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A Backward Glance

It is a little painful to remember myself in the first gathering of college freshmen, in the fall of 1965, in the faded genteel living room of a Radcliffe dorm. The other girls, in drapery clothes, offered limp hands and languid smiles. I, midwestern in wraparound skirt and shirt, all but pounced on my new classmates, quoting them back their middle names—Claire Adriana Nivola!—memorized from the photos in the freshman handbook. By the end of that year, I myself had become languid, or a facsimile of it—and that’s a little painful to remember, too. I tried to speak in a bored breathy voice. I wore slingback heels to the library and a little tweed skirt suit smoothed inside by a severe Lycra girdle. That, I thought, was how you attracted a Harvard grad student. After all, I had been schooled by my mother to believe that my body’s whole task in life was to avoid doing something shameful: never to bulge out of clothes, reveal underwear straps or leg hair, get too hungry, restless, or joyful. My body was not to be trusted.

Fortunately, a wave of new thinking was rolling in from the West Coast, a slow wave that would come to be called the sixties. My first taste of it came at the beginning of sophomore year, when a girl from California appeared on the front steps of my dorm, wearing a sky blue coat and a straw boater. I’d heard about Robin Von Breton from older girls. She’d taken a year off to work in L.A. for Charles and Ray Eames. She was a poet. But the jolt of this sky blue coat (coats then were gray, black, brown) on this blonde earnest person, and the hat out of a Victorian novel—this sense of a costume that pleased her alone—was unlike anything I had ever seen. We proceeded inside together. She took off the coat. She was wearing a trim tent-shaped dress of stiff canvas, imprinted with huge red strawberries on a field of yellow.

There are moments that are watersheds in one’s life—when a vast structure of assumptions shifts, opens, tumbles. Robin wasn’t trying to look like an adornment to a Harvard man. She was a young woman whose every move proclaimed originality. And it wasn’t just a pose. Her poems were clean and natural (although turquoise, from a turquoise typewriter ribbon). Robert Lowell had let her into his seminar. But the most potent of Robin’s traits, to a dazzled me, was the boldness that had led to that dress. Actually, she had several such dresses, all with different patterns. “You don’t know about Marimekko?” she said.

I did know vaguely about the small fabric company in faraway Finland, the source of these geometrically shaped canvas dresses with the wild patterns.

They had become all the rage in fashion magazines. *Vogue's* pictorial had been positively sylvan: Marimekko-clad Finnish models posed on old wooden docks, among lakeside reeds, in forests. But I hadn't known about the store right here in Cambridge, on elegant Brattle Street, which was called Design Research, or D.R.

Did I dare go there? My allowance was whatever my mother could squeeze out of the household budget (and I had five younger brothers and sisters and a father who sometimes gambled on the commodity market). But one sunny day I rode my bike to the old white-brick row house with the stark, bright interior. Upstairs, in their own pink-and-white selling space, were the dresses, ranged on blond wood hangers. I can see myself, dark hair parted in the middle, wearing a trim navy skirt and white blouse, staring at these dresses, which were anything but well behaved. Each one was saying something like "Rejoice!" in a language of huge fruits, psychedelic stripes, flower explosions.

I was waitressing then at the faculty club. I stopped buying books; I saved all my tips. After a few months, I went back to get "my" dress. It was a stiff canvas sheath with a mandarin collar whose top half featured plum-colored sea urchins swimming in a sea of rust, with rust sea urchins on plum on the bottom. I put it on, right in the store. I can still remember the feel of that canvas—so clean and crisp. I can feel again the relief of my body set free—the dress's geometry required no girdle.

The Marimekko didn't unleash the erotic me—that would come later. It stood for something even bigger than eros. When I think of the dress, I see myself in motion: racing to class, whizzing on my bike, in animated conversation about Edith Wharton (ignored then by Harvard) with a beautiful graduate-student teacher, Ann Douglas, who became my thesis adviser. It was as if the Marimekko dress emboldened me to write the thesis about women writers—and by extension, to dare to be a writer myself. I, who'd assumed (as my mother did) that under my faux suaveness lurked the inevitable marriage to a boy back in St. Louis, the ferrying of children to the country club, the volunteer work.

On a trip home, I gave the dress to my mother. Why? Because another girl in the dorm had given me her cast-off Marimekko, with its brazen black-and-white stripes. I could be generous—or rather defiant: "Here, Mom, in one dress, are all the things you said I couldn't be, yet somehow wanted me to be—a creature of pleasure, boldness, devil-may-care-ness." But my mother loved the Marimekko. She'd already broken out of her own young-matron mold, it turned out, to become a passionate civil rights worker. She'd become bright like the dress, which she wore to meetings and rallies. She wrote to thank me in a new tone of voice—not as a mother but as a confidante.

Little did I know how short a time we would have to enjoy our new status. A few months later I flew home for spring break. As a surprise, she'd booked a beach cabin in Alabama for a family vacation. We set off in the car in the rain,

she and I and four younger siblings; my father would join us later. As we headed south on Highway 61, the rain got heavier. I'd just replaced her as driver. A truck roared past, flooding the windshield. I braked hard; we smashed a low bridge; I blacked out. The kids in the back slammed knees, elbows, heads. In the passenger seat, my mother broke her neck.

I remember a rural hospital; bandages and wheelchairs; the nurse with the country twang who told me my mother was dead; my uncle shepherding in my shattered father—they'd flown down in a small plane. The rest of us, except for cuts and bruises, miraculously weren't injured—but how would we ever recover? We flew back through clouds and rain to find our driveway suddenly full of cars; our house full of neighbors putting casseroles on the dining-room table. At the funeral, packed with people, the plain pine coffin stood alone on the altar steps.

I stayed home a week more as aunts, grandparents, friends, and strangers passed through our living room, bestowing tearful hugs. I walked around in a daze, not sure, suddenly, of anything. When it came time to go back to college, I felt it as a relief. Packing on the eve of my departure, I went alone to her closet, which already smelled of neglect. In a row of somber dresses, the plum-and-rust Marimekko stood out. I put it in my suitcase.

From then on, I would wear it for both of us.