



At Long Last, Love

As mother-daughter relationships go, JEANNE SAFER'S was distant, difficult. But at the eleventh hour, the psychotherapist uncovered the sweetness at its center.

“I’VE HAD ONLY ONE SCALES-DROPPING-from-my-eyes revelation in my life, but the timing was perfect because it brought my mother back to me. Minutes before my final conversation with her as she lay dying, I realized that the behavior that hurt and infuriated me all my life came not from her self-involvement and insensitivity, as I had always assumed, but from the deepest love.

I was 600 miles away at the time; she had made it clear that she didn’t want me there in person at the end. “She doesn’t want you to see her like this because she doesn’t want to worry you,” explained Linda, the case manager who had been my surrogate sister-therapist throughout the five years of my mother’s encroaching dementia. “Worry me! She’s not even thinking about me,” I raged. “She’s abandoning me. She’s not letting me comfort her—just like always. She’s said goodbye to her cat but not to me, goddamnit.” My husband joined the chorus of “she’s trying to protect you in her way,” but I was having none of it. Too often my mother’s narcissism had masqueraded as selflessness. So many things that were supposedly for my sake had really been for hers.

Trying to manage my fury and grief, I struggled to accept that our final would have to be a long-distance call. Then, unbidden, an image of my mother as a young woman with her own mother—a photograph I own—came to mind. I saw my grandmother, an immigrant who fled Russia at age 17 and never really grew up, a woman so passive and frightened of life

that she barely made an impression. Even in her late 60s, she seemed clueless. I saw

Jeanne Safer in her Manhattan home office, August 2005.

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MELANIE DUNEAU, GROOMING: JENNA MENARD

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 92 my mother being adult for both of them, her vitality and air of authority masking her fear of failing at the impossible task of caretaking. Standing slightly in the background, she was steadying her mother’s arm and holding her mother’s purse as well as her own. I suddenly understood that my mother must have vowed, whether she knew it or not, to spare me her fate. She would never “worry” me by exposing me to any behavior that smacked of weakness, neediness, or incompetence. Unlike her own mother, she would always take

that I know how important it was for you to take care of me, and you did it.”

She dropped the facade, the infomercial of business as usual, hoping that she’d heard what she thought she’d heard, and said with astonishment, “Really? I did? You know that?”

“Yes, you did. You took care of me,” I said with a tenderness that I hadn’t been able to muster for decades, that for the first time cost me nothing because it was the truth.

“Thank you!” she whispered joyously, almost ecstatically—words my mother

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care of me as she defined it, letting me be the child she should have been. To her dying day, she would be a better mother than the one she had, never leaning on me—always carrying her own purse. I felt a flood of gratitude that I had figured this out in time to tell her.

Linda told me to call around noon, when she thought my mother would be strong enough to speak to me. She told me that despite labored breathing and flickering consciousness, my mother was marshaling all her resources for the occasion. Giving her plenty of time to symbolically put on her makeup—she never lost the knack of putting herself together smashingly for my visits—and summoning all the resolve and calm in a crisis I’d learned from her, I sat down on a park bench in the December sun and dialed.

“Hello, darling!” she said with complete self-possession and lucidity. “You’re just back from Buenos Aires, aren’t you? Did you have a good time?”

I had called her on my return just three days before, when she didn’t remember that I’d gone. “Mother,” I said, cutting to the chase, “this may be our last conversation, and there’s something I want to tell you.”

“What are you talking about? I’m fine,” she demurred with hearty, almost credible, conviction.

Pressing on, I said, “I want you to know

had never uttered, and in a tone she had never used, in the 57½ years of our acquaintance. Her last moment of consciousness was our first of genuine mutual consolation.

An accident of fate granted my mother and me this extraordinary dialogue at the eleventh hour. But the insight that made it possible was the fruit of long reflection—and years of providing and receiving psychotherapy—that would have paid off even if I’d never had the chance to tell her. Understanding is precious whenever it comes, because change in the inner relationship with a parent is what counts. Anytime there is love to salvage, recovering it enhances your life, compensates for things that went awry, and neutralizes bitterness.

Recognizing the good intentions concealed in my mother’s bad behavior didn’t fix everything between us—not every mistake she made was motivated by love—but it did kindle empathy and kinship that I’d been too hurt and angry to feel for years. I became less an aggrieved daughter and more a fellow human being: her peer at last. Finally I understood that love that’s misguided is still misguided, and still love. ●

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