

The Mother's Day Present I'll Never Forget

Neither time nor death has stilled this message of love from a mother to her daughter

By MARYA SAUNDERS

MY MOTHER has been dead for 10 years. But I still get a present from her every Mother's Day. Each year, I take out a small, and now quite worn, plastic record on which is written, "Mother's Day, 1950." The handwriting is my mother's. In the grooves of the record is her voice, and the message is one she sent me several months before she died. Even though my mother cannot be with me this Mother's Day, I will feel very close to her. When I play the record and hear her words in her own voice, I will suddenly be surrounded by happy memories and the rare sweet warmth and love which can only exist in a family.

I did not always feel this way. In 1950, I was a young actress newly arrived in New York from Chicago, trying to launch a career in television and the theater. At the time, Mother was seriously ill, but only my father, her doctor, and I knew how ill. I had come to New York only because she had insisted on it. We had planned on my trip, and to do otherwise would have let her know how hopelessly sick she was. When the record first came in the mail, I slipped it onto my phonograph and set the needle. As I listened, tears started to stream uncontrollably down my face. Mother's soft voice telling of her very great love for me on Mother's Day was more than I could bear. I switched the record off and cried like a small child desperately afraid of losing her mother.

A few months later I was able to go home on the pretext of getting a television job in Chicago. Mother died soon afterward. Grief-stricken, I returned to New York to work and tried to accept the fact that she was dead.

Many times in the following months, I picked up the last present my mother had sent and held it in my hands. But I could never summon the courage to play it. The fear of being hurt was too great, and I always put it away again.

In the four years that followed, I tried to block out the pain of my mother's death. The record with her message was now carefully wrapped in tissue paper and buried in an old album of records on top of my bookcase. I still had not been able to listen through to the end of it.

Then one early spring evening I was preparing to take an acting job for the summer in a stock company. A close friend came to help me pack. We had finished dinner, and he was perched on a ladder going through the bookshelves.

"What are you keeping these old records for?" he asked.



"Oh, those," I answered, trying to ignore the question, "I want them." I ran to the kitchen to start washing the dinner dishes.

A minute later, I heard him click on the phonograph. Then, quite suddenly, my mother's voice came from the other room. I heard her say, "My darling."

I grasped the dish in my hand and ran over to the phonograph. My friend had found my old Mother's Day present tucked away in an album. For an anguished moment I stood over the record ready to turn it off. But instead, I covered my face with my hands and listened. Tears welled in my eyes. My friend asked very gently, "Do you want me to turn it off?"

"No, no, I want to hear it all," I answered. Slowly the tension in my body began to fade.

My mother's voice, which I had not heard for four years, sounded fresh, alive, and so beautiful. When her message was over, I started the record again, and this time I was able to listen to it calmly.

I've played the record often since that day. It is very beautiful to me now, and each year it becomes more precious. Only two very close friends of mine have ever heard this record. Her message is one only a mother could send, and it still makes me blush. But I share it now because it shows that Mother's Day is really a day when children give themselves a present: we remind ourselves that we are loved by someone with an infinite capacity for love, someone who sees us as a person far better than we actually are. Thus we give ourselves a reason for being better. This is what my mother said:

"My Darling, this is for Mother's Day. I know you will be thinking of me in terms of our days together and, darling, I want to tell you how grateful I am to be one of those honored on this day.

"I thank God for the privilege of having contributed to the universe a beautiful soul. Thank you, my darling, for your loving thoughts, your honesty, your insight, your gentle understanding, your compassion for others, your right-mindedness and for so much beauty which lies beneath the skin.

"I have much to be grateful for, my darling. Your beauty would be a joy to all those who do not know you. But the soul which animates those features is the beauty which remains in one's mind and heart. With all my heart, I cherish you, darling, and once more thank God for the joyous glory He has sent me to merit the title of Mother. Thank you, darling. God bless you."

COVER

This mother-daughter scene, photographed by Josef Schneider, is Family Weekly's way of wishing "Happy Mother's Day" to Moms everywhere. For a heart-warming story in remembrance of this special day, see above.

**Family
Weekly**

May 14, 1961

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Address all communications about editorial features to
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

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