



“Your Mother Knows a Few Things”

Her mother was cynical, sophisticated—and full of really bad 1950s-style advice. But when the chips were down, she came through with pizzazz. A generation later, **JEANNE McCULLOCH** wonders what kind of wisdom she'll pass on to her own baby girl.

MY MOTHER AND I DID NOT ALWAYS GET ALONG. But there was a time, when I was about 16 and my father was still alive, when we did. Late at night, we'd sit up in the living room, drinking diet soda and smoking cigarettes. I had just learned to smoke then, and I was working for a certain look, a special controlled nonchalance that I saw my mother as having perfected. So I puffed as she puffed, watching her every move. The way she'd inhale deeply, then let the smoke out in a long dramatic waft. The way she cocked the cigarette just so between two fingers, her head leaning on a hand, the elbow casually grazing the arm of the couch. She looked both poised and wise, I thought, even in her pink nightgown and fuzzy slippers, feet up on the coffee table. The topic was inevitably men.

“He left her flat,” she'd say about one of her friends, or “With that weight gain, c'mon, she had it coming.” Above her head, the cigarette smoke curled languorously, but her free hand cut the air as she spoke, her dark eyes snapped.

High above the honks and shrieks of the New York City streets, my father and sister far away in sleep, this is what I learned those late nights in the living room: that ▶

The author (right) with her mother, Patricia, and sister, Darcy, New York, 1965

to my mother, after the ballet lessons, the braces, the first pair of high heels, the next essential item was a man. "The army of women" is how she referred to her friends who were divorced, or widowed, who were suddenly alone. "Don't be one of the army of women," she'd warn, and though I didn't know what she meant, I pictured them all: gray, elegant, with shiny black pocketbooks and Chanel suits, shuffling together down Madison Avenue. I believed that was something bad, something to avoid.

But this was long ago, long before my father died, and she followed some years after. Now I have a daughter of my own, Charlotte, a 7-year-old in high-tops and cargo pants, who cruises our neighborhood on a Razor scooter with her baseball cap on backward, her penny-colored hair flying up behind. I can't imagine I will ever be offering her the things my mother offered me those late nights. Certainly not the cigarettes, or the diet soda, or god forbid the particular brand of parental wisdom that made young girls believe they would be nothing in this world without a man. Yet as I watch Charlotte skirt the bumps and divots in the sidewalk, hop her scooter in the air, I wonder, what can I arm her with that will make her safe from hurt in this world? Once she's done

with Razor scooters and cargo pants and other things that make 7-year-old girls happy, no helmet rules or parental controls on the computer are going to protect Charlotte from mistakes of the heart.

AS FOR ME, I TOOK MY mother's advice. Not long after college, I married the boy next door—if one counts the boy in the next dorm room as the boy next door—and let the wild tide of romance funnel into one settled stream. Dean was a tall, decent boy from Maine. We had never really spoken until a week before college ended, when he stayed up one night until dawn explaining Einstein's theory of relativity to me. By the time the birds were announcing the coming day and we had moved the discussion to my bed, I decided this boy, this New England boy destined for a lab coat, was a better choice than anyone I would muster out of the gang of guys in Shakespeare 101, with whom I spent most of my time. Besides, I liked his cleft chin and his whisper in the dark. Even if what he was whispering that first night was $E = mc^2$. And I liked that he wore a silver earring in his left earlobe. Beyond the earring, the cleft, and the theory of relativity, we could not have

been more different. Dean wanted the simple life, and I wanted the most beautiful KitchenAid mixer we could buy. This seems a minor thing, but once we had moved together to Manhattan, we spent entire dazed sunlit Saturday afternoons walking into every hardware store on Broadway and leaving empty-handed because we couldn't agree on a blender or a toaster, let alone a lifestyle. As the appliances broke down, one by one, so did the marriage. At the end, all we had accumulated between us was the desire to spare each other's feelings. Finally, one day Dean said, "I don't know, it's like a house of cards and the cards are just, well, tumbling down." As he said it, his hands fluttered in the air and fell to his sides. I thought of dance class as a child, when the teacher would say, "Think of your hands as the leaves, girls, leaves in the autumn, tumbling to the ground." And I thought, that's it. Dead leaves.

After the dead leaf gesture, Dean took off his wedding ring and it lay in the palm of his hand, a little lost craft. We both looked at it, for a moment, then he shoved it deep in the pocket of his jeans. He left a few days later, a duffel bag slung over his arm, like a kid catching the next bus back to college. I called my mother, who was living in Paris, to break the news. "I am completely undone by this," she said over the phone, the long-distance wires crackling. "I am the only woman I *know* who isn't a grandmother." To my unmarried sister she confided, "Now I'm back to square one with you girls. Jesus Christ." But things change. I like to think that. The next day she called back and invited me to visit her at her house on the beach at the tip of Long Island. "I think I better come on," she said. "Coming on" is what people did in my family in the case of emergencies. They hopped planes, dropped plans, they banded together. "You know I like to give you your 'space,' as you kids call it these days, but I've been brooding."

I could hear the exhale of her cigarette, as if the smoke were drifting lazily through the phone wires, obscuring all my determined boundaries. "Ma, I'm fine here," I said. "I'm doing just fine." But the voice didn't sound like mine. It was a thin eggshell of a voice saying no, I mean yes, I mean.... [CONTINUED ON PAGE 272]



McCulloch (right) with her mother and daughter, Charlotte, New York, 2000

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"I don't want my baby girl alone," she continued. "My tiny baby girl."

WHO'S MY BABY?" I ASK CHARLOTTE when I pick her up from her first-grade classroom. "Who is my tiny baby girl?" "Me," she says, and jumps into my arms. I wonder how long it will be before she says, "Mother, please do not address me in that fashion in front of my classmates, or, for that matter, ever." But the truth is, when my mother addressed me in that fashion after Dean and I parted ways, it was quite all right with me that my mother decided it was time to do some mothering. Since my father had died a few years earlier, she had become something of a traveling road show. She liked to tell me about it over the phone: the parties, the plays, the exotic road trips. She was alone suddenly in the world, after my father's death, and she liked to keep herself surrounded. And now the road show was returning to the homeland for a few lessons in showmanship.

IN MARCH IN NEW YORK, YOU can sometimes smell the dirt thaw. If it is an early spring, the streets give off an odor at once filthy and fresh, as if the promise of budding trees and new life will soon triumph over the long, dark days of winter. The year Dean left, spring came early. My mother came soon after that.

"You know, I can't really help you with this," she warned me as we drove down the Long Island Expressway to her house. "If you had asked me a few years ago the wisdom in marrying a young man who favors his mother's meatloaf over a nice restaurant, well, I might have said some things then." She raised her eyes. "But did anyone ask me?" She seemed to be addressing the car's sun visor above her. "No." She shook her head. "Yet," she told the visor, "it's a mother's role, in a time like this, coming on. I can't help you with that mess. But," her face brightened, "I can help you with this." She pulled out a pile of glossy magazines she had been reading on the plane from France. "Here, look at this." She flicked a long red nail at a page of young women in poufy skirts. "Bubble skirts. Everyone in Paris is wearing them. I got one for

you, to cheer you up. Anyway, at a time like this, it's important to be chic. Baby girl," she patted my hand, "we're going to get through this thing with grace and style if it kills us."

RECENTLY, CHARLOTTE CAME HOME from school and told me she was going to die. "Zeke told me I didn't have a heart," she said. Her almond eyes were wide with terror.

"Were you mean to him?"

She flicked her wrist in a way that dismisses a detailed confession and murmured, "Well, maybe a little. He gets on

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my nerves." The vicissitudes of childhood friendship—in the schoolyard more fleeting, but often seemingly as passionate as adult love.

"So maybe, Charlotte, he didn't mean you were going to die. Maybe he meant you didn't return his affection."

"But if I don't have a heart, I *am* going to die," she said, launching into what her older brother, Sam, refers to as one of her "chick fits." "Jeeesh-a," she announced, "like I need this. He's telling me I'm dying, Mom, because I don't like him following me around." In a chick fit, words take on extra syllables. *Situation* becomes "sit-chew-ayy-shun." "I am die-ing-uhn!"

Oh, the maternal heart. Can I save Charlotte from being cool to a towheaded boy with bright blue eyes who loves to trail her at school? Can I save her when some boy in ten years doesn't return her love?

OKAY, LET'S GET THIS done and get this done fast," my mother said. We were in the attic of her house, a late Saturday morning. It was pouring outside. In a house by the sea, the reverberations of a rainstorm are boisterous and spooky, and as a child I loved being spooked, loved it the way you loved something loud, something forceful, something you could never control. The

very drama of it put me in a world that was my own: the rain falling in mad sparks of sound against the roof, the echo of the surf, thunder like a rip through the sky. The attic was a ghostly theater when it rained.

Soon after Dean and I were married, we stored all our wedding presents up in the attic. The blue Tiffany boxes, the festive silver bags, various bowed and bubble-wrapped items. We had never gone through them; they had stayed up there, a huddled reminder for five years that we were too young for things like china and crystal. They would wait until we'd grown up. Suddenly, unused and unopened, they

were the only things between us to separate, and without my having to say it, my mother realized I couldn't do it alone. She seated herself in the old beanbag chair we had in the living room in the late '60s. It was orange and hollowed out, the Styrofoam beans flattened with age. She peered into the dim light at all the boxes, the trunks. At one point she had moved all our baby items up here in anticipation of grandmother status. In one corner was our old highchair, white wood, with a pink elephant on the seat. I reached out to touch it and my finger made a long white line in the dust.

"Let's get it done before the weather clears," my mother said. She wriggled herself further into the beanbag. "Then we can take a nice walk on the beach."

The wind was howling. "Ma, it's dreadful out there."

"Oh," she said, "trust your mother." When she had something absolute to say, my mother always referred to herself in the third person. "Your mother knows a few things. It will clear."

The boxes were carefully marked. TWO SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS, BRASS CANDLESTICKS, SOUP TUREEN, CERAMIC COOKIE JAR (REALLY UGLY), one box was labeled. BRANDY SNIFFERS (\$\$\$) another said. I brought over a box marked SILVER CHAFING DISH. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 274]

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 272] My mother eyed the boxes.

"I hope to god you wrote thank-you notes for all of this."

"It was five years ago."

"Your mother just wants to make sure. There's some pretty good loot here."

I held up the silver chafing dish. "What the hell is a chafing dish anyway," I asked.

"That one happens to be very expensive. Who gave you that?"

"I don't remember."

"It's very good sterling silver." She took off the ornate top and held it up. I could see her red lips reflected in the shine. "Take it home. I'm sure it came from our side of the family."

"How are you so sure?"

"C'mon. It shows real taste. Let's give him something he can really use. That life preserver, for example. Who gave you a life preserver?"

"It goes with the canoe." A canoe had been tied to the top of Dean's family's car when they arrived at our wedding. It was their present to us—a beautiful pea green boat. It had spent the last five years accumulating cobwebs in my mother's garage.

"Who gives such presents?" my mother asked. "A canoe in New York City. What were you planning to do with it?"

"I don't know. Circumnavigate the island?"

"Please," my mother said, shaking her head. She added the life preserver and the canoe to Dean's side of the list. "Bring on the next box."

The next was china dinner plates. A dozen of them, pearly gray. I remember picking them out. Actually, I remember standing in the store, afraid to touch one, as if it would slip through my fingers, shatter right there on the floor and everyone would know the marriage was a joke. A facade. That we were not ready for adult things in life like fine china.

"You never used these?"

"Well, we never had cause to."

"You eat. God knows *be* ate."

"I don't know. It was safer to use the old stuff."

She waved her pen in the air. "Look. China breaks. You have to be careful, but it doesn't mean you don't use it."

Look, a heart breaks. You have to be careful, but that doesn't mean you don't use it.

"I don't know. I guess I was just scared," I admitted.

But if I don't have a heart, I'm going to die!

"Let him have the goddamn china then." She wrote it down: TIFFANY DINNER PLATES. ONE DOZEN. "Fine. Life goes on."

I closed the box. Goodbye, I was thinking. They looked so serene, lying there. I'd lost them and they didn't even break. The cause some ineptitude more abstract than slipping through fingers. Or just that exact. Just that dumb and tragic.

"You don't want these things sitting around haunting you forever," she said, "trust me."

LOSS. SOMETIMES I PICTURED a box of the stuff, the consistency of powdered sugar, or ashes, stored away like all the items in the attic. If someone came along and offered me more, I'd say, "Loss? Thanks, but I'll pass. Got all I can use right here."

The morning tapered into early afternoon as we finished up. "Help your old ma," my mother said, erecting an arm from the depths of the beanbag. Though



her face, at this point, was lined with age, like a sheet washed and dried too many times in the wind, she still held herself strong against the world. To her death, my mother was a woman used to having her way. As we reached the bottom of the attic stairs, a blast of light shone down the hallway from the window. "Look," she said. She tapped a ruby nail against the pane. "See? I wasn't crazy." We watched the waves break in long blades of foam. The sun made crazy diamonds across the water. "This is all I can give you now," she told me then. "Baby girl, it's going to be a perfectly glorious day."

SO HOW COULD YOU BE MARRIED AND then unmarried, Mom," Charlotte asked me one recent Saturday. We were heading toward Hudson River Park, Charlotte beside me on her scooter. She dragged the toe of her navy blue high-top sneaker against the cobblestones, which is what she does when she asks a question she feels tentative about.

"Sometimes grown-ups make mistakes," I said.

"Like in math or something." Her voice

dropped to a whisper. "That's a mistake."

Charlotte had only recently learned that before I married her father I had had a first husband. She had run across a photograph of a tall stranger in a gray morning

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suit embracing me in a wedding dress. It would have been a hard thing to try to obfuscate, so I had told her the truth.

"So then grown-ups can make bigger mistakes than in math homework. But it wasn't a mistake, after all. If I had stayed with Dean, I wouldn't have you."

"So he's not my father, then? Phew. 'Cause I was worried he must be, and I don't even know him."

"He's not your father. If he were your father you would have to be 20, and you're not even 10."

"I am 7," she declared, as if to end this discussion by making her own point.

"And who is my baby girl?"

"I am."

Once we were safely to the other side of the treacherous West Side Highway crossing, Charlotte tore down the promenade south along the Hudson River, off to meet her friend Zeke on Charles Street; Zeke, who last week she had disdained and this week was her main man. She darted confidently through the oncoming traffic of baby strollers, couples hand in hand, dogs without their leashes, her penny-colored hair flying up behind. "Careful," I wanted to yell, but Charlotte was already well beyond earshot, riding high and free in the early spring light, the morning a seasonal whisper of what was to come. The sun made crazy diamonds across the water. It was going to be a perfectly glorious day. **Q**

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