

Birthday Teas by the Sea

By Lisa Boalt Richardson

As I pour the tea into my cup on our birthday, I feel as though my heart is pouring out its pain. Then as I begin to stir the sugar, my mind is stirred with thoughts of sweeter times and birthdays filled with tea parties we have shared. This year I will drink my tea without her.

I was born on my mother's 26th birthday. Since I can remember, we have always spent that wonderful March day together. It was so special to have that common bond. My mom was more than just a mother to me; she truly was my best friend.

Once I became an adult, college and careers kept us separated by miles, but we never let distance keep us apart. Our telephone conversations probably would have been boring to most, but not to us. We talked about anything and everything and sometimes nothing at all. She would give advice on everything from cleaning to marriage to raising children. I would listen to her and try to soak up her knowledge. In addition to her wisdom, she possessed a faith that was strong and real. She walked the walk she talked about and wanted me to do the same.

When I became interested in tea, we began having afternoon tea whenever we got together. Every spring, I looked forward to going to Florida to see her and celebrating our birthday with afternoon tea. We would talk about it for weeks before the event and anticipated the day with great excitement. We discussed where we would go, but in the end, we always went to the same place—The Ritz-Carlton, Palm Beach.

The weeks seemed to creep by until our magical day. Finally, the day would arrive, and as we kissed my kids goodbye, our escape began. We always took the interstate to get there as quickly as we could. As we pulled in and the valet took our keys, we felt like two princesses about to enter our castle. When we walked through the doors, we immediately felt the magic.

We always requested an ocean view for sipping our tea. I can still smell the jasmine that permeated the air as the server brought our pot of tea. As we began talking about our dreams, we melted into the down-filled sofa in

the lobby lounge. With each wave that lapped the shoreline, I could feel my body begin to relax.

As the server brought our finger sandwiches, we went deeper into conversation—Mom would share her heart, and I would share mine. I can still taste the cucumber sandwiches and scones with clotted cream and jam. By the time we were nibbling on our pastries and chocolate-covered strawberries, the stresses of life were gone.

Not wanting our day to end, Mom and I would stroll outside to breathe in the fresh, salt-filled air. We would sit on lounge chairs under the palm trees and watch the waves roll in and out. The sound of the ocean and the seagulls filled our ears with the music of nature. It was God's grand finale to our perfect afternoon.

Just as we rushed up the interstate to get there quickly, we always took the scenic route home beside the ocean. We would listen to classical music and look at the Palm Beach mansions of the rich and famous. Although my mom didn't own a mansion, I felt I was sitting next to the wealthiest woman in the world in her small compact car.

The last time we had tea by the sea was bittersweet. After finishing a whirlwind of doctor visits and packing, we took one last drive down the interstate to "our" place. The conversation wasn't as peaceful, and it was difficult to hold back the tears. This sweet mother of mine had Alzheimer's disease. As we took one last stroll outside, I knew I was bidding farewell not only to the salty smell of the ocean but also to a tradition that would no longer be. The long, scenic drive home seemed to race by in an instant. I didn't want it to be over, but it was.

Now all I have are the beautiful memories of our teas together. She doesn't know who I am anymore, but I know who she is and will always remember for her all of our birthday teas by the sea.



Author Lisa Boalt Richardson and her mother cherished their birthday teas at The Ritz-Carlton, Palm Beach.

Photo courtesy of Lisa Boalt Richardson