

MY

Which is harder: living in the shadow of a beautiful mother or watching her beauty disappear? by Brooke Kroeger

# BOMBSHELL

MOM

It was the same before I turned 40 as it was when I was 4. No stranger could believe that the handsome blond woman with a style she herself felt sure Jackie Kennedy had borrowed was old enough to be my mother.

Actually, she is 21 years older; my brothers came after at intervals of three and nine years. So I grew up the only daughter of this effortlessly youthful creature of five feet four inches, 110 pounds, long waist, perfect bottom, and pert, shapely legs that tapered into the feet of some mythic princess, size 5½ triple-A. I realize this is not the 1990s ideal; but because my mother's "figure" was so universally admired in our community, I was well into my 20s before I realized short legs were a deficit. I liken this lapse to the way we now look at the bathing beauties of the 1950s and wonder how anyone ever found all that cellulite so comely. This is not to say that my mother had cellulite. She did not. And, without benefit of exercise or sport or diet, no one was built better.

She was more striking than beautiful. What set her apart was her particular

combination of style and noraage and the way it threw her into such sharp contrast with most other mothers of children my age. Her appearance provoked reaction in every imaginable setting. I still sometimes rerun the film clips of what this was like:

■ Age 5. The dentist's office, 1954. "Oh, how nice," the receptionist says. "You're here with your sister today." Some variation of this scene happens another 200 times over the next 30 years. In every case, my mother corrects the mistake but delights in the flattery. As a little girl, I find these comments shameful. I worry that no one believes I have a mother.

■ Third-grade spring recitation, 1958. Mothers with tightly permed hair crowd the classroom shoulder to shoulder, like a mall fabric-shop display of insipid floral prints. The late arrival is the only ash blond, hair in a side-parted pageboy discreetly pinned back behind the ear on one side. She wears tailored slacks in pale, pale yellow and a notched-collar blouse the same color, and she stops the room. Subtle, smart, sexy without trying. By 9 years of age I am well accustomed to



Taken during the author's college years—Mom is 41.

## attachments

the inevitable remarks. I have gotten beyond the worry over whether I appear motherless. But a new one has reared: why can't she just blend in?

■ Age 15, 1964. College boys hang around our house. They love my mother, amazed by how much better she looks than their moms. By now I have heard the adage, *Want to know how a girl will look in 20 years? See her mother.* Whatever my ambivalence about this situation—however annoying it is that all sorts of people feel compelled to comment on how she looks all the time—I do apprehend the significance of my lucky dip in the gene pool.

Like most mothers of teenage girls, mine makes me crazy. But I learn to admire the way she "presents." It becomes a source of sincere pride. And, since I begin to believe I am going to turn out the same way, it becomes part of my identity. I accept, even feel quite pleased, to be the girl whose mother is aging like that.

■ College days, 1968.

My mother visits. We're together in a hotel lounge. Two licky salesmen at a table across the room have the waiter offer us a drink. Mom, the consummate prude, feigns shock, giggles, and tells the

men in full voice and smile we are mother and daughter. We all laugh. She tells the story a hundred times after, thrilled, at 40, to be mistaken for a college girl.

There was a darker side to all this. By dint of all the focus on how my mother looked, there was focus from her on how we all looked. In our family we value honesty far above tact; males outnumber females three to two. Evaluations are brutal. I still experience dread getting off the plane to visit my parents—even now, at age 45—knowing that the mental tape measure will be drawn, calculating how full the face, how broad the behind. It is mother's old agenda, but we've all gotten sucked in. "Jowls!" the older of my brothers blurted in a mock shriek when I came home from college up ten pounds. I was hardly fat, but given the impossible family standard, I might as well have swallowed an air mattress. At our house this was very

funny. True is funny. So we all howled.

I still experience the impact of having grown up that way: every time passing a mirror provokes too harsh a self-criticism, every time my brothers and I catch ourselves too focused on one of their receding hairlines, every time I subject my own daughter to too much scrutiny. I know better. I try not to do it. It happens anyway.

■ Living abroad, age 32, 1981. Mother comes to visit. She's in a brown straight skirt under a tailored brown leather blazer. She's 53, striding off the plane with her familiar confidence. I haven't seen her for almost a year, so the change is startling. I notice that under the blazer she can't get her zipper all the way up. Her stomach bulges under her skirt. I try to suppress shooting her the barb on the end of my tongue, but I've grown up under her tutelage, so I can't. Mom defiantly sucks her midriff in deeply to



A current photo of Mom.

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demonstrate how tiny her waist still is. She feigns hurt, but I've hit the truth button and, in an instant, we are both laughing out of control.

During the 13 years since then, my mother has become what her doctor describes as obese. It's an overstatement, but she really is fat. A nonfunctioning thyroid went undiagnosed too long, and the resulting impact on her metabolism has meant a weight gain of maybe 50 pounds. On a small frame, it's a lot. On the most youthful mom in town, it's a shock.

I would have expected someone with her history—so obsessed for so long with the subject of appearance—to be thoroughly depressed over this development. Not so. In fact, I can't get over how fully she seems to have accepted what has to be an unwelcome change. She makes half-hearted passes at dieting, worries about her health, and declaims from time to

time on why women need more fullness in their later years. Whatever sense of significance her looks may once have given her life, at bottom her values are better than that. She never speaks wistfully of what was. She has even developed this new persona; a throaty belly laugh has come from somewhere to complement the new girth. Given her history in a culture so consumed with appearance, it's impressive, don't you think?

And for the daughter who had resolved so much of her ambivalence and who had grown pleased to be aging—physically, at least—in her mother's mold? At the deepest level, I am very proud that this is the person she has turned out to be. On another, I've had my thyroid checked twice. □

Brooke Kroeger is the author of *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*, soon to be released in paperback.