She never had a light touch. Not even when we were in junior high school. She was a force of nature and she made a lasting imprint on the world around her.

Her musical gifts were a mystery to her family, almost as much as her family was a mystery to her. She often mused that she’d been switched at birth. Growing up in Queens, in the same neighborhood schools and synagogue, we became friends. Music was the link. I was her accompanist at her audition for Ithaca College, and I’ve never heard the Bach Gounod Ave Maria without thinking of her and that day.

She was daring where I was cautious, and bold when I had second thoughts. I never spent more money than I did when I was with her. Her generosity made me bolder. She called me cheap - I called her extravagant. She said, “My goal is to buy retail – and not think about it!” Because of her and with her, I visited Sarasota for the first time, saw opera and more in Cologne, Germany, and with my daughter and Cherie, we cruised to Alaska, helicoptered onto a glacier and took a seaplane through Misty Fiords.

She had no sentimental attachment to **stuff** and would sooner throw something away than keep what she no longer needed. A rose-colored hand-blown glass bowl that sits in my dining room was rescued from the trash as she was moving out of 98th Street. She routinely gave away so many things - from jewelry to furniture - and I am sure that some of us here have one or more treasures in our possession that began in hers – or in her garbage.

She was irreverent, had little patience for religion, but honored tradition and rituals – like Thanksgiving, Passover seders at our house, Chanukah parties that spanned from her apartment to Amy & John’s, or searching until she found the recipe that best replicated her Grandma Becky’s brisket.

She loved animals. She had dogs since we were children together, and I am certain that her family’s poodle, Bojangles, led to Murphy, Moe, Lucy and Buster. Her cats included Popagano, Glimmer and Ramsey – who ultimately adopted Cherie. And she loved cars. Her father, Lenny, drove an endlessly changing stream of cars that included a bright yellow Lotus, something none of us in Queens had ever seen. Joanna could identify any make or model of car – and to my confusion, her idea of fun was a visit to a car museum. In that way, she was her father’s daughter.

She was Auntie Mame to my children, Alex & Kyra – her godchildren - encouraging them to take leaps of faith, to embrace every art form and to grab life with both hands. She is the reason my children are musicians: she responded to Alex’s early interest in music by insisting that I find a Suzuki teacher for him. If you spent time with her, you quickly learned she held strong opinions, and she had no hesitancy sharing them.

So, when Alex and I were locked in the typical mother-child struggles over practicing, she unequivocally announced that my job was to “back off, pay and drive.” Her judgment was harshly expressed but unerring – and today he is a musician. She was the first one to hold Kyra when she was born, helped bring her home from the hospital, and immediately told me that Kyra was an “old soul.” She was right about that, too.

Our lives were richer because she was in it. There were long weekends spent at the log house in Sherman, Connecticut, and at the Goodyear estate in Cooperstown when she performed at Glimmerglass – dating back to when the festival was still held in the local high school. As a three-year old, Alex was so excited to see her in *Gianni Schicchi* that he screamed out “Hi Joanna!” from the back of the theater as soon as she stepped on the stage. When he saw her as Katisha, he became the Royal High Executioner, and when she was Pirate Ruth, Alex became the Pirate King. His fascination with theater - and the fact that his professional career combines his two loves (music and theater) - came as no surprise to any of us, least of all Joanna, who was his staunchest – and most critical - champion.

Our family expanded when she met Larry. Larry was and is a gift – not only to Joanna – but to each of us as well. While generous and passionate, Joanna was also stubborn and opinionated. When I met Larry, I told her that with him, she became a kinder and gentler version of herself, and for the first time I can recall, she actually agreed with me. I was so privileged to be asked to help with the planning and execution of their wedding festivities, and to be the official photographer. This was a family affair that included all of us and many of you here today – and the vision of Alex, dressed as Flopsy, sweltering in one of Larry’s famous life-size puppet costumes, will never be forgotten.

[2]

Her multiple health challenges began early and included a torn Achilles tendon, diabetes and the related complications -- severe infections and neuropathy that made walking difficult. But she embraced new adventures on a portable electric scooter that she learned to master, to the dismay of any slow-moving person in her path. The scooter, a project conceived and executed by a devoted circle of friends – many here today – reflected on HER generosity to us.

And then, on top of the diabetes, there were debilitating migraines, a stroke, kidney failure, cardiac complications and countless amputations that steadily took more and more of her lower limbs -- and the cumulative effect was more than any one person should have to bear.

She did not hide her anger or frustration with her failing body, and that stubborn streak of hers came in handy: against all odds, she continued to overcome. Larry - you gave her the greatest gift that anyone could give to another person: you gave her dignity, care and a quality of life that would have never existed without you. You are a role model for the rest of us.

She and I were born just six days apart. Even with all of her health challenges, birthdays were always to be celebrated. My birthday is September 8th and hers was September 14th. And just two weeks ago today, for very first time in close to 60 years of our shared history, her birthdate came and went without her. It’s a strange new reality to lose your oldest friend. With so many years of having her, it was easy to assume she’d always just be there. And then she wasn’t.

I still am not quite convinced she’s really gone. I think she would like the idea that I’m holding onto the memory of her long after her body has departed.

She always liked to have the last word. So, just maybe she’s still hanging around, determined to also have the last laugh.

[3]