

CUTTING THE TIES THAT BIND

By Arlene Levine

WE ARE always leaving each other in order to arrive somewhere else, be it geographical or emotional distance that we travel. Not long ago my mother was going on vacation. She needed me to take her to the airport. I said no. I had a doctor's appointment that night and I didn't want to miss it. Did she understand, I added, that I'd be tired from work and that there would be nothing wrong with her taking a cab?

"Nothing wrong?" she said. "Easy for you to say. Don't you realize that he'll know I'm gone?" "Who'll know?" I asked. "The driver, for heaven's sake! He could come back and . . . who knows"

I thought for a minute, my mind flitting between agreement and disbelief. I opted for the facts. "Well, there's always that chance. Yes. But it's unlikely. And anyway, if you think like that, you'll never take a vacation, Mom."

A wan smile. "I'm too exhausted from packing to argue." A hesitation. "I guess I'll have to try to find someone else to take me." Another pause during which I silently wished her good luck.

"You could do that if you want, but if it were me, I'd rather the cab." Then, one hand on the doorknob, I leaned over to kiss her goodbye. Her expensive perfume smelled wonderful, like when I was little. She'd be so beautiful, dressed up to go to a party with my father. His dour control always emphasized her animation, made her appear too gay. And somehow her caresses never left me comforted.



Credit...The New York Times Archives

Would she come back? What if something happened to her while they were out? A car accident? For what seemed like hours after they'd disappeared, I'd keep guard at the living room window, peeking through the Venetian blinds, until my baby sitter, with vague reassurances, put me tearfully to sleep.

In my bed I'd continue the vigil, eyes peeled and ears alert for telltale signs of their return. But fear is a tiring thing, and soon I'd be fast asleep with only my dreams for company. The grizzly bear prowling my backyard. The wolfish hound nipping ravenously at my heels until I, breathless, barely manage to open the front door and slam it into his hideous fangs. Sometimes, though, I'd need to use my keys and before I could open the door and prevent him from ripping me apart, I'd wake up in a cold sweat.

"Do you think we'll see each other again before I leave?" my mother said.

Startled back to now, I hesitated. "Well, uh, probably not. No. Really, with work and the house and everything . . . I'll call you though." As I bent toward her cheek, she turned and her lips lightly brushed my mouth. A farewell kiss to keep us both safe until she comes home.

The day of her departure I am at work or, more precisely, in school. For me, being a teacher is the same as conducting an orchestra. You have to know your music, what you want from it and how to get it from your musicians. Certain days the sound is so sweet you want to cry; on others, the discord moves you to tears.

Today I am not myself. Well then, I think, who are you? The words swimming in my head are familiar but they are not mine. Just an old voice that lives inside me and is still critical, demanding. "What do you mean you did your math homework but you lost it? If I don't see it, it's not here. No excuses acceptable around here -ever. If I hear your voice one more time, you can just stand in the hallway until you remember your manners. What kind of sloppy little mess is this? Do it over and be quick."

I bite my tongue, trying desperately to keep my personal struggle from spilling out onto my class. I meditate on the quote that I keep on my desk, "Love more, demand less." Still, my mood envelops the room in an ominous silence. A hand flags my attention. "Well, what is it?" "Ralph's crying." "He is?" I bark.

"Yes, he's been crying for a few minutes now."

I see the brown hair protruding from the cradle of his arms. "O.K. Ralph, come over here and we'll talk." No movement.

Nicely now, cajoling. "C'mon, Ralph. Let's discuss it. Whatever it is, we'll work it out."

During the silence that follows, I watch his 9-year-old shoulders heave (Ralph is not his real name) and remember this is his first day back at school after an extended absence. He and his mother went away somewhere together. He hasn't done a stitch of work all morning.

"All right. Enough is enough. Over here on the double, young man."

My heart hardened. No room in there today for a snivelling kid. I shove a tissue into his little fist. His breath is coming in long sobs. "I don't feel well. I want to g-g-go home." More sobbing. "What hurts?"

"Nothing. I just wanna go, that's all." "Why?" "I can't stay here. It's too long."

"Too long for what?" I'm curious now. He's shuffling from one foot to another, trying unsuccessfully to control the hiccuping, choking sounds.

The softie that is me would usually be close to tears now, as well. Some of that "me" feeling slips through the wall of distaste that has mushroomed between us, and I try again. "Listen, Ralph. You're a big boy. You're in fourth grade. Not kindergarten."

During a lull in his pain he confides: "I know, but I'm still scared. What if. . ." and he trails on with a string of possibilities that would set a mother's teeth on edge.

I stop to wonder who on earth has filled this child so full of insecurities. What matter if these horrors never materialize, I think. The brushstrokes of fear already color his reality. The panic is palpable; a fetid miasma that hangs about him. My every sense rebelling against it, I grow short-tempered. "You'll have to stop this nonsense, Ralph."

"I can't," he wails. "I want my mother."

"You'll have to. What will you do one day when your mother really isn't around? How will you live if you don't learn now?"

"I don't care. I just wanna g-g-go home." Fresh tears. Most of the class watches intently; a real-life soap opera. A few snicker, hiding their dread of the demon Ralph has unleashed behind their bravado.

The endless mantra of his voice drones on. "Please, I wanna go home. Please. . ." Suddenly I see myself picking my way down the flight of steps that leads from my mother's porch to the street. Her figure, framed in the doorway, waves forlornly in time to the rhythm of Ralph's chant. The wrench of a heart is an impossible sensation to describe. Then I'm in my car and gone.

Ralph is not. He stands there sniffing, eyes, nose and mouth trembling. I feel his anguish too sharply to be kind today. "Grow up!" I explode as he shuffles back to his desk.

"I can't," he flings over his shoulder at me.

I sigh. Maybe tomorrow I'll be able to explain to him that it's not can't but won't, and how someday he will.