

Growing Up Without a Mother **By Jessica Axel**

I've never been a big fan of Mother's Day. It's not the commercialization that fuels my dislike, though — it's that for 14 years, I haven't had a mother to celebrate.

On September 20th, 1996, my mother's 36th birthday, she died. Four years earlier, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. In the intervening time, she endured hours of chemotherapy and radiation, the loss of her hair to the chemo and a breast to mastectomy, a surgery to reconstruct her missing breast, a bone marrow transplant, and countless days away from her family in the hospital. All this while raising three children and making sure that “cancer” was never, ever a dirty word in our house.

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I was 10 years old when she died. I grew up in Cleveland, where my parents had settled after my father finished law school, and all of our relatives lived out of state. The first Mother's Day after my mom's death, I gave a gift to my best friend's mother, not knowing who else to present with the sunflower seedlings we had planted at school for the occasion. But every Mother's Day after that, until I left home for college, is a blur in my memory, like so much from those years. For me, the second Sunday of May was just another day on the calendar.

Some events have the ability to split a life into halves. I feel like I've lived two lives: the one that ended when my mother died, and the one I'm living now, since she's been gone. For most of the past 14 years, especially when I was younger, my almost unconscious strategy to cope with my loss was to pretend there was no loss at all: if my “life” began when she died, then it was like she never existed. If there was no hole left by her absence, there was no hole to fill.

Even with my attempts to blot her out, though, my mother's death colored every part of my life. I can't say for sure growing up was harder for me, without a mother, because I haven't known anything different, but I have a feeling some aspects were more difficult. As a young teenager I resented my friends' relationships with their mothers, even when those relationships weren't at their best: at least they had someone to fight with. It took me years to come to the realization that just having two parents didn't necessarily make life easier. Although my father loved us and raised us the best he knew how,

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It has been almost 15 years since my mother's death, but it's only in the past couple of months or so that my thoughts have really begun to turn towards her — not only as my mother, but as a woman. She married my father at age 23 and I was born when she was 26. Her greatest desire — and greatest accomplishment — was to be a mother, and by the age of 29 she had a three-year-old daughter and newborn twins. At the age of 25, my own life is much different: I am not dating anyone, let alone married, and at this point, I do not plan on having children at all. It makes it all the more difficult to understand her. It makes me wish I could ask her what she was thinking, what she was feeling, when she was 25.

Although in ways I had to deny her existence in order to grow up, I am finally, in my mid-twenties, beginning to reconsider my mother. As a child and a teenager, when I thought of her, it was as of someone almost magical, a perfect being who had done no wrong. Someone who was too good for this world, and had therefore been taken from it. I am now starting to see her for what she was, as a person, a good one who was well-loved by everyone who knew her, but a real person with flaws like the rest of us. I will never fully understand my mother. I will never get to ask her the questions I've always wanted answers to. I will never get to take her out to brunch and give her a card on the second Sunday in May. But she is an undeniable part of me. She always has been.