

# Images of My Mother

By B. DeMarco-Barrett

**SUMMER VACATION WAS** almost here, but my photography professor, Jeff Weiss, said going on vacation was no reason to stop shooting pictures and that making pictures every day of your life was how real photographers lived, and I wanted to be a real photographer.

So that summer after my freshman year of college, while I stayed with Mom and my stepfather George at their Philadelphia duplex, I spent days on Kensington's streets. A lower-middle-class neighborhood where the movie *Rocky* was filmed, Kensington's crowded streets offered a zillion opportunities for shooting candid photos of people sitting on front stoops, shopping, hanging out in doorways. As the El clattered by on train tracks overhead, I shot reflection shots of myself in storefront plate glass windows. The term "selfie" was decades away.

Before summer break our class had been experimenting with shooting nudes, so one day I asked my mother if she'd let me do nudes of her.

"Oh, no, Barbie," she said, "I could never do that. But I'll put something on and you can do your pictures."

My mother disappeared into her bedroom and I loaded film onto my Canon SLR. I smoked one of Mom's filterless Pall Malls and skimmed the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, hoping and praying my mother would wear something interesting.

Her accordion bedroom door swished open, and seconds later, she stood

before me in a black bra, black pantyhose over underwear, black high-heeled sandals, and round, black-rimmed sunglasses.

“This okay?” my mother asked.

What she chose was better than any outfit I could have picked for her. And her look was quirkier than nudes would have been. And besides, my mother and I couldn’t have handled doing nudes. No one in my childhood home ran around in his or her undies, much less naked.

“It’s perfect,” I said, and we giggled.

Even though my bipolar mother and I had a combustible relationship, we still had rare, intimate moments that were pure fun.

“What should I do?” Mom lit a cigarette as she stood in the kitchen doorway, her hand supporting the elbow of the arm that held the ciggie.

I opened the door to the fridge and she propped her black stockinged foot on the shelf in front of the eggs.

For another photo, we gathered snapshots of my stepfather, brother, and me. She slipped the photo of my stepfather under one bra strap, placed a photo of my brother under the other bra strap, and held my framed high school graduation picture in front of her bare belly.

“How about you sit up here?” I said, and she slipped into a slinky robe, took off the sunglasses, and hefted herself onto the orange Formica counter where I shot a photo of her smoking.

Thirty-six frames later, we were done. She went to get changed while I rolled my film and extracted it from the camera.

We were exhausted, but we were also exhilarated. I was gratified that my mother and I had made a new memory, happy in the making of art. At the time, this was the ultimate act of sharing for me. It was wonderful to share it with her.

Back at school that September, I spent my first week in the dim red light of the darkroom where I developed rolls of black and white film and printed 8x10s of my mother, as well as shots of the Philly landscape.

Two weeks later, I was up for critique. With an audience of classmates, the images of my mother seemed more erotic and revealing than nudes would have been, so instead, I pinned the Philly photos onto the canvas-covered board and left the mother photos in a pile on the floor. After

my classmates talked about the photos, Jeff strolled along the wall, hands in his blue jeans pockets.

He stopped at the pile of photos on the floor.

“What’s this?” He picked them up and began riffling through them.

“Just images of my mother,” I said.

He held one up. “This is your mother?” He unpinned my city photos, let them drift to the carpeted classroom floor, and replaced them with a dozen photos of her.

My classmates crowded around the pictures.

“This is the real deal,” Jeff said, his green eyes catching fire. “The landscapes are nice, but your mother pics have your voice all over them.”

At the time, I wasn’t sure what he meant by voice. I had never heard this term. I would hear it stressed many times after, how vital it was for an artist to find his or her voice, to create art colored by his or her own idiosyncratic vision and style. But at the time, it was all new.

As the group chatted up my photos, I wondered how my mother would feel about images of her pinned to the board, how she would feel being objectified and talked about in the third person. Actually, she would have loved it.

One guy said, “Your mom’s hot!”

I suppose she was, but as a kid, her sexuality embarrassed me. She wore low-cut blouses that advertised her cleavage. She never feigned prudishness. She was attractive, was comfortable in her skin, and wasn’t ashamed of anyone knowing it.

It no longer bothered me. Our photo session was a bridge where we could share a moment.

She may have been hard to get along with due to her mental illness, but we also shared fun times, and these photos prove we shared remarkable mother-daughter moments. I was sure my friends didn’t have mothers who let them shoot intimate photos with them as the focus.

When I remember my mother, who died soon after 9/11, I focus on all that was not lost. And when I look at these photos of her in her underneaths, I can almost smell the cigarettes we used to smoke, taste the coffee we drank that she brewed in her percolator, and hear us howling with laughter in her Philadelphia kitchen that summer after my freshman year.



**Summer Fun with Mom**

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