

Life Lessons

by Patricia Herchuk Sheehy

The envelope was stuffed in the mailbox between bills and circulars and three catalogs. I

thought for sure it was a wedding invitation — thick white vellum, my name handwritten in black ink in a style I could never master. Instead, it was an invitation to my 25th high school reunion. Obviously, a mistake. Standing on the sidewalk, the rest of the mail tucked under one arm, I did a quick calculation on my fingers. There was no mistake. Twenty-five years had come and gone and the class of 1964 wanted to celebrate. As I write this, nearly three more decades have passed and, still, memories and regrets slip along the edges of my mind.

I placed the invitation on my kitchen counter, allowing it to taunt me for weeks before deciding to attend. Maybe going back — reconnecting with my past, seeing the truth of myself and how others saw me — maybe it would help my rocky passage through middle age. I worried, though, that I hadn't changed enough. Then I worried that nobody would remember me and those who did wouldn't care. Mostly, I worried that this might be my last chance to apologize.

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It was Easter Sunday, 1958. At twelve, I was the oldest of four children. A blue-collar family, we'd fallen on hard times and now lived in a housing project. But my parents were quick to remind us that we weren't real "project kids" — we'd stumbled into this world and would soon forge our way out — and we needed to understand how life worked beyond our brick compound. Simply put, that meant there were examples to set, rules to follow, lessons to learn. Lots of lessons. That Easter Sunday was no exception.

As soon as I woke, dressed in flannel pajamas, my hair in pin curls protected by an open weave brown net, I padded into the living room ready to sneak candy from the bounty I'd come to expect. Every Easter, we each received a basket brimming with marshmallow animals, jelly beans and malted eggs. Always a few plastic toys, a paddle and ball, and, in the center, a chocolate bunny with a sugar bow tie. Well, the Easter Bunny had come all right, leaving behind the expected baskets for the younger two. But all my sister Janice (younger than me by one year) and I received was a large chocolate-covered coconut egg, something along the lines of an oversized Mounds bar.

Mom and Dad were a united front against our disappointment. As children get older, they explained, things change. From now on, there would be one major present for Christmas, maybe two, instead of six or seven, and a single candy for Easter instead of an entire basket. Janice and I looked at each other, our eyes rolling until only the whites showed, our lips tightening in a side smirk.

Apparently this was a lesson in growing up. And we didn't like it. Not one bit.

As it turned out, it was the smaller of two lessons meted out that Sunday. The next was mine alone.

My best friend was Cheryl, a towering large-framed black girl with jet-colored hair and brown eyes. I was a short, small-boned, white girl with sandy brown hair and hazel eyes. We were in the seventh grade and nearly inseparable.

After church, I was about to run across the street to share my coconut egg with Cheryl when my father stopped me. He was a man of his time — and this was a time when neighbors accused one another of being communists, and most white people thought Little Rock should remain segregated — and so he worried a lot. He worried about racial mixing and what the neighbors would think about whatever his kids did.

“You have to stop seeing her,” he said. “You’re getting older and boys might get involved. It’s not right anymore.”

I knew I should say something. I should argue. I should defend my friendship. But I didn’t. Clutching the box with the chocolate egg, running my thumb across the cellophane top, I just kept looking up at him. And I said nothing. Finally, he let me go. “This one last time,” he cautioned.

I remember walking really fast, across the street and around the bend, out of my father’s view. When I knew he couldn’t see me, I slowed down. Cheryl’s building was the next one on my right and I needed time to think. But I didn’t know how to think about all this and so I just shuffled my feet across the sidewalk for a while scuffing up my new good shoes. Eventually, I opened up the heavy door to her building and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Cheryl grinned as she let me in, seeing the candy in my hand. I entered shyly, suddenly a stranger in this familiar place. In her kitchen, I positioned a serrated knife on top of the egg, ready to slice off half, ready to share my Easter candy with my best friend. Just before pressing

down through chocolate and coconut, I moved the knife slightly to the right, slicing off a piece for her much smaller than I'd intended. Already I had begun the process of betrayal.

After that, it was never the same. I stopped calling for her on the way to school. I walked home the long way, by myself, tagging behind kids I didn't know to make it seem like I was with them. And every time she asked, I lied about why I couldn't see her. I couldn't tell her the truth. What could I possibly say about something I didn't understand myself? And I could no longer look her in the eyes. Finally she stopped asking. In high school, we'd wave to each other across the wide hallways. But that was it. It never felt hostile, just separate. And lonely.

Two years after graduation, we were still in the project and it was me, alone, who moved away. Only for a while, but long enough to discover life through a lens unfiltered by the shield of family love. Vietnam was in full swing. Racial tension was high. Riots were breaking out everywhere. Living on my own, I realized how harsh life can be. And how hard it is to protect the ones you love. That's all my father had been doing. Forbidding me to see Cheryl was his attempt at sheltering me — and maybe himself — from a world that judged too much, tolerated too little. Yet, in obeying him, I'd betrayed myself. I was one of the masses who did nothing. Even as the adult in me was starting to change, standing up in little ways for what I believed in, I continued to be embarrassed by the young girl who didn't fight for her best friend.

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At the reunion, I was surprised so many classmates remembered me. Swept up in a sea of squeals and recognition, of hand-grabbing and hugs, I found myself bridging past and present with long-

forgotten stories. I squeezed my husband's hand, glad he was witness to this moment of acceptance and closure. Only one thing was left to be done. I kept scanning the room, wandering from group to group, asking others if they'd seen her. They hadn't. And nobody knew if she was coming.

The lights flickered, signaling dinner was about to be served. We sat at the table I'd scoped out as soon as we'd arrived, leaving my purse behind to save our seats. It was near the door, perfect for the early escape I no longer desired. I was toying with my salad, when my eyes caught the movement of white chiffon. "That's her." I nudged my husband. "That's Cheryl." There she was, framed by the doorway, a large woman in a caftan-style dress, her once long jet hair now cropped close, dusted with gray. She broke into that familiar grin, nodding her head and pointing a finger toward me. All those years, and the recognition was instantaneous.

I watched as Cheryl moved toward me, and when I was absolutely certain she was headed my way, I pushed back my chair and stood up. We hugged, tentatively at first. Then tighter. And then tighter still. I breathed in her scent and quickly broke away, knowing I had only a few seconds before the world would claim her.

I took hold of Cheryl's hands and, for the first time in decades, looked unflinchingly into her brown eyes. "I always loved you," I told her.

"I know, Patty," she said. "I've always known."

Her voice was soft, her look direct, and in that moment I realized that she really did know. She knew all of it.

And I have to live with that.

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