

Mothering Day

by Tina Drennan



Mother's Day.

It pops up once a year, just when you're planning your Memorial Day bash. It's joyful for many, inconvenient for others, but let's admit, it's down right awkward for those of us who squirm in front of the Hallmark racks, searching for the one card that will serve the purpose without compromising our souls, not to mention our wallets. According to the National Retail Federation, consumers will spend \$15.8 billion on Mother's Day this year, with an average expenditure of \$138.63.

This was not exactly what Anna Jarvis of West Virginia had in mind back in 1914, when she won her campaign to make observation of Mother's Day a National holiday. By the 1920s, Anna had grown weary of the blatant commercialization that had hijacked her idea, when all she really wanted was to honor her own mother and remind us all to show our mothers appreciation for their "truth, purity and broad charity of mother love." What she intended to be a holy day honoring mothers and all they do and sacrifice for their children was quickly seized as a ripe opportunity for retailers, florists, and candy makers to cash in on a glorious windfall.

Alas, poor Anna did not thoroughly research her project, or she might have foreseen the impending calamity. This was not the first time in history an attempt to honor motherhood has been hijacked.

Festivals celebrating motherhood have been popular throughout the centuries. The Ancient Romans celebrated for several days at the vernal equinox, in honor of the mother goddess *Cybele*. After a day of fasting and a day of sacrifice, *Sanguis*, the day of blood, (scourging, whipping and castration) was followed by *Hilaira*, the day of joy. After that came a much-needed day of rest, followed by a day to clean up the blood, beer bottles and empty pizza boxes. I'm not sure how any of this honors our mothers, except by cleaning up our own mess afterward, but as a mother, I might just as well have enjoyed the card and a box of Godivas.

By the sixteenth century, Christianity was the order of the day, and the Roman Empire gave up its bloody mother's day celebration for a more useful day of worship. The Church swapped the celebration of the vernal equinox in the middle of March for honoring the Virgin Mary on fourth Sunday of Lent. Believers

made reverent trips back to their church of origin, their Mother church. This practice came to be known as going "a-mothering." Non-believers must have gone "a-fishing," although it wasn't popular at the time to be a non-believer. (If you were, you didn't spread that information around.)

It wasn't until the 19th century that "Mothering Day," celebrated more or less regularly the second week of May, morphed into what we know today as "Mother's Day," a retail bonanza only surpassed by Halloween and Christmas. Which brings me back to my original position in front of the Hallmark rack. If I were tasked to buy each of my various

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My parents divorced when I was around two years old. My mother traded up from a swab jockey, my father returned from the Pacific, to a slick-dressing purchasing agent where she worked. I was dropped into the fifties when parents slept in twin beds and no one—*no one*—got divorced unless they were movie stars, misfits, or madmen. Fortunately for me, my grandmother was there with a wide lap, loving arms, and the ire of an Irish woman to set me on the path and the strength of character to keep me there. We kept up appearances, but everyone knew, *shhshh*, she lives with her grandma because...her parents are... *divorced*.

At the time, I was oblivious to the scandal. In fact, I felt kind of special going to visit mother on the third Sunday of the month. During those times, she gave me what wisdom she could muster, like "never squint into the sun, it makes wrinkles;" and "put your bouffant to bed on a silk pillow case." As

well as, "never drink martinis on an empty stomach." I could compare my mother to Anna Karenina, driven by desire to leave her young husband and child for another man, except that she'd made a very good choice that lasted her a lifetime. I dutifully purchased the momcard every year, though we did little in the way of bonding. (A big, well deserved I told you so coming from Ms. Jarvis.)

My grandmother taught me the important things, the enduring things, the card-worthy things. That God is Love with a capitol ell, and that God was my father *and* my mother, so I wasn't missing out on anything. She sent me through years of Sunday school, where I was drilled on the Ten Commandments, The Sermon on the Mount, and the *Be*-attitudes. For my liberal education I learned useful dittys like "whistling girls and crowing hens always come to some bad ends," and "we don't smoke and we don't chew, and we don't go with boys who do." Her mother's day card was usually hand drawn or pasted up as an exercise in grammar school, the words *I Love You* steadily becoming more legible. Having raised seven children of her own, my grandmother was Jane Austen's classic mother, worthy of the highest Hallmark praise. Imagine her shock when, after a string of wild affairs with brunettes and redheads and air heads, my father finally married an "appropriate" mother, a person I will refer to as Honky-Tonk Ruth. I spent my next eight years in California's South Bay, a *wannabe* Gidget, pushing back hard against her St. Charles, Louisiana influences--a very different kind of South.

Ruth's hair was too frizzy, her skirts were too long, she smoked and drank, and sang loud and bawdy at country bars before karaoke was a sparkle in the inventor's eye. I could never understand why she pushed so hard. The worst thing I did was cut the push ups out of her black strapless bra and stuff them in my bathing suit. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when she discovered the surgery, but she never did; at least not on my watch. (Would be step mothers of twelve-year-old daughters beware: you don't stand a chance.) By the time I reached junior high school, having divorced parents was only mildly embarrassing compared to having a country-singing step mom serving beer at the local bowling alley in a little black and red chambermaid outfit.

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In retrospect, Honky-tonk was not all that bad. She taught me my love of Creole cooking--red beans and rice, shrimp étouffée, and hush puppies—and the finer points of growing your nails really, really long without the use of acrylics. There are certainly worse examples of ruthless mothers in literature. The villainous Madame Thenardier of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* comes to mind. Without my grandmother's teaching, I might have resented Honky-Tonk's habit of sending my not-quite-ready-for-hand-me-down clothing, furniture and toys to her nieces back in St. Charles. Can't you just see the tab divider among all the cheerful choices in the card rack: New Mother, Humorous, Grandma, Religious, Honky Tonk, M. Thenardier. Ruth got a gig with country band in Inglewood and eventually ran away to Calamesa with a red-headed drummer.

Just before I entered my senior year in high school, my dad-- probably in reaction to being left by two age-appropriate wives--decided to go young. Sweet lady Jane, four years my senior, moved into our house in Anaheim. A year later they were married. It was like getting a new big sister instead of a mother. We had a blast. She taught me to propagate dieffenbachias, smoke pot, broil filet mignon, and eat it voraciously with pints of Baskin Robbins. We studied Psycho-Cybernetics and Christian Science. She got a Porsche for her 22nd birthday; I didn't, so I left home and got married.

My mother and I grew closer after I was married, and had children. She held them at arms length, like they were puppies about to pee. When life in Orange County became intolerable, my husband and I moved the family up north, and mother and I seldom saw each other. But, on her 70th birthday, her life fell apart. My step father, Vern, suffered from Korsikov's Syndrome, a debilitating form of dementia, and it was clear, she wasn't much better off. I stepped in, put Vern into Alzheimer's care, and took her into my home without reservation. It was a bittersweet reunion. Friends and family wondered: how could I

devote myself to her when she was never there for me? The thought never crossed my mind. All I knew was that I had her back, even if our roles were reversed. I believe I gave her the mothering she never had as a child and it was healing for both of us.

Should I get the blue ribbon Hallmark card? Lace and roses and lines of rhyming praise? I honestly don't know, given my history, how could I? Nature or nurture? I think Buckminster Fuller had it right: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I



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learned a little something and took a little something from each of them, for good or ill, then added my own triumphs and mistakes to the mix.

I signed that petition to legalize pot in California. I have recently acquired a tolerance for country music. My mother was there for my first breath and I was there for her last. My grandmother still sits on my shoulder, reminding me we are all One.

In 2008, my daughter gave me rosy pink granddaughter, wide eyed and ready to take her place in our bloodline. I have very big shoes to fill. How on Earth will I change myself in order to be good enough for her? My first clue is a secret I've learned about grandmothers: They have the advantage of hindsight. Things that seem so important in the brains of a teenager tend to get put into perspective.

Many years after I had children of my own, I had the opportunity to meet with Honky-Tonk Ruth. Suffering from emphysema, she had been contacted by her own daughter, one she had given up for adoption at birth. The daughter would

have been my age. They had re-established their relationship and she had been welcomed as a grandmother into her birth daughter's family. She told me she was sorry she was so hard on me; that she only wanted to protect me from a world that could be cruel to a young girl. I believe she simply treated me exactly the way her mother treated her and never saw the obvious. And after raising my own teenage daughter, I had some sympathy for her.

Sweet lady Jane left my father to chase another dream and found calamity and regret. The death of my father brought us back to a friendly place and we keep a thread of connection. My mother is gone ten years and I still call to her in my dreams, look for her in the shadows of a late afternoon, and wear her jewelry when I feel lonely. My grandmother still sits on my shoulder, the voice of reason in an unreasonable world. There are no cards sitting in any rack that will bring these women closer to me. Anna Jarvis spent her whole life fighting to call back what she set upon the world, wasting her inheritance and her life. She never married and never had any children. That was her undoing.

What I take with me on my journey these days is the weight and the joy of being a grandmother. My baby granddaughter will face challenges, but she has one thing I never had: a loving, wise, and very present mother, deserving of all the praise a mother can receive. No card can express my gratitude for my daughter and her devotion to her child. Carlos Castaneda tells us in the *Teachings of Don Juan*, that we are not whole as women until our child has given birth. Once that happens, we are mother and daughter still, but we are also part of a sisterhood of mothers. No card can put that into words.

So go ahead. Enjoy the sappy card and chocolates if they come your way, it can't hurt. But remember, on mother's day, it is it is the strength of motherhood itself that binds us, runs in our veins, and carries us on...and on... and on.

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