

# Mother love

The relationship between a mother and daughter can be the closest we experience – and the most complicated. Vanessa Nicolson reflects on a lifetime of love and tears

She is strapped into a wheelchair, head bowed and back curved, buckled into herself, staring into bony hands. The lustrous black hair she used to style so elegantly has turned pure white and is scraped back into a thin ponytail. Her gold-framed glasses hang limply around her neck. She wears clothes she once would have never considered wearing: elasticated trousers; loose, shapeless tops; practical shoes with Velcro straps.

Sitting next to this very old lady, in the sunny garden of a residential home in Italy, she is unrecognisable.

## Maternal approval...

When I was growing up in the 1960s, I knew my mum was different. She was Italian, glamorous and clever, and divorced from my gay, British father. We lived with my Italian grandparents

in an apartment in Florence. My *nonna* looked after me when my mother, an art historian, was on her work trips or enclosed in her room, writing.

The sound of her typing is seeped into childhood memories. I would press my ear against her closed bedroom door to hear those clattering keys, knowing that silence might mean the possibility of an interruption, of being able to knock and enter her study to show her something I'd drawn or a piece of homework I was proud of. I loved my mum and wanted her approval. A smile of maternal pride and encouragement could erase the remoteness that I experienced at other times. And when she was present and engaged as a mother, she was wonderful: drawing me pictures (she had originally wanted to be an artist), telling stories and looking after me when I was ill.

Things became more difficult when

I hit my teenage years. My Italian grandparents had died and I had been sent to a progressive, co-educational school in England chosen by my liberal dad. My days revolved around waking late, missing meals, smoking in the lavatories and skipping lessons. Holidays meant returning to Florence to stay with my mother. She worried that I looked too thin and produced delicious Mediterranean food, a welcome antidote to the inedible gruel offered at my boarding school. Filling me up was her way of nurturing, and I greedily devoured this manifestation of her love.

## ...and disapproval

But when we sat opposite each other in her little kitchen, I would lose my sense of self. She would stare straight at me, assessing me critically. I was no longer the little girl she could control. She complained about my clothes, my >>>

>>> attitude, the friends she didn't like and boyfriends she disapproved of. I responded by cutting off into silence or would snap and answer back. We had nasty, confrontational rows. To be loved, I felt I had to be what she wanted me to be. This involved being respectful, admiring, accommodating and intelligent. She was dismissive of 'silly' girls. Despite the food, it was almost a relief to get back to school.

Yet, despite her inflexible disposition, she could be funny, affectionate and wise. She taught me the importance of having purpose, of taking nothing for granted, of challenging oneself, of patience and resilience. She encouraged me to love beauty in nature and art, to study and read, and after university I forged a career in the art world.

## Motherhood and me

Our relationship improved when, aged 30, I became a mother myself. I felt more in control. I would let her occasional criticisms of the way I was bringing up my daughters wash over me because it wasn't going to change how I felt I should be as a parent. And when we were all together, my children gave me a sense of myself, a confidence that my mother couldn't undermine.

My girls also taught me to see that my personality didn't have to be erased, or taken over. I looked at them in nervous admiration when they stood up to their grandmother or said something like, 'I'm sorry, got to go now,' when my mum was banging on a bit too long. I had always obediently sat for hours, trapped, listening to the stories I had heard hundreds of times before, dreaming of escape, feeling I had no voice.

As she hit her 90s, my mother began getting weaker, forgetful, less able to look after herself, but still she stubbornly refused any assistance, or to move closer to me, her only child. She stayed in Florence and I would visit regularly from London, but mostly she was alone. A few years ago, her life was saved by a neighbour whose rooms

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overlook hers across an internal courtyard. He was closing the shutters when he saw her collapsed on her bedroom floor. The fire brigade had to kick in her front door before the ambulance men could get to her.

She hated the hospital. She shouted at the nurses and she despised the other patients. I would find her sitting in the day room holding her head in her hands, refusing to eat the meals brought to her. She distrusted the doctors and pleaded with them to let her go home, alternating anger and threats with pathetic whining.

Once she was discharged, I insisted on arranging care, but the women sent by the agency never lasted more than a few weeks. She argued with every one or barricaded herself in her apartment so they couldn't get in. 'I can't bear to have anyone in the house,' she said. I tried to persuade her to accept more full-time care but she would not compromise. I knew from experience it was impossible to contradict her.

## That strong heart

On my birthday last summer, she was found collapsed again, this time by the carer whom she had finally agreed to, but only for a brief twice-weekly visit. I had been phoning continuously from England, worried because she wasn't picking up, but knowing that she often either didn't hear the phone

or couldn't be bothered to answer.

For three days, my mother – soon to be 97 – was lying on her tiled kitchen floor. She was rushed to hospital again but discharged within a week. 'She has a strong heart,' the doctor said.

## A constant reminder

I found a place for her in a residential care home around the corner. She arrived screaming, yelling that she wanted to go home. But she has calmed down and, on a good day, she even says she likes it. When I go to see her, if weather permits, I wheel her around the beautiful garden they have there. Or we sit close to each other and she tells me the stories I have heard many times before. Always censorious, she can still make me feel as though I am wearing or saying the wrong thing but, more often than not, I feel tenderness for this frail, difficult woman. Last time I saw her, she turned to one of the nurses as I was leaving and said: 'Wasn't I lucky to have a good daughter?' and I felt relieved. I still try to get it right but it doesn't panic me as it once did.

My life has not been straightforward, the ups and downs quite extreme at times – troubled relationships, ill health, bereavements – but my mother has been in the background throughout, sometimes unreliable, critical and remote, occasionally tyrannical, but at other times supportive and interested. She hasn't always been the fantasy mother I would have wished for but, ultimately, I know she loves me, as I love her. Strange to say, considering the volatile relationship we have had, I shall miss my difficult, obstinate, independent mother when she's gone.

Meanwhile, I shall keep sorting the mounds of stuff in her apartment. If anyone knows of a good home for flesh-coloured 1950s corsets and suspenders, lemon yellow and pink nylon nighties and sheets, a selection of shoulder pads and balls of string in different sizes, I'm the person to come to.

Vanessa Nicolson's book *'The Truth Game' (Quartet, £15)* is out now