



READERS WRITE  
MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS

Photo: Joyce Tenneson

MY MOTHER NEVER LOOKED OR ACTED the way real mothers were supposed to. She wasn't soft or huggable, she didn't sew clothes or bake cookies, and she never volunteered to be class mother. Also, unlike my friends' mothers, she never looked completely done in by chores and child rearing. On the contrary, she remained untouchably glamorous.

My mother had great legs and she knew it. She wore short skirts with a pair of green lizard-skin high heels. Every afternoon at three o'clock, the house in perfect order, she took a "beauty break" for a half-hour or so. (God help me if I did anything noisier during her nap than turn the pages of a book.) Then she made herself a cup of tea and renewed her manicure. She had pretty hands and flawless nails that she enameled every day. It was a great honor to sometimes get to choose the shade.

My mother could also be funny and irreverent. Shopping for an Easter bonnet could easily end in a comedy routine, the hat perched at a ridiculous angle on my mother's head and her tongue sticking out in a parody of a country bumpkin while the salesgirl sniffed scornfully at our hysterics.

While she prepared supper, my mother would play pretend with me, entering willingly into my fantasy world. During my cowgirl phase, she'd drawl, "Waal, Slim, mosey on over to the bunkhouse and fetch me some rice for the ranch hands' supper." And off I'd trot to the pantry.

Before my father got home, my mother changed her dress, brushed her hair into a shiny halo, and made up her face. Upon his arrival, I receded into the background. They shared an embrace, a drink, and some conversation before we sat down to eat.

On Sunday evenings, my mother took a bath, put on an appliquéd, peach-colored satin dressing gown and matching mules, and retired behind the closed door of their bedroom. My father read me the funnies for a while and then joined her, leaving me to get my things ready for school the next day. I was barred from their sanctum until my bedtime.

My mother never let my father see

her without the dentures she was forced to get at age thirty.

She never failed to praise me for good grades, but she also never told me I was pretty or well dressed.

She never let me squeeze between her and my father when they were sitting on the living-room couch.

She never made me feel I had done an adequate job at anything she asked me to do — except once, when she was dying.

I was taking care of her on weekends, to relieve my father. One day, trying to get her settled comfortably, I said, "Ma, is there anything else I can get you? What else do you need?"

She shook her head and pointed one of those still-graceful fingers at me.

"You," she whispered. "You're all I need."

It was all I needed to hear.

*Teresa Taylor  
Cutchogue, New York*

SOON AFTER THE SUPREME COURT'S Roe vs. Wade decision, my mother was offered a job at a new medical clinic that provided, among other services, abortions and contraception. Shortly thereafter, my parents' marriage ended.

I was crushed when my mom had a party to celebrate the divorce. Only nine years old, I couldn't understand how she could be so happy that her marriage to my father was over.

My brother and I lived with my mother, who was working at the clinic full time and going to school. When she got home, she was occupied with homework. She never asked us how we were doing after the divorce. I don't remember being happy.

For my twelfth birthday, my mom said I could have a party. I didn't have many friends, but I managed to come up with five girls to invite. We all sat in my living room waiting for my dad

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READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

Upcoming topics and deadlines are:

ISSUE	TOPIC	DEADLINE
November 2002	Safety	June 1
December 2002	Against The Odds	July 1
January 2003	Scars	August 1
February 2003	Falling In Love	September 1
March 2003	Perfection	October 1
April 2003	Asking For Help	November 1

to arrive with the cake he had made from scratch at my request. He was late, and my mother was growing fidgety. She had not planned any games or activities for us.

Suddenly, my mother went out to her car and came back with an easel. There was something she wanted to show us, she said. On the easel was a large board, which my mother removed, uncovering an illustration I did not recognize. She explained that it was a picture of a woman's uterus. She then proceeded to give me and my friends a lecture about the female reproductive system, describing, in great detail, how girls got pregnant and various ways to avoid getting pregnant.

My father arrived shortly thereafter, but too late to save me from the humiliation.

*Hilary E.  
West Hollywood, California*

ALL MY LIFE, I'D BEEN MORTIFIED BY MY mother's tastes. My childhood home was a strange combination of garish and gloomy. Heavy, dark antique furniture filled the rooms, and paintings in ornate frames covered every inch of the walls. The upholstery tended toward jungle or African motifs, complete with giraffes and lions. Plastic souvenirs shared shelves with fine china and exquisite engravings. Every surface was buried under mounds of paper, clutter, and knickknacks.

When my new husband and I completed our dream house, I was blinded by the bright, shiny newness of the light-filled rooms. It had everything my childhood home didn't: muted colors, unadorned walls, and modern furnishings.

I remember unwrapping Mother's housewarming gift with a familiar feeling of trepidation: what god-awful thing had she found for me this time? True to my expectations, the gift was all wrong: a handmade pillow with an old cross-stitch on top that had been done by my grandmother more than forty years ago. The pattern was a floral print in dull pinks and greens set into a faded brown background. Mother had dug the cross-stitch out of an old trunk,

attached it to a piece of burgundy linen, stuffed it, and hand-stitched some cheesy black-and-gold rickrack around the edge. Nothing about the pillow fit the sleek décor of my new house. I choked out an obligatory thank-you and hurried it into a closet.

Weeks later, I pulled the pillow out again to see if it was as bad as I remembered. It was. But now I thought of my mother's hands, gnarled by arthritis, fingers bent and kinked, struggling for hours to make this gift for me. My mother had once been a talented seamstress, sewing slipcovers and pleated, floor-to-ceiling curtains on her ancient portable Singer. Now, stitching the pillow together and attaching the trim had required every bit of her abilities. And I couldn't even muster the grace to display it for the week that she'd stayed with us.

My mother died less than a year later. I had some good times with her before she died, but we never spoke of the pillow. Though I suspect she forgave me, I will never forgive myself.

*Linda Paul  
Boise, Idaho*

WHEN MY DAUGHTER CAME HOME FROM school today, she was sad, and I made her happy.

I laid out on the kitchen counter a package of cookie dough, powdered sugar, food coloring, frosting, and sprinkles. I also got out cookie cutters in the shapes of leaves, gingerbread boys, candy canes, witches, cats, and pumpkins.

As the smell of gingerbread filled the house, my daughter and I mixed the brightly colored frosting and piped it onto cookies, dressing the boys in tie-dyed shirts and glazing the fat cats hot pink with lime green polka dots.

When all the mixing bowls were empty, I said, "It's time to get ready for dance."

My daughter just nodded without a word of complaint, swabbed the last bit of ice blue frosting from the lip of a bowl, and popped it into her mouth. Then she smiled, put her arms around my neck, and disappeared into her room to get ready.

I wished with all my heart that today could make up for yesterday, when she came home happy, and I made her sad.

*Kathy Khoury  
Phoenix, Arizona*

THE DAY BEFORE I LEFT FOR INDIA, MY mother and I had our biggest fight ever. A simple argument, fueled by our shared anxiety about my departure, turned ugly and personal. We screamed at each other for an hour, and then both cried alone. Neither of us apologized.

A month later, I was shouting into a phone in the public-call office in Varanasi. My mother's voice sounded far away, and the connection often broke up. She seemed tired and worried, but glad to hear from me. I was trying not to cry, even as I felt the burning in my throat. I had barely spoken to my family in the month I'd been gone; the price of a phone call to the States was hard to justify on my modest budget. But now I needed to hear my mother's voice. I could barely remember her face.

As we filled each other in on recent events, I closed my eyes and found that I could begin to see her dimples and her dancing eyes. I could tell that she missed me, maybe even more than I missed home. I heard the dogs barking in the background and pictured the kitchen where she was standing.

I realized then that our terrible fight had been forgotten. All the hateful words had somehow vanished into the space that separated us. All that remained was our love for each other.

*Elizabeth Knight  
Berwyn, Pennsylvania*

AS A GIRL, I THOUGHT HORSES WERE MAGICAL, graceful, powerful. I would run in the field across from my house, imagining I was a horse, galloping through the grass. I read all the horse books I could find at the town library.

I wanted horseback-riding lessons in the worst way, but my father thought my desire was snobbish, in part because the only nearby place to get them was a venerable — and snobby — country club. My father said that if I got good grades, I would be allowed to take

lessons, but we always fought about it. During these arguments, my mother would sit at the table, casting a distant look through the curl of her cigarette smoke, and offer no opinion.

I eventually met a woman who boarded horses in a small stable behind her house. I would walk or bike to see her, helping out in any way I could. She taught me how to bridle and saddle the animals, how to pick their hooves clean without hurting them, how to curry them until their coats gleamed. I oiled the tack and mucked the stalls, all so I could take her Tennessee walker out in the woods for a ride.

When my mother found out about this, she forbade me from going to the stable and called the woman a gypsy.

Finally, my unhappiness wore down my parents' resistance, and we all went horseback riding together as a family at a local stable. It was a raw April day, and the parking lot was mud and ice. The sun's glare hurt my eyes so much that I could barely see the horses to tell which one was best.

The ride leader, a dashing young man with dark hair, rode a handsome, spirited horse and held another horse by the reins: one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen, with a fine, arched neck, prancing dancing feet, and a tail like a fountain.

His own horse bursting with energy beneath him, the ride leader yelled, "Does anybody know how to ride? I need a seasoned rider for this mount."

As much as I yearned to speak up, my neck and face burned with shame that I would even for a second consider myself worthy. I was an amateur.

I was assigned an ordinary horse, not bad, but nothing like that horse. I stayed all the way in the back of the line, apart from my family. The horses walked nose to tail through the woods for about an hour, made a loop, and headed back the way we came. I might have had more fun galloping through the woods on my own two feet, but I didn't complain: I was getting what I wanted, a chance to ride.

By now, the sun had risen in the sky and no longer glared in my eyes. I could see clearly the two lead horses

and their riders, talking and laughing. One, of course, was the young ride leader. When the other rider turned her laughing face to me, I felt a wave of hot, confused emotion. It was my mother, completely at home on that magnificent horse.

I found out that, when she was a girl, she'd had her own horse, a thoroughbred. But she waved off the rest of the story. "Forget it," she said. "It's in the past. And anyway, it's none of your business."

*Pamela B.  
Jeffersonville, New York*

"WHOSE BABY ARE YOU TONIGHT?" MY mother would ask, holding out the fluffy green towel as I carefully stepped from the tub into her arms. She called it "catching" me. I might be "Chocolate-Cake Baby" or "Skinned-Knee Baby" or "Halloween Baby." Sometimes she would put the towel in the dryer while I was in the bath and then catch me in its heat.

I caught my own babies in this same towel. I have moved this towel across the country twice. It has been washed and dried so many times it barely holds together. In the dryer, the loose green strands wrap themselves around socks and napkins and nestle into the sleeves of t-shirts. My husband laughs and says, "When are you going to throw that old towel out?"

*Throw out my towel? What could he be thinking?*

My children are now too old for me to dry them after their baths. I bring my towel with me to the pool for my daily swim. I catch myself now. I am "Lap-Swimming Baby."

My mother is in her seventies. When she dies, perhaps I will catch her in the towel and softly tuck her in. Then I will be nobody's baby anymore.

*Anjelina Citron  
Bellingham, Washington*

*(end of excerpt)*