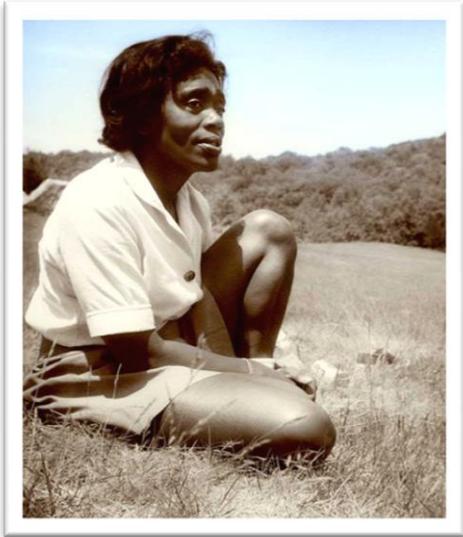


Forget-Me-Nots

By Rosa Jurjevics
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Roni McLeod c. 1960s, retouched by David Lebe

Upon my return from Boston, where I attend college, and dizzy with the prospects of home, the customary pile of mail one expects after a long sojourn greeted me. Two thin off-white envelopes lay within the bank statements and junk. Printed across them was the pseudo-rustic seal of my elementary school. Envelopes like these come every so often, as graduates of private academies are likely familiar. They bear preformulated notions of nonspecific nostalgia designed to coerce us, hearts pining, into reaching for our checkbooks. I ripped them open without much expectation, which is, as I think about it, how these things always begin.

The letters were two of the most terrible I have ever read.

"We are devastated to inform you..." the first letter began, words printed across the page in neat black type, the second letter unimaginatively similar. "We regret to inform you..."

In five minutes, two of my favorite people were gone.

I sat on the floor, trying to think. Trying to cry. I held the letters, one in each hand, side by side. Their death made no sense and seemed perfectly logical at the same time, and by this tandem I was somewhat eased; the shock of death is old hat, a friend I hadn't seen in a while.

I read their names; Joan Zuckerman Morgan. Veronica McLeod. Names reduced to prim, sanitized words on expensive letterhead stock. I read the names again and again, searching for their owners, as though they were lost, which, in a way, they were.

And after some thought, I found them.

Joan Morgan was tough. She was a pioneer, the creator of a program of movement, dance, and conceptual space she had dubbed "Rhythms," linked but not identical to Waldorf's concept of eurythmics. Conducted on the near-topmost floor of the school in the "Rhythms room," a high-ceilinged space with plate-glass windows and a pretreated ballet-school floor, Rhythms mixed child's play and yogatic wisdom. Set to the soundtrack of a live piano, and, in that vast room framed by teal curtains, sunlight pouring in from those huge windows as we frolicked to the concertos and arias of greats we didn't know the names of, Rhythms could be downright magical.

Joan was the first adult that I ever struck a deal with. At age three, I had developed a precocious sense of self-consciousness and was prone to severe embarrassment my peers seemed either not to possess or not to indulge. I, however, was much the helpless victim. While my classmates were happy to perform whatever tasks were called for, I often stood rigid in self-preservationist abstention. In short, I was crippled, alone in the wake of the others, sweating feet planted firmly on the Rhythms room's urethane-slick floor.

While most teachers would not have this, as this is the way of teachers -- you must sing, you must run the obstacle course, you must do "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" -- Joan understood something about me, something I didn't yet understand about myself. Of how she and not the multitude of progressive educators I was passed around to happened upon this I will never quite be sure, but I remember her dark eyes and the flash of a metal crown as she spoke, dropping her commanding voice an octave: "If you really don't want to do it, don't do it," she said, as though speaking to an adult, "Come sit by me."

So I'd sit. Sometimes I wouldn't and would instead get swept into the swing of things -- galloping, for example, which I loved, with my strong legs and tall-girl stride -- but, if plagued by my own premature neuroses, I'd take my place on the stage where Joan sat, holding whispered court with her between her barks of "change!" or "higher!"

Joan was not an easy woman. She was stubborn and commanding, and her expectations were high. But she was fiercely brilliant, usually democratic and incredibly dedicated. Part choreographer, part yogi, and part dramaturge, she both ran our classes and drafted together our end-of-the-year class plays from the haphazard ideas with which we bombarded her. How she turned wary eight-year-olds into colonial settlers, sixth graders into Socratic scholars, and kids about to enter high school into post-revolution American families is a mystery to me. But she did, pulling, forcing, and stirring things from us we did not know we had. She got us through and around the bend.

A few years after her retirement and my entry into college, we met randomly in the West Village. We stopped to chat, and I watched her as we talked, taking her in. She had always been a strong presence, but there was something I had missed, and I tried to pinpoint it as we rehashed the old days with both fondness and shared frustration in a school we felt was departing from its original philosophy. Mostly we talked about our lives, what was new. Looking into those eyes, I saw it, what I had not quite caught all those years, what had either eluded or simply not occurred to me: Love. As she walked away, as I walked away, it dawned on me as it never had before. "She loves me," I thought to myself, as if it were impossible. I knew it was true then and knew, with a touch of bittersweetness, that it had been true all along.

That was the last time I saw her.

Roni McLeod's favorite art piece was a terra cotta bust of Abraham Lincoln, crafted by a student long since graduated. This little likeness -- and it was quite striking, as I recall -- was an item she kept front and center, a space of honor on the shelf. I, too, loved it, the idea that it had been left in the wake of its maker, existing

entirely on its own. Our mutual delight in the Lincoln bust was the first thing that linked Roni and me. I regarded the delicate handiwork as impossible, and she was immensely pleased by what she knew was merely exemplary.

As a small child, I was intensely afraid of Roni. Her jaw jutted forward at an odd angle and, framed by a row of impeccably straight teeth, made her appear slightly ghoulish. Her voice, loud and booming, reverberated in the hallway, filtering up the stairs to where I stood, petrified.

But Roni was softer than she seemed. Her overwhelming presence, the one I shrank from in the stairwell, proved to be a healthy dose of vivacity mixed with tough love. She was, I learned, prone to laughter, to boisterous expression, to bursting into song. And oh, she could sing. That great, big voice of hers carried the tunes in a low, almost mannish baritone, so low and rich and full. At assemblies, when the school gathered to sing folk and seafaring songs, Roni's voice rose from the back of the room above all the rest, true and clear. In class, she sang us numbers from *The King and I*, telling us the story as she kneaded clay with her wrinkled brown fingers. I repeated it to myself, that phrase: the king and I, the king and I, until the king and I became thekingeneye.

She let us breathe, Roni did, and for that we were in her debt. She ran a wide berth around us, giving technical instruction and then letting us go. This freedom was not taken lightly, and any slackers were given a few harsh words, loudly delivered and forceful, worse than any punishment. We worked well in that room, under slightly dimmed light, cooled to keep the clay moist. She watched us from her big brown eyes, set against surprisingly youthful, softly padded cheeks, leaning in to comment over our shoulders. She let us play, let us stretch, and, during after-school, sang us rousing rounds of "O, Canada" as we rinsed our brushes.

After Roni's retirement, the art room was given new designation as the second grade headquarters and was crammed into the schools' new annex, a building that lacked the soul and ambiance of the old one. On the day of the first class there, I asked the new teacher (a woman I would later befriend) if she had seen that little Lincoln. Her brow furrowed, and she gestured to a few unopened boxes, shrugging. "I don't know," she said; "if he's in here, he's in here."

But he wasn't.

The school letters sit somewhere in my room. If I pick them up and read them once more, they will no longer hold meaning, the "regret" and "devastated" will fall flat. These two women do not lend themselves to paper in a form letter, a token of mass condolence. I can't believe they're gone by the same logic that I can't quite believe the world is round -- we should be walking upside down, no? Joan and Roni's presences should not still be sending out signals. They should grow quiet, as many probably expect will happen. But it won't.

I have made sure of that.