

## DAWN WAS JUST BREAKING . . .

I sat beside her bed in the wee hours of the morning, watching her uneven breathing. I wondered how, after eighty years of life, it had come to this. Here we were, in the same hospital in Hollywood, Florida, where she had spent the better part of six months, trying to recover from an automobile accident. This was my mother, the person who had given me life, and who had spent her life taking care of everyone around her.

My mind wandered back to the first time we had come to Florida when I was eleven years old. It was so exciting! The four of us, my parents, sister and I, had taken a train from Penn Station in New York in the hot, muggy, summer of 1954. My parents had rented two rooms in an apartment hotel on Indian Creek Drive for the summer.

The trip was eye-opening, as we passed through the southern states. There were stops where passengers could disembark for a few moments to use the restrooms and quench their thirst by using the dribbling water fountains. I had seen a sign over one of them which said "Colored." How exciting, I thought! Colored water would be appearing, instead of the regular colorless kind. What fun! As I leaned over to take a sip, noting that the water was, well, colorless, my mother took my elbow roughly and directed me towards the water fountain that was labeled "White." I could not understand why. Back on the train, Mom explained to me that "Colored" was another word for "Negro," and only Caucasians were allowed to use the "White" water fountain. What??? Growing up in New York did not prepare me for either the difference in name, or the fact that such a bizarre arrangement existed. Although I persisted in questioning this aberrant behavior, I was never provided with a satisfactory answer.

Our trip by cab to the hotel took us through what, at that time, was sleepy, sparsely populated Miami Beach. We gaped at the palm trees and the tiny homes painted in pastel colors, which were nestled between the trees. Finally, we arrived at our small hotel that faced the Indian Creek. It was pink and white, and surrounded by well-kept tropical bushes and towering palm trees. My parents' room, an efficiency, had air-conditioning! The room I shared with my sister, did not. Instead, we had two large windows perpendicular to each other that provided cross-ventilation. Our room was one block from the ocean, so at night we opened both windows, and slept comfortably feeling the balmy ocean breezes.

Our hotel did not have a pool, so the residents had unlimited access to a pool and beach at a small oceanfront hotel two blocks away. The minute I stepped onto the sugary white sand, I knew I was in paradise. I could not have imagined that there was any place outside of New York State that could capture my heart as did that first step.

The ocean was as warm as bath water, but very buoyant. Quite different from the Atlantic waters up north. I had come to Florida not knowing how to swim, so I did not venture out very far. Just wading and splashing around with my family and new friends every day, was joyful and exhilarating.

And yes, my father saw to it that I would finally learn to swim. I had resisted all efforts to teach me how to swim at beach clubs in New York. This was especially frustrating to my parents, both of whom were excellent swimmers. As a result of my refusal to try, I was relegated to the shallow end of the pool. While my family and friends swam laps and dove off the diving board at the deep end, I jumped around with a tube around my waist looking enviously at the others.

At one point, I took off the tube and ventured towards the deep end. Suddenly, the bottom of the pool slanted and I was above my neck in water, terrified and frozen to the spot. My father agonized whether he should jump in and save me, or make this a teachable moment. He chose the latter. "Bethy," he yelled, "kick as hard as you can. Left arm over your head, right arm over your head. That's it, that's it!" I blindly followed his instructions until I reached the side of the pool. Then he jumped in and accompanied me to the deep end. I could swim! Later that summer, I taught a four-year-old boy how to swim.

The summer ended too soon, and once again we spent another year enjoying the change of seasons in New York. But we vowed to go back the next year to our new-found paradise.

I was brought back to the present as the machines monitoring my mother's vital signs continued to record her decline. I held her hand, and told her that it was okay for her to go: she would join my father who had died sixteen years before, and that my sister and I would remain as a close family unit. I was not sure she could hear me, but she seemed to press my hand ever so gently. As I watched her raspy breaths, my mind once again recalled happier times we had spent together.

As we had promised ourselves in the fall of 1954, the next year found us back on Indian Creek Drive. This time we flew in a prop jet, and that was quite a ride. It was bumpy for the entire trip. We could see lightening flash outside the plane, and hear the thunder. I was too airsick to be frightened. But once we landed safely, the ride was forgotten as I rushed out to explore the beach.

Some of our friends from the year before had returned. It was almost as though we had formed a summer family. There were a huge number of young teenagers in my age group. We spent the time swimming during the day and in the “rec room” of the Cadillac hotel at night. We played 45 rpm records and danced to that new phenomenon our parents hated: Rock and Roll. Ah, sweet innocence! We could wander the streets until midnight, because the streets were deemed to be safe and there were fifty of us! Today we would have been picked up in some kind of street gang sweep.

Again, the summer flew by, and it was time to return home to New York. Mercifully, the red-eye flight home was smooth and uneventful. I slept through the four-hour ride, and awoke just as the sun was coming up. I realized I was no longer in my beloved Florida and, although daybreak was beautiful, it was bittersweet. I determined that one day I would go back there to live.

That fall I was back in Junior High School, once again required to write the dreaded annual composition, “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.” This time, I was delighted to recount all the fun I had experienced, in what I thought of as my private paradise. I described the ride home, awakening with the sun, by dramatically saying that “dawn was just breaking, and so was my heart.”

They say that if you visit Florida, and want to return, you have “sand between your toes.” It was true of my family. As time passed, my parents relocated to Florida in 1973. Unfortunately, my father died soon after in 1974, and my mother was left here without her spouse or her children. My husband and I followed in 1978, happy to leave the cold, snowy New York winters, and happy to join my mother here.

Suddenly, I was jolted back to reality as the heart monitor above my mother's head flatlined and alarms went off. A nurse appeared in the room. She looked at my mother, looked at me, and then slowly and sympathetically shook her head. I leaned over the bed, kissed my mother's forehead and, fighting back tears, told her good-bye and that I loved her.

As I stood up, I turned towards the window in her room. And once again, dawn was just breaking and so was my heart.