

Mom's Parting Gift to Me

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by Karen DeBonis, AARP, February 12, 2020 | Comments: 0 by Karen DeBonis, AARP, February 12, 2020

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Janis Clark

Author Karen DeBonis shows off her mother's jeans.

I wouldn't pick through Mom's clothes until Dad was ready. She had only been gone for two weeks, after all. I'd wait to take his cue.

"Karen, do you want to go through your mother's closet and take what you want?"

He was ready.

My 87-year-old father was surprisingly at peace since his wife of 63 years had stood up from the couch one night and pitched forward, dead before she hit the floor. In the two years since Mom's heart surgery, Dad had held her hands through painful days and restless nights. Seeing her suffer had made my father vulnerable in a way he'd never experienced. Now that Mom was at peace, Dad was, too.

At 60, I experienced this first big loss, and I wasn't sure if I was at peace. I had flown in to support Dad, but it was me who needed one of his bear hugs.

Mom and I had swapped clothes often over the years. I'd never had a bevy of women friends with whom to share possessions or secrets, so I'd leaned heavily on my mother. We had leaned on each other. If either of us had an interaction with a family member that felt off, we were each other's sounding boards — we processed, we vented, and we felt better. My mother was my confidante. I called her my best girlfriend.

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I'm an introvert; Mom was an extrovert. She wondered sometimes if she had pushed me too hard to be more outgoing. "Take that off your regrets list, Mom," I'd said. "I've never felt anything but supported."

And, until a few years ago, I'd never felt anything but loved. I couldn't put my finger on what had happened in our large family, but something had changed and I felt shut out. Mom refused to discuss it. I didn't expect her to completely understand my angst — even my therapist and I struggled to get to the root of it — but I wanted her to listen. I wanted her back. I wanted what we used to have. In my head I reasoned that Mom loved me as much as always, but in my heart, I wondered. And wondering nearly broke me.

While Dad relaxed in his recliner, I went into their (into his) bedroom. Mom's walker was still in the corner, draped with the clothes she'd worn that fatal night. I fingered the coral sweater, a color and style that looked good on her and me. But, looking up at the ceiling, I said, "Not yet, Mom."

Mom had been getting an earful from me since she died. "Hey, Mom, how about putting in a good word to the big guy for me?" And, "I'm trying so hard, Mom. Please help me."

A month before she died, Mom was the strongest and most energetic she'd been in two years. But the wall between us had grown so dense that I felt like I had already lost my mother — even though she was alive and well enough on the other side. Desperate, I allowed my dam of containment to burst.

"I feel like I'm 6 years old, competing for your love," I sobbed over the phone. "And when I was 6, I didn't have to compete!"

Finally, I had broken through. Mom asked my sister and me to visit for a girls weekend, like we used to have. I booked my flight. I had planned to ask Mom a favor: to send me a sign after she died, so I'd know that she understood everything and that our bond had not broken. Then, she died.

Part of me believed that Mom did now understand. Another part of me felt abandoned. I begged for a sign anyway, beseeching the ceiling, "Please, Mom. Please?"

As I rummaged through her closet I found Mom's favorite periwinkle cardigan. “Wouldn't that look great with my eyes, Mom?” Her eyes were blue, too, and we both wore a lot of that color. Then I found a quilted vest, a workout jacket and a sweatshirt. When I came to a pair of jeans, I passed them over. Why waste my time? The fit of jeans is unique to each woman, so the odds of my mother's pair flattering my figure were slim to none. After neatly folding my stack of the clothes, I caressed the coral sweater again. “Do you want me to take it, Mom?” After a pause, I said, “OK” and added it to my pile.

That evening I thought about the jeans. The next morning they called to me, like a chocolate bar hidden in the pantry. Maybe I should check them out? This time I took the jeans off the hanger and held them up. They weren't elastic-waisted, as I'd assumed. They were dark denim, with a skinny leg. Nice stretch. My size. Why not? I tried them on and stood before the full-length mirror. They were a perfect fit. “Thanks, Mom,” I said, tears streaming down my face.

Mom had always wanted the best for me — to be happy and fulfilled and surrounded by loving family and friends. I knew in my heart that she loved me as much as ever. Her death didn't change that. If I closed my eyes and listened, I could almost make out a whisper — “Karen, I'm still your best girlfriend.”

And, Mom, I'm still yours.

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