

Today is My Mother's Birthday

by Phyllis Chesler



Had she lived, she would have been 110 years old today. Where did she go? Where is she now? She—the only girl in her family who was actually born in America, the caretaker for her aging, ailing parents, the incredibly dutiful daughter, the fiercely religious woman who could not read the prayers in Hebrew.

Dutifully, coldly, she made sure that I had every advantage denied to her—but it also embittered her because this surely meant that I would become “different,” distant, that I’d never settle down nearby, that there’d be no daughter in her life, “to have and to hold, until death do us part.”

Despite shopping and cooking and preparing three meals a day every single day of her married life; despite cleaning and sewing and doing all the laundry; despite orchestrating doctor appointments, homework, and lessons galore—her reward was someone who refused to help her with the dishes because I was always reading; who left home early and led a life apart.

Mommy: Please forgive me.

Only after you died did I discover that you had some scrapbooks filled with reviews of my books—the very books about which you never, ever ventured a kind word—although once, you did ask me: “What, another book against the men?” Also, after you died, one of your friends told me that on bus trips across the country that you’d go the local library and ask them if they had any of my books.

And so, you were actually proud of me, perhaps you even loved me.

Mommy: I wish you were here, wearing one of your flowered

house-dresses and a pair of your sensible shoes, or one of your pastel chiffon dresses which you saved for family weddings, the ones with matching handbags and low heeled pumps. (I thought you were the Queen of England the way you clutched your handbag throughout the evening).

And now: What has become of your throaty chuckle, your sentimental piano playing, your dimple, your rather cute figure? You can give me all the newspaper clippings you always saved for me and I won't complain, I'll read every line.

Happy Birthday my Virgo Girl. Come visit me in a dream. I'll be waiting for you.