

From her closet, with love

Zibby Right lost more than a best friend in the September 11 attacks—she lost her funnier, more risk-taking other half. Twelve years later, a gift of style helped her feel whole again.

I can't remember where or when Stacey got her red feather boa, but it was a permanent fixture in the many places we lived together. We met during our freshman year at college, and immediately spent all our time in each other's rooms, me cross-legged on her rag rug, or Stacey on my striped duvet, her strong legs stretched out over my desk chair. The next year we shared a room so small that I had to crawl onto my bunk if she needed to get to her desk. There were off-campus apartments junior and senior year, then an apartment in New York City, decorated with posters tacked to the walls. Her feather boa was there, of course. She would grab it playfully on her way to dinner, wrap it around her neck dramatically to watch the Oscars on our hand-me-down sofa, or dance provocatively with

it during the parties we hosted. *Really, Stacey?* I'd think and occasionally say. *A boa?* She couldn't have cared less.

We both planned to get our MBAs, but while I packed up for business school in the summer of 2001, she stayed on in New York, settling easily into her new job at Marsh & McLennan, sky-high in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. When I left, it was harder to say good-bye to Stacey than anything else. I have a picture of the two of us hugging at our moving-out party, cheeks smashed together, as close physically as we were emotionally.

On the morning of September 11, when she rushed to work as she always did, her boa must have swayed on the back of her bedroom door, next to her blue fuzzy robe with the moon and stars on it. I found it there after I raced back to New York on the 12th, to sit vigil in her apartment, waiting for her to return. Then I helped pack it up weeks later, once we realized that, like thousands of others, she was never coming back.

I've always felt like Stacey and I were more than just best friends. We both had serious boyfriends during the seven years we knew each other, but our relationship went deeper than those romances ever did. In some ways, we were as attached in our 20s as I feel to my husband now, tiptoeing toward 40. We seemed to fill in the pieces we were each missing, like spilled paint spreading slowly into the colorless bits of our personalities, until we were both fully shaded just the right amount. I was always a bit shy, a perfectionist, on time or early for everything, an avid rule-follower and people-pleaser. Stacey, hugely popular and outgoing, pleased people on her own terms. It was Stacey who pulled me up on the restaurant's stage at my 21st birthday dinner, her arms waving overhead, woo-hoo'ing, her index fingers pointing as she made me dance with her. It was Stacey who got a group of girls to go skinny-dipping in my family's pool one summer night, something I'd never done before, or since. I can still feel the cool water electrifying my skin, our heads bobbing up and down amid

the ripples under the dark night sky, laughing. I like to think I helped Stacey, also, tethering her down when she drifted off too far, urging her to focus. She was probably annoyed when I made her change from a short skirt with a giant slit up the leg into a boring black dress for an interview, but I know she appreciated it once she landed the job.

Losing Stacey felt as if the structure I'd trusted to hold me up had irreparably broken; the ground beneath me had shattered. When I returned to school, I got emails from classmates about drinks; a friend reconfirmed her wedding that Saturday night. *How could I possibly be a part of any of that again?* I deleted-all and spent weeks in tears.

Stacey's mother was kind enough to send me some of her clothes, including a few of my own things that had mixed in with hers over the years. I remember taking them all to the dry cleaner and trying to explain to the man behind the desk how precious they were: a leopard-print skirt, a brightly flowered one, her beaded belt. I hung them in my closet, and I'd touch them just to say hello as I put on my own, more conservative clothes. Occasionally I'd rip off the dry cleaner's plastic bag and slip a piece on. When I left the house dressed in something of Stacey's, I felt a thrilling boost of energy, a sweet secret I was carrying around. In fact, I was wearing one of her favorite tops on the night I decided to get together with the man who became my husband.

Over time, I no longer needed Stacey to wrap that boa around me and yell "Zibs!" to get up and have fun; I did it on my own. Twelve years after her death, I still think of her as I say "Why not?" to all sorts of new situations, as I dance enthusiastically with friends. If I scratch down to the root of some of my best qualities, my most fun adventures, I find Stacey there.

A few months ago, I met Stacey's mother for lunch near my home in New York. It was, as my 6-year-old daughter, Phoebe, would say, "happy, sad, happy, sad" to sit with her again. "Stacey had so many friends," her mom said, as we finished our salads. "But you two were soulmates. Stacey always told me that." Then she reached into a bag beside her and pulled out Stacey's red boa. My fork froze in midair. Sound stopped. All I could hear was my heart pounding, and I felt tears coming to my eyes.

I hadn't seen her boa since the day that October when I helped box up her belongings. I might have glimpsed it as I worked with her mom one quiet afternoon in Connecticut, unpacking some of her things in her family's home. I can still remember how shaken I was when, on my knees hunched over a box, I uncovered one long strand of Stacey's gorgeous brown hair amidst the tops and dresses. I sank back on my

heels, holding her hair to the light streaming in from the window, wondering how *this* could be all that was left on earth of my best friend.

"Here," her mother said at lunch, as she handed the boa across the table. "Stacey would have wanted Phoebe to have it." The boa was worn, some feathers gone, but it still radiated the vibrant energy that was Stacey.

I brought it home that afternoon and walked it down to the playroom, where my kids were skittering around happily. When I told Phoebe that the boa used to be Stacey's, she said, "Your friend who died in that building?" Then she reached for it. I was tempted to say no, to clutch it to my chest. But I knew that no matter how protective I was, nothing would bring Stacey back. So I sat on the stairs and watched my daughter dance around the room draped in the boa, blissful. I tried unsuccessfully to hide my crying.

"It's okay, they're happy tears," I said, as my son came over to see what was wrong. And they were. I tried to explain that when someone dies, their possessions are precious things to remember them by, but that Stacey would have wanted us to enjoy her boa. If it becomes threadbare after a million dress-up sessions, that's okay. The true gifts she gave us will stay perfectly preserved in my heart—and in theirs. Even so, they always tell playmates to "be careful with mama's friend's boa" as they joyfully fling it around their necks. Happy, sad, happy, sad. **®**



Zibby wearing the boa at a party last November.

TARA DONNE: PROP STYLIST: ERIN SWIFT AT KATERYAN.

ZIBBY: MATTEO PRANDINI/BFANYS.COM.