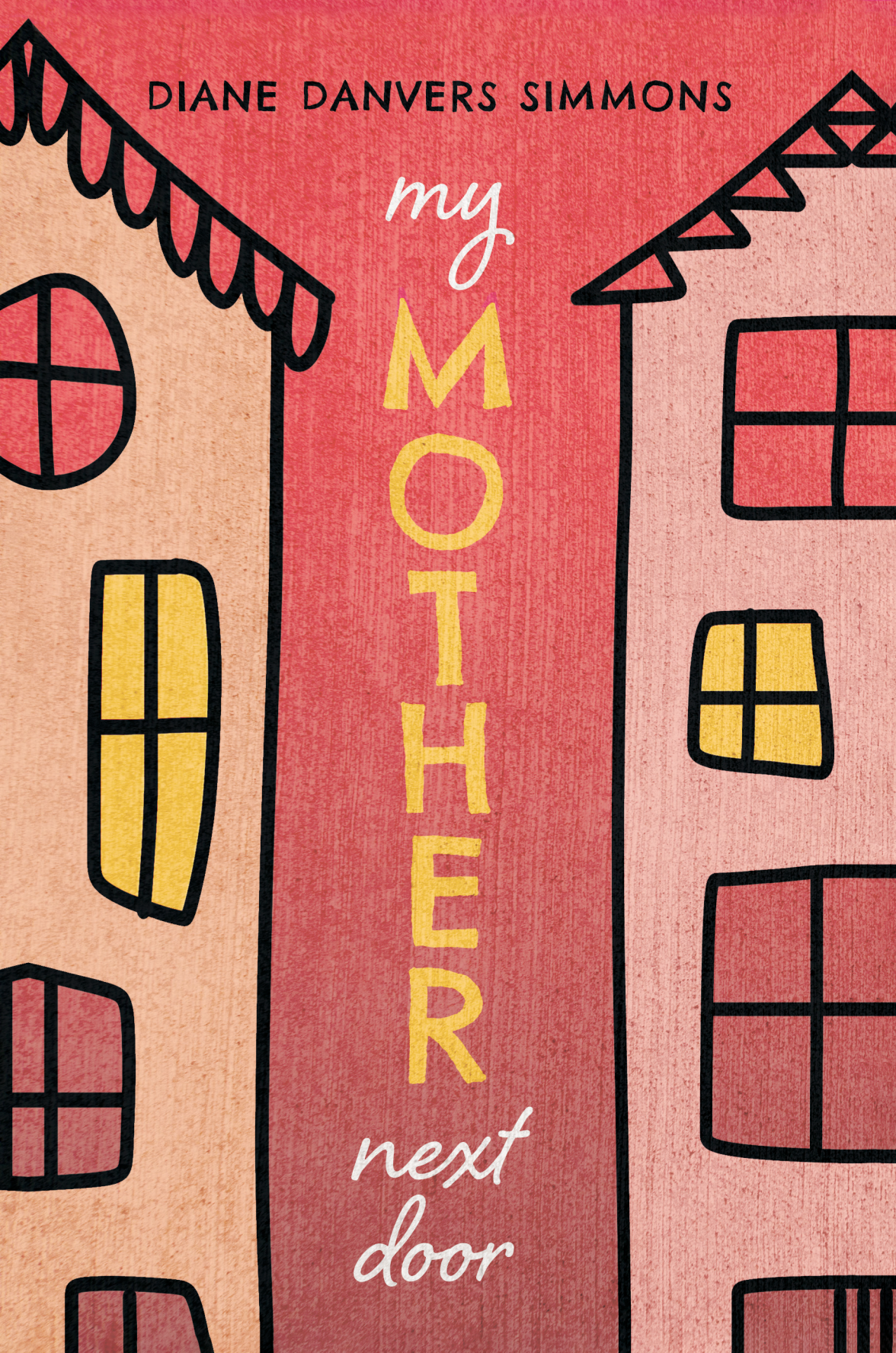


DIANE DANVERS SIMMONS

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# PRAISE FOR *MY MOTHER NEXT DOOR*

“Diane’s experiences and relationship with her mother touched all of my emotions, from love and happiness, to hate and sorrow. The strength, understanding, empathy, and compassion you ultimately gained from your traumatic experiences with your mother, along with your ability to forgive her, are life’s greatest goals. *My Mother Next Door* has inspired me to use my own sixty-year-old lens to reflect back upon my own life to help me better understand the experiences that shaped the woman I am today. Your beautiful and heartfelt book has life lessons for all of us, and I plan to share it with my mother, my daughter, and all of my girlfriends.”

—**Shelley Zalis**, Founder & CEO of The Female Quotient, Forbes magazine columnist, Co-founder of #SeeHer

“Diane has captured the delightful soul of her younger self to spin a wonderful and gripping tale of the tug-of-war between family love and family struggle . . . a must read!”

—**Ashleigh Banfield**, Anchor of “BANFIELD” on Newsnation

“This is a unique and compelling story of mother loss, grief, and healing. Diane offers us a beautiful model of how to live with the contradictory feelings of loss and longing in order to find the gift of acceptance for our imperfect mothers. Read this book and soak in the gift of personal growth that forgiveness brings.”

—**Judith Ruskay Rabinor**, PhD, Clinical Psychologist,  
Psychotherapist, and Author of *The Girl in the Red Boots* and  
*A Starving Madness*

“A bright, lively account, leavened with humor and wit that takes the edge off a unique story of loss, confusion, and reconciliation with one’s circumstances and the mother who brought it all about. Ms. Simmons writes with flair, with insight, and with a generous heart. A delightful book worthy of a deep read.”

—**Greg Fields**, Author of *Arc of the Comet* and  
*Through the Waters and the Wild*

“Readers will appreciate this beautiful and honest story of the complexities in a mother/daughter relationship.

Simmons reminds us, as daughters, we are deeply connected to our mothers, and how this impacts our own parenting.”

—**Dara Kurtz**, Author of *I am My Mother’s Daughter:  
Wisdom on Life, Loss, and Love*

“This book really touches the heart with a bit of much needed humor. A must read for mothers and daughters.”

—**Adrienne Arieff**, Author, Co-founder Project Mentor

*My Mother Next Door*

by Diane Danvers Simmons

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DIANE DANVERS SIMMONS

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*next*  
*door*



VIRGINIA BEACH  
CAPE CHARLES

# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the Dunphy women who've come before me,  
and their indomitable spirit, which has been passed down  
from generation to generation.

Thank you for never allowing NO to be the final answer, and for  
giving me a voice.

And to my father, who taught me the importance of family,  
however complicated.

## A SECOND DEDICATION

I would be remiss if I didn't include a second dedication, to the one and only pop diva, Ms. Diana Ross, whose career, grace, and beauty inspired me during those turbulent early years, and whose music saved me.

According to Mum, I met Diana Ross on a train when I was four. I don't remember a thing about it; however, Mum was one of the world's best storytellers, and this was one of her favorites. The story goes that Mum and I were on a train heading to Liverpool, and sharing our compartment was a stunning Black American singer who made a huge fuss over me. She was with two traveling companions, and she chatted with my mother the entire journey. Even though this was the most unlikely of chance meetings, this diva's wonderful music has always been my salvation. Every time I found myself going into a dark corner of my mind, I would crank up Diana, with or without her Supremes, and lose myself in her music.

I still do.

So, in honor of Ms. Ross as an individual artist, and as a member of the Supremes, each of the chapter titles in this memoir comes from one of her songs.

# DISCLAIMER

My story is written as a narrative memoir, one which shares vignettes of my mother's life and mine leading up to her departure and the immediate years thereafter.

The events, the places, the houses, the people, and my pets are all real. However, even if I pride myself on laser-sharp memory, there is only so much one can or wants to remember without a little creative liberty. And as you'll read, there was a lot of creative liberty and storytelling going on in my upbringing. However, I have not altered the essence or the fundamental truth of my story.

Out of respect and to preserve their privacy I have changed the names of all my living family members and friends except my eldest sister Marie, who said she would be offended if I didn't use her real name, my sister Lesley, and a few of my high school friends, who also didn't feel I should. And finally but certainly not least, my cousin Mike, who made me laugh when he said, "No problem, as long as I get the opportunity to play myself when the book gets turned into a film."

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# AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Not everything that is faced can be changed,  
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

—James Baldwin

**THIS IS THE STORY** I never intended to tell but was destined to.

When I was sixteen, I solemnly vowed never to do unto my own future children what my mother had done unto me—my very own “motherly” version of the golden rule. I mean, how could she? But then, decades later, when my daughter turned sixteen and I found myself standing in my mother’s shoes, I realized three things. Firstly, that sometimes a vow can be so deeply ingrained that it tests our limits (or it can paralyze us); secondly, that there were some parallels in our lives. And finally, that seeing the humor and absurdity in life with a chilled glass of rosé in summertime or a hot toddy in winter is really the only way to survive.

In her youth, my mother escaped the boundaries of her beloved Ireland and family expectations to seek her fortune in Britain, just as I too headed further west and left Britain for the USA in my twenties (though my exodus was as much to get away from Mother’s shenanigans). Then, in middle age, she escaped the boundaries of home and parenthood to reclaim her independence.

And now I too felt as if something inside of me was missing, and I had to find a way to reclaim my true self, explore my next chapter, and spread my wings again—without throwing my children out of the nest in the process.

Standing at this crossroads in my life, unable to decide whether to stay, go, or attend another self-help pilgrimage in my latest yoga gear, my entire being teetered on a precipice. I knew I could not pass on the same pain I'd experienced at my daughter's age or destroy all the good years I'd invested in my American family.

It wasn't until I was on an adventure in Morocco, attempting to reconnect with my daughter and heal the turmoil that burned within her from my own marital fallout and her first year at college, that I was taken aback by some disagreeably wise words from the most unexpected of channelers.

A German lady named Lisa and her Turkish husband, Erhan, told me, "You need to forgive your mother, and you need to break the pattern for your daughter and future generations."

What?! We might have just shared a delightful day of tea, stories, and an evening meal with a glass of rosé together in Riad Rosé, but they barely knew me, for crying out loud. After another swift glass of rosé to stop myself from *actually crying out loud*, followed by fervent denials, insisting that I'd forgiven her years before, actually never blamed her, and had let go of those memories so long ago . . . I realized maybe they had a point.

So, finally, in my quest for resolution, I reinhabited the child of the British 1970s that I was, and ventured out on my own version of Monty Python's *Holy Grail* (though happily without any French knights telling me my mother was a hamster and my father smelt of elderberries, after farting in my general direction). It became a long journey of rediscovering parts of myself and my youth that had been buried—the truths that make up the character of the woman I have become. It was about recognizing the patterns, the triggers that I didn't even consider or maybe hoped weren't there, and continuing to make the choice to react differently and find the silver linings. This journey didn't take me even further west but instead

brought me right back home to my roots, to the irreverent comedy that kept me sane in the madness, and to the people who had been my fellow travelers in those early years

I reconnected with my eldest sister, Marie, my major source of family myth, mirth, and mystery; my former sister-in-law; and my aunt and my cousins, as they shared stories that even my brutally honest mother hadn't. There were intimate moments around a firepit with my lifelong friend, known as Sophie in this book, reminiscing, laughing, even crying as she brought back to me moments I'd forgotten or blocked. Memories came rushing in as we pulled out the hairbrushes to sing along to some Diana Ross song, accompanied by our own, now adult daughters. Traveling back to the UK, my mother country, I also reconnected with old high school friends, the ones who'd been by my side in those confusing adolescent years, and who stepped in to hold me up once again. Each shared their own recollections, anecdotes, and feelings, as well as their impressions of my mother, father, and me. Each of them shared something I'd forgotten, or affirmed something I hadn't.

My cousin Mike nailed it when in a recent text he said the two of us were part of the "barrier generation" (a made-up term by Mike) as for most of our lives we have chosen to talk about the good, the funny bits (of which there were more than enough for any sitcom), but not the painful memories our bodies held on to.

What emerged when I began to write was a story of heartbreak and forgiveness, love and hate, madness and sanity, comedy and sadness, sacrifice and self-liberation, defeat and empowerment—feelings which surprised me as much as they challenged me and enlightened me, in more ways than I could ever have imagined.

Through this journey, I not only placed my fifty-something self into my sixteen-year-old self, but I also saw it all through a new lens, as the mother of my own blended American family: a teenage daughter and son from my womb, and an older stepdaughter and son, courtesy of my husband's first wife. And as corny as it sounds, I've learned a lot about *being*, something I thought I already had down after all my Deepak and meditation courses.

For me, it's miraculous that you're even reading this introduction. The path to publishing my story has been long—albeit, I've discovered, necessary. Then there's the fact that I'm mildly dyslexic (though some might say more than mildly!). I've only learned and admitted this recently, even though my nursery school reports did say I spoke “double Dutch,” to which my parents would respond (thankfully), “Doesn't every creative three-year-old?”

But honestly, writing this has been the hardest thing I've ever done, and it scares me to fucking death (I never swear, so that's the impact it has on me) to finally have it out in the world. It feels so exposing! Will people understand my humor? What will family and friends say? Will the British forgive me for all the Americanisms and spelling quirks? I can even hear my mother's voice right now as she would frequently say, “You have to be cruel to be kind sometimes”—and she could be the cruelest. But as I sit with this thought, what I do know is that for all the pain she caused, it was my mother who gave me the courage needed to take a leap. And in turn it was my son and daughter's belief in me that put me over the edge in writing this book.

I can't help thinking it's ironic that, as I finish this introduction, at the end of finally writing the book, I'm nearer my mother's age than the age I was when this story took place. Yes, that's how long it's taken. And the truth is, even if I pride myself on my memory, there's only so much one can—or can bear to—remember without a little creative liberty and British humor. Growing up in a household of storytellers, namely my mum and dad, the truth always became a more elaborate version of the facts with each telling. As they say (whoever “they” are), you can't let facts get in the way of a good story. But still, there are certain words spoken, moments in time, experiences, and feelings imprinted on one's soul that can never be erased.

Thank you for picking up this book. Each one of us has a story, which begins with our mother, and everyone's story has parts that are messy, painful, unexpected, beautiful, and comical. So this is my story—not my brother's, nor either of my sisters. I hope my story touches you and encourages you

to look deeper into your own foundational relationships, why people do the things they do and the influence they've had on your life, and maybe even admit some things you didn't want to. But most of all (and to be clear, this is not a self-help book; Mother certainly wouldn't approve of that notion), I do hope it makes you smile and reminds you that our mothers are human too, with feelings, however cruel or kind; and to ask those awkward questions and have the uncomfortable, often nutty conversations about the person your mother was, is, and perhaps is yet to be.

Who knows what you'll discover, and who knows where it might lead?

**Diane Danvers Simmons**

Somewhere in the world and grateful that I got my Covid vaccine, April 2021

PS A note for my American readers; I have intentionally spelled Mum with a *u*, not an *o*. That is how it's spelled and pronounced in Britain. However, as I write I can't help thinking that in Mum's case, it could also be an acronym for *My Unapologetic Mother*.

# 1.

## LOVE CHILD

**I CLEARLY WASN'T THERE** at the beginning of this tale, but my mother in particular took great pleasure in sharing with me her state of mind when she found out she was with child. The story always started with her visit to my pseudo-uncle Frank, AKA our family doctor, who also happened to be one of my father's closest lifelong friends. So, I'll paint a picture of related stories shared around the dinner table with my mother holding court—stories which became more elaborate with each telling. Or by my father at a cocktail party, scotch in one hand, cigar in the other, and a devilish grin on his face, as he took great pride in his manhood and in turn me. However R-rated their renditions might have been, they always left out a few of the really juicy facts, which luckily for me my sister, Marie, has since filled me in on.

It went something like this.

"If I didn't know better, Frank, I'd say I was pregnant, but that's impossible at my age. I'm going through the bloody change, for crying out loud!" Mother declared to her then new doctor.

However, Uncle Frank, or in Mum's story Dr. Frank—the spitting

image of Clark Gable—was the epitome of a kind, charming British gentleman and was quite certain of his diagnosis.

“Mary, my dear, this truly is a miracle. You are pregnant!”

Here was the first of the dramatic pauses in her storytelling . . .

Stillness, deathly quiet . . . Even my mother admitted she was tongue-tied at the diagnosis. She questioned if this was some cruel prank being played on her by Lou (my father, whom she was dating at the time) and his friend the doctor. But as with any good yarn, there was always more.

“That’s impossible. I’m not Mother Mary, for Christ’s sake!” my mother countered in disbelief, working hard to regain her composure without launching into a diatribe of Hail Marys at this unimaginable predicament. Immaculate conception had just taken on a whole new meaning in her life. Was this immaculate selection, spawned by the immaculate ejaculation?

I can still hear Mother as clear as day, continuing her story with this all too familiar line:

“Jesus Christ, Frank, I sincerely hope you’re mistaken. I’m already a bleeding heathen in the eyes of the Catholic Church for divorcing Marie’s and Jack’s father.” (Being a heathen was an accomplishment in which she reveled with great pride.) “And now this, getting pregnant out of wedlock. I’m going to be cast into the everlasting flames of hell and thrown out of the Catholic Church once and for all. Not even Jesus Christ himself can save me now!”

I can only imagine Uncle Frank, whom I adored, sitting patiently, with deep concern for his newfound friend as he closely monitored the emotional perils of guilt and shame that this forty-five-year-old Irish-Catholic divorcee was now fighting.

But guilt never occupied Mum’s soul for long, and as she curbed the shame and shock, the color rising in her cheeks, a wry smile spread across her flawless face. There had to be a plausible explanation. She didn’t know whether to believe Frank or not, but she was sure as hell going to find out.

“Has that canny old bastard Lou put you up to this, Frank?” Mum was back. She jested with Frank, trying to lighten the moment as she

wrestled with the magnitude of this colossal “fuck-up”—albeit a very pleasurable one, from what she could recall.

So, with no visible motherly shame or any chance of me getting a word in edgeways, with the latest newcomer to the story hooting and hollering, I’d have no choice but to ease back into the comfort of my chair and watch the latest version of the story unfold.

“My dearest Mary, I am a doctor and you a mother thrice. Intuitively, you and your body knew before you even came here. You’re truly blessed, and right now only God, Jesus Christ, you, and I know.”

“Oh, that’s grand. I wish he’d bless someone else who’s half my age. What’s he trying to do, test me?” When I think of that reaction now, I imagine her sitting there, attempting to breathe before she busted the vein pulsating in her temple as she processed the weight of this dilemma. Was God testing her, or was he trying to make up for all the children he’d taken from her? Being the gentleman he was, however confused he might have been, Uncle Frank would have waited patiently for Mum to continue when she was ready.

“And for the record, Frank, God Almighty always knows what he’s doing. It’s part of his ‘immaculate,’ if sometimes comical, plan,” she continued, gathering her faith. Her faith being a direct line to God without the interference of a third party, of course—her nemesis, the Catholic Church. “Well, I suppose if that’s what God wants, I must be Mother Mary. I certainly hope Lou’s as understanding as Joseph was. God have mercy on us all!”

Beneath the surface, she admitted to me years later (as she told stories about gypsies’ gifts for fortune-telling), that she’d known it was true. She was Mary Dunphy, and long before she moved to England, a gypsy had foretold that she would have a child late in life. But this late? Her fate had been sealed, and she was about to lose her newfound freedom, yet again.

This conception was the result of an unlikely alliance even now, but back then, a recently divorced, unmarried woman in her mid-forties who’d just been impregnated by a sixty-year-old widower was virtually unheard of. Even though she knew it would temporarily mean the end to her

independence, Mary (my future mother) was a practical woman, an astute soul, a trailblazer, and there was no way she'd allow a potential scandal to stop her. She'd dealt with far worse. Also, Lou (my future father) was quite the catch. He was a respectable, handsome, charming, rather dapper man. As a widower, he offered her the life she wanted and—in her mind—deserved. All without the encumbrance of an ex-wife to worry about.

Father, on the other hand, was clearly thrilled to take on the same responsibilities as Joseph: even in his mid-seventies he took great pride in telling me and anyone else who would listen how this unexpected announcement had stroked his ego at the time. In fact, he would boast of how proud he was that he “still had it in him”—literally; from a formidable army of four million sperm, one lucky soldier had overcome the long and perilous journey through my mother's fallopian tubes and succeeded in reaching and binding with my mother's one and only still-fertile egg. None of his contemporaries were having children in their sixties, and Mick Jagger hadn't even started yet!

According to my mother, both of my parents' offspring (particularly hers) had mixed emotions at the rather unusual turn of events. Dating was one thing, but a forty-four-year-old mother of grown children pregnant out of wedlock? That was another story. Wasn't it the teenagers who weren't meant to have sex and get pregnant?

It wasn't until I was writing this book that I learned some of the juicier stuff from my sister, namely how they spent their first Christmas together at my father's rather large, beautiful house on Victoria Road in Ealing, West London, which proved to be a big success—in more ways than one!

It was common knowledge, even to me, that Mum and Dad started casually dating in 1958. But unknown to me, that auspicious Christmas, gathered as a family at his home on Victoria Road and introducing their teenaged children to each other, was when the completely unthinkable happened to my premenopausal mother. One might call that divine intervention.

Mum always said that the house on Victoria Road was haunted. I think it's more likely that one thing led to another after a few glasses of her

favorite libation, Asti Spumante, paired with Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney's blossoming romance in the beloved *White Christmas* movie! However, back to Mother's version. Haunted or not, according to her it certainly had magical powers, both dark and light. She believed that some sort of higher power orchestrated its magic on the immaculate plan that God, the fairies, and the universe had in store for her and my father.

Lucky for me!

When Mother was four months pregnant with me (a pretty significant detail which she always chose to exclude at the dinner table to save face), she married my father at a London register office. Their three teenage children from previous marriages, Marie, Jack, and Lesley, all bore witness to the union of their nonconformist parents—a scandal, maybe, and certainly a far distance from the ordinary.

The sixties were just around the corner, and we swung into a new era as an unorthodox family, much like much like an alternative *Brady Bunch*, albeit without the perfect American white teeth. With hormones at both ends of the spectrum and testosterone permeating the walls of 2 Victoria Road, they blended—or rather stirred daily—two families from contrary immigrant backgrounds, made up of two (soon to be three) religions, as they prepared for a new baby.

My bet is that after a few confessions to the local priest, she took solace in the fact that Abrahams's wife, Sarah, of the Old Testament had given birth to Isaac at age ninety and was bestowed with the title "mother of nations"; by comparison, Mum was a spring chicken, and maybe her child had some significant purpose.

Between my soon-to-be father's wholehearted desire and persistence and her deep-rooted Catholic guilt, abortion was not an option, even for her. But the risks involved for both child and mother at her age were not lost on her or any of the family. She accepted her and her child's—my—fate. As she used to say, with all the lack of sensitivity of the times, "I knew you'd either have Down's syndrome, or you'd be bloody brilliant." Appalling as it sounds, I like to think that in her own way she was saying she'd have loved me no matter what.