

# Man to Man

By Mark Millhone



"Smile, son, or Mr. Whiskers gets it."

# W

HY ARE THERE

no Mother's Day cards for those of us with dysfunctional families? Cards that say something like "Roses are red, violets are blue. You always hurt the ones you love, but don't worry, I won't sue! Happy Mother's Day!" Or "World's best mom! (When she's not drinking!)"

My mother didn't drink, but she made up for it in other ways. Whiplash-inducing mood swings. Screaming fits so loud that the neighbors would call the police. She had a particular gift for making scenes in restaurants—my two older brothers and I always knew we could count on being treated to dinner *and* a show. While a bibliography of my crazy-mama stories would run as long as the menu at a Jersey diner, the blue-plate special is the one about the incest. The story goes like this. Once upon a time—in the professional opinion of the strip-mall hypnotherapist who unlocked Mom's repressed memories from before the age of 2—Mom was raped by her father, beaten with a pipe by her mother, and then buried alive. She survived only through the divine intervention of some angels who were nice enough to cocoon her in golden light until her guilt-ridden parents (my sweet Grandpa Joe and Grandma Helen) returned to the scene and dug her up—presumably for the illicit pleasure of raising her as if none of this had ever happened, because, by my mother's own admission, the rest of her childhood passed largely without incident.

I've told the story a hundred times, but I've never felt I was betray-

## My Crazy Mom

Now that she's gone, I realize how much she taught me. Like how *not* to raise my kids

ing her trust. That's because, over the years, she told anyone who'd listen. Friends and family. Her massage therapist. The catsitter. Mere minutes after meeting my fiancée for the first time, my mother casually inquired, "You know about the incest, right?"

**MY MOTHER BELIEVED SHE WAS GIVEN THIS TRAUMA**, this special burden, because she alone was special enough to bear it. So, while her victimization was a thorn in her side, it was also a badge of honor—her connecting point to the great mystics, prophets, and saints, who knew a little about suffering.

My mother's spiritual quest to heal these wounds turned the last 25 years of her life into a traveling medicine show of anything New Age or



alternative. This included Reiki (she attained the rank of Reverend Master of the Healing Hand), crystal therapy (if you'd been through what she had, your chakras would be out of whack, too), and past-life regression (this lifetime was a picnic compared with her previous 10,000). Her last guru-of-the-month was a medium I'll call the Enlightened Fred, arguably the foremost channeler of Ramada, a beneficent and healing spirit not, to my knowledge, affiliated with the hotel chain.

Ramada discerned a vortex of evil over central Iowa, where my mother was reared. It turned out Grandma Helen and Grandpa Joe were little more than psychic pawns under the thrall of a succubus who, as it happened, manifested itself as my great-grandmother Roxie. While it's a shame about Roxie, I was relieved to hear Grandma Helen was in the clear. She always doted on me.

My mother once asked that I tell my kids our family secret when I felt the time was right. I penciled this in for never, but maybe that's just the denial talking.

The reason I joke, of course, is because none of this is funny. I'm embarrassed to admit that, over the years, it was just easier to think of her as a punch line than as Mom.

**WHAT'S UNDENIABLE ABOUT MY MOTHER** is that her life was an unhappy one, and that she needed this tale of gothic horror to explain it to herself. Who am I to judge? My attempts to turn my mother into a joke, and my miserable childhood into a series of knee-slapping anecdotes, are no less a distortion. Both of us edited out the parts that no longer served the life story we felt like telling.

My mother has her ending now, at least for this lifetime. Two years ago this coming September, 4 days after celebrating her 50th wedding anniversary, she died at the age of 73. A heart attack. Such an ordinary ending to such an extraordinary life, like a heroine from

some grand opera slipping and falling in the shower.

"Was it unexpected?" is the question everyone asks.

"No, we scheduled it."

That's what you want to say. Truth is, in hindsight, we almost could have. Her once Amazonian frame had withered to a spectral 98 pounds, and she'd begun using an oxygen tank to manage such strenuous tasks as going to the store to buy cigarettes. By the end, she was constantly tethered to that tank like a space-walking astronaut, one foot in this world,

the other already in the next.

Despite all that, her passing was still a shock. At least to me. And, almost 2 years later, I still find her death imponderable, disorienting. It's as if someone rearranged the furniture while I slept. How ironic that after spending most of my adult life avoiding my mother, trying to reduce her to a punch line, she looms so large now that she's gone. She's like a song I can't get out of my head, a phantom limb, something in the air. I deeply regret all the years wasted in anger, hating her for not being the mom all those Hallmark cards were written for: the milk-and-cookies-waiting-for-you-after-school mom, the kiss-it-and-make-it-all-better, world's greatest mom. Only now does it even occur to me to wonder if I was the son she wanted me to be.

And the thing is, that perfect mom, even if she does exist, couldn't have given me the gifts I received from my mother. My dad was a newspaperman for 20 years, but it's my

mom who made me a writer. Her life forced me to confront the ways in which we're all characters in a story of our own invention, trying desperately to tie up the messy threads of our lives. Don't we all have our necessary fictions that let us sleep at night? Think about it that way and my mother's story, *Misunderstood Visionary Battles Dark Forces of the Universe*, is definitely worth picking up.

**I'D LIKE TO THINK THAT SOMEHOW**, in one of her upcoming lifetimes, my mother will finally make the bestseller list and find the understanding and peace she deserves. Her stories were utterly original.

I also find myself desperately wanting to believe that my sweet, crazy mama was right all along, at least about some things. If she was right about reincarnation, her physical body was just a rental, which explains why she didn't take better care of it. I take comfort in thinking of her lifetime of pain as a big fat check deposited in the karma bank. There's no way she'll have to come back as a houseplant or a cockroach or a politician. She's moved on to a better place.

At least that's what the catsitter told us. She said my mother came to her in a dream and asked her to let us know that she's happier now and that she forgives my father. For what, I'm not sure, but I guess that's their business. It's nice of Mama to keep in touch.

This year, Mother's Day is May 14. For future reference, it's always the second Sunday in May. She gave you life. Give her a box of chocolates. Some flowers. A card. I sent mine in care of the catsitter. Sure hope it reaches her in time. I love you, Mom. **MH**

## You Have Your Mother's Biceps

### 4 physical traits you can thank (or blame) Mom for

Because you have an X chromosome—from your mother—and it bullies your Y around, its flaws are your problems. Along with dozens of serious diseases, here's what else you inherit from Mom.

**YOUR SIZE** When you were an embryo, a battle briefly raged inside you, says Michael Meaney, Ph.D., director of the Program for the Study of Behavior, Genes, and Environment at McGill University. Dad's genes wanted you to be big, strong, and fast, so you could outrun tigers in the jungle or Lions in Detroit. Mom's wanted you to be small, so you'd be easier to

deliver. Which is a better fighter? Well, the world is filled with more 5'9" accountants than 6'6" power forwards, isn't it?

**YOUR MUSCLE MASS** "The genes responsible for making muscle cluster on the X chromosome," says David Bainbridge, Ph.D., author of *The X in Sex: How the X Chromosome Controls Our Lives*. That means Mom may be responsible for your innate ability (or inability) to build massive lats.

**YOUR HAIRLINE** Last year, German scientists confirmed what researchers long suspected:

that men often inherit their maternal grandfather's hairline. The culprit: the X chromosome's androgen-receptor gene, which, among other duties, regulates hair growth. If Mom's dad is bald, your chances of the same go up by 25 percent, Bainbridge says.

**YOUR WAISTLINE** Yes, your lifestyle largely determines your weight. But genes are important, too, Bainbridge says. At least a dozen on the X chromosome have been linked to obesity. One such mutation is present in one-fifth of Caucasians and half of African Americans. —SETH PORGES