



## On My Own

When my mother died, I grieved for the woman who had become my best friend. In the process, I discovered myself



I am 52, but it wasn't until my mother died last December that I finally felt like a real adult.

She watched my hair turn gray, my arthritis set in, and my four baby boys become teens with stubble. Yet to Helene Krasnow, no matter my age, I was always her little girl. At times now, without her, I feel like one. I'm old enough to be a grandma myself, but this slap of loss leaves me heaving, at odd moments, with kindergarten sobs. No one loves a daughter like her mother—even at times when it doesn't feel like love, when that love

confuses, annoys, suffocates. She is a mirror and an anchor. She is the person I counted on to push my hair out of my eyes, to buffer me from bullies, to lead the way.

After more than half a century together, separating is staggering. Today I grieve for a woman who not only grilled my cheese sandwiches

until I was 18 but also grew into my drinking buddy (vodka martinis, slightly dirty, two olives), staunch advocate, staunch adversary, the most loyal girlfriend I will ever have. My mother preserved my whole history as if it were a precious quilt, patching together stages with pictures and notes, keeping the sprawling bolt of

fabric intact. And when that primal and seemingly ancient connection was cut, it was like being yanked from the womb again—only it was way tougher than the first time. She grew on me and in me, and the distinction of selves became blurred. We shared a heart.

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It wasn't always this pretty.

I spent much of my adolescence wishing my formidable mother belonged to somebody else. A Polish-born survivor of the Holocaust, she wasn't a classic, cuddly mom. We didn't bake cakes together; in fact, her three kids were banned as cooking partners—too messy. She was obsessed with order, running our household with military precision: breakfast was at 7:00 A.M., lunch at noon, dinner at 5:15 P.M. (no snacks in between), lights out at 9:00 P.M. Rather than coo if I took a tumble, she

OLIVER KUGLER

would huff and say, “Stop crying. It could be worse.”

My father was the motherly one, sitting patiently outside the girls’ dressing room at Marshall Field’s while I tried on white blouses and Villager kilts to keep up with the styles of middle school in the ’60s. He was the one I fled to for solace when a bad dream shook me awake. You did not arouse my mom for something as piddling as a bad dream. This witness to the Nazi purge of an entire civilization did not tolerate whining.

I was jealous of my childhood buddies who had frivolous moms without brutal histories. These moms bought them *Teen* magazine. They were “whatever” moms. I remember going over to friends’ houses after school and rejoicing in being able to devour Twinkies without having them be snatched away with this sharp reminder: “You’ll ruin your appetite for dinner.” Friends’ mothers smiled a lot; my mom cried a lot. She used to lie on the smoky-blue chair in the living room, her eyes closed, clutching a tattered black-and-white picture of her dead parents.

Decades later, I appreciate my mother for the reasons I used to loathe her. I detested that she was regimented and uncompromising. Yet her unflinching predictability and boundaries put stability at my core. She didn’t teach me how to cook or how to be girly. But this mother of mine, who wasn’t big on coddling, passed on the most valuable gift of all: resilience. Because of who she was, I feel as if I can handle anything.

Despite unspeakable horrors, my mother always persevered.

Her closest family was burned in Nazi ovens when she was in her teens. At 65 she watched her husband die on a San Diego vacation, from sloppy care in a small hospital treating him for a heart attack. Instead of retreating in despondent widowhood, she put on silk scarves and blue blazers and worked at Lord & Taylor in Chicago, becoming the top salesperson in menswear. At 82 she lost

her foot to circulatory disease. This stunning woman, who didn’t like to leave her house without dusty-rose lipstick on, now boldly ventured out with half a leg. She would drape a paisley shawl over her stump and sit regally in her wheelchair, savoring the sun on her face during walks along Lake Michigan, proudly meeting the eyes of those who gaped.

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Even from her grave she is propping me up, and pushing me forward. When the tears come, as they do each time I realize she is no longer just a speed-dial away, I feel her shake me and huff and say, “Stop crying. It could be worse.” Her parting example of courage is indelible. I watched as she clutched at her final days with fierce tenacity, finally succumbing after countless infections. The doctors thought she would last six months after losing her leg. She lived another three years.

My irrepressible mother would race back to earth and kill me if I crumpled when she died, immobilized because I lost my mommy, at the age of 52. She was 18 when her mommy was incinerated, and she managed to carry on for the next 68 years. Watching her push through pain was the most powerful lesson a parent can give a child—that life is harsh, but you must not be destroyed by external cir-

from Chicago to stay with her daughter near Chesapeake Bay. She stands on her toes to grab my neck in a hug, engulfing me in her Shalimar cloud, and I wince at a fantasy touch that feels real. On a recent trip to dismantle her apartment, I shoved her bottle of Shalimar in my purse, and it has become my fragrance, infusing me with her, helping to fill the canyon she left.

Friends speak of knowing that their deceased moms have returned when mystical signals suddenly appear. One woman is convinced her mom is now



**Making breakfast is when my mother feels most present, as I do what I watched her do for decades.**

cumstances. “If Hitler didn’t get me, nothing will,” she used to say. I miss her voice and her scent, even her barbs. I miss being somebody’s child.

Yet she reminds me constantly that she is not really gone.

A stranger walks by wearing Shalimar, my mother’s fragrance, and a whiff of her perfume shoots a lifetime of maternal images through me. My mom is not supine in a pine coffin; she is racing toward me at the airport, having just gotten off a flight

the fat, beautiful cardinal that flutters, nonstop, around her bird feeder. Another daughter sees her mother’s face in rainbows. My continuing connection with Helene is not as otherworldly. All I have to do is open my mouth and shoo my kids away from the cookie jar because “It will ruin your dinner,” and there she is.

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In her final years I probed and listened hard, desperate to hear any



leftover stories and the last of her advice. And she prodded me in areas of my past she had dared not excavate before. We cried a lot and said “I love you” a lot. When death started whispering her name, I knew I had to dig in, love wholly, forgive, and hold nothing back.

What I learned during those final months was that resolving your relationship with your mother while she’s alive makes for a more centered, settled self when she dies. With clarity and closure, the jolting passage from girl to woman born at my mother’s burial was more emancipating than debilitating. Only when my mother moved on was I able to take the best of her, leave the worst behind, and become an unstoppable blend of the two of us.

Surging with the spirit of Helene, I am surprisingly giddy with a sense

graph, a shot of her as a wild-haired teen with a seductive grin. The picture is next to a pumpkin-spice candle, both placed on a silk scarf she adored. By the pungent flicker of the flame, I am awash in certainty that we are one. I wailed when my mom was dying and wondered: “Who will I be when my mother is gone?” Standing on the other side, I am happy to discover who that person is: I am my mother’s daughter, an adult woman who will persevere. I could live another 40 years, and she prepared me well to make this voyage without her, however lonely it may get.

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It’s the first morning of June, and outside my kitchen window the pink of dawn glistens on the Severn River in Maryland. I hear my mother asking for coffee, with a trickle of

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of adventure and invincibility that is rising like a phoenix from the ashes of grief. I am relieved that she is no longer suffering. I am released to become an unbridled woman who doesn’t have to please anyone anymore. For as long as I can remember, I would hesitate before making major decisions, gauging my moves on: “Would Mom approve?” Mom is someone else now, the power that fuels me, but no longer my judge. I am free.

I can write my first work of fiction, and it can be the most raw and sexual piece of beach trash anyone has ever devoured on a vacation.

I can wear hippie skirts and unkempt hair and not be greeted with a dramatic eye roll.

I can learn to mother myself; it’s about time.

I can be absolutely fearless, since one of my biggest fears has already occurred—I lost my mother, and I am okay.

Each afternoon, I talk to her photo-

skim milk and a half-teaspoon of sugar, the way she liked it. Making breakfast—slathering jam on toast and chopping cantaloupe—is when my mother feels most present, as I do what I watched her do for decades, a wet towel slung over her shoulder. I look at my hands, callused and large veined, rough from water and soap and children and time. They are my mother’s hands. I want her here, right now, and I am starting to sniffle when my 17-year-old son, Theo, standing six feet four, kisses me on top of the head and requests scrambled eggs.

I stand on my toes, pull him to my neck in a hug, and am grateful I had a mother for so long and that there’s plenty of sweet life ahead. ■

*Iris Krasnow is the author of I Am My Mother’s Daughter: Making Peace With Mom Before It’s Too Late (Perseus, 2006). Hear more from Iris at www.radioprime.org. Click on “Content Connections.”*

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