

Seamstress to the Scars

I knew Breast Cancer as a child, long before I ever knew a name for what I was seeing. It was hard stuff for a kid to assimilate, and only years later did I recall what a shock it was to see the effects of the disease and the 'cure' on a regular female body...

My mother was a Rosie-the-Riveter during World War II, but before that, she had worked—always, it seemed. First, she was a domestic and child care worker in her teens and early adulthood, sometimes to help out the family during the Depression era, other times to snatch some independence from them and take off, 'on a toot', said one uncle. Only later in her youth did she discover her real talent (though it never paid off like the job at the airplane factory). My mom could sew up a storm, and make two of anything out of next to nothing.

She learned to sew in self-defense, she always claimed. Less than five feet tall, she got tired of trying to shop in the children's department, or wearing her hand-me-downs 'as-is'. Learning to alter a sleeve, or take up a hem was an act of resistance and self-assertion. And she was 'wicked good' at it, as Yankees would say. Our house was festooned with left over fabrics, a great boon to an active artsy child with a Barbie doll to clothe. As neighbors began to admire her efforts, others with particular alteration needs began to bring her work, or commission clothing from scratch (we took that as very positive). But as our neighborhood changed from white to black, Southern preferences took their toll on her custom. No neighbors came to have their clothing twitched to perfection; no cheerleaders pranced in their short skirts and modest panties through our living room anymore. Mama got a job in a store as the Alteration Lady, since it didn't matter to them where she lived. And her fame grew, especially in our new neighborhood. The crazy lady with the circle and star painted on the patio could sew all sorts of things. Everybody knew her work.

And so, only special business came to the Alteration Lady living among the blacks (though that was not the name assigned to our neighbors by most): women who, for whatever reason, felt they had something to hide, women who did not want anyone to know their clothes had been altered. What better escape from prying white eyes than into the shady neighborhood where the legendary seamstress still lived? One long term customer was an enormous woman and successful champion at Bridge, through which tournaments she ate her way as a bluff, a stress relief, and long-time hobby. No regular size would fit her; my mother would start with a printed pattern and work from there. The kitchen table could barely accommodate one sleeve of the expanded pattern; skirts were...awesome. Finally in disgust, Mama hired me to work on the 'tents', and I earned my allowance as 'Omar, the Tentmaker', stitching hems into the night before tournaments like some Puccini heroine, sans the nasty cough.

Another special moment came when a snazzy car turned up in our drive, bearing the split trousers of one of the Temptations R & B group, headlining in the show at the Fountainbleu Hotel on Miami Beach. Times and the South being what they were, no white seamstress employed at the hotel, not even a Cuban (!), would stoop to mend a black man's pair of pants, no matter how famous he was, or how necessary the costume. But one of the waitstaff backstage at the show was from our neighborhood, and it was decided that there could be no reason why a woman living among blacks would refuse the commission, if asked. They were right, and a fabulous, very long and thin-legged pair of lime green double-knit pants appeared in our living room—no person attached, thank goodness (the proprieties remained intact). We marveled at the height of the performer, the fine work on the sequined cuffs, and the mighty tear that rent the zipper unsalvageable. Frustrated but equal to the creative challenge, my mother declared, 'Oh, what does he need a fly for, on stage like that? They can just tell him to hold it', as she turned the zipper into faux fly with an elastic waistband. Fees were paid, the shimmering pants were whisked away, and as far as we ever knew, worked perfectly well. We were pleased with our brush with fame.

Most regularly, however, came the older white women, bravely making their way into the Forbidden Zone to consult with my mother. They were all shapes and sizes, all social levels, but one thing leveled them: their missing breasts, their scars and mutilated shoulders, and the difference in their acceptance of their plight and their willingness to confront it. That they came at all set them apart: it was a functional apartheid then that only the desperate or the Do-Gooder social worker would even dare acknowledge, much less violate. But still they came, seeking nimble fingers and the gift of utter anonymity that only the Wrong Side of the Tracks could confer on their situation.

As I attended my mother at fittings, making myself useful with pins and tape measures, I saw the aftermath of the sorry state of breast surgery in the early days of growing survival rates and techniques in the late 50s, and early 60s. I recall most clearly Edna, the mousey Church Lady from the Southern Baptist church we used to attend before the Change of color and attitude that accompanied it. Later as a Hebrew Scholar, I would learn, with some amusement, that 'edna' in Hebrew refers to female sexual pleasure, orgasm if you will, and it seemed an irony as I recalled a real Edna who had no such associations to her name or life. Always dressed in rose, with certain pleats strategically placed on the bodice, she would blush a fiery red and then go blotchy with shame as she undressed for her fittings. Turning away from eyes that were not looking, we would speak quietly of her dismay at her body after the fittings were over. 'It's not her fault', my mother would say; 'what has *she* got to feel bad about? That surgeon, though, is a butcher and I'd tell him to his face if I ever caught up with him!' All right, I thought; poor Edna. There are other ways to feel about those awful scars, lopsided silhouettes, and smashed nipples, I concluded—but it was hard not to share Edna's consternation at her deformity, and in that sharing, feel fear of a similar future fate.

Thank God—or Goddess, more aptly—for Mrs. Robb, then! The first white woman I ever heard use the word ‘pee’, much less engage in that activity when needed, she was the first visible hot flash viewed by my childhood eyes. I laughed with her as she would throw herself on the couch, throw off the partially pinned garment, fan herself with anything available, and opine that God could never, ever be a Female entity, or such indignities would never exist. My mother would join in the laughter, and they would share drags on illicit cigarettes as they waited for Mrs. Robb’s body to ‘rejoin the living’, as she always put it.

She met her breast cancer and its aftermath with the same aplomb, and then some. Her entire shoulder area, and not just the breast (as with other customers) had been removed: a dark, deep hole gaped in her side, and there was very little my mother could do to make even a short sleeve lay properly, and a capped sleeve?—out of the question! Together after fittings, we would strategize from our Girl Scout craft-knowledge, and we tried to fabricate a variety of crude, home made prostheses, cool enough for the Miami summers and hot flashes besides, to help Mrs. Robb get comfortable. Ping pong balls glued carefully together with Elmer’s (too lumpy), custom sized balls of yarn, loosely wound around newspaper balls (too hot), and wiffle balls all came and went on our dining room table as we sought to restore Mrs. Robb’s breast. I thought at the time that it was very unfair that I could not turn these efforts in at school as my craft project, but I had learned to keep female secrets as well as my mother. I knew I was a young acolyte at the door of the Temple of Women’s Mysteries, of which my mother was an unexpected and untrained priestess, and we guarded our knowledge of the Dark Side, the dreaded Female Problems, as well as any priest kept his confessional.

When we presented some of our ideas to Mrs. Robb, she quite literally blew us off our helpful and tentative feet. “But where would I keep everything if I used one of these?” she asked, eyeing our misshapen prostheses askance, and proceeded to demonstrate. She took down her droopy half slip before our eyes, and first produced a lacy linen hanky from inside her secret recesses of scar tissue. Next, she pulled out a bag of M & Ms, then a lipstick, and finally, a small and heavy change purse, stuffed with folded green bills! She laughed and invited us to join in, saying to my mother, “Honey, this is the most useful spot I’ve ever found on my body! It’s way too useful just to fill up so some other people won’t look at me funny!” We smiled, and however secretly shocked, agreed that we would stop trying to do more than make modest, cool clothing—with a special little entrance in the seam below the armpit whose function was now only too clear. It was a Secret Portal to her hidden treasures, not the least of which was her ability to convert her horrendous blemish into something of convenience for her and laughter for others.

As an adult Ph.D. faced with a hot, voluminous doctoral robe that nevertheless still had no functional pockets or place for a purse, I took a page from the childhood lesson Mrs. Robb had taught me. I sewed a huge silk pocket into the seam beneath the armhole, and use it to store my own lacy linen hanky, a few cough drops, and a lip gloss, some paper money plus my keys. It’s easy to access in the big

floppy sleeves, and I always have cab fare if I need it, even if some new graduate chooses to pinch my purse in recognition of how poorly paid their new position will leave them. I think of Mrs. Robb amid the pomp and circumstance, withdraw a paper fan from beneath my arm, and return to a different time, hearing an inner speech of female bonding and knowledge and spirit, no matter what the men enthroned above me may choose to intone on a hot day in May. Scripture passages and mighty thoughts go by, but my mind's eye is populated by lime green sequins, hidden caves of many treasures, and my time as assistant to the Seamstress to the Scars.