

T W E N T Y



S O M E T H I N G

BY THOMAS HENNING

To know my mother is to know vibrancy, humor, compassion, and, of course, dysfunction.

My mother was 19 when she delivered me. She'd met my father when he was stationed in Greece; they got married and conceived a child, although not necessarily in that order. When the time came to give birth, my mother demanded that her child be born in a Greek hospital, not on a military base. Princess was not in the mood for M*A*S*H.

The moment my mother got to the hospital, she started chastising the other mothers to be for making such a fuss during childbirth. She told the nurses to tell them to quiet down and stop making a big deal. That all changed when she started hard labor. Not two minutes into the contractions, she was doing her best Leona Helmsley imitation and demanding drugs. Three hours later, she awoke on a gurney in a hallway, not knowing the gender of her child. She would spend many years trying to figure that one out.

That's my mom. I love her. Life with her was like my own private *I Love Lucy*, and, sweet-peas, I had ringside seats.

My mother came to this country with a bare knowledge of English, a little child in tow, and a husband in Vietnam. To top off matters, she had to live in Iowa while her husband was stationed in Vietnam. Pumpkins, picture it, a Greek princess from Athens landing on *Hee Haw* with a child and no playbill. Later, we moved to New England and my parents opened a restaurant like any good Greek family would.

My mother was meticulously clean both at home and at the restaurant. Her dislike of all that was dirty or aesthetically unsound was legendary. I remember her dusting my broth-

ers' room, something she did daily, when two of them came in looking devilish. Sammy mentioned that Michael might have something in his pocket. My mother, not one to be left in the dark, demanded that Michael show her. After some prodding, Michael pulled out the object: a roadkill rat, flat as a pancake and about as attractive as Bette Davis' Baby Jane.

The diva who is my mother covered her face with the dirty dust rag, did her best Flo Jo impression and ran. My brothers were startled, still too young to realize they had just committed sacrilege in the House of Joanna, and chased her with the rat pancake in tow. Picture it, sweet-peas: a little woman running

She was the blend of Zsa Zsa Gabor and Flip Wilson that people just could not get enough of.

around her three-bedroom ranch with a dust rag over her face, yelling in Greek, while two bewildered munchkins, clutching their prize, chased her through every room in the house and around it for good measure.

After the Titanic-esque terror subsided, the rat was disposed of and my mother peeled the dust rag from her face. Then she spent the entire month sanitizing the house. The cause of the black plague had been in her home, and she was bound and determined to perform her best Murphy's Oil exorcism.

(Incidentally, this dislike of rodents was a family trait. While strolling in downtown Athens, her father once saw a mouse run up a man's leg. In panic, he took his own pants off right there in the street, just to make sure he would not suffer the same fate.)

That is my mother. Her mother died when she was very young and she lived with her aunt.

Although they loved her like their own, she always felt as if she was living in someone else's home. As an adult, she cherished her home and wanted to provide her family with a living environment to be proud of. To this day, I never feel as safe as I do when I am in my mother's home.

Aside from providing a home for us, my mother also spent much of her time imparting life lessons. Sometimes she missed her mark, but she always gave it her all.

I remember that before the neighborhood guys would go out looking to "score," she would gather them all at our restaurant and give them some crucial prevention advice. In her thick Greek accent, she'd say, "Listen,

before you go out I want you to do me a favor."

Now, my mother was adored and revered by everyone in the neighborhood. She was the blend of Zsa Zsa Gabor and Flip Wilson that people just could not get enough of. So the guys would lean in and ask her what the favor was. She would continue, "I want you to go to the market and buy a can of Raid." When they would ask why, she would reply, "If you are going to have sex — and I am a woman of the world, I know these things happen — I want you to spray the girls with it to make sure you kill all the bugs, kill the bugs. You don't know where they have been."

As a direct result, I think my mother not only boosted the sale of bug repellent in the early to mid-'80s, she single-handedly killed the sex lives of many young men "dead in their tracks."



photo Maxwell Stroud

Thomas Henning and his mother Joanna made a rare public appearance together at the Vermont CARES "Magical Evening."

But this is why I love my mother. She is audacious and compassionate all at once. She can laugh at herself and inspire people to laugh out loud; pumpkins, I think that is one of life's most beautiful sounds.

My mother also has such heart. She works for the Visiting Nurses now. She is always talking about how much meaning they give to her life, and how fortunate she is to work with such amazing people. She cares for people in a way that inspires me to take more notice of my community and myself. She is strong, courageous, and full of life.

I don't have many role models in my life; for the most part I don't believe in them. But my mother is my role model. This woman came to a new country

and raised four sons, leaving her family, childhood, and past a continent away. She endured a 22-year marriage that was, to be polite, difficult. She sacrificed more than I can comprehend and endured more than she had to for her children.

She is beautiful and flamboyant, insightful and charming. She is my mother; I could not be more proud of her or proud to say that I am her son.

If I could get sentimental for one more moment, pumpkins, I have just a tad of advice. Love your mothers. They are amazing people, and sometimes we take them for granted. Don't make that mistake. Listen to their stories, enjoy their laughter, and tell them you love them with a hug as often as you can.

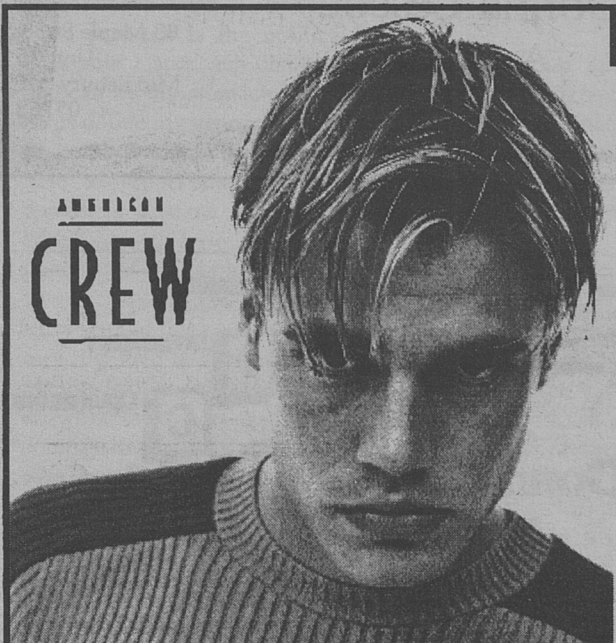
I love you, Mama. ▼

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