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Storied New York  
Midterm  
Oct. 25, 2011

Trying to follow in formidable footsteps

This past Saturday, Oct. 22, marked the one year anniversary of my maternal grandmother's death. To honor the life of Helen Currie and pay my respects, I went to Bemelman's Bar in The Carlyle Hotel on East 76th Street to have a vodka tonic, the drink I'd heard her order time and time again.

She'd spent time at the Cafe Carlyle, listening to George Feyer on the piano, during her trips to New York as a buyer for Davidson's, a department store in Pittsburgh, Pa. Her being a working woman in the Sixties, and me being a graduate student in 2011, I didn't quite have the funds to pay for the cover charge and a drink in the Cafe Carlyle, but I still felt her spirit present with me.

Although my grandmother and I never got to visit New York City together during her life, I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for her. Not only did she tell great stories that made me want to pursue a life in the Big Apple, she lived a life that made it possible for future generations of women to make their own life choices. For both, I'm eternally grateful.

My grandmother came from simple beginnings. She was literally a coal miner's daughter - her father, a Scot, had a degree in coal mining from a Scottish university, but couldn't find a job there. He moved the family to the hills and hollars of West Virginia, back to Scotland, eventually settling in Aliquippa, Pa.

She didn't enjoy school, and dropped out, but not before meeting my grandfather (who, in great irony, went on to become a professor of education. Never enough school for him!) at a dance. They married when they were 19, and shortly thereafter she earned her GED credential, and took business classes so she could work for Davidson's.

She was a success. On her trips to New York, she bought for the dress, sportswear, accessory, jewelry and lingerie departments of Davidson's. My grandfather long bragged that the store never had to have a sale because she knew her clients so well that merchandise flew off the racks. As an awkward pre-teen, I admired her sense of style. Gifts from Grandma Currie were almost always on trend and flattering. My mother had famously been named "Best Dressed" in high school, because she often had new styles before they were widely available - although she'll also be the first to admit she skipped school so often it seemed as if she had a new outfit for every day.

I became a little obsessed with New York, thinking if I lived there, it would have the same glamorous effect on me. When I was nine, I wrote a novel, in a notebook with a yellow cover, about a leaf monster trying to destroy New York City. Most of my favorite movies were New York-centric - "Annie," "Ghostbusters"... I loved the scenery, loved that Bill Murray's character in "Ghostbusters" was so sarcastic. Even if I didn't know what sarcasm was yet, I liked the attitude.

As I grew older, my fascination with New York grew every time I heard my grandmother talk about the garment district (or the time she approached a man she thought she recognized from Aliquippa, which has a large African-American population. The man turned out to be Sidney Poitier, and she had walked into a movie scene.)

I started seriously trying to figure out what I could do in the fashion industry in New York when I started high school. I didn't think buying was going to be the job for me - I wasn't fond of math, and the industry was changing. Being a buyer for a store in Pittsburgh, if there were any independent ones left, probably wouldn't involve going to the fashion shows anymore. Chains handled all their buying at store headquarters. I didn't see myself becoming a designer, since I'd never been a particularly good artist. I didn't see myself suddenly growing to six feet tall, so I also ruled out becoming a supermodel.

Writing was a long time love, and I realized that Seventeen, and YM, and Vogue didn't write themselves. Journalism was going to be my career, I decided. I found out that West Virginia University, where my uncle had earned his doctorate, had a highly-ranked journalism school. It was a nice distance away from home, and reasonably priced. And I'd always had a soft spot for the "wild and wonderful" state, because of my "wild and wonderful" grandma. It was the only school I applied to, and I was thrilled when I got in.

And although I also knew I wasn't a singer, when I realized my high school's chorus was going to New York City my senior year, I joined so I could finally see and walk the city for myself. We sang the National Anthem at Shea Stadium. We went on a dinner cruise around the Statue of Liberty. I bought shoes for the prom at Macy's. It felt right; I couldn't wait to make it my home.

It is probably due to my grandmother's triumphs on her visits to New York that kept my family from saying anything discouraging as years passed and I still didn't seem any closer to landing a job at Vogue than I had been at 16. I said it was going to

happen, and it was going to happen. I also appreciate that no one ever told me to just get married and let someone take care of me, or that I needed to have kids. I fully believe had my grandmother not been a career woman my mother's whole life, my family's dinner conversations would have been more about who my sister and I were dating than what we were accomplishing. Marriage was something to enjoy when you met the right person, not a goal in and of itself.

When I separated from the Army in November 2009, I thought I was finally on my way to New York. A new G.I. Bill was going to cover more of my tuition expenses at Columbia University, which I thought would be my stepping stone. But when I took the writing test, I had computer issues and miscommunication with the proctor, and wound up going an hour over the allotted time.

I thought I still gave good answers though, and a Columbia grad had looked over and given me advice on my application essays, so I thought I still had a chance. When I visited a friend attending Fordham in February 2010, it seemed like a move to Manhattan was imminent. I visited an eyebrow trainer. I visited Hearst Tower, at the invitation of a department editor at the Oprah magazine I'd gathered sources for while I was deployed. I didn't get lost, and thought I felt like a natural on the subway.

The e-mail I received that March said otherwise - I wasn't accepted for the Class of 2011. I was crushed. But a few months later, when my grandmother was diagnosed with lung cancer, and I was the only one in the family who could move to Palm Coast and live with her, I realized I hadn't been meant to be in school or working yet.

I worried that being out of journalism for so long would work against me. I originally planned to try to pick up some work in Florida, but the cancer was farther

along than we realized, and my grandmother was too dependent for me to have outside work. I put my efforts into studying for the GRE, so I could apply to more than one school. I read piles of magazines while I waited for my grandmother to need my assistance.

Sadly, in those four months, we didn't get to talk about her nearly 30-year-long career much, or her time in the city. Talking much became too difficult for her. But while for a long time, she'd worry about me the most - whether I was out late or would get lost, even though I'd been known as the most independent, least gullible, I think she believed after our time together that I was going to be safe in the city.

Now I sense an occasional "hello" - when I walked into Washington Square Park to make some phone calls one day, a bagpiper started playing. It gave me chills. Most of the places my grandmother used to frequent are now closed, as is apt to happen in a city that changes every day - I can't go to Peter's Backyard, or the Monk's Inn or check into the Mayflower Hotel.

Instead, I have to find my own places. I have the benefit of living here, and being single - I'm not just here for a week or so once a season. I can take the time to explore and enjoy everything the city has to offer. If I can navigate New York with as much aplomb as my grandmother did, I think I'll have at least a 30 year relationship with it, too.