

The Flying Bubbie. Lillian Kleinman Litvack

My mom never held a job outside the house. She spent her time puttering around, chatting with the neighbors, shopping on the Avenue with her metal cart in tow. She raised three children on her own with no help except for my Dad so she worked plenty but not outside the home. She spoke four languages, but her English was only fair after decades of living here and she could only read a little. Her middle school education ended when the war came for her.

One day, when I was about 11, she came home and announced that she got herself a job.

“Lilly, how do you feel about me going to work? I have never not been in the house,” she asked.

I said, “Fine” and I meant it.

We lived in a three-story brick house attached to another three-story brick house on Bogart Avenue in the Bronx. There were tenants who lived upstairs and friendly neighbors all around. After you opened the heavy wooden front door, there was a small vestibule with a cabinet that held a key. Then there was another vestibule with a staircase leading to the upstairs apartment, and our door straight ahead. I was used to entering the house alone, so it was no big deal and burglaries were non-existent.

My mom's new job was to scoop and serve food as a cafeteria lady in Einstein Medical Center, a kosher cafeteria for the medical students. It was not far from our house, walking distance, and we sometimes went there as a family for a kosher meal out.

My mother's first day at work was a stormy one, rainy and windy and angry. I got home from school around 3 when around 5, she blustered in, sopping wet, her kerchief askew, her hair flying in a million directions, and a look of sheer exasperation.

"Lilly, you wouldn't believe it," she cried.

After a big sigh, she said excitedly, "There was a big, big wind (on the hospital campus) – such a big wind, I never saw before, so strong, it picked me up and carried me up, into the air, so fast. I was going so fast I almost hit a building!" she blurted. She barely stood 4'9" but was sturdy so this must have been quite a sight.

"You mean you were flying?", I asked.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "I WAS FLYING! I couldn't believe it!"

"Then what happened? "

"I was lucky. God looked out for me. The wind all of a sudden stopped and dropped me onto the grass, before I hit the building!"

That was my mom's first and last day as a cafeteria lady. As far as I know, she never pursued any jobs after that.

This incident reminds me of the time my mom got lost blueberry picking. We shared an upstairs bungalow with family friends in the Catskills. The older siblings were already working and out of the house, so it was just me and their son at home. We were about 9 at the time.

It was late and getting dark, and it was very unusual for my mom and her friend to not be home for supper. Finally, she flew in the door, all huffing and puffing, her hair a hot mess with scratches on her “zaftig” suntanned arms and legs. She wore a sleeveless cotton shirt with Bermuda shorts.

“We got lost picking blueberries in the woods. “I don’t know how it happened! With God’s help, we made it out”, she exclaimed and proudly showed me her small container filled with blueberries.

The blueberries were boiled with a little sugar and made into jam for toast the next morning.