Surviving first holiday season without Mom

by Marsha Kay Seff

I'm trying to sort through my feelings about my first holiday season without Mom.

The thing is, our family never really celebrated, so I didn't miss a big family party. But I did miss my mother more than usual.

While all my friends were gathering with their relatives, I reached for the phone to call Mom more often than I had been. And I had been doing that a lot.

While everyone else was opening Christmas presents, I finally felt moved to plow though suitcases I hadn't had the energy to tackle since Mom moved to a skilled-nursing facility almost two years ago. It was the third time I had done this chore for her - first when she moved from Miami Beach to an assisted-living facility in Southern California; again, when she left there.

Every sweat shirt and sweater I picked up had a history. We'd bought all of them together at the thrift stores. Shopping the thrifts had been one of our favorite pastimes before my mom became too ill to get in and out of the car.

I made piles of clothing for a few friends of hers. Some clothes went to skilled-nursing residents who don't have family to shop for them. A few, to me. The rest will go back to the thrifts where, I hope, they will give other mothers and daughters some joy.

Yes, I kept a few jackets that she loved. Though they're big on me, I wore two to work. Cuddled in them, I felt as if Mom were still with me.

I've also been wearing the silver earrings I bought her through the years. They look great on me, and Mom would approve. It feels as if they were her holiday presents to me.

One suitcase is full of her diaries. I'll save them for later; I don't have the heart to read them yet.

Oddly enough, her false teeth were the saddest find. How much grief they had given Mom. How much time I'd spent in search of a miracle "glue" that would keep them in her mouth. The night she lost them at Denny's

and I had to crawl under the table to find them still cracks me up. We were fortunate we could laugh at incidents such as that, for there were plenty.

Yes, I miss my mother. She always was my rock and my source of unconditional love. But I'm luckier than some adult children: I have no regrets about not doing everything I could to help make her last stage of life comfortable and happy. And there's no unfinished business between us.

So, I stroke Mom's sweater, which is draped over the passenger seat in my car. And I laugh when I pick up the phone to tell her something that no one else would care about. Instead, I phone my dear sister, Bobbe. Now, she's my mommy, and I'm hers. Thank goodness looking after Mom and Dad brought us so much closer.

As for the false teeth, I can't bring myself to throw them out. I've even thought about putting them in a shadowbox and hanging them on the wall.

Don't worry, it's just a thought ...

MEDICARE PART B

Bad news for some from Medicare: This year, the payment for Part B - the optional insurance that helps pay for doctors, outpatient hospital care and some other medical services that Part A doesn't cover, such as physical and occupational therapy and some home health care - is climbing for many of us.

Instead of the usual flat fee, the new costs for 2007 premiums are based on adjusted gross income as reported on your 2005 tax return. Single Medicare recipients whose AGI was $80,000 or less and married couples whose AGI was $160,000 or less pay $93.50.

The rest pay more: The cost is $105.80 for AGIs of $80,000 to $100,000 for singles and $160,001 to $200,000 for couples; $124.40 for AGIs of $100,001 to $150,000 for singles and $200,001 to $300,000 for couples; $142.90 for AGIs of $150,001 to $200,000 for singles and $300,001 to $400,000 for couples; and $161.40 above $200,000 for singles and $400,000 for couples.