

## Substitute Advice

Mother was a plus-size woman long before Lane Bryant catalogs hit rural mailboxes. She didn't bother with standard-issue muumuus or fleecy slippers, though. As my Aunt Sylvia put it, Mother was "drawn to polyester, like moths to a flame." Aunt Sylvia made a lot of references to fire. Anyway, Mother owned a pair of elastic-waist polyester slacks in every Crayola color, and then some, and usually matched those slacks with sleeved, billowy blouses. Frills, ruffles, or flounces didn't much interest Mother. But vibrant hues and bold patterns did—swirls, plaids, circles, waves, stripes. As it happens, "colorful" and "comfortable" proved to be Mother's fashion bywords her entire life. Think 1970s on repeat!

Aside from the eye-popping wardrobe, Mother had an abundance of short, bouncy black curls. She shunned the frozen, shellacked look of the day. We had the same can of Aqua Net in the bathroom cupboard for years until my oldest brother crafted a homemade flamethrower from it and a Bic lighter. Aunt Sylvia was favorably intrigued. Mother's round face was framed, literally, with a curious pair of cat-eye spectacles, the frames a bright stained-glass motif and about two decades out of fashion. Her initials, delicately tooled from silver foil, adhered to the left lens. Like a bounce-house or a bumper-car track, Mother just looked like a hoot and a half.

My mother graduated from State Teachers College at Frostburg sometime in the early 1960s. After a stint as a public-school teacher, she resigned to raise a family, which eventually included me and my three siblings. She says she stayed pregnant for 84 months straight, but I've done the math, and it doesn't add up. Mother wasn't a math teacher.

Once my sister—my youngest sibling—was old enough to attend school, in 1980, Mother yearned to teach again. She found a part-time position at a preschool just a few miles from our house. She proved to be a perfect fit—an ebullient personality with a knack for dispensing just enough discipline to elicit respect, but never fear. Plus, her three- and four-year-old students loved her colorful, larger-than-life presence and the sheer joy she showed for the minutiae of everyday life: frogs, cabooses, raindrops, earthworms, mountaintops. Her knowledge of dolls and toy trucks bordered on prodigious. Not content with only her part-time work, she applied to be a substitute teacher with the county school board. Application approved! Really, was there any question it wouldn't be approved?

All was well with her substitute-teaching gig until I walked into my sixth-grade classroom one day expecting to see Mr. Hostetler's gigantic mustache and bald head. Instead, I spied my very own mother, resplendently decked out in a blood-orange ensemble, neatly writing her name in smooth cursive strokes on the chalkboard.

Keen perception is one of Mother's many superpowers, so she could tell instantly that I was wary of this arrangement. She greeted me and my classmates, and explained the day's first lesson, which included a group activity. As we separated into groups, amid the clatter of moving desks, I heard whispers about my mother, each one landing like a

sucker punch: she was fat, she wore funny clothes and even funnier eyeglasses, she wore a dirty mop as a wig. The whispers lasted only a few seconds but they proved paralyzing to 11-year-old me.

As the school day wore on, Mother knew something had me terribly upset, but she didn't reach out immediately to mollycoddle me. That evening, she called me into the kitchen to help her with dinner. She was making chipped-beef gravy in the electric skillet, and she wanted me to man the toaster, dropping four slices of bread into the appliance at her direction. Our family of six could eat an entire loaf of Wonder Bread on chipped-beef night. As Mother stirred the milk into the rue, she asked me casually to explain my sulkiness at school. I hemmed and hawed, dodging this question and a subsequent one. Mother was nothing if not dogged. She eventually wore down my defenses, partly because she had always been easy to talk to, even with the tough stuff, like when our beagle Pepper died or when that lummox C.J. Merritt gave me the slimiest wet willy ever. So, as tears suffused my eyes, I finally told Mother what my classmates had said.

She bent down so our plastic frames were only inches apart—she and I shared the gift of nearsightedness—and she took my chin between her thumb and forefinger. Her response surprised me. “I hoped you had missed those.” I must have looked dumbfounded, realizing a beat late that she too had overheard the comments.

She released my chin, steadied her gaze. “A long time ago, I promised myself I was going to be the person I wanted to be. I was going to dress how I liked, laugh as much and as loud as I liked. Love who I liked. And I was going to choose happiness whenever I could, even when things didn't go my way. Some people don't understand this approach—to sideline sadness or anger, even spitefulness. My way doesn't always work, but I always try.”

“But they were mean, Mother, and I didn't know what to say,” I countered, as the first tear ran down my cheek.

“Those things were hard for you to hear today because you love me. And I love you. But in the end, it's so much easier to choose to be happy, no matter what anyone else thinks.” Our eyes remained fixed on each other's, her lips curving into a tender smile. “It's so much easier.” She pushed a second slow-tracking tear from my cheek with her thumb. “As your Aunt Sylvia would say, blaze your own path.” That sounded a lot like Aunt Sylvia, I had to admit.

At just that moment, the toaster bounced four pieces of toast away from its fading orange coils. She and I both knew the conversation was over. “I better get back to this gravy, and you better get back to that toast. Your dad will be in from the garden soon and want dinner.”

In the intervening decades, I've learned some amazing things from a mishmash of people—taciturn teachers, windy preachers, fierce friends, quirky professors, complete strangers—but one of the greatest lessons I ever learned came from an unforgettable substitute teacher I call Mother.