

Dear Abigail (Abby) McGrath:

By Phyllis Chesler

Carry On!

We were girls together at Bard College and we met in the springtime of our lives. I am talking to you Ms. Abigail (Abby) McGrath. We had plans—and now you’ve just up and gone, dead of liver cancer at 84.



Abigail McGrath, a founder of the Off Center Theater in Manhattan, in 2019. [Christine Sargologos](#)

Abby: You were one of a kind. You did everything, knew everyone, had a distinguished Harlem Renaissance lineage—your mother was a poet and your aunt a famous novelist. And you? You were an actor, a director, a dancer, a “bouncer” at Max’s Kansas City, a kooky but brilliant off-Broadway theater person, a mother, a quintessential survivor.

We met for tea in my neighborhood and discussed—what? Great Art? Our work? Nah, we discussed symptoms and laughed at our physical limitations which never stopped us, not one bit. You joked about your feet. I one-upped you with stories of my own. But together, we remembered Jeanne Lee, the most talented of jazz singers, our Bard College classmate and Ran Blake, her dedicated accompanist—also a classmate; actress Barbara Colby, on the verge of stardom, who was shot dead in Los Angeles; and my roommate, Mary, (and now I cannot remember her last name), who died in a car accident after our first semester and who has haunted me ever since. Gone, all gone. You were surprised that I knew Jay Clayton, another great jazz singer who died last year. But why? Girl: I also got around.

Abby: I deeply regret that I could not accept your invitation to be a writer in residence or to deliver a lecture for your “baby,” Renaissance House, in the Oaks Bluff section of Martha’s Vinyard. What a good and generous idea, to offer writing spots and writing salons to gifted and aspiring writers. Well, I did faithfully read what you had publicly read every Fourth of July, that famous work by Frederick Douglas “What To The Slave is the Fourth of July?”

Abby: I was hoping to have a long overdue discussion with you about racism and about Israel. I thought that the two of us could really share some raw truths—but whenever we made a date, one of us was ill, or out of town. Damn!

Abby: In good conscience, I cannot envision you resting in peace, not anywhere, not even in the Great Beyond, you would still find a way to keep going in your spunky, incredible way.

Carry on dear Abby! And may your sons find comfort in your legacy.

First published at [Phyllis' Newsletter](#)