

Preface

The Queen of Memory



Nobody loved clothes more than Ellie. When she arrived for a weekend visit to our home in Connecticut, the back of her car sagged under the weight of her suitcases—all packed lovingly, neatly ordered, pressed, not a handkerchief out of place. Jeannette and I had a closet especially available for her visits, wooden hangers ready. She would hang each and every blouse, pair of pants, and jacket, then say, “Let’s see the garden.” She’d have an outfit on in minutes, and the flowers seemed to perk up in attention as she rattled off each name in Latin, its nickname, and at whose garden in which country she’d seen it.

4 Ellie was all about memory. At the drop of a hat, she could spin a tale from her beginnings in the rural South, in winding Faulknerian sentences that climbed up walls like vines and spread through counties and states, with cryptic asides about who divorced whom and who took to the bottle. She bounded through decades, sometimes barely lifting her fork while we all ate, so as not to miss a beat. Nothing could impede her tales. Once, before getting in a cab on a side street in Manhattan, taxi door open, one leg already in, she riffed into a tale. Soon, seventeen cabs were honking wildly. She stared a cabbie down and said, “Jus’ a minute. I’m not finished.”

So it was like watching Sandy Koufax lose his pitching arm when Ellie’s memory began to fade. It just couldn’t be. She was queen of memory, and cloaked herself no less in her clothes than her memories. As her condition worsened, Jeannette instinctively began to photograph her mother’s clothes, so she could trigger her mother’s memories. The photos started out simply staged, but soon Jeannette—always a simple dresser—sought out fabrics and patterns as backdrops. She found old papers in her mother’s closets and drawers. It was as if honoring her mother’s clothes brought out a hidden textile dexterity in her daughter. Living four thousand miles away in Rome, Jeannette began scouring small fabric shops on worn side streets, in buildings with patched mustard and umber walls. Each fabric had a personal reference for her mother: One was to a toile in their family’s home, or to a place Ellie had been when she wore a particular dress, such as the tableclothes from the restaurant “21,” one of Ellie’s favorite New York haunts.

Jeannette worked daily, climbing a tall ladder to attach fabric to strings fixed to a cornice, so as not to mar the walls in our Rome apartment (which is precisely how Ellie would have done it). She matched exactly one fabric to each article of clothing, with a precision that seemed an ode to Ellie.

Then, photos placed in a portfolio, Jeannette would visit Ellie, first in Ellie’s home outside Charlottesville, and later, when her condition had become full Alzheimer’s, at a care center. When Ellie couldn’t remember her daughter’s name, she could still recall when and where she’d worn her clothing: The time she piled strawberries in vats beside their pool for Bill Blass’ first trunk show in Atlanta; the time she’d gone to Highlands in August, walked into the corner pharmacy, and who did she see...; the time she’d worn a red cape and driven her beloved silver BMW four hours to the ocean so she could pack shrimp in an iced cooler to bring to her grandchildren, Isabelle and Ben—with a bouquet of peonies from her garden wrapped in a wet towel and foil, or with a bird’s nest she’d found in a shrub.

It was remarkable and moving—and sometimes nearly impossible to breathe—as Ellie’s memory was revived. Each visit prompted renewed energy for Jeannette’s project. She filled huge suitcases with her mother’s clothes, paid extra when the airport check-in attendant’s eyes popped over the weight, flew back to Rome, then set out once more to match her mother’s clothes with the right fabric, to not only create an ode to her mother, but to cull more and more memories.

As Ellie’s memory collapsed completely, it was like hearing a bagpipe deflate. Hers was a world so richly constructed, so thoroughly indexed in her mind, that it was as if a verbal tradition had been lost. Ellie was Ellie, there were no others. Even toward the end, one of Jeannette’s photos would elicit a memory, but in a tale too common, known to millions throughout the world, eventually those last memories faded.

And so, here they are for the world, a bouquet of flowers from a daughter to her mother, in memory of a mother whose memory was like no other.

Ellie used to call on holidays and say, “Happy days...happy days.” This is one of those happy days.

JAMES D. BARRON, *son-in-law*, Rome, 2009