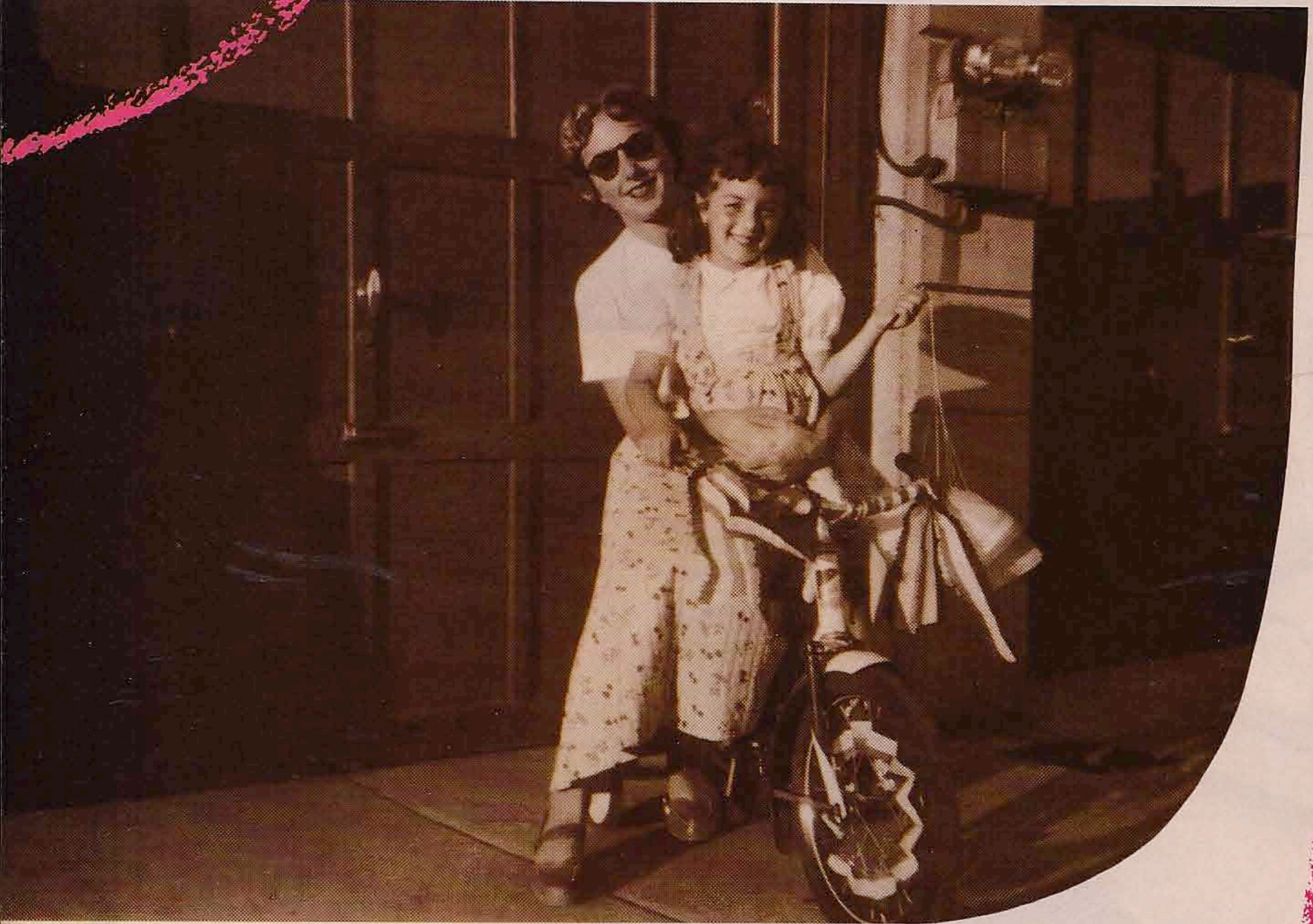


by  
aimee  
lee  
ball

# the secret life of



The author at four, with her mother, Gladys. Matching outfits made by mom

# mothers and daughters

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ere's the

**bad news: you can't  
get a divorce. here's  
the good news:  
you don't really  
want one. because  
for better or  
for worse, she's  
your one and only**

It is ten minutes to eight in the morning, and my phone is ringing. Once again, my mother has beaten my alarm clock (and beaten the phone company out of their daytime long-distance rates). I have told her, for more than ten years now, ever since I left home, that when she calls me before 8 in the morning or after 11 at night, I am likely to be semi-comatose, but no matter—the warnings have been largely ignored. Mothers operate by their own inner clocks, and my mother's clock is set at 10-to-8 A.M.

We have lived, as I say, in separate cities now for more than a decade and are largely connected by the phone, the umbilical cord of adulthood. It's a congenial arrangement, apart from the occasional discussion of who calls whom and how often, and probably no small part of the reason for our peaceful coexistence. We are not so far away that we can't share all the news that's fit to tell, but not so close that she can drop by to complain about my hair or my housekeeping. We have to *plan* to be together—pack a bag, take a train—and we try to make the time together untroubled rather than dutiful. We are not so likely to let an innocent remark escalate into armed combat, and we look at each other through more loving and tolerant eyes.

Omigod, did I actually admit that out loud, in public? *I get along with my mother.* It seems treacherous to the ranks of daughters everywhere, long-suffering and struggling for certification as grown-

ups, to concede the war of wills. But I have not conceded. I have simply... grown up.

Your mother has a bad reputation. I don't mean to impugn her honor, I just mean that mothers get bad press. Credit must be given for all the hours of our childhood they painted calamine lotion on our poison ivy and other ministrations to our health, but at about the age of puberty it is their influence over our *mental* health that moves out in front, and it is inestimable. They scrutinize our choices as if every skirt length were a political statement; they share hoary wisdom like "Why would a man buy the cow when he can get the milk free?"; they begin to prepare to *perhaps* let us into the sorority of women, while retaining the right to recall us back to babyhood at their discretion. They let us know who's in charge, who knows best, who's right. Mother-daughter relationships are potentially the most volatile in the world, even more than the ones between men and women, and you can't get a divorce.

So why do we endure, struggling against the odds to make this one tempestuous relationship work? I see an answer in the plight of a friend with an impossibly difficult mother—a mother whose ego and sense of competition and bad temper give her daughter a lot of grief. With such a parent, you might think a person would find somebody else to provide the nurturing, the responsiveness, the *being there* that you want from a

mother. But that's just the point: There isn't anybody else. And so my friend will phone home like E.T. She will put the best face on whatever it is her mother can give—turn it around so that the set of needs that aren't going to get fulfilled anywhere else will get fulfilled. Because there are many times in life when, though you'd die before you'd say it, your deepest instinct is: I want my mommy.

Part of the power and the draw of a mother lies in the simple fact of a shared history. There is a shorthand between you—with less preliminary stuff, you can get at the essence of what wants to be said. One woman I know lies in wait for what she and her sisters call *The Look*, which is an unspoken and killing judgment from their mother meaning anything from "How much weight have you gained?" to "This man you're seeing is pond scum" to "Your outfit would be appropriate on Pia Zadora"—all conveyed by the glint of an eye and the arch of a brow. Another woman has become so adept at the mother tongue, she knows that when her mother says, "I've never seen you wear so much jewelry," she really means, "I've never seen anyone wear so much jewelry," and she's holding back, "You look like a goddamn Christmas tree."

A mother's voice cannot be drowned out by loud music or impure thoughts—she is there to remind you she knew you when and has squatter's rights on your soul—and the (continued on page 139)

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trick, if you can manage it, is to accept her interference, even to enjoy it, in the sweet knowledge that it is temporary: Either you or she will eventually go home. A woman I know went off on one of her semiannual visits to her family, having anticipated her mother's general distaste for her wardrobe and having packed accordingly, meaning she took everything she owned. As they dressed to go out for dinner one night, she would try on an outfit, parade in front of her mother for approval and, not getting it, march back in with another choice. This is a woman who, in real life, seeks approval from no one but her dentist on her flossing technique. Her boyfriend, watching from the sidelines, asked with a smile, "How does it feel to be twelve years old?" She smiled back. "Terrific," she said.

Now, most of the time, a competent adult who can feed herself and walk without weaving does not want to be treated like a child—even by her mother, especially by her mother. But occasionally, in the privacy of one's home, it is okay. It is better than okay. Last winter I, and half the population of North America, had the flu—a flu that just wouldn't quit. I needed an exorcist to get it out of my body. And although my friends came with tea and sympathy, I got so weak that the doctor declared I needed someone to stay with me. Someone. As if there were some other one than my mother. She arrived in town with parsley and a rectal thermometer. "This," I said, as she fed me chicken soup and thin-sliced wheat toast with strawberry jelly and the crusts cut off, "this is exactly the way you like me: weak and helpless and dependent." But there is some part of the return to the womb that feels undeniably good. Who else but a mother will beam at your sickbed when you declare, "I think I'm strong enough to eat an egg"? And not just any egg. She will hear your most impossible request ("I'd like the inner temperature to be . . .") and then *she will do it*. And if it isn't right, *she will do it again*.

The worst thing my mother ever said to me was, "You don't treat me like one of your friends." It was the worst thing because it was true, and the only answer to it was, "I don't need another friend, I need a mother." A mother is supposed to have a higher threshold of boredom or anger or impatience, to take the kind of abuse that would get you kicked out of a friendship or a romance—and come back loving you, undilutedly. She's supposed to place your welfare and comfort above her own, give you the bigger piece of pie (unless you're on a diet, and then she's supposed to have very expensive, lightly steamed, out-of-season asparagus for you). She's supposed to lie for you ("No, Arnold, my daughter cannot come to the phone—she's broken her arm") or even lie to you when necessary. "The

world is hard and cruel," says a friend, "and I don't want that from my mother. I want to be told, 'It's not such a bad haircut, darling.'"

Mother love is a safe harbor. She does, without complaint, what you couldn't pay somebody else to do. A friend who prefers to remain anonymous tells of experiencing what the commercials call problem perspiration—"I would use these industrial-strength deodorants and break out in a rash, and then I'd use something less potent and I'd smell. And I was complaining about it to my mother, and she said, 'Here, let me smell,' and *she smelled my armpits*."

I am very much my mother's daughter. I've always had the illusion that I could pick and choose among her character traits, deciding which ones I'll keep, but it ain't necessarily so. I have her good manners, and her glove size, and her capacity to spill whatever she is eating right in the center of her shirt. I have her handwriting, and her allergy to green peppers, and her stubborn inability to say, "I'm sorry," and I have her pelvis. This last I know because I travel over 100 miles to see the same gynecologist I've seen since the age of 16 (not an unreasonable distance when you're deeply in love) who has treated my mother for even longer. And because he once mentioned how alike we are from the hips down, and because she was in labor for 36 hours and almost died in the act of having me, I have a frozen fear of childbirth. I inherited none of her finer features—her good posture, her great legs—so why should I expect to be spared her shortcomings?

I am very much my mother's daughter, but there are four words coming from her that are guaranteed to make me apoplectic: *If I were you . . .*. As in, "If I were you, I'd clean up this mess before I went out." As in, "If I were you, I'd buy the skirt in black, not white, because white will have to be cleaned every time you wear it." The rational response to "If I were you . . ." would be ". . . but you're not." But there is little rationality in the empty spaces between mothers and daughters—there is only emotion and angst. Because she will say—indeed, she will believe—that her instincts are entirely generous and benevolent, that she wants only your happiness. And that is a crock.

There is a poignancy that comes from the recognition of how desperately our mothers still need us to be their children. We forge our emotional distance early on, killing them with small stab wounds, and then we make the job complete with physical distance—a distance they are constantly trying to close up.

"If my mother thinks my pants are too tight," says one woman, "she will just grab me in the crotch and yank. It's like being in a time warp—suddenly I'm twelve years old, in the corset department of Hoexter's Department Store, and

my mother is fitting me for a bra, right in the aisle, snapping that 28AA over my shirt. I can't go shopping with my mother because she's still trying to dress me. I don't want her control, but I don't want her sanction, either. I want us to meet, dressed and socialized."

There is something else that happens in the lives of mothers and daughters, and it is called role reversal. The question of who is taking care of whom is less easily answered, and even if the answer is clear and defined, neither of you would be comfortable articulating it. You start paying for her at lunch. She has bronchitis, and you call her doctor to make sure it's just bronchitis. You let her do things for you, not because you need them done or because you can't do them yourself, but because it makes her feel good to do them, like when you were six and she let you mix the cake batter. The words "Whatever you think, dear"—never before heard in your mother's mouth—start creeping in. The power struggle has shifted—maybe it isn't even a struggle anymore, maybe it's just two women. For the moment, or even many moments, you can transcend the roles.

Not too long ago, my mother was about to celebrate a milestone birthday, and she announced that she wanted no party, no presents, no cake with candles. All she wanted in the whole world was for me to go on a trip with her. My mother is a terrific lady, but she's *my mother*, and this presents a set of problems to me that are nobody else's problems. For weeks after I agreed to the trip, I was slightly embarrassed about the idea—one friend pointed out that I recited a little litany of justification ("My mother is having this milestone birthday . . ."). And then one day, my mother, ever the witch at reading my mind, said, "I don't think it's strange that you're going away with me. I'm fun." I started to get hysterical. "It's true," she said. "I'm cute and I'm fun." And so she is.

We decided to go to France, deeply influenced by the fact that my mother thought she was getting this French-speaking tour guide: me. And I do get very smart-assed about my linguistic skills and get myself into trouble (I think I've asked for a *pamplermousse pressé*, which is a crushed grapefruit juice, when I've actually asked for a *parapluie pressé*, which is a crushed umbrella). But mostly I got us in and out of restaurants, on and off planes, up and down old grillwork elevators without too many flukes. I was a good tour guide. I was a good mommy.

It is tricky to travel with *anyone*, to share bathroom habits and wake-up calls and sight-seeing priorities, and it is especially danger-laden when one person is used to being the grown-up and the other the child. And there were some moments of clashing opinions—we had

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our share of If-I-were-you's. (You cannot completely sublimate nature, even for two weeks in another time zone.)

But mostly the trip was a confirmation of a theory I've been harboring for some time: that the reality about mothers and daughters is not as bad as the rumors. That more people have a better relationship than they think they do. That even while you're trying to figure out who you are to each other, you can accept a few truths: You will never stop disappointing each other in small, petty ways. You will never stop needing each other in big, important ways. The motherlode is deep and wide for a daughter—the source of what women we become, since we've probably learned what it's like to be a grown female person from our mothers and Mary Tyler Moore. Eventually, you recognize what your mother's got to give, and you come to terms with her—terms of endearment.

I'm back on the phone with my mother. Except it is so early in the morning, I literally do not recognize her voice.

"Who is this?" I ask through sleep.

"You don't know, I'm not telling you," she says.

I'm straining to wake up. "Where do I know you from?"

"From *life*," she yells, "you know me from *life*."

That's all she's been trying to tell me all these years. And not a bad reason for coming to terms. ●

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