

### Motherly Awareness

*A grandmother-by-marriage, I have never given birth or raised a child. In 2003—while folding clothes to give-away, I realize how sweet a mother-daughter moment might have been.*

Like high school picture books collecting dust, my youth is captive in a box of clothes. As memories of youth I am not vain enough to think I'll ever fit back into them. No. These clothes hold another kind of power. Other clothes are routinely rotated for seasonal wear. Twice a year my clothes closet gets purged. Boxed or bagged these clothes wind up at the local women's thrift store. My youth-box of clothes are never considered giveaway. Each year I shake my head, thinking, I'm not ready to let go. These 'snapshots' of cotton, silk, and polyester, stored for twenty-five years, tell a story just as any photograph would.

Compliments of workers in India, Afghanistan, and Mexico, a number of garments reflect my late teens and early twenties. Bohemian treasures, they explode with color. Splashes of orange and yellow tie-dye patterns, contrast with loud swirls of purple and greenish-blue. Most were purchased in the mid-1970s at the Minnesota State Fair or at expensive, off-beat hippie boutiques. I still recall the agony of choosing a single item given my budget as a working-class college student. Later in life these cheerful skirts and blouses became a lesson in global economics—subtle reminders of my role in possibly exploiting underpaid women and children.

During college I felt flirtatious and delicious-looking in a cream-colored lacy blouse with spaghetti-thin straps. It exposed bare sun-kissed shoulders. Well-endowed, I wore it daringly. For underneath its see-through gauzy cotton, cleavage *was* revealed.

Beloved is a charcoal gray interview suit whose thin woolen blend is smooth to the touch. A hopeful jobseeker will get her dream job with this outfit. On me, the padded jacket ended several inches below my hips. The mid-calf skirt flounces like a cowgirl skirt, only more sedate. My skin still recalls the feel of the suit's silk inner lining. It was the best power suit for days when I needed an edge as an up and coming Professional Career Woman. *May she who wears it transcend every glass ceiling put in her path.*

An expensive black lace dress with sheer cotton lining was rarely worn, never returned. I bought it without trying it on at the store. At home, it didn't look right over my wide hips. For awhile, once a year, I'd try it on to see if it looked any better. I always meant to give it to a friend. Well, friends moved on and I became a bona fide dress hoarder.

A conservative silk-lined dress suit, with three wide horizontal bands, still looks like an off-the-rack from Saks Fifth Avenue. It's gorgeous. Solid bands of fuchsia, dark purple, and black follow one another from shoulder to hemline. Beautifully embossed gold and black buttons cascade evenly down the front. I try to imagine what pumps and earrings I wore with it—but alas, I don't remember wearing it. It probably was one of those 'the sales price is right, even though I can't fit into it,' kind of purchase.

Unexpectedly, laughter comes. In my hands is an outfit of sparkling gold lame: a skimpy halter-top, a knee-high skirt with a long provocative back-slit, and a shoulder wrap about five feet long. Instantly, I am twenty-something, onstage at a musical production singing, impersonating, Lena Horne. The outfit looks like it could fit a Barbie doll.

More clothes, more images. In my early twenties I'm a vision wearing an elegant butter-yellow jumpsuit. Buying it was reward for ending a spiritual fast after college graduation. Holding it against my body, to fold and return it to the box, a quivering begins just below my heart.

Suddenly, I'm crying. Tempted to use the clothes, I turn away. Using the back of my hands I wipe aside streaming tears. What is going on? Trying to get a handle only encourages sobs. What deeper emotions want acknowledgment?

Like a psychoanalyst I peel away layers beneath the tear-fest. Youth, it appears, is not the only symbolic thing about these clothes. These bits of fabric bring to mind decisions made in the span of twenty-something to oh-my-the-biological clock has tic-toced itself silly.

Of decisions made in a lifetime, deciding to be biologically incorrect is a momentous hormonal declaration. Deciding *not* to become a birth mother ranks right up there with all the other decisions a woman makes in her egg-producing lifetime. The final declaration took place when I was thirty-nine. Only a few years after getting married, I ended years of teeter-totter indecision.

I have never regretted the no-birth choice. Yet, in the moment of teardrops falling, truth emerges like headlights coming out of a dense fog on a new moon evening.

It's not youth I miss. I miss a mother-daughter moment. Flesh of my flesh who might've cared how her mother got through a moment of angst. Someone with whom I could reminisce—like I have done so many times with my mother. A longing overpowers me to hear the sound of a daughter's laugh. To see her smile. To see her take on the world.

And now, the tears sure feel like regret. I will never, in this reality, nurture a fetus or physically give birth. No matter how tempting it is to push regret aside, I stay with it for awhile. Though not in a wallowing shroud of self-pity.

At this moment, with one and a half feet into menopause, eggs almost depleted, I create space to move through this new vibration gently, with awareness. After all, it is the first time I've faced regret with an open heart and mind.

When tears subside, I ask Gary, my husband, to take this box of clothes to the thrift store. My resolve may crumble if I take them.



### Abyssinia (2000)

It was in Sodere I sang  
impromptu with rural  
Ethiopian women

We stood under  
an open blue afternoon sky  
in communal showers of  
hot mineral springs,  
whose diverted waters  
tumbled forcefully  
out of extended metal pipes

We were women baring skin

Our laughter, smiles, and  
hand gestures, made  
outstanding bridges of  
moment's truth

Who needs language translators  
when melodies are sung?