

TENDER RIVAL

SHARING MY AILING MOTHER WITH HER ONCOLOGIST

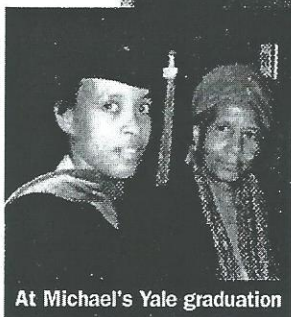
➔ On the other end of the phone, her voice is very professional as she pronounces the word cancer. For a moment, all is still. Please, once more, repeat, take me back a step: "Your mother had chest pains. She came to the emergency ward; while there," she discovered that my mother, my other, who at times has been my nemesis, has ovarian cancer. Yes, I can—will come tomorrow, to that place where I began.

While I am riding from New York to Boston, memories of mother wash over me: always talking with pride about her past. Her past pushing her forward, into life, allowing—making her enjoy—relish not only her life, but also mine. This has caused me great angst, for I have not always taken such pleasure in my own existence.

In the hospital, it becomes apparent: There is no script. Before, visiting mother at home—her home—I was conscious of what to do and of what to expect. But here, I am now the novice, not knowing what to do next. Seeing her takes my breath away. She is beautiful. Our eyes meet. We mirror each other's souls in a lingering gaze usually reserved for lovers.

Words often flow easily from her lips, perhaps, at times, even too easily. But today, I must utter the first word—first cry, "Hello, mother." She bestows her smile on me; that smile, which encouraged me to take my first step, later heartened me to travel halfway around the world, when I was fearful of even stepping out our front door.

At last, she speaks: Her voice still has that slightly raspy yet soft tone, which is described—not by her church friends—as sexy. She informs me that my shoes do not match my outfit. Ah, yes, she is still mother. However, when bending down to examine my errant shoes, I catch a glimpse of an unfamiliar



At Michael's Yale graduation

expression on her face. Is she angry that death is also in this building? Or perhaps what I spied was actually

emerging from me and was reflected in her enchanting walnut-colored eyes.

No time to ponder that unfamiliar expression, because mother has much to say about her young doctor: "Linda is beautiful, Linda works very hard, Linda went to Harvard." Mother swore Yale was the better school when she eagerly packed my bags for that ivy-covered place. And of course, Linda's shoes always match her outfit.

After many months of travel to

Boston and Linda's—no, doctor to me—calls are customary. During this call, she informs me that mother would not consider herself alive if attached to machines. Therefore, alternatives must be discussed during tomorrow's visit.

From the outside, mother is no longer as beautiful, her voice is almost unrecognizable. These thoughts spin through my mind when broaching the subject of her death. Linda reaches out for my mother's hand. Mother turns to Linda, who announces, "I don't know what else to do for you." Mother squeezes Linda's hand: "Don't be upset, you've done all you can." Tears stream down both of their faces, as I calmly stare at the two of them.

It's weeks after mother's funeral, and I'm going through my mail in New York. My life is finally returning to a routine. Wait. A card from mother's doctor.

She was with mother a few hours before her death. They listened to a recording of "Für Elise," which was one of mother's favorite pieces; they sang a hymn, which mother taught Linda. After that, they spoke very little but looked at each other often. Mother pointed to the clouds, "I'll be with the earth and all of creation soon." For the doctor, times spent with mother "were beautiful moments." One last thing the doctor wants me to know—how much my mother loved me.

As I clutch Linda's card, at last, I am crying, weeping, as memories of my mother wash over me, now pushing me forward, into my own rich life.

BY MICHAEL ANGEL JOHNSON