

Finding My Mother on the Streets of London

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As I walk down Sloane Street in London I am horribly confused. I feel like I should remember all these shops and sites around me, but nothing seems to ring a bell. Apparently, this is where I stayed seven years ago when I came here with my mother and sister. Well, not here on Sloane Street exactly, but in the area. I pull my mother's peacoat tighter on me, adjust my gloves, and start down another unfamiliar road.

No matter what street I walk down though, nothing looks familiar. I should have figured it would be impossible to find the apartment I stayed at with my mother, it's been so long and I'm sure the complex changed its interior from when I last remembered it. I have this picture of a pink lobby in my head, or was it gold and the bedroom was pink? I spent so much time at the apartment last time I was here that I feel like I should know this.

When I came here in 2012, I was 13 years old. I was in middle school, I had long hair, and I was going through a horrible anime obsession. My parents had been separated for a while, but they still lived under the same roof. I'd never been out of the country, and I was thrilled when my mom told us we were going to the gorgeous city of London to visit my auntie Meg, one of my mother's four sisters.

When we got to London, Meg informed us that there was something wrong with her visa and she needed to get back to the states. She would be gone the entire vacation. "I never would have let you go on that trip if I had known Meg wasn't going to be there," my dad told me later.

While my father encouraged me and my sister to have a relationship with our mother, he was wary of my sister and I spending vacations alone with my mom. She'd once driven drunk on some highway in California and almost killed us. She tried to buy a pet alligator in Florida, and she snuck us into abandoned amusement parks on the east coast. Trips with my mother were always interesting.

I have blocked out the memories of the vacations I took one-on-one with my mother. The London trip was no exception. I only remember going three places; Regent's Park, the London Eye, and these colorful shops on a cobblestone street. I thought that the shops were on the same street that we were staying on, but the only shops near the street name my aunt gave me were name brands like Gucci, Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Dolce & Gabbana. None of these shops were colorful either; they were all either white or gold, giving Sloane Street this sense of being far away from everyone else in London. They seem more fitting to my mother's idea of an ideal vacation spot though. When I picture her now I can only see her in furs, designer sunglasses, and high-end shoes. Shopping was like a sport to her.

The remainder of the one-week trip in 2012 was spent inside. My mother, and consequently my sister and I, never adjusted to the jetlag so we woke up at three in the afternoon every day and fell asleep around four in the morning. I watched a lot of Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Super Nanny, and Don't Tell the Bride while eating pasta and double stuffed Oreos.

Seven years after our trip to London, I'm back just in time for the second anniversary of my mother's death. Two years ago, the day before my nineteenth birthday, I was woken up at five in the morning to my father telling my sister and me that the police found my mother in her apartment. She died of cirrhosis of the liver. Whenever I think about this, I picture her dead in the bathtub. I'm not sure if that picture is true. She may have just died in her sleep, but no one told me.

I can't say I was shocked. I knew she was sick, but she lied so many times before, I didn't take her seriously. I saw her on New Year's Eve that year, and she looked terrible. Walking with a cane, she looked eight months pregnant her stomach was so swollen. Her face was pale and she looked so tired. We went to a nail salon down the street from my house, planning on getting manicures and pedicures. She kept messing up the paint on her nails and I kept yelling at her that I needed to be at a dinner with a friend who wasn't even that close to me. She told her friends that she had a wonderful time and that she was so happy to see me.

No matter how mean we were to each other, my mother always told her friends that she was so happy to see me. To my face, she would say that I was a slut who deserved to be raped. I would say that she was an unlovable woman, and no one would miss her if she disappeared. Cute mother-daughter stuff like that.

The morning my mother died I cried for exactly two hours. When I was done crying I got out of bed, ate some cereal while my dad and stepmom cautiously watched me, and felt perfectly fine for the rest of the day. At the funeral, I did not cry because I didn't think she deserved my tears.

Even though I used to say I hope she died, even though I never cried at the funeral, even though I have reduced my entire mother to a punchline for my friends and I to laugh at, I think about her all the time. She is always on my mind, and I hate it.

I give up on trying to find the apartment. There is no way I will ~~would~~ be able to recognize it without an exact address, and nothing looks familiar anyway. I am just walking in circles for a building that may not even be there anymore. I decide to go to Regent's Park instead.

I walk to the bridge and feel the same kind of confusion as I did on Sloane Street. Were there cars here last time? Were there always these many birds? Was the bridge this big? I looked over the water in the direction of the London Eye, the same way I looked out with my mother. I had one photo for reference.

On this trip to London I have countless photos of everywhere I've been and everything I've seen; Cambridge, Bath, the Tower of London, the bus tour, the boat tour, churches, flowers, clubs, food. I want to remember everything I did while I was here. There are only nine photos from my visit to London with my mother. Two are in front of fountains, one is in a cab, one in front of Harrod's, and the rest are all taken on this bridge in Regent's Park. [they were all taken the same day, and the three of us are smiling and pointing at things even though we just got off the plane.

I am not sure what I expect from this bridge. Maybe some kind of movie moment where I finally understand my mother and our relationship. Maybe I hope that this moment will let me finally forgive my mother for all the years of fighting and crying at each other. Maybe I will finally remember the trip and how I felt while I was here.

I don't feel any of these things. I feel like I am standing on a bridge, looking at the birds and the water just like any other tourist. I feel frustrated that I can't connect with my mother in a cosmic way by just standing there and looking at the photos of us seven years ago.

As I leave the park my dad calls me. He's just calling to check in, asking me what I'm doing today. I can hear New York City through the phone as he walks to his office. I tell him about my quest, saying I couldn't find the apartment, but I found the bridge. I tell him I'm excited to see him soon. Saturday. My birthday. My mother's death day will be my last day in London. My birthday will be spent in Scotland with my siblings and parents. It will be nice to see them, to tell them about my travels around London, to be distracted on the 19th by the people who care about me.

I know why she did the things she did and said the things she said. My mother was sick in more ways than one. She was deeply flawed but she could never be fixed no matter how much I wanted her to be. Maybe it will all come together one day, and I can forgive her for everything, but walking back to my hostel, trying so hard to remember what my first trip here was like but coming up with nothing, it seems obvious that day won't come soon.