

Ann Levin

## The Letter

Mother's Day was coming, and I wanted to write a cute little essay about my mother's orgasms. Not her real ones, of course. But rather the lightly fictionalized ones she described in a series of short stories for her various creative writing classes. Like the one a woman has in a house in the Caribbean, which she compared to Macy's Fourth of July fireworks. And the one a similar character has while she's eating pâté on a picnic lunch with a man just like my father. The idea was to wring some laughs from the excruciating embarrassment of reading about your parents' sex life.

So one morning I got up early and settled in with a big cup of coffee to find the stories, which were mixed up with hundreds of letters she'd written over the years to friends, family members, and us, her five children. All of it was crammed into two bulging manila envelopes that she thrust at me about ten years before she died, saying, *you really ought to do something with this someday*. Every now and then, I'd pull out a page or two and take a look, but most of the time they sat in a file box near my desk.

That morning, as I sorted through the messy heaps of paper, I stopped now and then to read some of my favorites, her greatest hits. Most were from the 1980s, ebullient, witty, and descriptive, dashed off on stolen stationery from hotels in London, Paris, and Rome, and filled with charming details about her and Dad's dinner parties and travels.

One was about the actual house in the Caribbean that she used as the setting for the orgasm story: *tastefully furnished, surrounded by the most beautiful garden imaginable ... all tropical blooming plants ... hibiscus, bougainvillea, poinsettias, African tulip trees ...*

Another recounted a dinner party she threw after they got back from Morocco, featuring dishes from Paula Wolfert's famous cookbook, including bisteeyah, a pigeon pie (she used chicken) layered with toasted almonds, cinnamon, and sugar and wrapped in pastry leaves. She joked about how it was more difficult to make than her previous triumph, lobster bisque, and even made the atom bomb recipe look simple.

Then I came upon one that I had never seen before—four pages, typewritten, addressed to her old friend Daisy, who had graduated with her from Smith College in 1947. It was dated Saturday, December 8, and Dad had added the year, 1973, in ballpoint pen with a note that read: *Sal's letter to Daisy F---*

As my eyes roamed the first page, it seemed that Daisy had written to ask for advice on whether to send her kids away to boarding school. She knew that the five of us had gone away and wondered how it had worked out. Still half asleep, I spotted the name of my older brother Howard a couple paragraphs down from the top. He had just been readmitted to Harvard after getting kicked out for cheating. Ma didn't have too many kind words

for his prep school—*stuffy, conservative, in the middle of nowhere*—but said he would have been worse off at home because he would have *goofed off, achieved absolutely nothing and ... bummed around with the least desirable people in the area.*

She also had choice words for my older sister Janet, then a graduate student in philosophy at MIT, and my younger brother Robert, who had recently gotten interested in transcendental meditation. My parents were highly dubious: *He feels that all the world's problems will be eradicated by this movement—no more pollution, racial strife, energy crises, acne, halitosis, unemployment, war, and probably Nixon.*

As I read the dense text with growing dread—it was single-spaced and fading to gray—I realized that these were not the proud boasts of a doting parent but rather a litany of my siblings' weaknesses and failures. Then I saw my own name and a detailed, scalding account of an epic collapse that began my freshman year at prep school and was continuing through the present day at none other than Smith, her and Daisy's alma mater. She criticized my appearance (*she allowed herself to become very fat*), my social skills (*she alienated many and annoyed most*), my judgment (*her reactions are too extreme*), my politics (*too radical, too feminist*), my ambition (*ruthless*), and my personality (*she is really a very sad child*).

Up until that moment, I had thought that all my old bad feelings about my childhood and our relationship had mellowed into warm-hearted nostalgia. But I was gutted, even though the letter was fifty years old. I thought about calling my therapist for an emergency appointment, but I'd had enough therapy to know that I wouldn't feel as bad the next day. I'd also had enough to know that I should just put the letter away. Instead, I forced myself to keep reading.

The only one she spared was Rachel, the baby of the family and her favorite: *She happens to be the one Levin child who is the best adjusted and most natural and by far the most fun to be with ...* I didn't disagree. I adored Rachel, too, and she was, hands down, the most fun to be with in the family.

Ma closed the letter by urging Daisy and her husband to visit her and Dad in Mount Pleasant after the first of the year: *Our house is empty and yearning to be filled up. We offer either the American Plan or the European and are as competent hostellers as the Holiday Inn folks. So please come ...*

It was 7:30 in the morning. I was still in my pajamas. My plan to write a sweet little piece about my mother's orgasms had gone horribly wrong and I was in desperate need of more coffee. So, I dragged myself into the kitchen where my husband, Stan, was making breakfast—a grapefruit and bowl of oatmeal, the same thing he'd eaten every morning since I'd known him. He had on his baggy black-and-gray Pittsburgh Penguins pants, not because he had any particular allegiance to the NHL team but because he loved those absurd little seabirds. I sat down at the table just to be companionable but I didn't feel like eating.

"Did you sleep?"

His day was just starting, and he was bright and curious (without

coffee) about the world, including how I had slept. I was too preoccupied to do much more than grunt. I tried to read the paper but I couldn't get past the headlines. All I could think was, *who writes a letter like that?* And to someone they'd hardly seen since college?

I had never met Daisy, although I'd heard her name growing up. It was possible, I supposed, that she was my mother's best friend and I just didn't know it. So, after breakfast, I decided to look her up online. In a couple of seconds, I found her obituary. She had died in 2018, three years after my mother, at age 92.

In the old photo that accompanied the notice, she looked cheerful and athletic, with thick, dark eyebrows and no-nonsense bobbed hair—the kind of good-natured, spunky girl who canoes in the Adirondacks and plays lacrosse as a team sport. No need to get her nose fixed like Ma's Jewish friend Lois. In fact, she could have been a model in an L.L. Bean catalog circa 1972, when I was a freshman at Smith and many of my classmates still sported the same preppie look.

In short, she seemed to epitomize the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal that my mother—that both my parents—both revered and reviled. I remembered Ma telling us about how she felt like a misfit at Smith in the late 1940s, with her frizzy hair and big nose. Could this letter have been some kind of bid to impress her waspy friend Daisy?

Then again, by 1973, when she wrote it—more than 25 years after graduation—Ma had developed her own distinctive style, which included making fun of the stuffy ways of WASPs whenever it suited her needs. As she did in a memorable letter about a spring benefit that she and Dad had attended at a local art museum that was hosted by one of their wealthy socialite friends. It was written with a Tom Wolfe-like attention to detail that made so many of her letters a delight to read—the women in Talbot, the men in emerald green jackets or trousers or madras pants.

*Dad looked deliriously Andover-ian with a navy blazer, pale khaki cotton trousers and a PINK tie. I kvelled*, she wrote, using the Yiddish expression for bursting with pride. She went on to describe the decorations (Japanese irises, orchids, a beribboned maypole) and the food: *better than much, yet left much to be desired ... a very dry smoked fish (what do the goyim know about smoked fish)?*

In just a few deftly turned phrases, you could see her outsider envy of WASP culture but also the gloating condescension and derision of a Jew who wouldn't belong to any club that would accept her as a member. (Ma adored the Marx Brothers.)

Gradually, I became aware of Stan's voice on the other side of the room. I had no idea how long he'd been talking to me.

"Hey, I'm going to the grocery store. Do you need me to get anything?"

I shook my head. He stared at me for a few seconds.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I'm fine."

"You're still in your pajamas."

I looked down. He was right. "Oh," I said. "I was just about to take a shower." But as soon as I heard the door to the apartment close, I went back to reading the pages scattered over my desk.

*Who writes a letter like that?* Someone who's a pretty freaking brilliant letter writer. In our family Ma had a reputation as a Trollope- or Tolstoy-level correspondent. After she died, a few people sent us back condolence notes that she had written, saying how much they had meant to them at the time. A cousin on my dad's side was even hoping that one day she'd write the definitive tell-all, spilling the beans about the nutty family she'd married into. It would be a sort of Jewish American *Forsyte Saga*, the British novel, then TV series, that chronicled the generations of an upper-middle-class family. Of all her admirers, Dad was the most devoted. He made copies of her letters on the Xerox machine in the store, often scrawling at the bottom, if they were to us, *Isn't your ma an incredible letter writer?*

And she was. Which was why, when she thrust the manila envelopes at me and said, *you really ought to do something with this someday*, I thought it was a great idea. Her writing was so vibrant, so filled with the spark of life. In the letter about the museum benefit, she also described an enchanting birthday party she'd recently hosted for a botanist friend: *Instead of napkins I ordered dish towels with a series of herbs imprinted on natural, rough linen ... centerpieces were candles in the shapes of eggplant and asparagus and a bud vase with a single yellow rose in it ... We set the champagne bottles in an ice-lined fish poacher decorated with cut-outs from the Pittsburgh Conservancy wild flower calendar ...*

Then came one after another ecstatically erotic passages about the food, her natural subject, the one she continually returned to: *For starters, crab in a Louis sauce, shrimp in lemony, mayonnaise dressing, a great whole poached salmon swathed in mustard mayo and garnished with cucumbers, lemon, and the freshest, most delicate dill from the garden ...*

That was followed by a description of the main course, to be eaten by candlelight: *roast loin of veal with a carrot, mushroom, and shallot sauce, fresh asparagus with dollops of mayo and decorated with red pepper strips, a soubise of rice, and lots of French bread and homemade butter. After all those rich dishes, that plain-spoken declaration at the end—lots of French bread and homemade butter—made you think, this woman really knows what she's talking about!*

But did that make her an expert when it came to me? Did she even know me at all? *Ann went off to George School with everyone expecting that she would be the perfect pupil. But she had apparently made up her mind that she would outdo sister Janet in every accomplishment and boy did she ruthlessly go ahead to establish herself as the smartest and most competent student the school ever had ...*

Me? Ruthless in boarding school? That's not how I remembered it. I was so sad and lonely, it was unbearable. Calling home every Sunday, weeping. Losing weight without trying. I couldn't eat because I'd choke on food. I stopped getting my period. I felt profoundly and deeply stupid, like everyone in my class was smarter than me. I couldn't keep up in Track 4

math and had to ask permission to drop down to a lower level.

I remember one Saturday in the fall of 1968, when all the other girls had gone to town, I stayed behind and sat in a window alcove in my pink cardigan sweater, my hair still combed under in a page boy, and tried to read a book. Back home, I used to whip through novels in an afternoon. *Black Beauty*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I prided myself on straight-A report cards. Now, I was reading *Jane Eyre*, or some other book by a Bronte, and I simply couldn't understand the words on the page. Were the sentences too complex? I just remember feeling that my reading comprehension was broken. It was as far from being ruthless as I could imagine.

As for my older sister, all I wanted was to be like her. I didn't necessarily understand why she liked the Paul Butterfield Blues Band or how she could read *The New Republic* cover to cover, with no pictures or color to relieve the unremitting pages of gray type, but I knew that I could trust her. Both her kindness and her taste. That first winter, when I'd flown out to see her at the University of Chicago, I poured out all my troubles, including my newfound perception that Ma and Dad were *just so bourgeois*. She was the last person in the world I wanted to compete with.

A garbage truck rattled down the street outside our office window. I looked up and noticed that the golden rays of morning were gone. It was almost noon, and I hadn't even brushed my teeth. So, I pushed myself up out of my chair and went to take a shower. By the time I got dressed, Stan was home from the store, unloading his knapsack on the kitchen table.

"I saw Nancy and Oliver at the deli," he said in a cheerful voice. Nancy lived a floor below us and her dog, Oliver, was perhaps the most beloved Labradoodle in the building. "And the sidewalk was clogged in front of the Bagel Shop"—something that mystified me because their bagels were soft and puffy, as tasteless as Wonder Bread. Stan didn't care—he was completely indifferent to food. It just irritated him (mildly) that the lines outside the shop made it impossible to navigate the sidewalk.

After he was finished putting away the groceries, he started to fix his usual lunch: a turkey sandwich on half a pita, using razor-thin slices of vacuum-packed deli turkey. Ma would have been horrified. I opened a can of soup. It was a classic Overeaters Anonymous portion control move—once the bowl was empty, I was done.

After lunch, I couldn't bear to go back to the office and face the letter again so I hid out in our bedroom with a stack of galleys I had to review. As I settled into our broken-down armchair near the window, I gazed across the room at a wall lined with books. I'd been carting many of them back and forth across the country for more than 40 years, including most of the feminist texts I first encountered at Smith. *The Feminine Mystique*, *Sexual Politics*, *The Second Sex*—books that truly did change my life.

So, maybe Ma was right when she said to Daisy in the letter: *She has become such an ardent feminist that she allows only that interpretation for all events. She has always responded to her latest interest with a burning*

*intensity that would make Savonarola seem as pallid as bread pudding ...*

The reference to Savonarola, the 15<sup>th</sup> century religious fanatic who burned books and destroyed works of art that he considered immoral, seemed a little obscure to me even though I knew that Ma had majored in modern European history. But I had to wonder: Was I too ardent a feminist? Was it even possible to be too ardent a feminist? If I was, had it somehow colored or skewed every subsequent decision I made in my life, including waiting until I was well-established in my career to get married and not having children?

Still, I thought, it was a weird thing to say to a fellow graduate of an all-women's college, and actually a weird thing for her to say at all. She was a lifelong member of NOW, the League of Women Voters, Planned Parenthood, and the American Association of University Women, fiercely proud of Smith's long history of nurturing feminist leaders, including Betty Friedan ('42) and Gloria Steinem ('56). For decades, she wore a "Smith College: A Century of Women on Top" T-shirt to aerobics. As soon as one fell apart, she'd order another one from the college bookstore.

You wouldn't think my feminism at Smith circa 1973 would have been a problem for her. But evidently, it was. She didn't like my left-wing politics either: *She says that her fellow students are much too conservative ... either indifferent to the current political and economic and social currents in the country or so interested in going on to graduate school that they will cheat, lie, etc. to get good enough grades to qualify them for law or medical school ...*

It was also strange that someone as smart as Ma didn't seem to understand that it wasn't just me who was rebelling. In 1967, Janet had called home from George School for permission to attend an anti-war march in Washington. (They said no.) Howard wore shaggy hair to his shoulders and wire-rim glasses like John Lennon's. Ma herself had dispensed with wearing bras after she finally lost all the baby weight she'd gained over five pregnancies, and as the swinging sixties rolled into the seventies, she and Dad tried out bell-bottomed jeans and even smoked a little pot. Just a few months before she wrote the letter to Daisy, she cheered her ass off when Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes.

There was a generational struggle underway across great swaths of the country and the world, and she should have known that—she was a history major. And besides, I wasn't Patty Hearst. I never robbed a bank. The most extreme thing I did my sophomore year at Smith was hang a picture on my door of Patty Hearst brandishing a machine gun when she was robbing a bank.

Though maybe the Savonarola remark wasn't really about my politics or my feminism at all. Maybe it was about the mental illness that hovered over our family like a storm cloud in a western Pennsylvania summer. I'd been dealing with it all my life. Anytime I lay down in the dark in my bedroom when it wasn't time to sleep, Dad would come up to check on me, terrified that *it was finally happening*.

To be clear, Dad's family really was nuts. His mother was bipolar. So

was his sister, and when they were in their manic phase, it was apparently a terrifying sight to behold. By the time I was born, my grandmother had already had a lobotomy and my aunt was heavily medicated, in and out of mental institutions. But I heard stories about my powerful grandma, who was more than six feet tall and strong enough to load washing machines onto the back of the delivery truck, smashing the window of their car when they were on the way to the store. And Frances was apparently trying to kill herself when she got her arm stuck in the wringer of a washing machine. Maybe Ma was worried that being *such an ardent feminist* was just the first step on the inevitable road to insanity.

This was hopeless. I wasn't getting any writing done, or for that matter reading, so I figured I might as well take a walk. It was early spring, too soon for the cherry trees around the reservoir to be in bloom, but it felt good to be out in the fresh air. I entered Central Park at 90<sup>th</sup> Street and set off around the bridle path.

Packs of girls from the private schools in the neighborhood were doing laps, as sleek and glossy as a fleet of baby Ferraris, gym shorts barely covering their butts. Even in early March, their long legs were tan from family vacations in the Bahamas and Florida. It occurred to me that they were younger versions of Daisy, who, before Smith, had graduated from Madeira, an exclusive girls' school outside Washington. All of them looked so healthy—dare I say happy?—but I knew appearances could be deceiving and imagined there were one or two who binged late at night, as I began to do at George School. That was one of the mysteries of my freshman year—why I flipped from not eating at all to eating three servings of everything at every meal. And why it was still never enough.

This, then—these girls running laps as the sun sank over the West Side and ducks paddled in the water and planes flew overhead to and from LaGuardia—this was what Ma and Dad had wanted for us when they sent us off to prep school, then college—to attain the academic and social skills we would need to flourish in the bourgeois splendor of Manhattan's Upper East Side or similar ZIP codes across the country. So we could have lives that were nothing like theirs.

The only son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Dad managed to get into Harvard from his undistinguished public school in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. But in Cambridge, Massachusetts, among all those New England preppies, he was embarrassed by his Yiddish-speaking father, who was a peddler and a junkman until he scraped together enough money to open a furniture store. In college Dad had wanted to be a sociologist. To solve the problems of the world. To understand why people didn't get along. But an academic life just wasn't an option when he was the only boy in a family with six girls, and someone had to take over the business.

Ma's childhood was even worse. Orphaned at age five, she was raised by an aunt and uncle who had kids of their own and didn't particularly want to raise her and her younger brother. Then she was molested by one of their sons, a beloved first cousin. Plus, it was the

Depression. When she was a little girl, her aunts used to drop her off at the movie theater on Saturday afternoons to babysit herself.

Whatever discomfort my parents might have felt at their waspy schools, the investment paid off, at least from their perspective. *Who writes a letter like that?* Someone who is convinced that sending your kids away to school will set them up on a glide path to success. From modest beginnings, she and Dad had pulled themselves up a couple rungs on the ladder and could only assume that it would be better and safer the higher you got. Being safe was especially important to Dad, who lost many relatives in the Holocaust. Yet even in the relative safety of America in the 1970s, Ma—when she wasn't busy trashing us—was fretting to Daisy about the current political situation: the Arab oil embargo, long lines at the gas pumps, and her and Dad's fears that any shortages would be blamed on the Jews.

It was striking to hear her call out the criminals in the Nixon administration when, in the very next paragraph, she was lacerating me for my extreme political views. Even Daisy was pretty far to the left in the Democratic Party, judging by her obituary. In 1972, she was a delegate for George McGovern. For decades, she was involved in the anti-war and nuclear freeze movements. I wasn't sure what made her principles more palatable to my mother than mine except for the fact that Daisy was her friend and I was just her daughter.

By the time I reached this logical impasse, I had done several loops around the track, so I left the park where I entered and headed home on East 92<sup>nd</sup> Street. Normally, the rows of sturdy brownstones consoled me, with their well-maintained stoops and picturesque windows. But that night, I was filled with a sense of sadness and regret—which in turn made me angry because it seemed to make Ma's words prophetic: *She is really a very sad child; hating herself for being the way she is and yet almost obsessed with this need to prove her superiority at whatever the cost. Then in her moments of reality she knows that she isn't all that superior.* That was the part of the letter that bothered me most—how she used the word “sad” in the same way that Donald Trump would many years later, not to mean melancholy but rather, pathetic.

In the lobby of our building, I lingered to gossip with the doorman, silently resolving to be done with work for the day. Upstairs in our apartment, Stan was standing by the window next to a tripod, fiddling with an attachment to a lens. On any other night, I would have asked him what he was up to. Instead, I was inexorably drawn to the letter again.

As I read it for the fourth time, a part I hadn't paid much attention to caught my eye: *It's the feeling that I don't want to let life slip by without having experienced many of the things I've aspired to. As I get nearer to fifty the sense of my mortality surfaces and in plain words, I want to have fun ... The burden of raising the children ... makes us both want to get the “suption” out of life before life drains it from us ...*

“Suption”? At first, I thought it was a typo. Then I looked it up and discovered it was indeed a word. It meant “body, substance, flavor,” as in “chewing tobacco until the suption is out of it,” a quote from the writer



Malcolm Cowley. I shook my head in admiration—that desire to get the suption out of life described Ma to perfection. It was the energy that fueled the rhythms of a thousand dinner parties, intricate travel itineraries, and real and fictional orgasms. She believed that she deserved it after a childhood of emotional deprivation, years of dealing with Dad's difficult family, and then the five of us.

There was no doubt about it: Ma was ambivalent about motherhood. When I saw in the obituary that Daisy had gone back to school in the '70s and earned a master's in history, I wondered if Ma wouldn't have been happier if she'd done the same—or even gotten a PhD or law degree. After all, she was the one who was awarded the senior history prize at graduation, not Daisy. She would have made a fabulous prosecutor.

But when Ma graduated from Smith, there were not a lot of career paths for upwardly aspirational white middle-class women. Marriage was still the best way to advance in the world. She left Northampton, moved back to western Pennsylvania, where she had grown up, and took a sales job at Saks in Pittsburgh. Two years later, she married my father and settled down in the small coal-mining town where his parents owned a store. Then she had five kids in eight years. Why? I have no idea because I never asked her. None of us did. Do children ever ask?

I heard a knock on the door. It was Stan.

"Should we start making dinner?"

"Sure. I'll be there in a second."

I tidied up the papers and stuffed them back in an envelope, relieved but worried about tomorrow. I understood I wasn't done with the letters, nor were they done with me.

In the kitchen I poured a couple glasses of wine and started chopping garlic and onions. *Who writes a letter like that?* Clearly, a woman more in love with her husband than her children. And who thinks it's okay to write a letter like that? Clearly, Dad. For hadn't he effectively endorsed everything she wrote by scribbling at the top, *Sal's letter to Daisy F----*, as if it were destined for the family archives? You had no choice but to conclude that the feelings were mutual.

It made me think of an essay I'd read years before by the writer Ayelet Waldman, where she described being a pariah in her new mothers' group because she was the only one still having sex with her husband while all the others were utterly besotted with their newborns. "I do love her," she wrote about her first child with her husband, the author Michael Chabon. "But I'm not in love with her. Nor with her two brothers or sister ... I'm not in love with any of them. I am in love with my husband."

Ma was the original Ayelet Waldman, Dad was her co-conspirator, and maybe analyzing our defects and nitpicking our flaws brought them even closer together. In all the years I was at war with Ma, I used to keep hoping that one day Dad would take my side, would say to me, *Ann, you look fine the way you are, you don't need to lose weight, there are more important things in life to worry about.* But he never did.

"You've been weird all day."

I turned around and Stan was standing at the stove, pouring water into a saucepan. Every night, we had one of three things for dinner: a stir-fry with steamed rice; baked potatoes with jazzy toppings like chili, bacon, or chives; or a roast chicken from Whole Foods.

I knew then that I had to say something about the letter but suddenly, it all seemed so ridiculous. Everyone loved Ma. I loved Ma. Why was I making such a big deal about it?

“Did Ma ever say mean things about people?”

He burst out laughing. “That’s all she ever said.”

When we finally sat down to eat, I showed him the letter. He read it silently until he got to the part about what might have happened if I’d stayed in Mount Pleasant for high school. *Knowing Ann, she would have been as ruthless here at home and would have had no one to challenge her and thus her expectations for herself would have gone beyond reality even more.*

“Ruthless?” He was incredulous. “You were 14! I could see how a 14-year-old Herman Goering might be ruthless.”

He set it aside when he was done.

“So?” I peered at him across the table.

“So? It’s completely deranged.”

Was he right? Maybe the person who writes a letter like that is someone deranged—by love or loss or discontent or sorrow. Someone grieving the career she never got to have, the glamorous Manhattan life she never got to live, the unconditional love of the mother who died when she was five.

I told Stan that Ma reminded me of the vaudeville performer Mr. Memory in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps*. He could not help but respond when someone asked him a question, even though it cost him his life. What if Ma was the same? When Daisy wanted to know, how was boarding school for your children, what if Ma just felt compelled to answer? If, in the process, her own kids came out looking bad, well, so be it.

Finally, I said out loud the words I’d been afraid to say all day.

“What if it’s all true?”

Stan’s face softened. “Do you remember the time she told me you could have been an Olympic skier?”

I had to laugh at that. For a few years in my childhood, my parents used to schlep the five of us up to a winter resort in the Laurel Mountains to learn how to ski. I hated every second of it—the heavy boots, the snow and cold, and the hordes of people in bright puffy parkas and orange-tinted goggles endlessly talking about bindings and wax. Once I left home, I never downhill skied again. But that didn’t stop Ma from concocting a fantasy about squandered potential. Was she delusional or just aggrieved that yet again, I had turned my back on a pastime she held in high esteem?

“Besides,” Stan said, “she didn’t even answer the question. Daisy wanted to know, how was prep school for your kids? No one asked her, what do you think of your children?”

It was true. I couldn’t imagine that after reading the letter, Daisy

had any more clarity about whether to send her kids away to school. Ma's letter was something else entirely, and whether it was true was beside the point. When she sat down at her typewriter and later her computer, she saw what she wanted to see.

There was no better proof than what she'd written about Rachel: *the one Levin child who is the best adjusted and most natural and by far the most fun to be with ...* What Ma didn't see in 1973, when she wrote the letter to Daisy, was that at age 15, enrolled at the Milton Academy outside Boston, at the time a patrician prep school popular with the Kennedys, Rachel was well on her way to becoming a Ted-level drunk.

She didn't even see it eight years later, when Rachel was crashing car after car at her first job after college because she was bombed out of her mind. Ma dashed off a letter to her on July 13, 1981, begging her to be more careful. *I don't wish to sound preachy, Rach, nor would I do anything to diminish your sense of worth, but I question your driving skills ... I beseech you to be paranoidly cautious; assume that every car is a threat. DO NOT DRIVE FAST! Both dad and I feel it was a big mistake to have gotten the standard shift. You have enough to do without the additional responsibility of shifting gears ...*

I inherited that letter, too. She and Dad were keeping track of all of them, just as any person of note would do, so they could be archived and someday, someone would chronicle her life. Because for whatever reason—maybe all those Bette Davis movies she watched in the dark theaters of her lonely childhood—she had an urgent sense that her orphan's tale was a story worth telling.

I was that someone, her archivist, the writer. Ma could have given the letters to one of my siblings, but she knew they weren't interested in mucking around in the past. She also knew—because she was my mother?—that no matter how badly we'd been estranged and how many awful things we'd said to each other, I was the one child most likely to do something with them. And she was right. Her hunch paid off. I did do something with them—I wrote this essay.

Happy Mother's Day.