

Memento Vivere

My mother has no headstone. I have no grey slab to memorialize her, so I must find great solace in smaller things: spring's birth of tulips, her favorite flowers. Her St. Michael necklace for protection, from when she took me to the Basilica. Flashes of green and purple, her favorite colors. The 4-stop shuttle ride back to Bedford Stuyvesant, to our old favorite roti shop where she called me to tell me that she had cancer. Every trip we went on is one I must now take by myself, recreating the path of two with lone steps.

When I remember her, it is easy to revert to memories of the last three months of her life, post-diagnosis, when she was in the hospital and her room no longer smelled like coconut lotion but sick skin, when she began to forget herself and was taken care of by a nurse the way I was by her as a newborn. Her weak smile when I told her my grandmother was trying to come visit her from Trinidad (the last time they saw each other was in 1992, when she left her home for a new one in New York). I am hurt by these almost as much as I am by the times where I felt I should have appreciated her more, told her how much she truly meant to me.

To do this, however, would be to remember her as her illness. My mother was a strong woman, and describing her as such feels far too general, but it is the truth. In my mind I look at her the same way I looked in awe as a child at etchings of St. Joan of Arc being burned at the stake by the fire beneath her feet, eyes up towards her god, refusing to back down from her fate. My mom always refused to break in front of me, keeping up her resilience until the end and undergoing tests and blood transfusions and chemotherapy with her head as high as ever. I remember how she looked when she had to shave off her hair for the latter, a tinge of sadness in her eyes at the lost locks but her face brighter than ever, reassuring me (and herself) that it would grow back, that it was worth it in order to get better.

When I was younger and had anxiety about the idea of ever having to live without her, she promised me repeatedly that she would never leave me. I could never have expected to lose her so early on in my life, and time after time I returned to the promise she had made to me, thinking about how she was no longer physically there to hug me or console me or simply make me laugh, far from comforted by what she had said about never leaving. What she said, however, was true: my mother is not gone. I may not be able to come home and tell her an anecdote from my day at school or eat roti and pholourie with her on our sofa, but she exists as my intuition, and my heart, and my blood. My mom is the source of my strength. Memories of her fuel my bright countenance and push me through every tough situation I am in. Through me, she lives; through her spirit, I live.

I am glad that she has no headstone because I am tired of her existing in such a cold, clinical space in my mind. My mother was and is the love of my life; she is not her lymphoma. She is not a statistic, and she never wanted to be defined as a victim. If I let her worst hours define her, I will not be doing the justice I owe her. I must make my life an ode not to Yvette Nicole Lawrence, deceased, but Yvette Nicole Lawrence, the laughing woman with the brightest brown eyes in Bedstuy who survived a car crash, who persevered in a new country with absolutely no one to help her get by, who will now survive her lymphoma-through me.

