

## Mom's Eulogy

Packed in a station wagon, we were driving through Northern California, embarked on one of our father's tours of National Parks, missions, and assorted historical landmarks before moving back East. We were stopped at a picnic area because our mother had to use the "facilities." Pati was at a picnic table waiting, and Evie and I were in the car. Since I was only a baby at the time, I have to cobble this anecdote together from the many secondhand variations that evolved through the years. But the simple fact of our mother being followed by a large bear on her way back to the car after her visit to the woods is immutable. That it was walking on its hind legs is inarguable, too, mostly because it makes for a better image. The animal's brown, almost mustardy color also meant it was not one of the ubiquitous, basket-raiding black bears. My father, shining a flashlight from the car to guide her back, claimed that he saw it rear up behind her and amble for a few steps. Because he didn't want her to panic, he did not bring her attention to her new admirer. And she made it back to the car without a clue. Though at some point, years later, she admitted to being confused at seeing our faces contorted with horror and awe, wondering what we were all so worried about.

This is only one narrative example of my mother's charmed existence but an allegory that captures the essence of her personality, the way she navigated, or danced, through most of her life. Had she been alerted to the bear, she might not have lived to ninety-four. Except for the purpose of reminiscing, she rarely "looked over her shoulder" to see what was behind but always straight ahead into the future, to the next thing. Which might explain the three cars she totaled in my childhood. Last year, she and I got into an argument when I mentioned the third: a four-speed silver '74 Camaro with a 350 engine and red seats. Her coy denials were classic, but anyone who knew her well recognized her impatience and not necessarily her speed, as the culprit—whether fixed on arriving somewhere or having something completed ASAP. It was her perennial mode.

We understood that if someone told our mother to do something, to try something new, or if our father was introducing her to a skill...she gave it 200%. She sometimes feigned resistance, but she always wanted *in*. She did not want to miss out, fail, lose, or disappoint. Once, getting fitted for rental skis, she was told by the technician to lean forward and test the binding release. 200% later, she had catapulted herself out of the skis and halfway across the room to spend the rest of the weekend off the slopes recovering from her injuries.

She was an endearing sandbagger. And her subtle competitiveness could work her into a sweat quickly, especially the idea of taking any sort of test or being in a situation where she had to measure up. I'm sure her petánque crew remembers this state viscerally. A forensic reading of the civilized but rollicking cricket game on Nauset with her grandchildren reveals a more intense reality. Zoom in on a picture of her at bat and you'll see a grimace bent **not** on the destruction of her foes, but to prove she could keep up despite her age. She did not want to let anyone down, and always had high expectations for her own performance. Though she never wanted you to know that.

Even though the proximity of authority was her kryptonite, our mother fretted her way through the Power Squadron course for small boat operators with my father as if her life depended on it. Her fear of police—and, by association, lifeguards, harbormasters, etc.—stemmed from the aforementioned automotive record or was, possibly, just residual guilt from all of the hotel and restaurant swag she'd pilfered on vacations to Bermuda. "The waiter over there is trying to get your attention, Evie," my dad would whisper as she was slipping an ashtray discreetly into her purse. Or,

“Here they come!” he’d tease whenever she was driving and a police car passed us. “Act natural. He’s turning around!” She bought it every time, because she did not want to get in trouble. Our father knew her quest for perfection well, and because he was a teaser, knew how to sow doubt, often commenting on the perspective in her paintings as he passed behind her, gesturing with his finger at how a certain roofline or cove edge *didn’t quite* agree with the vanishing point. She’d return to the drawing board in an optimistic furor.

Now, imagine our mother’s brand of idealism, motivation, ambition focused on bringing up three kids, taking care of an ailing husband, or on maintaining her own independence for two decades after he died. It was heroic. And one of the reasons she was so *alive*, stayed so positive. This would also explain the deep sadness she expressed after her stroke, a palpable disappointment which she somehow managed to communicate, and which we understood. And recognized. When she put her mind to something, there was no stopping her. Making decisions had always been something our father did, but in her own hybrid way, she-often, especially with the validation and encouragement others, could be fiercely decisive. She knew what she wanted, and, when she asked for your thoughts, you knew pretty quickly that she’d already made up her mind, and you’d better be on board.

Imagine this sort of determination focused on meeting new people! In all of their adopted communities and travels, our parents owed their friendships to my *mother’s* gravitational pull, *her* easy conversation. Our dad was a personable, affable guy, a gentleman, but *definitely* not the one to initiate connections, or the one to forge (in a matter of minutes) relationships that would last a lifetime. It was the same brand of magic dust, the cosmic aura that secured her the family name “Motif #1” because of her photogenic radioactivity. Sometimes, after getting off the phone, we’d feel profoundly sorry for her, pining away on the Cape, lonely, installed in front of the TV waiting for her children to visit. So, we’d jump in the car, get down there, only to learn very quickly that in a single week she’d been to the health club, to a concert with friends, a movie, a book group, bowling, out for a burger... And we’d think, *Wait a minute...*

Imagine this enthusiasm, this hunger for experience and openness to learning new things targeting an iPhone. She was texting me like a fourteen year-old two days before she had her stroke (thumbs up, rainbow emojis, exploding hearts, etc.) in response to some publishing news. Or imagine that energy focused on a dancing career! Evie shared some videos from 2018 in which our mother, after dusting off and strapping on her shoes and steadying herself between a table and a bookcase, was able to summon up a few of her old tap dance routines while listening to music. It’s really inspiring to see it come back to her, inhabit her, and then to watch her face and her feet as she struggles, trying to find the groove, waiting for memory to deliver the goods. Then it happens; something interlocks in the commerce of sound and motion, and she says something like, “there it is, that’s it, I’m in...” And her wide-eyed astonishment and pride when the song is over and she looks up at the camera.

We could also see that muscle memory when she was still jumping off the dock at Ryder’s Cove in her mid-80s, sputtering to the surface then magically, gracefully planing off into a classic, measured elegant crawl. And, maybe we’d seen it, but hadn’t recognized it yet, in the way she nonchalantly strolled back to the car in Northern California, emerging from between the shadows of redwoods. She’d just met the nicest bear, and he probably wanted to stay in touch, or, maybe, he just wanted to dance.

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