How I Learned to Cook

& Other Writings on Complex Mother-Daughter Relationships

EDITED BY
MARGO PERIN

WITH SELECTIONS BY
Alice Walker, Paula Fox,
Joyce Maynard & Others

HOW I LEARNED TO COOK

AND OTHER WRITINGS ON COMPLEX MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

❖ ❖ ❖

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For Marci,

for teaching me how to love

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HOW I LEARNED TO COOK

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INTRODUCTION

Mothers everywhere are idealized as the source of eternal love, nurturing, protection, and self-sacrifice. In Western culture, the idealized mother is most clearly represented by the image of the Virgin Mary, whose face radiates the endless compassion, love, and suffering mothers are assumed to feel for their children.

This is the public view, the stuff of myth. But what goes on in the shadows between mothers and their children, and especially their daughters, who, being female, are most closely aligned with their mothers? How to understand the mother in Pam Lewis's "A Little Death," who, on catching her husband in Pam's bed, threatens Pam not to tell anyone? Or Paula Fox's mother in *Borrowed Finery*, who leaves the infant Paula in a foundling home a few days after her birth and, the rare times she shows up throughout Paula's life, continues to reject her? Or Hillary Gamerow's mother, in "How I Learned to Cook," who tells her children she put rat poison in their dinner?

There have been countless stories of the shadow worlds of children and their fathers, stepfathers, and stepmothers that describe complexities within the relationship, ranging from mild intergenerational conflict to extreme sexual and physical abuse. What we haven't seen much of are stories that explore the thoughts and feelings of daughters as they navigate their relationships with their mothers. For along with the myth of mother comes the myth of daughter, who is identified as her mother's companion, helper, defender, and savior. As Meena writes in

"Domestic Silence," "Who am I when I am not the dutiful daughter trying to save her mother?"

Even the healthiest relationships between mothers and daughters are not immune from ambiguity. In Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House*, this is played out on a stage of politics and poetry when Kim tries to assert her identity: "For, whatever else we shouted or declaimed, a single idea was at the heart of our quarrel. I mean of course the fact that we thought different thoughts, and experienced the world differently. That we were no longer the same person." Nawal El Saadawi, growing up in Egypt at a time when her mother was expected to withdraw into the background, even within the family, experienced a lack of mothering in spite of the love she and her mother felt for each other. In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi writes: "Gradually, my mother was withdrawing from my life. I no longer saw her except in the kitchen. I no longer heard her speak. Most of the time she sat listening to my father's stories. . . . The distance between my mother and me grew bigger and bigger, and the distance between my father and me smaller and smaller. My mother began to sit at the far end of the couch."

The lack of a literary forum for the shadow side of mothering has served to make most women keep their stories secret, ashamed of revealing their feelings and perceptions, afraid of betraying love, frightened of being labeled disloyal, treacherous, or, in our day, antifeminist. (More than one writer I approached in selecting work for this anthology said they couldn't tell their stories until their mothers were dead.) This can be even more true for women who have chosen to have children. Many women are fearful of degrading the role of motherhood, which, ironically in the face of how mothers are mythologized, is uniformly under-

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valued. This lack of support is not only financial but also physical and emotional, even in countries where mothers are the most revered.

On some level, perhaps we don't speak openly about our mothers because we understand the pressures upon them. These can be socioeconomic pressures or those arising from personal history where our mothers themselves may not have been properly cared for. We know that even among mothers who are not deliberately abusive or neglectful, their skills are not always adequate to fulfill their children's basic needs, needs that are inevitably monumental.

Alice Walker had to work, as her own mother did, leaving her daughter with the same feelings of abandonment that she herself felt about her own working mother. "Because of [my daughter]," she writes in "Sunniness and Shade," "I've reunited with banished bits of my own life; to know again the daughter and the mother I was, and to feel pity and empathy for both; to appreciate the admirable daughter courage that, though self-denying and therefore painful, still springs from a valiant solidarity with the mother who, in this world, always has too much to do and too few to help her. I've also discovered the world is full of mothers who've done their best and still hurt their daughters."

About her mother, who was married at nine years old, Nahid Rachlin writes in "My Two Mothers": "I am not angry at my mother as I used to be. I can see that her life has been limiting, difficult."

Kate Braverman's mother, in *Lithium for Medea*, is having marital problems. "'We have nothing in common,' my father explained. I stood near his shoulder while he picked avocados. . . . 'She's been one hell of a disappointment.'"

After years on the move, Helen Ruggieri's mother, in "Home Is Where Your Stuff Is," attempts to establish permanence through obsessive housekeeping. Ruggieri writes, "We'd never be able to sit on a couch. . . . We'd have to stand in the doorway. Maybe we'd have to detour to get to the stairway so as not to walk on the rug. . . . You had to keep the place clean, like a hospital. . . . My mother liked to brag you could eat off the floor."

Gina Smith's mother, in "Sladjana," is an alcoholic. "I saw why she did it," Smith writes. "Drinking and using drugs makes the happy times happier and the sad times easier to bear. It also helps you to forget all the things you're embarrassed about, and makes it easier to talk to people—the way normal people do."

Jamie Callan's mother suffers from mental illness. In "Just Another Movie Star," Callan writes: "I sat back in the plush red velvet passenger seat next to my mother, as if we were sitting in the audience at one of the opulent theaters of the day and about to see a great movie. . . . I remember looking at my mother and thinking this was the most beautiful, most glamourous woman in the world. She patted my knee and shouted, "Aren't you glad to have such a fun mommy?!" And I screamed back, "Yes! Yes! Yes I am!"

For Elizabeth Payne's mother, the pressures came from sources that remained a mystery to her daughter. Payne writes in "Anybody Could See It": "We were a lot alike that way, grievously good secret keepers. I needed mine, but I also needed hers. Her secrets were evidence of crucial things, a chain of things, that if you followed, shadowing, on her tail, creeping slowly, so she didn't notice you were peeking, you would find a hidden mother, a mother you didn't recognize, but yours nonetheless."

As daughters, we have a primal understanding that all women, especially those of us born before the days of women's libera-

tion, though still true today, have long been defined through our servitude to others, rather than by our own individualized and self-fulfilling journeys through life. Men are thought to realize themselves through work, but for women it has traditionally been motherhood. Because women are seen as being closer to nature, whose primary raison d'être is biological, having children is how women are believed to fulfill their purpose.

In a world that continues to value men over women, daughters are more likely to suffer from the pressures on their mothers, and their mothers' unrealized ambitions and repressed desires, than are their sons. As Rosemary Daniell writes in *Fatal Flowers*: "I perceived my mother, grandmothers, sister, daughters—and all the women whose roots I shared—as . . . trapped in a morass of Spanish moss, Bible Belt guilt, and the pressures of a patriarchy stronger than in any other part of the country." In *At Home in the World*, Joyce Maynard describes her mother's limitless interest in her life as being caused by her mother's lack of fulfillment. Her mother read Maynard's diary, leaving instructive notes between the pages. In *Fierce Attachments*, Vivian Gornick writes: "In refusing to recover from my father's death [my mother] had discovered that her life was endowed with a seriousness her years in the kitchen had denied her. . . . Her pain became my element, the country in which I lived, the rule beneath which I bowed."

Then there are those mothers about whom Ruth Kluger writes: "No one is as dependent as mothers are on the dependency of their children." Her own difficult relationship with her mother continued right through their incarceration in Nazi death camps. "With the increasing isolation of the few Jews left in Vienna," she writes, "my mother became dependent on me for companionship and tortured me with her anxieties. . . . Some years later, in 1944,

when she happened to be right, my lack of confidence in her . . . almost cost me my life."

And there are mothers who exhibit darker tendencies and who even seem to take pleasure in harming their daughters. Such is the mother of Jamaica Kincaid in *My Brother*, about whom she writes: "My death now, before her own, would make her feel regal, triumphant that she had outlived all her inferiors: her inferiors are her offspring."

By not fearing the shadows, we can find light, joy, and love. In this collection, every writer has had the skill and courage to also explore her own shadow to become the realized, compassionate, and empowered woman—and writer—that she is. Some have found themselves through discovering a source of love outside their mothers. For others it has been through political or intellectual explorations. Others have developed an inner strength in their search for truth. All exhibit the great sense of self-awareness that comes from writing honestly about one's experiences. That these women became such powerful writers is a testament to the importance of writing the whole story and not perpetuating the myths that deny the complexity of human experience. It is my hope that the stories in this book will encourage others to brave the real story of their own lives.

MARGO PERIN, 2004

from

BORROWED FINERY

PAULA FOX

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Car headlights shone on ranks of stunted pine trees and clumps of small weathered gray houses, silent, silvered for an instant as we drove past them. Who was driving, Uncle Elwood, with whom I was living at the time, or my father, I can't recall. We were on our way to Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod, where my parents were living in a house on Commercial Street. Soon after my stay of a few days, when they were away, it burned to the ground—the fourth fire started by the retarded son of a Portuguese fisherman.

The house, a saltbox, was set back from the street a few hundred feet on the hummocky undernourished ground characteristic of land near salt water. I have a snapshot of myself standing in front of a straggly rosebush growing on a rickety trellis in the yard, its stems like insect feelers. There is another photograph of Uncle Elwood and me by the bay. He kneels to hold me around the waist, although there is no surf; the water is as flat as an ironing board. I suppose my father took the picture with the minister's camera.

A German shepherd my parents owned attacked a cat that was drifting along the narrow cracked sidewalk in front of the house. My heart thudded; my vision narrowed to the two animals,

one helpless, the other made monstrous with rage. I grabbed the cat. In its terror, it scratched my hand.

There was no one in the house that day to whom I could report the scratch. I washed my hand at the kitchen sink, standing on a chair to turn on the faucet. The wound bled intermittently for a while. When my parents returned from wherever they had been, I didn't bring it to their attention. I had been left in a Manhattan foundling home a few days after my birth by my reluctant father, and by Elsie, my mother, panic-stricken and ungovernable in her haste to have done with me.

I discovered a steamer trunk in a little room next to the kitchen. It was on end and partly open, like a giant book waiting to be read. Deep drawers lined one side. Suits and dresses hung in the other. They looked as though they'd been pitched across the room, arrested in their flight by small hangers attached to a metal bar, to which they clung, half on, half off.

I had never seen so many women's clothes before. I touched them, felt them, pressed against them, breathing in their close bodily smell until I grew dizzy. I pulled open a drawer and discovered a pile of cosmetics.

I hardly knew what they were for, but memories stirred of Uncle Elwood's mother, asking that her face be powdered when she was about to be taken for an outing in the car and a large powder puff in his hand as he bent toward her face, or the lips of some of his parishioners, too red to be true.

My mother was suddenly in the room, as though deposited there by a violent wind. I gasped with embarrassment and fear. She began to speak; I saw her lips move. I bent toward her, feeling the fiery skin of my face.

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