

THE LOOK

Diane McKinney-Whetstone recalls how her mother could dispense guidance with a glance

Thank you, Mom, for wearing the hat I made for you. It may have been the year before or three years after that day when Paula and I rushed ahead of you on our way to an afternoon event at church, and you yelled out, “are you girls wearing your girdles?” because you maintained that although it was fabulous to have ample hips, we still had to look neat. But just as the word *girdle* hurtled from your lips, some of our classmates walked by, boys of course. I think Paula started to cry, and I prayed for the pavement to swallow me up because of course my life was over.

The hat was a bold silk paisley of yellows and reds and lavenders. I hadn’t known what I would do with the fabric when I started gathering the edges together and a couple of hours later had fashioned something that was a cross between a turban and a tam. The expression on your face when you said, “Ooh, Di, this is gorgeous, it’s all the go,” was one of absolute approval. It’s etched in my memory with its opposite, your expression the morning after my senior prom, when I’d defied your wishes and stayed out all night.. I stood on the porch around noon of the next day, afraid to enter the house. You were at the door, curling your finger. “Come on in, doll,” you said with a light voice, because the next door neighbors were sitting out, and I guess you didn’t want to give them a preview. Once I was in the vestibule, you snatched me the rest of the way. I registered the look my sisters Gweny, Lainey and Lindy gave me when I got into the living room—a look that said, *Run, girl, save yourself*. The worst wasn’t that this was as close as you’d come to hitting me since you spanked me when I was 9—I was wearing my sister Gloria’s fur, which was like a coat of armor anyhow. The worst was the expression on your face. You were disappointed. You were hurt. I told myself I’d never speak to you again, and I managed to carry it off for the rest of that day. I had to use my own anger to cover up what I really felt: devastation that I had caused such disapproval to interrupt your magnificent smile.

I’d forgotten about the hat when you wore it to church that following Sunday. You really did. You wore that imperfect floppy creation of mine. “My Di made this,” you said to anyone who cast a curious eye. “Isn’t it fabulous?” It’s almost as if you knew that in less than seven years you’d be gone, and your range of expressions would take on magnified significance from then on. You knew that I’d need to remember you beaming in that hat, and that, no matter what else, your pride in us trumped all. Girdles or not.

Diane McKinney-Whetstone is the author of five novels. Her most recent book is *Trading Dreams at Midnight* (Harper).