

Judith Hannan

Judith is a 60-year-old mother of three from New York City. In this chapter she describes her experiences with her mother's mental illness, her own personal struggles, and how motherhood has helped define her sense of self.

For much of my childhood, my mother was a whisper of her full self. When I became a mother, I developed rules in response to those years. I would not reside in her shadow.

My twenty-one-year-old daughter, home from college for the summer, was leaving to visit a friend for the weekend. "Are you going to come to the door to say goodbye?" she called.

"Of course," I answered from the living room and went to give her a hug and kiss.

I was at the door, too, when her twin brother left for his summer job each morning, delaying my daily meditation practice until the elevator doors closed behind him.

I have been walking my children to the door since they were little.

***My first rule for good mothering:** Be there. Be there when the children wake up, while they eat breakfast, at the door when they leave for school. Do not disappear behind blank eyes or into rumpled sheets behind a closed bedroom door.*

As a child, I didn't know my mother had a story and that that story was being written on my character. I only knew what I experienced: her slowly waning animation. By the time I was 4 I had a dropping in my stomach, as if my belly were growing eyes, the kind that can see what the brain can't. When my mother said goodbye to me at preschool, I held my breath until she returned. She never seemed quite the same as the mother who dropped me off, as if my planet had rotated without her.

By first grade, I ate breakfast alone, the sight of my rubbery eggs as unappealing to me as to my mother who couldn't deal with my school-phobia induced tantrums. At the dinner table, where we gathered every night at 6:15—my mother, my father, my sister, and I—a glaze would shroud my mother's eyes that couldn't be penetrated from either side of those walled off pupils.

In the third grade, I returned home from school, finally able to cope with a few hours of separation from my mother because my new teacher was showing me how to play the guitar. "I learned a new round at school today," I said to my mother. "Will you sing it with me?" Her back remained a few moments too long hunched over the kitchen sink. An unnamed pain circled within her eyes. I performed like a circus monkey waiting for the clink of my mother's happiness to fill my heart. My mother didn't sing well. I thought I was the source of her tears.

In the sixth grade, when I got my period, my mother never got out of bed to talk to me. She called from her room to tell me the Kotex was under the bathroom sink. I found it next to an unopened box of hair coloring. I had seen my mother remove this box from its hiding place, turn it over in her hands, study the smiling brunette on the cover, and then summon some cryptic determination to put it away, still unopened.

I never searched for the meaning behind my mother's projects. The sight-singing lessons that ended after a few sessions, guitar lessons that continued until the anxiety of performing in recitals brought dissonance to the experience, the canvasses that remained unpainted, her one year as a Brownie leader, one sewing, one involved in the League of Women Voters, one spent redecorating a house.

I was 11 when I came home from my friend Ruthie's, searching for my mother to tell her that Ruthie said she didn't like me anymore. I wanted my mother to act like the lionesses I saw on *Wild Kingdom*. I wanted her to roar and make Ruthie apologize. But my mother was too intent on her reflection in the bathroom mirror. When her eyes finally turned to me, they weren't even curious enough to ask, "Who are you?"

She "went away" a few days later. There were no men in white coats or jackets that wrapped around her like a puzzle. My father drove her to the hospital—the kind with no maternity ward, surgical suites, or emergency room—where she was gone from my view.

When my older daughter, Frannie, was twelve, I was late picking her up at an event after school. It was the second time that month. "I'm just not myself these days," I explained to Frannie.

"You keep saying that," Frannie said. "I don't want to hear it."

The second rule: Show no weakness or anxiety. Do not wobble or fall when a child leans against you. Be their mountain.

My memory of what happened after my mother left is as blank as her mind appeared to be. My father told me that he took me and my sister to the hospital to visit. My mother was waiting outside in the garden and when I saw her, I ran to her crying, "Mummy, mummy." I don't remember her hug, but I assume there was one; I always understood that my mother loved me.

I remember only a dream. In it, when my father took us to see our mother, I thought, finally she will tell me what happened. I saw her looking out through an open window. The window was high. My father and sister could reach it, but I could not; no one would lift me up and my mother wouldn't look down.

My mother avoided the electric shock therapy the doctor prescribed. She checked herself out of the hospital and entered the outpatient program at McLean

Hospital. Without knowing why, I understood that these acts were heroic. Without understanding how, I saw my mother emerge, joint by joint, over the lip of her despair. It was like the sudden emergence of Popeye's muscles after eating his spinach, only I didn't know what my mother's "spinach" was.

Was this still my mother—this woman who seemed invincible, who went off to college and graduate school and work, and whose eyes no longer glazed over but penetrated so deeply it felt as if she could read my every thought, detect my every deception? I entered high school, went away to college. I tried to separate, but how could I resist regressing, repeating those younger years, this time with a mother who would not disappear.

When I left home my separation anxiety roused itself. It wouldn't let me sleep, eat, take a shower, and leave my dorm room. It distorted my senses, my balance, and, like an infant, the relationship of my body to the world. It sent me running home as often as I could, where my mother's strong fingers would knead the tension from my scalp. Back at school, I stayed tethered to my mother through the telephone lines; even as I heard the weariness and frustration in her voice, or maybe because of it, I kept calling. I knew she wouldn't hang up on me.

Finding my own strength came slowly. It came from a marriage in which my husband could relieve my mother of some of the burden of my anxieties. It came from practicing bite-sized pieces of life—living on the sixth floor so I'd have to learn to ride an elevator, going on subway rides while my husband held my hand, and taking a Freedom From Fear of Flying class. I regained my footing when we moved closer to my family for 2 years while my husband was in graduate school, when I started therapy, when I entered the workforce, found a career in fund raising, and got promotions eventually becoming Director of Development at the 92nd Street Y.

When I was 30, my mother died of breast cancer. During that time, she never asked for my help, to care for her, to bend my head over her feet to tie the shoes she could no longer reach. As much as I had grown since graduating college, I was still her baby when she died, the one to whom she never said "I am afraid," "I hate my body," "I am going to be cremated."

I was flying with my family when our plane was hit by lightning. As I heard my children screaming, I braced myself against the turbulence and planted myself in front of them where they couldn't avoid my eyes. I gripped them in my presence until the crisis subsided.

The third rule: *Do not be a shadow mother.*

When my children were born, I finally began to tell myself my mother's story. It began with a cliché—a suburban housewife, married with babies at too young an age, no schooling beyond high school, and no internal passion that propelled her into the external world. She could be any of the women Betty Friedan talks about in *The Feminine Mystique*. But that era of the 1950s and 1960s was merely the petri dish in which the specific toxins of my mother's childhood were allowed to grow.

My mother was 6 when her own mother had a stroke, paralyzing her body and scrambling her mind. I learned from an aunt that my mother was locked outside the bedroom door without even a too tall window to give her hope; my mother couldn't

see, couldn't touch, and couldn't ask whether she still had a mother. She had two older sisters who had had friends and boyfriends, Hebrew and music lessons, who went to conservatory, and had their pictures in the paper. My mother went to school and came home where she saw her mother wrapped around the hot water heater as if it were providing the warmth of a human, speaking to absent or deceased relatives in Yiddish. A controlling sister—who siphoned off the love my grandfather could have shown my mother—oversaw my mother's childhood but did not enrich it.

My mother married the only man she ever dated, a young genius who went to work every day in a research lab, whose muscled body implied a sense of security, and who could understand and fix anything with physical properties. He could not find or patch the leak in my mother's spirit.

My grandmother's definition was taken away from her. My mother lost hers. Motherhood defined me in a way nothing else had. It was the first job for which I had a blueprint—be the opposite of the mother I had as a young child and channel the one she became later. This binary system perhaps made me a good mother. But I wonder if the shadow I ended up casting over my children was too big. As I saw them off in the morning, made sure we had meaningful dinner conversation, was there for every hurt, and hid every one of my own insecurities and doubts, I didn't always leave enough room for my children's identities. I couldn't grow beyond the mother I needed as a child, having never experienced the full arc of the mother-child relationship.

When my aunt was dying, I went to see her in the hospital before she was disconnected from the machines keeping her alive. Frannie, now a young adult, said, "I want to come with you."

"I'll be okay by myself," I said. I saw Frannie's disappointment, her potential exclusion from this adult event and from my own sadness. Then I realized I really did need Frannie and it was okay to tell her.

Final Rule: *There are no rules except for what the moment asks of you.*

Motherhood kept me out of the shadows. I had allowed it to be an antidote to my own stunted maturity. The year before my nest emptied, the anxiety and depression of my college years returned. I wasn't leaving home, my home was leaving me. I felt like one of those cartoon characters who run off a cliff and keep pedaling in mid-air before they plummet to the ground. I didn't fall; the floor has stayed beneath me, but it is an uneven surface at times as I grow with and outside of my children.