my two moms

SOFT SPOT THE AUTHOR, WITH DAUGHTER LUCIA, NINE, BROUGHT THE LESSONS OF HER PAST TO BEING A MOTHER HERSELF. S-SUNG SHIRTDRESS.

When a dynamic Frenchwoman burst into **Susan Bell**'s life and became her father's lover, her world turned upside down—in a good way.

Last spring, my nine-year old daughter, Lucia, asked me to read her my acknowledgments for a book I'd just written. At the phrase "To my mothers," she interrupted: "Won't they think that's a mistake?" The plural didn't sound right. I had grown up with two mothers, however, who lived thousands of miles apart and never conferred on my upbringing. I wanted to honor both women who raised me.

Popular wisdom tells us that blood relations are our closest. But it was a woman with no genetic tie to me who kept me emotionally, and perhaps literally, alive from the age of twelve to 20. Her name was Jacqueline, and she was my father's second wife. I won't call her my "stepmother," because the term suggests a mechanical, obligatory mothering, or worse. Whereas Jacqueline mothered me with a zeal and warmth all the more startling because my birth mother, Helen, had not died or disappeared. Jacqueline didn't have to give me so much, she wanted to.

Jacqueline and Helen were opposites. One was flamboyant, the other modest; one materialistic, the other frugal; one affectionate, the other distant; one playful, the other tense. I did not, at the time, appreciate this maternal yin and yang. As a teenager, I found it impossible to love two thoroughly different women, and so, to make my life simpler, I chose one over the other. Although I felt guilty for gluing myself to, in conventional terms, the wrong mom, I never once reconsidered my choice. To let myself love and be loved by Jacqueline was not an act of defiance. It was an act of self-preservation.

Starting in 1947, my birth mom, Helen, bore or brought in six children when six did not sound like so many. She gave birth to a son, Steve, but could not get pregnant with a second child. When two young cousins, Marty and Richie, became orphaned, my parents took them in. Three wasn't enough, so they adopted an infant, Randy. In the hope of bearing one more—God willing, a girl—my mother underwent the medical wizardry of the times and at last, in 1955, gave birth to a daughter, Amy. Five felt like plenty, and my parents abandoned their childbearing efforts. Three and half years later, I surprised them.

Big is not always better. Our big family, by the time I entered it, did not resemble the celluloid kind, where kids and parents get into terrible fights, then in the yard, under the dusky light, apologize and hold hands going in for dinner. In my family, we fought and didn't make up.

We were all at the mercy of my dad, who told me when I was twelve, with characteristic indelicacy, "I knew on the honeymoon it was a mistake to have married your mom." If true, this explains, in part, his frequent outbursts over the 25 years of their marriage. My parents had tied the knot young, after a wartime courtship too short to be revealing. Helen's starlet legs and eagerness to please won my father, who had, himself, a powerful, ribald charm. This charm made him more handsome than, in fact, he was. Celadon eyes and a strong jaw were marred by an enormous, D-shaped nose. Undeterred, my father flaunted his grotesque facial knob as a second sexual protrusion that made him more masculine than guys with only one.

When I was very young, we—six children, two parents, a housekeeper, and a German shepherd—inhabited a faux English Tudor in a suburban satellite of Boston. The turrets, balconies, and brown bricks of our manse were bizarrely out of sync with the surrounding ranch houses and skylit moderns. According to the Realtor, fugitive Nazis had built it in the fifties—thus the defensive thick walls, small leaded windowpanes, and basement rifle range. Spectacular, dark, and labyrinthine, it was an edifice my friends liked to comment on more than enter.

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SUSANNA HOWE. Sittings Editor: Heidi Bivens; hair, Stacey Ciceron; makeup, Jenna Menard. Details, see In This Issue.

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FRENCH CONNECTION BELL'S STEPMOTHER, JACQUELINE, ON HER HONEYMOON IN PROVENCE, IN 1974.

Courtesy of Susan Bell

The centerpiece of the house was a stone spiral staircase, whose railing rested on iron spindles so widely set that my parents installed opaque sheets of plastic to keep the littlest children from falling through. The plastic was a convenient shield when once, in the middle of the night, voices woke me and my sister, and, peeping over the edge of the plastic, we watched my father take swipes at my mother on the landing outside their room. Dad's violence was something we all had to dodge; the tiniest infractions would ignite him. My sister wrapped her arms around me, and we crouched there for a while, until she, acting the elder, pulled me back to bed so I wouldn't see more.

Though she didn't have a salaried job, my mother was always busy. She moved quickly through a room, ever on her way to do errands; and almost never lingered with her children to play games, read, or talk. Sometimes, in the evening, I visited her majestic bedchamber in the hope of starting a conversation. I asked questions about my siblings and friends, but her one-sentence platitudes roadblocked my probing mind. "Life isn't always easy," she'd say, or "Don't let things get you down." She even used, without irony, "That's the way the cookie crumbles." She wasn't wrong. But I sensed she would talk to anyone about anything and give the same quick replies. The distance between my deepest thoughts and her generic responses felt infinite. By eight years old, I had stopped telling Helen anything that meant something to me.

Our most tender moments together were at night before she'd go out, when she let me apply her makeup. I relished the ritualistic painting of the brown line across her lid. She would sit still for longer than she wanted and tolerate my careful, slow application. These moments, when I felt my mother's rhythm adjust to mine, were silently joyous and all too rare.

I entered sixth grade with a solid grip on sadness. By the seventh, I was a depressive bohemian cliché. It was a fifteen-minute streetcar ride to Harvard Square, where on Saturdays I would go to absorb its intellectual, folksy ambience. I'd sit for hours in a café with a pen and a notebook, writing about the human complexities that threatened to flatten me. Helen did not have the sanctuary of notebooks. Writing about her life would have meant acknowledging it. She could not. A woman did not divorce easily in the sixties and seventies; what would her life be as the only single mother in a town where bad marriages were as carefully maintained as lawns?

The summer of my eleventh year, our family played host to a fourteen-year-old French girl named Chantal, who wanted to improve her English. I spent all of August admiring Chantal's voluptuous breasts and hiding my flat ones. I taught her how to shuffle a deck of cards, and she taught me to ask, "Comment allez-vous?" The wet smack of her consonants signaled a lovely, sensuous universe I might one day escape to: *Wwwen weel eyu cawm veeseet me een Fronce?* I adored Chantal. But it was her mother, Jacqueline, on view for only a few hours that summer, who flipped my understanding of womanhood upside down.

Jacqueline arrived with her beau, Pierre, he neck to toe in black leather. They were going on a road trip and would swing back for Chantal before their return to Paris. To her own black leather pants, Jacqueline added a snug white T-shirt of thick cotton, and a long 18K-gold chain, from which hung a cabochon ruby encased in a gold hive. Her hair was dyed the color of glazed yams. She had floodlights for eyes. "Chérie" and "darling" exited her mouth as often as cigarettes occupied it. She had the mischievous but wholesome air of someone who drinks hot chocolate made with cream instead of milk. Jacqueline was, in sum, no less magical, strange, and gorgeous than a unicorn cantering through my suburban wood. Helen, beaten down and tentative by nature, with all her goodwill and love, could not compete.

It would be another year, however, before Jacqueline became my father's lover. In the meantime, he moved to Manhattan to watch over his textile business. He told Helen the distance would improve their marriage. For two years she believed him. As a frequent weekend guest, I knew better.

On a typical Saturday, my father and I lunched at a souvlaki stand, went to Alexander's department store to shop, then visited his showroom in the legendary D & D building; after a siesta, we'd meet his current gal pal at the Palm, where I'd gleefully poke holes in my veal piccata and watch the butter squirt out. Later, I had pillow fights with my dad before looking out his high window and wishing on the electric stars below. I'm not certain which I found more thrilling then—New York's bustle or the lavish attention my father paid me.

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There were serious trade-offs, however. I had to witness my father's courtships with the tacit understanding that I could not talk about them to my mother. I was profoundly uncomfortable by his recruitment of me as his confidante, not to mention morally confused by his behavior. But I liked how grown-up his secrets made me feel, and how loved. Finally, I was more than another set of skinny legs to be clothed and carpooled. At eleven and twelve years old, I was invited into adult conversation, taken to adult restaurants, and told adult jokes. I imagined my father saw me as especially mature because I was poised, sagacious, and tall. More likely, he understood that I was too young, impressionable, and hungry for his approval to argue with his actions.

My father had enjoyed a year of covert bachelorhood when Jacqueline broke up with leathery Pierre and booked a ticket to New York. She had an intuition, and was the kind of woman to act on it. The seed of Jacqueline's attraction to my father must have been her memory of him in uniform. The amazing fact was they had met when he was 20 and she eight. In 1944, my father went to France as a soldier. Before leaving, his *up front >306*

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father-in-law asked him to find an old Polish friend who'd immigrated to Paris. That friend was Jacqueline's grandmother, a Jew who'd been hiding for years with her family in cellars until the Allies arrived. When my father paid a visit, he bounced, unaware, his future wife on his knee and fed her chocolate. Jacqueline's personal salvation would be forever linked, in her mind, to the liberation of Paris and my father's strong, uniformed knee.

Their romance was, from its start, illuminated. My father's temper was tamed (for a few years) by their extravagant love. His wardrobe was the only obstacle, which Jacqueline refurbished with the dispatch of a four-star general. Out went the beiges, browns, and synthetics. Within months, my father was sporting silk ascots, pink shirts, white jeans, and moccasins. Soon afterward they were married and living in Paris.

For the next few years, I used every school vacation to join Jacqueline and my father in Europe: eighth-grade Christmas at a Swiss lodge, spring break in the Camargues, summers in Provence or Normandy; and there was always Paris for Thanksgiving or a long weekend. We traveled like rich people, which we weren't—but what the hell, my father was in love with a ravishing redhead with expensive tastes. We were entering the seventies, when credit and spending more than you had were redefining what it meant to be American.

You might think that Jacqueline seduced me away from Helen with fancy hotels, meals, and shopping. I certainly enjoyed the niceties that appeared whenever she did. She and members of her family were involved in the fashion world, and Jacqueline frequently took me to her brother-in-law's atelier in Paris to be outfitted. Some ensembles were too stunning for my conservative New England base, but I took them anyway, and wore them to school, which gave me a reputation for being, well . . . different. Memorable were the gray-and-red checked wool trousers with matching checked cape—something Diana Rigg might have worn in *The Avengers*. The white satin top with flouncy sleeves and puckered torso worn over black velvet pants felt regal.

In fact, the luxuries Jacqueline offered meant nothing compared with her behavior toward me, ever tender, direct, and insightful. I was an analytical, word-obsessed, excruciatingly vulnerable adolescent. To my great relief, Jacqueline encouraged me to stay that way. She viewed my sensitivity as a strength, whereas my mother (and the rest of my family) kept at me to "lighten up." To Jacqueline I confessed, in tears, my fear of being permanently emotionally damaged by my family life. My siblings had spun off into separate, self-destructive, noncommunicative orbits; my father's tyranny had begun to reappear; and my mother's superficial remarks now provoked a deep hysteria in me. I felt like an orphan born into a family of eight. "Suzy, chérie, I understand. You are suffering. You feel alone. Your suffering makes you stronger, but you cannot see that now. You are afraid of your sensitivity, but it is the thing that makes you special. You are an artist. You are a writer. You will find happiness when you use your talent." I loved her for never tossing off my pessimism as mere adolescent melodrama. I loved her for noticing my creative instincts, even if her faith in me seemed outlandish. I respected her for suggesting that art, not a man, would save me.

Her constant physical affection, not just her words, mattered. We snuggled in bed or on the couch long past the time when snuggling was considered, in American culture, appropriate. In my late teens and 20s, I would still curl my long-limbed body up in her smaller one for comfort.

Then there was her humor. Sometimes Jacqueline's giddy forthrightness went too far. When she discovered (by looking at my face) that I'd had that special first time with a man, she immediately opened a bottle of champagne and whooped for joy. I cringed, wishing that some things could remain sacred. But she spoke about people we knew with a bluntness that cracked me up. She was funny, and I was laughing, in part, from the relief of at last hearing someone tell the unpleasant truth.

I have no illusions, though. Had I been born to Jacqueline, I would probably have been misled by her love of spectacle, need for luxury, and aestheticization of life. As it was, by my twelfth year, I needed exactly what she was and had to offer me.

Discretion is difficult for a teenager, and I tried in vain to hide from Helen my devotion to Jacqueline. I never stopped feeling, throughout my adolescence, that I was hurting my "real" mother by adoring my "step-." My guilt, like a psychic barnacle, grew. Helen, to her credit, rarely revealed the pain she must have felt watching me bypass her for a newer, spiffier mom.

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Today, at 49, I have relinquished the nonsense of guilt and reconciled with my mother. She and I enjoy a harmony all the more satisfying for the care with which we've built it, through open dialogue, over the last fifteen years. Becoming a mother myself helped me understand the respect Helen was due. I realize now, too, that while I am a more visible reflection of Jacqueline, I carry indispensable lessons from Helen. Her levelheaded approach to fashion, for one, was a healthy counterpoint to French glam. My inner balance, such as it is, owes much to both my mothers.

Jacqueline divorced my father after a decade together, and he died a couple of years later of a heart attack and stroke. He was 59. I was 25 and determined to never marry and have children, never attempt to create the classic nuclear family that I viewed as a farce. When I turned 34, however, I met a man of such decency, whose power was dazzlingly quiet, and who, as an artist himself, respected my claim for time to write. As a shock to all who knew me, and to myself most of all, I married him. The final shock came when we chose to have a child. Mothering terrified me. The maternal duality of my youth felt like a puzzle I couldn't solve in time for my daughter's birth. I realize now, nine years later, that I solved it by simply becoming a mother.

Lucia has reaped the bounty of my having two moms. An amalgam of Helen's earthy values and simple needs and Jacqueline's warmth, words, and taste for cashmere has passed to Lucia through me. So has French, which I have taught Lucia, who is now bilingual. My daughter takes her own lessons from her two maternal grandmothers on her regular visits to each. On the last, Jacqueline said gaily to a friend on the phone, "I have to go. My daughter from New York is here." I noticed she did not say stepdaughter. □