

Graduations

By Nina Collins

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In the fall of 1986, as I was embarking on a new life as a college freshman at Barnard, my mother was dying of a metastasized breast cancer that was eating away at her spine. Only I didn't know it, and none of her friends and family knew it, because she had chosen to keep it a secret. So when she hobbled, or sometimes used a cane, we believed what she told us, that she had pulled a muscle while exercising. She had always been thin, so the extra thinness went unremarked upon, at least by me, who was caught up in my own New Chapter excitement.

I remember standing on the line at Orientation, arms laden with forms and the dog-eared course catalog. My mother was by my side, patiently waiting so we could go to lunch together afterward at the uptown outpost of Souen, her favorite macrobiotic restaurant. She stood there as I did, nervous and excited, in a long skirt, t-shirt and sandals, shapeless embroidered hippie purse slung over one shoulder, her graying curly hair slightly messy. We met Marnie from Mill Valley, Victoria from Dallas, and Andrea from Brookline, beautiful, tall girls with shiny hair and nice clothes. They all seemed glamorous and exotic to me, a far cry from my high school classmates. My mother, herself kind of glamorous and exotic, but in a kooky distracted artist sort of way, chatted with the other parents, smiled her infectious grin, was charming and fragile. She wasn't feeling physically strong, and the emotion of my impending departure was taking a toll too. For her it must have felt a bit like an ending, and for me, a beginning, although neither of us said as much.

She was ecstatic when I got into Barnard, early admission the fall of my junior year of high school. I was precocious, and I wanted out sooner than most. Mom and my high school guidance counselor agreed that if I got into a "good enough" school, I could go. She was a Skidmore graduate, one of the very first black ones, and the fact that I'd chosen another Seven Sisters school pleased her. I could tell she was sad all that fall, but she mostly kept it to herself. She would sometimes say she missed me, and because she lived only an hour away in Rockland County and worked in the city, I would see her at random times. One day that October she called from a payphone and told me to meet her on the corner in ten minutes. I was paying \$200 a month to live off-campus in the closed-off dining room of a rambling, run-down, pre-war apartment on Riverside and 114th Street, rooming with four sweet boys from Columbia, boys who smoked pot, ate Chinese take-out, and watched David Letterman every single night of the school week. We had a Soloflex machine in our living room. I ran downstairs, and just as I got to the curb she pulled up in her leased mauve Toyota Corolla, the car would that would be repossessed when she died a year later. She handed me two lemons and a package wrapped in white paper; it looked like a small submarine sandwich. "Broil this, with lemon. Eat some today and some tomorrow. You need the protein." It was a pound of halibut.

Sometimes I would call and complain about how much work I had, or tell funny stories about my waitressing job in the Jazz Room at The West End, and she would remind me not to walk carrying heavy book-bags. “It’s not good for you to carry too much weight on one side of your body, it’ll throw you off-balance.” she’d say.

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That December, during Finals Week, my mother picked me up on Riverside and we drove over to Columbus Avenue in the 70s to shop for her wedding dress. After many years divorced, she had met and fallen in love with a man named Alfred the year before, and they had decided to get married at Christmas—a small ceremony, family only, in our Nyack home. I remember the two of us in the store, sifting through long, brightly colored, close fitting, silk dresses. I was resentful of the upcoming nuptials, unsure about this interloper in our home. Even if I was no longer there, I wanted my mother all to myself. From her side, I can see now, all these years later, that she was sick, and in love, and her kids were growing up, and she was trying to hold it all together as best she could. So it was an awkward, cold afternoon, full of love, and tension, and things unsaid. We chose a rose colored gown, with an open back and a sash in a deeper hue, and she wore it on Boxing Day when she got married. The dress hangs in my closet still.

Last month my own eldest daughter graduated from high school. I took her up to Boston last week for her college orientation, and felled by a cold, wound up spending most of the time alone in a hotel room, shedding a few more tears than I’d like to admit. I’m incredibly proud, and mostly delighted, that my daughter has become such a lovely and capable young woman and is headed out into the world. But in a brutal reminder of the way we carry our wounds and pass them on, there’s a part of me that has been flung back by this transition, to that place, twenty-five years ago, that place of enormous loss.

Nine months after my mother’s wedding, I was by her side at Sloan Kettering during her last few days, as the morphine drip relieved her pain and took her away from us. I had a little brother to finish raising, a stepfather I didn’t trust, and a biological father who had not much to offer. It was a lonely time, a situation I wouldn’t wish on anyone. As I now watch my own children at that moment, that cusp of adulthood, I have to remind myself that I’m still here, that it’s all different for them, that they don’t have the same scars. They have different ones, for sure, but they don’t have mine.

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