

## **My Mother and the Complexities of Love, Grief, and Memory**

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My mother, Rochelle, would ask me sometimes when I was in my 20s, “Was I a good mother?” I knew why she was asking, and I loved her so much that I told her what she needed to hear, “Yes, of course. You were an amazing mother.” I wanted to protect her, and I wanted to make her feel good. I had learned at the earliest age how to stuff my feelings, so it came easy. And then I lost her when I was 26. She had just visited my husband, Ruben, and I at our new home in San Anselmo and she couldn’t wait to decorate it with me. That same week, I got an early morning phone call from my hysterical father, choking out the words, “She is gone.” “Who is gone? I said completely confused. “Your mom. I’m so sorry,” he said as I felt my knees buckle and the breath leave my body. She had died of a heart arrhythmia in her sleep at the age of 57 without any warning. I was gutted.

My mom and I had just come through a relatively drama free teen and young adult years together and we had grown very close. The years of my childhood had faded away and I never wanted to look back. She took great joy in me and I felt completely loved by her. At her funeral, I eulogized her and said what everyone who loved her already knew...she was warm, smart, funny and generous. But as the years rolled by, time, distance and life had a way of surfacing things that I didn’t want to see. I willed myself to think of only the good memories of my mom. I spoke of her only in the most loving terms when asked, using the praise we heap on those who have passed away that we love which often isn’t the whole truth. I grieved privately telling myself that it is my style but really it was the best way to avoid talking about what I didn’t want to look at or understand.

The truth was that my mother was bipolar. She came from a long line of mentally ill women and men that damaged her. Her genetics plagued her for her entire life. It took a loving woman and filled her with rage out of nowhere. As a mother, she was all contrasts. To grow up with her was bedtime stories and kisses on your forehead or screaming with full rage about some wrong we had done before locking herself in her room all night. It was laughing with her friends on the phone or picking up the same phone later to scream into it that she knew it is being tapped. It was going to a beach BBQ with family friends or watching her eyes flash from side to side and her jaw clench in a certain way that meant we were in for it. My older sister, Julie, and I would watch her rage build over time like a pressure cooker that had to be released. Most nights she would get into the shower and yell at nothing or have imaginary fights with someone that had crossed her at work. Most days, she was perfectly normal...working hard around the clock as a Coastal Commissioner, coming home to grocery shop, fix us dinner and put us to bed. All I wanted was to be near her, touch her soft hands, listen to her voice and watch the way she threw her head back with she laughed. I loved her more than anything and she scared me. Her moods would shift without warning and it took a heavy toll on my sister and me.

My mom’s mental state made her make erratic parenting decisions that left us alone at home and vulnerable in our neighborhood near downtown LA. People we trusted took advantage of us while our parents were away working. Our mother felt unsafe too...she could be emotionally careless and would often blame us for any wrong that came our way. I was a shy, sensitive kid

that learned quickly to be quiet, to have no needs and to keep my head low. I didn't feel safe in our house which made the world feel unsafe too. When I felt overwhelmed with fear, I would sit on the bottom step of our stairwell where I would press my body against the wall as much as I could...it was the only place in the house where no one could see me through any window. My comfort was to be unseen. Our Mom would always wake up the next day after an episode like nothing happened, so we learned to do that too. We didn't talk about it for years – not to each other, not to our family and not to our friends. Those years left us quietly broken in many ways.

When I became a mother of three kids, I'd never felt more joy or more vulnerable. I found the weight of motherhood to be crushing...so beautiful, so powerful and so painful. I saw how my kids looked at me for safety and comfort. I watched their eyes change and their little bodies recoil if I had the slightest anger in my voice. I saw the power of parenting in real time and my childhood came back and sat heavy on my heart. In my quiet moments alone, I would think about my mother and it filled me with anger. How could she I thought as tears streamed down my face? We were little girls and we were thrown to the wolves. We had no sanctuary. The hurt flooded out of me as I tried to understand what happened in that house. Her yahrzeit would painfully pass, and I felt completely alone in this new stage of grief. Slowly, I started to speak about my memories to my husband, my sister and in therapy. My therapist asked me to picture myself in my childhood home and I thought of my seven-year-old self sitting on that bottom stair wanting to be unseen. I wept for that little girl who felt so alone. The truth of my mom's mental illness started to form as I struggled with feeling that I was betraying her and dishonoring her memory by even speaking about it. I was reminded that telling your truth is not betrayal...it is real, it was not my fault and it happened.

Love, grief and memory are complex. We can acknowledge people's complexity in life, but it is much harder to do in death. When you lose someone, their life and their connection to you takes up precious space inside you that settles in your bones. That space holds memories that make you cry with laughter or feel a love you can't put into words or make tears roll down your cheeks when you least expect it. When you are grieving someone, who hurt you from mental illness, addiction or any other struggle in life, you don't have an easy story. It feels isolating to hear only about lost loved ones with seem like perfect people because you can't see your grief entirely reflected in that. I no longer think of my mother and ask "how could she?" because I know why. She truly tried and she had an untreated mental illness that she could not control. She loved my sister and I deeply and we knew it despite everything. We lost someone that we treasured. She was so much more than her worst days. I miss her everyday and I know that the best parts of me come directly from her. My daughter, Maia Rochelle, is named in her honor. It is possible to hold everything that a person was in your life, all of it, and it doesn't lessen your feeling of love or loss for a second. On this holy day of Yom Kippur, let's allow ourselves and others the space for their truth...for love, for pain and for grief in its entirety. Let's receive that truth with kindness because it is so hard to find the words to be fully honest. Secrets make us speak in half-truths or hold our breath in silence. Their weight doesn't serve us...they need air to be released.