



JOANNA CALAZANS

Readers Write

BOXES

THE KANSAS SUMMER OF 1953 WAS hot and humid — too hot to play war or basketball. By midmorning the temperature had climbed to one hundred degrees. Most houses had nearly worthless “swamp coolers,” but my dad’s appliance store was air-conditioned, so I jumped on my bike and rode there for relief. I soon spotted the empty cardboard boxes that had held large appliances, and I nagged Dad until he let me take one home.

The box was five feet long, and I was at a loss for how to transport it sixteen blocks on my bike. I tried “wearing” it on my head with the back corner hanging over my rear fender, but it was blown off by the Kansas wind before I passed two buildings. Next I tore down the box and turned it into a wing, which I tied to my back fender. Looking like a Cessna buffeted by the gusts, I slowly pedaled home.

I had to make three stops to retie the string, but I finally got there.

The number of potential uses for the box made my head spin: a fort, a house, a secret cave. No other kid in my neighborhood had a box this big. I whipped out my four-inch jackknife and began sawing away without a plan, cutting crude windows on three sides and a door on the fourth. Then I crawled inside, poked out the window flaps, and opened the door, but it was hot and stuffy, so I got out.

Dad offered me five more boxes, and I recruited Karl and Roger next door to help me transport them home. I would direct our project, now known as “the Cave.” We cut more windows and made telescoping slide-outs and secret exits. We stocked the Cave with peanut butter and Kool-Aid, then morphed into pirates, speaking in brogue and dueling

with swords.

That afternoon it rained hard, and our cave’s roof became soggy and lost all pretense of form. We went into the house to listen to *The Lone Ranger* on the radio.

Later that summer we built a platform from scrap lumber in a large maple tree and obtained three new boxes for walls. We tacked the cardboard panels to the tree using vertical boards as supports. At the end of a day’s work we had an enclosed treehouse seven feet high. Exhausted, I sat on the floor and leaned back against a wall, which instantly broke loose. First a hammer fell, then a can of nails, and then me.

*Ronald L. Riffel
Sarasota, Florida*

IN THE MILITARY I BECAME ACQUAINTED with a box called the “seven cube,” which takes its name from the seven cubic

feet of space inside. Marines use seven cubes to store the gear they are taking overseas. I worked for the chaplain, so my box had a thirty-day supply of wine (both kosher and sacramental), prayer cards, prayer beads, rosaries, Bibles, Korans, Torahs, Armed Forces Hymnals, candles, Communion hosts, and grape juice. It was a waterproof box with a heavy-duty lock, mostly to protect the wine from unauthorized consumption, though it was almost undrinkable.

I learned to pack only what we needed to care for our Marines and not what some officer in Washington said we needed. I dragged that box all over Iraq, keeping a running inventory of its contents in my notebook. Sometimes I slept on it.

I also became very familiar with the medium-sized flat-rate box from the post office. Everyone on deployment got them in the mail. They were magic, because they transformed combat-hardened Marines into excited children when they arrived.

The red-white-and-blue Priority Mail boxes brought us fresh socks, snacks, pictures from home, and, if we were lucky, soft toilet paper. Some were sent by strangers and addressed to "Any Marine." Mine from home often contained my son's schoolwork or art and the occasional handwritten note. We had to burn all of that to protect our families in case we were captured, but I liked getting his boxes anyway.

These days I send boxes to my son. I fill them with Legos, snacks, and a handwritten note. He lives in California with his mother, while I live in North Carolina. Divorce isn't exactly a war zone, but it's not easy.

*Michael Ramos
Leland, North Carolina*

PACKING UP OUR POSSESSIONS FOR a three-year sojourn in the German countryside was a daunting job. For me it awakened memories of having to leave most of my belongings behind when my family immigrated to the United States from Germany many years before. "You may fill one box," my mother had instructed me.

For this move my husband brought home many boxes: sturdy, uniformly sized, and folded flat. "Take along whatever you

love," we told our three young daughters, hoping to make the transition easier for them. They still couldn't quite imagine trading our light-filled home in Berkeley for a thatched-roof house near the North Sea.

On Sunday I started wrapping favorite pictures, glasses, and teacups in soft towels. The girls deliberated about toys, games, and tchotchkes. Occasionally they came to ask my advice: Stuffed dog? Yes. Legos? *No, you've outgrown them.* Scrapbook? Yes. Metal detector? *No.*

"Won't there be buried treasures in Germany?" my youngest wondered.

"Of course, but it's just too bulky," I told her, and she cried.

I was having my own dilemmas: Favorite cutting knife? Needles and thread? Dog pillow? The bronze Buddha? Knowing we would be returning to Berkeley eventually, I didn't even consider anything in the back of closets, the attic, or the basement. And still there were so many items! I thought of the refugees who'd escaped

Hitler's Germany with only the clothes on their backs, a few coins in their pockets, and perhaps a diamond brooch sewn into the hem of a dress.

By Friday a pyramid of boxes rose in the center of our living room: sixty-five in all. Everything in them had seemed indispensable to at least one of us.

Two big men from the shipping company arrived and loaded the boxes onto their truck. Our own departure was still two weeks away. I watched them drive off, wondering how we would fare for fourteen days without our essentials.

As it turned out, there were plenty of dishes, towels, clothes, books, and CDs to keep us happy. Though we had just shipped away sixty-five boxes of belongings, we still had everything we needed.

*Christine Schoefer
Berkeley, California
(end of excerpt)*

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your writing under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary one-year subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your piece is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
The Internet	February 1	August 2012
Forgetting	March 1	September 2012
Role Models	April 1	October 2012
Confessions	May 1	November 2012
Acts Of Kindness	June 1	December 2012
Snow	July 1	January 2013