great. Things seem way too serious. I imagine you've felt this way.

The potty training saga continues. Sweetness really is improving but his communication skills are lacking. Is this a male thing?

Hello to everyone.

xxoo

Written 1996

Published Tuesday, May 19, 1998

*The Arizona Republic*

## *White Peach Season*

In June 1995, doctors started to pronounce my grandmother dead. But I knew there was no way a Georgia born woman would die two weeks before white peach season.

White peaches, also known as Babcocks, hit stores the second week of July. Their lower acidity makes them sweeter than other peaches. Forest Burgess would wait until the last white peach was gone and then die.

My mother and I spent the summer locating Babcocks. We found the earliest white peaches while we were on vacation in California. We packed two crates in our luggage and checked them on the plane home.

Forest held her first white peach of the season to the light and turned it.

“Where did you find it?” she said in between breaths. “Isn’t it beautiful?” I could see her consider the family rule: If you have a white peach and want to eat it in the presence of others, you share. The unspoken alternative is to eat it when no one is looking.

“I’m not hungry,” I shouted. Among other health problems, Forest had congestive heart failure, fluid in her lungs.

I took the peach from her and peeled away the skin, the way she always did, careful to leave the flesh smooth and intact. Forest closed her eyes and ate one slice at a time. At 89, she could still moan with delight as sweet juice dripped from her fingers and lips.

“It’s sinful the way you eat a peach,” my grandfather had said to her decades ago. He didn’t know how to love peaches, only that white peaches commanded a premium — an extra few cents a pound. Eventually they divorced over the issue.

The women in my family can talk about a peach longer than men can talk football. The art of selecting a good peach is passed from mother to daughter. We learn early how to sniff a ripening peach, press the skin at the stem’s base and listen by thumping with the flick of a finger to the quality of the core.

The women in my family also teach that as a mother cares for a child, so a daughter will care for an aging parent. For her last seven years, Forest was bedridden and my mother oversaw the details of her life. My mother waited for hours for a doctor to return her call, transferred bags of library books into and out of the trunk of her car and arranged fresh cut roses in old mayonnaise jars. She handled the weekly surprises: the broken water line, the burglary, the empty oxygen tank.

“They increased her medicine a week ago,” my mother said as she sorted Forest’s pills in a muffin tin. “She’s lethargic now. Maybe she needs potassium. I’ll call the doctor and get a blood test ordered.”

I watched my mother so involved and thorough.

“What would happen to her if I weren’t here?” my mother asked.

## about the author



Photo: Brad Reed

**K**athleen Buckstaff lives with her husband and their three children in the San Francisco Bay area. In addition to writing columns, plays and books, Kathleen works as a performance artist. With the help of Artistic Director Carol MacLeod, Kathleen wrote a one-woman play using the e-mails, letters, columns and diary entries contained in this story.

“The Tiffany Box, a love remembered” opened at the Theatre Artist Studio in Phoenix, AZ on November 4, 2010. Kathleen performed the play to sold-out theatres in Phoenix and San Francisco. She performed the play again in New York City as part of a solo festival, and “*The Tiffany Box*” was selected as one of the most outstanding plays.

Kathleen received a BA in English and Creative Writing from Stanford and a MA in Journalism from Stanford.

The author extends her gratitude and love to her husband and children.

For more stories and Book Club discussion questions, please visit: [kathleenbuckstaff.com](http://kathleenbuckstaff.com).

# THE TIFFANY BOX

**T**hrough treasured e-mails, letters and diary entries, Kathleen Buckstaff recreates her life as a mother of young children. We follow her as she gets her first big break writing for the *Los Angeles Times* about her children, her husband and their dog, Rosie.

Kathleen's stories hit home with many readers and the *Los Angeles Times* offers her a sweet deal to pen more columns. Writing with a rare and honest voice, Kathleen shares moments such as trying on foam bellies in a maternity dressing room, her children tricking the tooth fairy and using chocolate to bribe her mother to babysit. Then, unexpectedly, her vibrant mother becomes ill, and Kathleen must learn how to be a mother to her own mom.

Kathleen shows the humor, hard work, insanity, love and joy that are involved in being a mother and a caretaker. This is a book full of wisdom and insight into how to live life well.



Kathleen Buckstaff offers a gem of truth on every page.

*The Tiffany Box* was originally a one-woman play. Kathleen performed the play to sold-out theatres in Phoenix and San Francisco. She performed the play again in New York City as part of the 2011 United Solo Festival, and *The Tiffany Box* was selected as one of the most outstanding plays.

Praise from an audience member:

**[*The Tiffany Box*] was brilliant, poignant, moving and very touching to me. It reminded me of *Wit* by Margaret Edson — also about life and death and cancer but told from the perspective of the patient.**

**Her themes of love, humanity and relationships leading to a fulfilled life resonated with me as did *The Tiffany Box*.**

— CORAL K.

Coming Mother's Day, May 2013, Two Dolphin Productions

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