

The Opposite of Wrong

(January 2019)

All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.
--Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

I miss the way she started speaking as soon as I picked up the phone. *I'm about to spend \$30 on a brisket*, she might say. Or, *Are my kids ever going to grow up? They're going to grow up, right?* I miss the way she moved about her kitchen, like the captain of a ship. I miss her smile, her musical laugh. I miss the way she had of hugging me that made me feel safe and loved.

I don't miss...?

I don't want to write what I don't miss—though I don't miss the way she could get angry at the kids and say things she'd regret later. I understood. Of course I did, having been guilty of the same thing and believing she'd learned it from me.

My mother had a saying—what every mother says to every child. "When you're a mother, you'll understand."

I'm still trying. Still looking through the wrong end of a telescope to understand my mother, then flipping the lens to focus on myself as mother to Michele and Michael.

When Michele became a mother we found ourselves surveying three generations of mothering struggling to answer one question: How does it happen that beginning with the best intentions and as much love as we can muster, we can't help but feel we've messed up?

Michele is gone. She died four years ago. This was not supposed to happen.

The list of things I want to tell her grows longer each day. Her son Andrew graduated from college. His sister, Rachel, studies pharmacy, works in the bagel bakery where Michele and I often met for lunch. In a drawer in my kitchen is an antique cookie cutter in the shape of a giraffe that I never got to give her. I will always wonder what else I forgot to give her.

Who doesn't want to be the perfect mother, the role you feel you were born to play? How did you learn to play this role? Why you watched your mother of course, and like reading a Chinese restaurant menu, you chose—*I will do that; I won't ever say that; I'll never be like that.*

One day, you're in a store, you pick up an item on a sale table; a designer handbag, tossed there so casually it looks like they might be giving it, no throwing it away. But the price tag reads \$299.95. You toss it back with a disgusted gesture. "They must be crazy," you say as your mother's voice comes out of your mouth.

Caller ID told me it was Michele. I picked up the phone to hear a loud sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"I was a bad mother." She was sure she'd done too much for her children, hadn't prepared them for real life.

Tempted to agree, I chose soothing words instead. "Maybe you were too *good* a mother."

"Well," she said with undeniable logic, "that makes me a bad mother."

We laughed, which at that point was all we could do, but later as I emptied the dishwasher, I thought: I raised her. If she's a bad mother, then I must be a bad mother too.

I don't think of myself as a good mother. Indifferent mother, unsure mother, scared mother, trying-too-hard-not-to-be-my-mother mother, unable-to-show-unconditional-love mother, afraid-to-

show-fear mother, made-my-own-mistakes mother, laissez-faire mother, give-them-what-they-need-and-leave-them-alone mother. Not a smother mother.

There's the mother you are, the mother you had, the mother *she* had. Why do we sometimes mistreat our children? Because someone did it to us? Didn't we resolve that when we became mothers, we'd never do that? We can't help it. But *why* can't we help it?

I told them the story of the "hallway incident" when they were teenagers and the best of friends. Michele was five and Michael two. They played on the floor in our garden apartment with colorful blocks that Michael had fashioned into a road for the toy school bus. In future years, we'd appreciate Michele's managerial talents, her way of outlining how we'd get from A to B, the way she coached Michael and me through divorces after long marriages. On this day she only wanted to "fix" his road, but that was too much for him. The blocks became flying missiles. I feared for their lives and my sanity.

I picked Michael up, took Michele by the hand, opened the front door, sat them both down in the hallway of our building, went back inside and shut the door. How long did I leave them there? I'd like to think it was no more than a minute or two until I could breathe again. When I opened the door, the two of them were clinging to each other, whimpering, tears running down their cheeks.

My mother says, "I'm getting your clothes ready for when I give you away." *Did she really say that?* We're in the bedroom of our apartment. Later she'll put me in the stroller and we'll pick up my brother at school. I watch her ironing my favorite dress—powder blue with puffed sleeves. She spreads the sash out, carefully inserts the point of the iron into the fold where sash meets seam.

Do I wait all day for a knock at the door? Look for a packed suitcase? Do I try to be extra good?

"Would you like two kids?" Michele says to the women at the airport sandwich counter. I'm standing nearby watching my daughter offer up her children as if they're unwanted puppies or inconvenient kittens.

We're supposed to be on vacation, on our way to Florida, to swim, snorkel, sightsee. We still call them "kids," but Andrew and Rachel are seventeen and fourteen, at the height of their abilities to irritate, aggravate, exasperate. What was the fight about? I can't know. I can only hear the pain in her voice, and wonder, not for the first time, *How did we get here? What can I do?*

Three or four weeks later, we're seated at Michele's kitchen table. Andrew speaks in monosyllables and untranslatable grunts. Rachel slumps in a chair in the family room while she studies her cell phone. Michele fights back tears. "I can't do this," she says when we have the room to ourselves.

I take her hand. This is temporary, I say. Things will get better. She gets up to pull a tissue out of its box on the counter. "But what can I *do*?"

I'd been thinking about this, because I'd heard her say it again—to the tour guide at the museum, to a server at Denny's. *Would you like two teenagers?*

"For starters," I say, "you could stop asking people to take your children."

She nods. Remorse and guilt play across her face.

My friend Sandi was 23 when her mother died at 45. I was 54 when my mother died at 86. We tell each other stories to keep them alive. "I wanted a fairy princess wedding dress," Sandi says. "A full skirt that swayed when I moved, lace, rhinestones, pearls, a tiara. My mother insisted I wear a plain satin sheath. I felt like Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene."

"My mother liked you better than she liked me," I say.

"I know," she says. "That always bothered me."

"I feel guilty making fun of my mother when she's not here to defend herself."

"Me too," Sandi says. "But if I could apologize, she'd just say, 'I told you so.'"

I did not want to be my mother, the woman who tried to mold me into her image of an ideal daughter—someone who was prettier than I was, thinner too, more outgoing. Think: *why can't you be more like Sandi?* I knew she did this out of love. I knew she believed if I followed her directions, I would be happy. And when I refused to play along, there were tears and anguish. *I'd tried so hard to be a good mother. Where did I go wrong?*

My mother, myself, Michele—I keep seeing similarities. We loved the color purple, and if you took the three of us to an antique shop, you would see each of our hands reach for the same blue glass pitcher. I look like my mother—short with curly hair, mine graying just like hers. My eyes are a combination of her green and my father's brown. Michele resembled her father's family—dark hair and eyes, olive skin, rounder body type. We shared the curly hair, which we always complained about. Still, in a photo taken ten or twelve years ago, you would see we are mother and daughter. We're at the zoo. Our heads are together and we're smiling at the camera. Something about our smiles, the shape of our faces, the dark, unruly hair, would tell you.

The personality trait we shared was impatience. We were the people you see in supermarkets, scoping out the shortest lines, complaining when the clerk chats too long with a customer or has to change the register tape. When my mother brushed my hair, I could feel her irritation as each strong stroke stung my scalp. "It's not my fault," I wanted to say.

"I got it from you," Michele would say when I counseled patience with the kids, with training the puppy, with driving in traffic, with anything.