Mom and I had vastly different dress styles: elegant tops and skirts vs. cargo pants and T-shirts. As weâ??ve aged, weâ??ve swapped

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A SENIOR BEAT COLUMN

It got hot in Carmel, and I was wearing my San Francisco fog clothes: jeans, turtleneck, sweatshirt. Iâ??d left the misty, chilly city in early morning darkness and driven 125 miles south to visit my invalid mom, 95, at my childhood home in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

Oddly, despite the coastal closeness, it was heating up there, too. I was hot.

So, I went to her closet, looking for a light blouse. I wasnâ??t in the habit of going into her closet; I had never peeked inside. Unsure if her clothes would even fit me, I went through the hangers and found a cotton embroidered Mexican blouse with a square neck, perfect for the day.

Naomi Marcus with her Mom, Lotte, into whose collection of elegant clothing she has been dipping. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

â??That is a nice shirt,â?• said mom, sipping tea in her bed. â??Itâ??s *yours,*â?? I laughed. She did, too, and said, â??Well it looks good on you.â?•

Mom is bedridden these days, since she fell and broke her tibia (shinbone) eight months ago. Though it healed and she is in no pain, her orthopedic surgeon said she canâ??t bear any weight. Sometimes she sits at the side of the bed, but thatâ??s it.

She is not interested in a wheelchair. So, she stays in bed with a view of the sea and pine forest, acorn woodpeckers, shimmering hummingbirds, lilacs and pink ladies. â??Not bad!â?• she gestures to her expansive view whenever I walk in.

A kind, competent and expensive cast of caregivers come and go: Latina, Filipina, Tongan, Irish.

Mom wears T-shirts and diapers now, though right behind her bed is a closet full of professional outfits from her decades as a clinical psychologist. She was in private practice and taught in the family practice residency programs at University of California-San Francisco hospitals in Salinas and Santa Rosa. She looked the part.

Being bed-ridden hasnâ??t diminished Lotteâ??s political spirit. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

My mother was always so elegant. I was so proud of how pretty and nicely dressed she was, when she came to my classroom with cupcakes on my birthdays.

Nice clothing wasnâ??t part of her growing up. She was 12 when she and her parents fled her native Vienna in 1939 â?? a year the Naziâ??s Kristallnacht pogrom in Germany. They left on an Italian luxury liner, headed to the only port that accepted Jewish refugees with no visas: Shanghai. She spent a decade in Shanghai enduring dysentery, poverty, her fatherâ??s death and her motherâ??s depression, then the Japanese occupation.

She made it to the United States at 21. She never went to charm school, browsed fashion catalogues or shopped in nice stores. She attended the Shanghai Jewish school and learned English, but I have no idea where she got her fashion sense.

As for me, I was never a refugee or in a war. I was raised in the golden rolling hills of California, but never had a closet of professional outfits, never. I sometimes think I chose my jobs based on how little it mattered what I wore.

In my youth, I was a tour guide and interpreter in Siberia and Soviet Central Asia, in the Ukraine and all over Russia. Clothes were about comfort (jean skirts) for the long, cramped train journeys (the Red Arrow from Moscow to Leningrad, the Trans-Siberian from Moscow to Irkutsk).

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Clothes were for wrinkling and absorbing sweat (cargo pants) on the bumpy, scary Aeroflot flights. Clothes were for squatting in during Mad Hatter-esque tea parties in smoky midnight kitchens with few chairs, where we drank, talked and played sad songs with melancholy Russians.

In middle age, I worked for a San Francisco agency that resettled newly arrived immigrants and refugees from the former Soviet Union. No one cared what I wore: Can I get them a â??chobâ?• or an apartment?

â??Naomi is always wearing old shawls and patched skirts from the Salvation Army,â?• said a former Russian ballerina who called me Naomochka. â??She is clearly dressing for comfort not for the mens.â?•

Staff at a UCSF Psychiatry Department community clinic, where I worked for several years, dressed way down â?? jeans and T-shirts. Our severely, chronically mentally ill clients were sometimes dirty, sometimes malodorous. Catching bed bugs was a constant worry.

My mother never suggested I dress better or like her. The last time we bought clothes together, I was 10. And this image is etched like a diamond in my memory jewel box.

Naomi Campbell in her paisley outfit, between Ringo Star and Joan Baez at Candlestick Park in 1966. (Photo by Jim Marshall)

Joan Baez, our family friend and neighbor, had surprised me by inviting me to see â?? and meet â?? the Beatles at their last live concert at Candlestick. So, Mom and I went to Gladys McCloudâ??s Shop for Girls in Carmel, where they outfitted me with a green paisley skirt and blazer and cherry red pumps. 1966. Very Mary Quant.

In all the photographs of *That Night I met the Beatles,* Aug. 29, 1966, my eyes are starry, and my outfit is perfect. It was the last time we shopped for clothes together.

Now I am old, mom is older. Her body is so small, her beautiful clothes would float on her. But on me, *on me*, they are just right. I visit her often, and it has become simpler to take clothes from her closet than bring my own from the city. And a funny thing is happening: I am getting compliments.

Outfits of hers I have worn include: a simple empire style dress, cotton, patterned in colored squares; a full peasant skirt and matching scoop-necked blouse in a simple pink and grey print; a Talbotâ??s belted denim skirt and grey linen blazer; a belted green coat and tailored blouses from Marks and Spencer; a pleated corduroy skirt, perfect for the fog.

Lotte Marcus, pregnant with Naomi, and her husband, Alan. (Photo courtesy of Lotte Marcus)

I wear her clothes and remember how she looked in them. I picture her when she wore lipstick and accessories and carried a leather satchel filled with files, folders and her many notebooks.

I feel like an imposter in my motherâ??s clothes. We share the same coloring but not the same shape, and it surprises me her clothes actually fit.

These days on the Monterey Peninsula, when I shop for her at the pharmacy or the grocery store, strangers occasionally approach me and say, â??You must be Doctor Lotteâ??s daughter; you look just like her. Your mom helped me *soooo* much.â?•

I wonder if they recognize the clothes, or me, but it doesnâ??t matter.

I sit on the side of Momâ??s bed, wearing her clothes, and I say, â??So and so said you helped him so much â?¦ Do you remember him?â?•

She looks at me with a tender frown, â??Naomi, I saw thousands of clients in all those years, I cannot remember them all.â??

Then with a radiant smile, she reaches to touch the soft, buttery fabric of the outfit I am wearing â?? one of hers again. â??But I remember that dress. I loved that dress.â?•

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1. All Posts

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Date Created
18/08/2022
Author
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