

On Mother's Day, see mom for the first time

By [Regina Brett, The Plain Dealer](#)

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One morning he left for school, not knowing he was looking at his mother for the last time.

My brother-in-law can still see her in her nightgown 28 years later.

He was only 13. The gold bangle bracelets he bought her that last Mother's Day were still on her dresser when they rushed him home from school.

His mom had been talking on the phone and then her heart stopped. Atypical pneumonia, they ruled. She was 45. The kids, two of them, were barely teenagers. The other two, barely adults.

I wore her pearls last week. Opened the fragile cloth purse. Took out the double string. Fumbled with the fancy rose clasp. Tried to look as elegant as she was.

I never knew her.

To say I never had a mother-in-law would be wrong. I have her through her daughter and three sons, through my husband, the oldest of them all.

She taught them how to set a table, where the forks went, how to fold a napkin.

She taught them to never leave the house with dirty dishes in the sink.

She taught them to love music, took them to New York for Broadway shows, to Blossom Music Center for rock concerts.

They lost her young, so they treasure everything she left. Every photo, every trinket. Every memory is a good one, even the bad ones.

People without mothers feel like observers on Mother's Day. So do children who longed for a mother's love they never felt.

Everyone celebrates something we're all supposed to have, but some still don't have or never got. What if your mother didn't tuck you in every night? What if she was a lush? What if she criticized you daily? What if she longed for freedom from it all?

What if none of that mattered anymore?

My mom was so busy running a house with 11 children, I barely got to know her growing up. Fortunately, I still have the chance.

Maybe you do, too.

So many women I know struggle to love their moms. Their mothers get under their skin. Mothers are part of our skin. You carry her DNA, her genes, her stories, even the ones that drive you mad.

The older I get the more I see her in the mirror looking back. I see her cheekbones, her smile, a map of her face winding into the wrinkled map of mine. I sing like she always did, humming over the kitchen sink, her altar.

My friend told me the other day she wished she could be friends with her mom. Wished she could start over and pretend her mother was someone she never met so she could rediscover her.

Maybe the best present we can give our mothers is to let them out of the box we put them in. Free her from your memories of her. Find out who else she is. Instead of tuning out the stories you know by heart, ask questions. Ask like you've never heard her stories before. Ask like you will never hear them again.

Get to know the woman she is, not just the mother she was. Give her a new start. Go in blank. To the nursing home. To the dining room. To the Bob Evans where she insists on celebrating every Mother's Day. To the church she longs to see you at.

Go without your autobiography looming over hers.

My husband and his siblings don't go a day without missing their mom. When I asked my brother-in-law what he would ask his mom if he had the chance, he thought long and hard.

"What would I ask her?" he said. "I'd ask her not to leave."

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