

My Mother Is Missing

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My mother was a pretty mother, a youthful, stylish mother who colored her hair, smoked cigarettes, and read novels by the sackful. At the public library, she checked out modern sculptures and paintings, and displayed them in our living room. She wanted her children to make her laugh.

My mother used to be a party girl, the belle of the ball, indulged by her parents. She became a child mother, offended by the pain of childbirth, furious at her abandonment by callous nurses and doctors who did not understand she needed pampering. My mother said my older brother came into the world angry on the hottest day in July, but it was she who was angry, at the world.

My mother hated to cook, regarded housework as superfluous. She loved to sunbathe in her turquoise bikini in our back yard. She was a rebel mother, a mother who took us to the Unitarian church and to Quaker meetings when our Methodist grandparents questioned our lack of religious training. She was a smart mother who went back to college with four children at home. She majored in sociology, studied late into the night, accepted only A's. We sat in the back seat of the station wagon while she drove around our neighborhood, placing her sociological surveys into every third mailbox. She became a working mother, bought herself a red Austin-Healey, fell asleep on the sofa every Friday after work. My mother was a Southern mom who volunteered for Eugene

McCarthy, taught in an all-black public school, wrote letters to the city council, read Betty Friedan. She told us we were free to choose our own politics and religion when we grew up.

My mother was a yelling mother. She couldn't make my younger brother come home on time, do his homework, or stay inside his neighborhood boundaries. She screamed at him, made him sit in the corner, told him he must follow the rules, but secretly didn't want him to. She called him her "Sunshine," he made her laugh, he was her rebel child.

My mother was a crying mother, emerging from the bathroom with red eyes, a mother in her bedroom with the blinds drawn and the door closed. She was a mother on medication, a mother who forgot important things, like my lunch money; a mother in the hospital, a mother who didn't share my enthusiasm for my first spelling book. She was a mother who didn't volunteer at school or socialize with the other mothers. A mother who drank ten cups of instant coffee every day. When she was too depressed to work, she left her job and stayed at home, making enormous tapestries out of bright yarns and burlap, and reading women's magazines. I looked elsewhere for someone to admire.

When my mother came to stay with me after the birth of my second child, she sat at my table drinking coffee and told me the same stories of my childhood over and over. She held my newborn son, letting his head flop over her arm unsupported. When Benjamin, my four year old, came home from preschool, she made only the smallest effort to engage him. She lost track of time, and took no initiative to do what needed to

be done around my house. Sleep deprived and overwhelmed, I could no longer count on the well of compassion and forbearance that had always covered my anger; it was suddenly dry. She sat. I seethed.

What was it about that visit that caused all my patience to abandon me, leaving me with only the urge to scream at my mother? After all, I'd covered all of this in therapy: cried about it, screamed about it, analyzed it and wrapped it up in neat little packages labeled "maternal depression," "caretaking childhood." Why was I then furious with her incompetence and her inadequate mothering, when nothing had changed between us? I could have focused on positive mothering role models: my grandmother, my aunt, other women I knew; but I didn't. It was my own mother I wanted, and she was missing, again. My mother's visit reminded me of what I did not get as a child, what I vowed to give to my children, what suddenly felt impossible to deliver, especially with two children.

Benjamin had struggled to adjust to his new baby brother's arrival. On the first day we were home from the hospital, he "accidentally" let the upstairs bathtub overflow, sending a deluge through the living room ceiling. Whenever I nursed the baby, Benjamin needed something, and he could not wait. He screamed at me, lay on the floor, red faced, kicking his feet. I had worked so hard at giving him the nurturing I missed, and I knew I was disappointing him. Every word he hurled at me pierced another hole in my mothering confidence.

After my mother left, depression came to stay. *I* became the sad mom, the crying mom behind the closed door. I held my nursing newborn in the night. As we rocked, I peeled back layers of self-doubt, anger toward my mother, and guilt over being angry. Finally I came to this: somehow I had counted on healing my childhood self by being the mother to my children that I never had. But if my mother was this incompetent at mothering me, how could I possibly have inside me what it took to be a good mother to my sons? I visualized myself as a newborn, cradled in her arms with my head flopping over, and I burst into tears. All of the ways in which I'd raised myself flooded over me, and I stared into what I imagined was the dark void in myself, the deep gulf that would never hold enough sustenance for my boys to grow up whole. Hope felt impossible, for my sons and for myself.

In the end, my way out of despair was through the wise observation of my therapist: "We often grow up to be the best possible parents to the child that we once were, rather than the child we have." My parenting of Benjamin would have made me the ideal mother to myself as a child: empathic, attuned, responding predictably, meeting every need. But I was far from the ideal mother to Benjamin. Yes, he needed the nurturing and empathy, but he also needed limits and the chance to learn how to wait, to tolerate frustration, to entertain himself, and to share his mother with his new brother.

Over many months, I worked hard at balancing the needs of my two children. Sometimes I had to practice saying no, meaning what I said, and living with Benjamin's frustration, tantrum by tantrum. At other times, my task was to care for myself, by giving myself time alone, creative outlets, solid boundaries, and time with women friends who

made me feel whole; in short, nurturing the child within myself, so that I no longer needed to do it by indulging my children. For some of us, these lessons are learned early in life, from our mothers, and they become a natural part of us that emerges as we enter parenthood. But for others, like myself, these are hard won lessons, forged in the fires of post-partum depression and learning from our mistakes.

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