

LEFT BEHIND

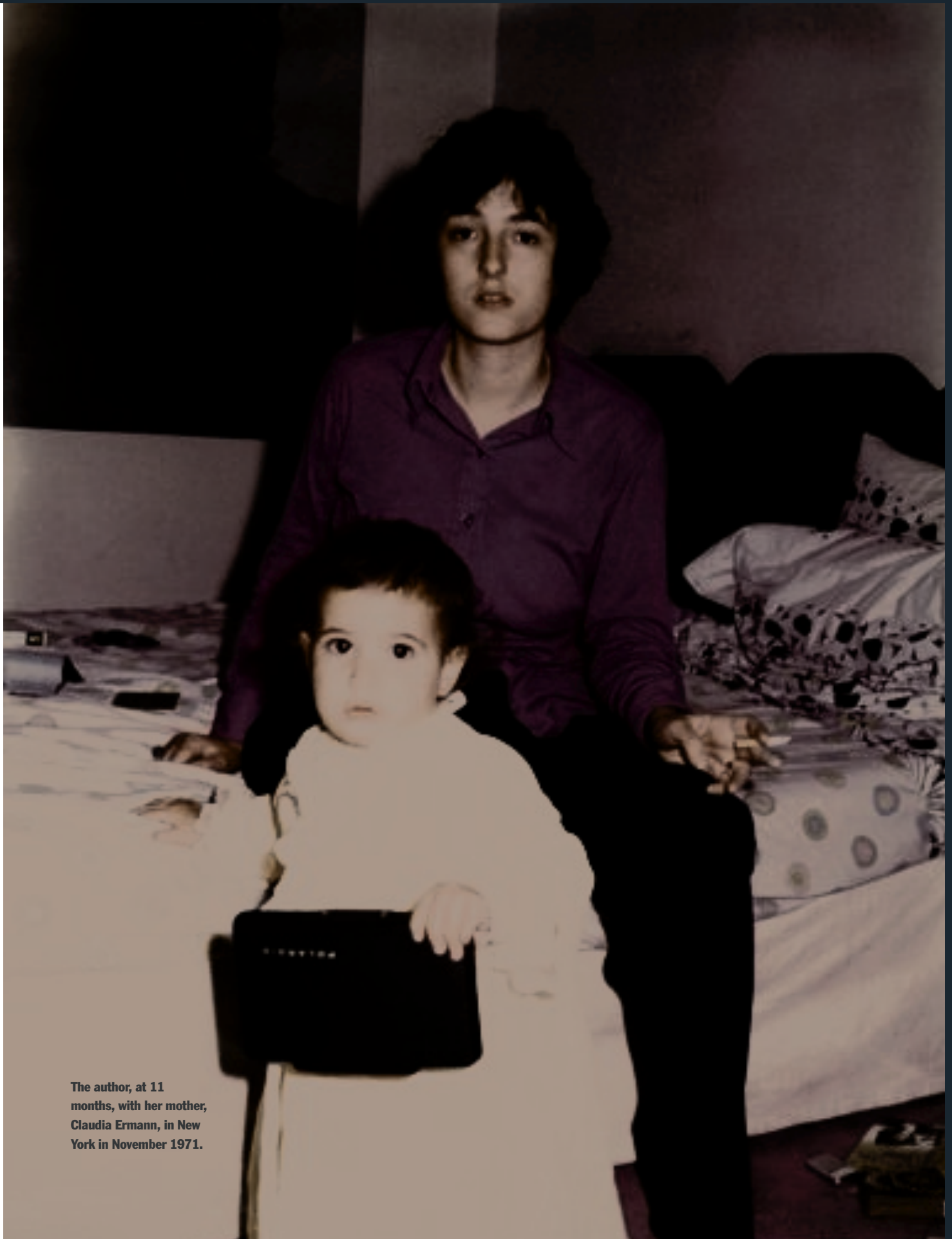
She was only 9 when the woman who'd abandoned her at birth was murdered. Now she's finally ready to seek the truth about her mother's tortured life and brutal death

By LYNN ERMANN

I IMAGINED THE KILLERS MIGHT HAVE HELD MY MOTHER UNDER THE WATER UNTIL SHE WAS DEAD, so I would try to stay at the bottom of the swimming pool for as long as I could before shooting up to the surface, choking for air. Or I'd float face down, like someone who had just been knocked over the head. Then 13, I envisioned my mother's killers as faceless and unyielding, two brawny men in white orderly uniforms who would one day murder me the way they had murdered her. Though I outgrew my morbid fantasies, I would remain haunted by my mother's mysterious death for the next two decades.

I was 9 when I first heard she had died. My father told me her body had been found in the swimming pool of the Florida mental institution where she was in treatment, that she had gone swimming on a December day in 1979 and drowned. This was the story my maternal grandmother had told him. But the story didn't make sense to me, even then. She was a good swimmer. It was one of the few things I knew about my mother, an aspiring artist who'd walked out on me when I was an infant and whom I'd seen only a handful of

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY AUTHOR



The author, at 11 months, with her mother, Claudia Ermann, in New York in November 1971.

times. The other things I knew led me to a question.

"Did she kill herself?" I asked my father.

"I don't know, Lynn timer," he said. He put his arm around me, but I couldn't cry, not then.

Later I learned from a cousin that my mother had been murdered, attacked in some way by two attendants at the mental institution. Apparently, only my grandmother knew the details, but I wasn't about to approach her. Grandma Bea couldn't even talk about my mother's life, let alone her death. So I retreated to my underwater fantasies and let the questions go unanswered.

I GREW UP TO BE A REPORTER and to write about the mysteries in the lives of strangers. The mystery in my own life remained unexamined. Then, about 10 years ago, I was at the New York City library doing research on Nexis, and I impulsively entered my mother's name in the newspaper database: Claudia Ermann. An old wire service story from 1983 popped up: "Former suburban Philadelphia doctor accused of sexually and physically abusing patients has avoided hearings by agreeing to give up his medical license." The doctor, John Rosen, "admitted that he left one patient, Gay Claudia Ermann, without proper continuing treatment . . . Ms. Ermann died after a beating inflicted on her while she was being treated by Rosen employees."

I cried, then called my father. He said he had not known the details of the killing — the abusive doctor, the brutal beating — and he was very sorry I had to find out. So was I. In my mid-

I pressed on. "Schizophrenia?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean she was schizophrenic," at least according to Grandma Bea, who died in 1989 and who had always told my father that the doctors didn't have a clue what was wrong.

I found my mother's name, again misspelled, in another book, Jeffrey Masson's *Against Therapy*. In it, I learned that after the two "therapists" held her down to get her to speak, they threw her into the swimming pool repeatedly. The last time, my mother got out barely able to breathe and had to be walked back to her room, where she died. That's where the coroner found her, not in the swimming pool. Masson also wrote that my mother had not spoken to the attendants for a year before that last day, which now struck me as proof of her sanity, given the "therapy" they were putting her through. There was so much I didn't know, but suddenly I was ready to find out.

My stepmother, Sue, was encouraging when I told her I was writing a story about my mother's death. "This is important for you," she said. My boyfriend, Jonathan, said it was the story I had been avoiding for my whole life and that I needed to face it to move on. Only my father was hesitant.

"You can't know your mother through her death," he cautioned me. He feared I would only find more questions, but never an answer to the "real question." I hated when he talked in riddles.

JOHN ROSEN WAS LONG DEAD, and so was my grandmother. The lawyers involved in the criminal and civil cases

I decided to confront my mother's killers and ask them about her final moments. I'd force the killers to speak, just as they had tried to force my mother to speak.

twenties, I wasn't ready to learn more. I was still too afraid that I might suffer my mother's fate.

It wasn't until after I'd celebrated my 32nd birthday — and finally outlived my mother, who died at 31 — that I Googled John Rosen and other key words. Immediately, I was hit with a flood of information on the founder of a faddish treatment for schizophrenics. Rosen believed in using talk therapy and confrontation to get inside his patients' delusions. More research turned up a review of a book with a chapter on Rosen, which mentioned that the mother of a Rosen patient had sued him after the death of her daughter.

I located a used copy of Edward Dolnick's *Madness on the Couch* that night. To my amazement, my mother's name was in the index, albeit misspelled: Ehrmann, Claudia, 116. It was sort of thrilling. But what I read on page 116 devastated me.

"In 1981, for example, Rosen paid \$100,000 to settle the case involving the death of a schizophrenic woman, Claudia Ehrmann, who had been under his care. According to prosecutors in the case, Ehrmann died when two of Rosen's attendants tried to force her to speak. One held her by the legs and the other punched or kned her. (Rosen was not present at the time of the death.) Ehrmann died, the autopsy noted, of 'blunt force injuries of the abdomen.'"

Afterward, I walked 30 blocks in a teary daze. What were they doing to her? Why did they want to get her to speak? Who put her in that terrible place? Was my mother schizophrenic?

I called my father. "She was diagnosed with a lot of things," my dad sighed.

couldn't remember much about a 25-year-old murder. That left the two people who had killed my mother.

Until I read the transcript of their court cases, I'd assumed they were both men. To my surprise, one was a woman. What stunned me more was that they had received probation for the crime. I thought they had gone to jail. (Rosen, who'd been out of town undergoing prostate surgery at the time of my mother's death, wasn't charged.) The woman who'd held my mother's legs down pleaded no contest to battery and got one year's probation. The man who punched my mother in the stomach was sentenced to eight years' probation after pleading guilty to manslaughter. The autopsy report said that my mother, who'd been found wearing a bloodied T-shirt, was bruised all over her face and neck. I felt furious reading the report, though my anger seemed disingenuous somehow, as if I were acting the part of the vengeful daughter.

I decided to confront both of the killers and ask them about my mother's final moments. I'd force the killers to speak, just as they had tried to force my mother to speak. As a journalist, I could approach them in a way I never could as a private person. From identity Web sites, I learned the killers were alive, each with an address history an arm long. "Like they're running from something," Jonathan observed.

Unable to find a phone number for the woman, I wrote her a letter asking for an interview and sent it to three addresses. I wasn't sure yet how to approach the man.

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Dear Lynn,

I won't be able to see you in New York, over your Christmas vacation. I'm going to Stockbridge Mass. for a rest because I've been nervous & tired.

I miss you very much and I feel bad that I can't see you. I love you very much and I'm sure we will have a good time together once I get some rest.

I'm looking forward to a letter from you.

I Love You,
Mommy

The author finger-painting in May 1973, and the last letter to the author from her mother, written in the winter of 1977.



from the waiters, she says, she earns \$60 to \$70 a night. "It's very good for me."

Katja Lopatina, meanwhile, is sprawled out on her front porch, a few blocks from the ocean. After two months on the Ocean City employment circuit, she's less chipper than her friend the salad girl. Katja got laid off from the hot dog stand after a few days, she says. The boss gave her \$100 along with her walking papers. "That was very generous," she says. From there, jobs became revolving doors. She stormed out of her job at a Chinese restaurant after the owner yelled at her. She was a hostess at a restaurant, but that was too boring, she says, and she quit. She worked as a prep cook in another restaurant, but no one in the kitchen spoke English, which she wanted to practice speaking, so she quit there, too. At last, she says, she's found the perfect job, waiting tables at a Phillips seafood restaurant.

"I consider it to be quite an achievement," she says. "Phillips is one of the best places a girl can work in this town . . . Not only am I the first Russian, I am the first foreigner [to work there]. I broke the Iron Curtain."

NADIA'S ELBOW STARTED HURTING ONE DAY at work in early July. It was nothing, she thought, and kept vacuuming. But soon her whole arm went numb, and she started crying. "I'm not going to be able to work," she remembers thinking.

Her supervisor immediately sent her to a doctor, who diagnosed tennis elbow. The hotel, which paid for the doctor's visit, put her on two weeks of light duty so she could rest her arm. This meant that she wasn't vacuuming or scrubbing toilets, just changing bedsheets and dusting. But it also meant that she had to quit the job at Dumser's Dairyland — scooping ice cream, she figured, was not a wise idea. And, with no second job, Nadia knew that her goal of saving \$3,000 for her cosmetics boutique was shot.

"I won't get that," she says. "I'll just have the money to give back to my parents and to buy some stuff." She's thinking about buying a digital camera and taking a trip to New York with Radi before heading home in early October. People keep telling her that the rest of America is a lot different from Ocean City.

Nadia was recently asked to work as a hotel receptionist, the job she'd once hoped for. There wouldn't be tips, but the hourly rate would be 50 cents higher. She would also get to practice her English more. But something had changed. Nadia no longer minded being a maid. She loved her co-workers, didn't like the thought of dealing with irate hotel guests

and decided to remain in housekeeping.

She doesn't regret her summer here. She says that it has made her more resilient and self-reliant. And she acknowledges she's been having fun. She shows pictures from another party with the Mexicans, where she's dancing with a man almost half her height. She and Radi have made friends with a few American men who live nearby. Mostly they party together. It's nothing more, says Nadia, who's committed to her boyfriend. But she says that one of her Bulgarian roommates, a 21-year-old woman, has been dating a 35-year-old American man who talks to her about getting married.

"That's not for me," Nadia says. "I don't want to live here."

Like Nadia, Radi no longer expects to leave Ocean City with a pile of cash. She also quit her job at the ice cream shop, which she simply didn't care for. She wouldn't mind picking up a new second job, but she's not too worried about it. She and a friend have been trying to earn cash by washing boats at a nearby marina. Radi has become buddies with more people at the pool, and her friends are planning to throw her a party before she leaves.

RADI AND NADIA INHALE THE AROMA OF SIZZLING PORK STRIPS, prepared Bulgarian style: salt and lots of black pepper. One of their roommates mans the grill. He sips from a can of Milwaukee's Best, clicks his tongs and flips over the meat. He's a prep cook at an Ocean City bar and can't get over how bad American food is. Nadia and Radi, who are sitting on the patio of their house in West Ocean City, launch into their own denunciations of American cuisine. After two months in Ocean City, they want nothing more than a hunk of Bulgarian cheese.

The grill master soon sets down before the women a small plate of seasoned pork, which is tender, juicy and quickly devoured. Nadia is still hungry. She reaches for a loaf of Wonder Bread, a jar of mayonnaise and an open tin of Spam that was purchased by one of her roommates. In Bulgaria, people don't eat ham from a can, but Nadia is hardly repulsed. She digs her knife into the Spam, slathers the bread with mayo and sinks her teeth into the sandwich. It is, perhaps, the worst food America has to offer — and Nadia says it's not that bad.

Tyler Currie is a Magazine contributing writer. He will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m. at washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

Left Behind

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I DUG INTO A BOX OF PHOTOGRAPHS and papers that I kept deep in the back of a closet I never used, and I found my mother's last letter to me. It was undated, but I thought it had been written sometime in 1977, before my eighth birthday. It was well-worn from frequent handling when I was a little girl. I hadn't read it in years.

Dear Lynn,

I won't be able to see you in New York, over your Christmas vacation. I'm going to Stockbridge, Mass. for a rest because I've been nervous & tired.

I miss you very much and I feel bad that I can't see you. I love you very much and I'm sure we will have a good time together once I get some rest.

I'm looking forward to a letter from you.

*I love you,
Mommy*

I felt a familiar anger welling in me. I barely knew this "Mommy," yet she wrote, "I love you very much" and "I miss you." It was all so hollow and presumptuous. My mother could not possibly have felt anything genuine for a child she hardly saw. In the same box were dozens of stupid generic greeting cards that she had sent me, always late. She had painted some of them herself. Those I liked. But she misspelled my name in most of them. "Nervous and tired" — how many times had I read those words?

I tried to focus on the parts of the letter relevant to the story: "Going up to Stockbridge, Mass. for a rest" was a reference to her going to an institution, the last one she stayed at before she was released into Rosen's care. It took about two minutes of Internet searching to find the name: the Austen Riggs Center. I called. I wanted to open her psychiatric records, but I learned I would have to jump through a number of legal hoops first. While I waited, I turned to another clue: my mother's return address in New York.

THE APARTMENT WAS STILL VIVID IN MY MIND: cats everywhere, newspapers stacked on the floor, turpentine-soaked rags, crusted dishes in the sink. I returned home after the 1977 visit with my mother and her boyfriend Eric and whined to my father that the apartment had upset me, which I regretted for years. Though I begged him not to, saying, "She won't want to see me again," my father called my mother to ask her to clean up before my next visit. I never saw her

again. Then, a year later, Eric died in a fire that he started while smoking in bed, and my mother had a breakdown. It was only when I was in my twenties that my cousin Margaret told me that my mother had been using drugs heavily throughout this period, and I began to wonder if what I had really seen in the apartment was drug paraphernalia. Or maybe it was just paint supplies.

My mother's neighbors at 219 W. 81st St. might have known her true condition in her later years better than anyone, assuming any were still around. To my surprise, they all were.

It was dusk when Don Berger took me outside to show me my mother's apartment, which was on the second floor next to his own. "They were pretty stoned out most of the time, your mother and Eric," he said.

"Yes, I heard she used drugs," I said, trying to appear unfazed.

But I hadn't heard what came next: "They used to have drag-out, knock-down fights. We could hear them through the walls. He was smaller than she was, and she would just beat the [expletive] out of him."

those two images of her for more than a decade. The Bergers told me to return another day to talk to Nina Feigin, yet another old-timer, who had been at this peculiarly mummified building since 1966.

IT WAS WHILE LOOKING FOR AN ARTICLE this year about my Grandma Bea's lawsuit against Rosen that I stumbled upon a September 3, 1981, Miami Herald story on the civil settlement that began: "Claudia Ehrmann, a tormented artist from New York City, came to Florida in 1979 to overcome her madness and ended up losing her life." The reporter, citing psychiatric reports, went on to detail a series of facts about my mother's past, all unfamiliar and horrible:

"She was sexually and physically abused as a child by her father."

"She tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of relaxants."

"She was abducted by three men in the East Bronx, raped and held captive for three days. She was later found dazed in a New York park, inexplicably carrying a piece of lead pipe and some raw meat in her purse."

now and pretty sane. Jonathan, whom I had been with for three years, had lately been hinting at a permanent future together.

It hit me that every decision in my adult life had been about distinguishing myself from my mother, which, ironically, meant that the mother who'd left me, or at least my imagined version of her, had never been far from me at all.

I RETURNED TO THE OLD APARTMENT BUILDING in a very different frame of mind. Nina Feigin, a kind-faced woman with a fringe of auburn hair, couldn't recall my mother ever having been in good shape, not even when she first moved into the building sometime around 1974. She thought maybe my mother and Eric had met in rehab. I asked Nina about the rape that I'd read about, but she shook her head. She didn't know about that.

There was one thing, however, that she had been waiting to tell me: "I remember a little girl; I knew you existed long before I saw you . . . She always talked about having a daughter."

For most of my life, I was sure I would end up nuts or murdered. It hit me that every decision I'd made had been about distinguishing myself from my mother.

What? "Did you say she beat him up?"

"Yes, we could hear it through the walls. My wife knows more," said Don, and we went upstairs to talk with Marge, a cheerful 50-something woman who papped to the door in bare feet and seated me at their kitchen table with Prim Diefenderfer, another neighbor.

Prim told me that my mother was gone by the time of the fire in the spring of '78. She was already at Austen Riggs and called from there to check on the condition of the cats.

Don recalled that my mother was a hulking woman, six feet tall, he estimated, and Eric was a skinny, short sad sack with a drug habit far worse than my mother's.

Prim volunteered that she saw my mother's paintings once, and they were "very disturbed."

"We found needles in the hall," said Marge, brightly.

I'd been right to feel uncomfortable in that apartment. Her neighbors made me think that maybe my mother wasn't crazy at all, just a druggie, and I suddenly realized that I had been vacillating between

I read that last part over three times. For a moment, I mused in a detached way: How could I write about a person whose suffering was in such an unimaginable realm? No one could relate to this. Plus the lead pipe/raw meat part was just weird. Then it all sank in, and I fell apart.

My father asked me to read it all back several times. He was as dumbfounded as I was.

Jonathan wanted to know where the "facts" came from. The story just said "according to psychiatric reports." It had to have come from Rosen. Or perhaps from the testimony of Austen Riggs therapists in the civil case? I didn't know.

What I realized when I finally stopped crying was this: For the first time in my life, I was starting to see my mother without seeing myself, and to feel her suffering without fearing for myself.

My father had always told me I had only one of my mother's characteristics — her laugh — but I didn't believe him. For most of my life, I was sure I would end up nuts or murdered. I clung childishly to feelings of damnation, so much so that my Dad would call me "doom and gloom." But I was 34

THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH OF MY MOTHER AND ME together was taken in November 1971, a month before my first birthday. My mother is holding a cigarette in one hand. She looks bloated and spacey from the psychiatric drugs. "Thorazine," my father explained when I was in my teens. Now she also looked sad to me, lost.

I flipped through all the baby pictures in my album to try to piece together a logical chronology. I am alone in the first bunch, and then suddenly my mother is there with me. Then she is gone again, then reappears, then gone. From my father, I'd learned that her postpartum unraveling occurred over the first year of my life, but he was always fuzzy on the specifics. At some point, my mother went away to a mental hospital, and I was home with my father. At another point, she was home with him, and I was with friends and Grandma Bea. Then I was back with my parents. Then my mother left us both for good.

In my twenties, I became convinced that my mother did not suffer from postpartum depression, but was just a self-absorbed bitch. My uncle inadvertently revealed that my mother had demanded that my father choose

between me and her. If he did not give me up for adoption, she would walk out on us both. When I confronted my father, he was upset that I had learned this part of the story, and he insisted that there had never been a choice at all: He couldn't be with the kind of person who would force him into such an unnatural and cruel predicament.

I DRAGGED OUT GRANDMA BEA'S BOX OF PHOTOGRAPHS and letters from the back of another closet and emptied them on the dining room table. The last time I'd looked through them was after her death 16 years before.

My grandmother had always described herself as a Park Avenue rich girl who'd run away from her controlling parents and found a great romance in Paris with my biological grandfather. With little "Claudie," who had been born somewhere along the way, they took exciting trips around the world. After my grandfather died young of a heart attack, Bea married my stepgrandfather and moved back to New York with Claudia, who'd been happily off at Swiss boarding schools.

manner and style, the closest approximation was her cousin.

Margaret, who'd grown up in suburban Long Island, was pretty in a no-fuss, outdoorsy, almost tough way, like my mother. The last time I'd seen her, maybe seven years earlier, she'd told me about my mother's drug problem. She said I could call her if I wanted to know more. I hadn't until now.

"Claudia started having problems at a very young age," Margaret told me. My mother may have been as young as 7 when she was first sent to boarding school, but she kept running away.

Margaret had never heard the claims of sexual abuse, but the question didn't shock her, either. After my grandfather died, Claudia began a pattern of falling in love with her teachers, and it was Margaret's understanding that when they didn't reciprocate her affections, Claudia would try to kill herself.

When the cousins saw each other in New York, they went riding or played games. Margaret described my mother as "fun . . . She wasn't wacky or anything." But she had never actually seen my mother when she was

"I had just come back from the men's room, not very romantic," my father recalled, "and I saw your mother sitting on that bench over there, and I asked her if she wanted to get a cigarette outside."

"Why did you approach her?"

"She looked attractive and intelligent. And she was just starting a break."

My mother was 17, my father 19. Within weeks, they were serious. Dad had always told me it was a needy relationship based on a common hatred of their parents and insecurity about themselves, that they lived an insular life and did little socializing. I had heard that sound bite many times. That couldn't be all there was.

"But what did you like about her? Why did you fall in love?"

He offered generic descriptions of who she was when they met: shy, smart, sweet, nice. It had been a long time. The best my Dad could offer was that they shared a love of painting. Unlike him, my mother had little formal art training, so Dad tried to teach her everything he knew. They often went to museums together. She learned quickly but

"Claudia started having problems at a very young age," a cousin told me. She kept running away from the Swiss boarding schools where she'd been sent since age 7.

The few photographs my grandmother had left me confirmed the fairy tale: adoring parents with a smiling child. As a little girl, my mother showed no outward signs of anxiety or fear.

"Everyone looks happy in pictures," said my father dismissively, obviously forgetting how my mother had appeared in my own baby pictures. He repeated the few Dickensian facts he had told me before about her childhood: She was miserable at the boarding schools, where they called her "clodhopper" because she had to wear orthopedic shoes; she had some kind of a breakdown after her father died at age 13; she was coached by Bea to pretend to be my grandmother's sister, so that Bea could appear younger and find a new husband. That's all my mother had told him. To learn more, Dad suggested I talk to my mother's first cousin.

MARGARET WAS BORN IN 1948, the same year as my mother. Bea and my great-aunt, my grandmother's sister-in-law, had even shared the same doctor. My father had told me once that if I wanted to get a sense of what my mother was like in

ill. She always saw her before or after hospitalizations, and my mother was always perfectly composed then, Margaret said.

Margaret wondered why I wasn't interviewing my father, the man who'd been married to my mother for four years. "What did you think of their relationship?" I asked her.

"They seemed really happy and really in love," she said, adding that it might have been the most normal relationship my mother ever had. Then I was born.

After I got off the phone with Margaret, I wrote out my mother's name. Claudia Ermann. Even after the divorce was finalized, my mother continued to use her married name. She used it until her death.

MY FATHER IS 59 NOW and has been happily married to my stepmom for 21 years. It was with some reluctance that he agreed to return with me to the place he first met my mother in 1965: the Art Students League in Manhattan. Forty years later, as we sat together in the league's lobby, the site of their first encounter looked virtually unchanged, Dad said.

was insecure about her intelligence because she had struggled academically.

My parents rented a studio on East Houston Street where they planned to paint every day, but no sooner had they fixed it up when the draft notice came in June 1966. They married two months later when my father was on leave. To their relief, he was shipped to Brooklyn instead of Saigon. They left the painting studio behind and moved into a rowhouse in Bensonhurst near the base.

He got out of the Army in 1968 and returned to low-paying office jobs while continuing to paint. My mother was also working odd jobs, and painting constantly. And they were happy, he said, for a while.

In 1970, she got pregnant. I wasn't planned, my father said, but they were excited, especially Claudia, who was determined to be the best mother possible. She quit smoking, ate a lot of yogurt and took Lamaze classes. Dad blames the "stupid" Lamaze instructors for Claudia's first bout of anxiety about motherhood: "They kept saying, 'If you don't do it this way, you don't bond; mother-daughter bonds don't form,'

and all this crap.” My mother was also irrationally insecure about my father’s decision to go back to college on the GI Bill that fall, fearing she would be “intellectually left out.”

He hesitated. “So Claudia got frightened, and she wanted to get an abortion.”

This I had not heard before. “And?”

“We talked it over. She talked about it with a therapist . . .” She made her decision. “She wanted to have you.”

I was born on December 3, 1970. After my parents brought me home from the hospital, my mother sank into a postpartum depression. For a year, they tried medications, therapy, hospitalizations. Nothing worked.

“And the postpartum, it got worse?”

“It just didn’t stop. There was no difference between Day One and Day 50.”

I wanted specifics. My Dad pressed a forefinger to his temple as if trying to push the memory forward.

“I only remember that, at one point, it came out somehow that Claudia was afraid to hold you. She was afraid she would drop you. I remember her saying, ‘I can’t hold the baby.’ So we made a project out of just helping her hold you. I showed her and tried to give you to her, and she just let her arms fall limp at her sides . . .” He let his arms fall, and his mouth turned down in an expression of deep, bottomless despair.

BAD MOTHERING CAUSED SCHIZOPHRENIA, according to John Rosen. The patient who heard voices, he said, was actually hearing versions of the same critical messages that the patient once heard from his or her cold, unfeeling mother: “Be still. Be quiet. Be dead.” Rosen would have to return patients to an infantile state and “raise” them again himself if they were to be cured.

First, though, he would have to enter their delusions and deconstruct them. If a patient was convinced he was being followed by the FBI, Rosen acted the part of the FBI agent and would argue with him. If a patient was sure the pillow she was clinging to was a baby, he threw it on the floor. He also shook patients and pinned them to the floor to snap them out of their delusions. When he was “raising” them, he often held them like infants. I could see where this all got murky. The “therapy” could lead to physical or sexual abuse, both of which Rosen was accused of later.

Though there was no evidence that Rosen’s method worked, the only other options available at the time to treat schizophrenia were electroshock therapy and institutionalization. Rosen promised parents he could cure their children without frying their brains. And a lot of people believed in him. According to the Miami Herald, Rosen had a client list that included Anne Morrow Lindbergh, a Rockefeller and Walter Annenberg’s son, who committed suicide while in Rosen’s care in 1962.

AN EMPTY LOT WAS ALL THAT WAS LEFT of the house in Boca Raton, Fla., where Rosen had once treated patients. The comfortable ranch house had been razed, and a dentist’s office was to be built in its place. I walked up and down the block, but



Above, Grandma Bea, 3-year-old Claudia and the author’s grandfather. Right, the author at age 2.



had no luck with the neighbors this time.

Forty minutes away from the site of my mother’s murder was the hotel where my grandmother once kept an apartment in the winter months. The hotel dining room looked the same. I had forgotten that it faced the pool, where I’d once spent the better part of every day when I was visiting Grandma Bea. I walked to the edge. Just as I recalled, there was a little window in the deep end that looked out on the parking lot. I went back to the hotel dining room to wait for Grandma’s friend Eileen and my great-aunt, who both arrived looking sleek and manicured.

“You’re so pretty; you look just like your mother,” said Eileen, who hadn’t seen me in years.

As soon as we sat down, I pulled out the tape recorder. “Ah, I see you’re all ready,” said my great-aunt, wryly.

No one in the family knew what had happened exactly; they’d just heard that my mother’s body had been found in the swimming pool. My aunt recalled that my stepgrandfather was “terribly upset” and spent months trying to find out the truth about my mother’s death.

How did Grandma react? I asked.

“She fell apart, or that’s what I heard,” said Eileen. “I just know that after it happened, all Bea talked about was taking care of you.”

I looked through the sliding doors. From our table, I could see the deck chairs where Grandma Bea would sit and watch me swim for hours. “You’re a fish,” she’d say, smiling, when I finally emerged from the pool. Then she’d wrap me tightly in an enormous towel, one of the few times she would ever embrace me, and we’d go inside for lunch.

ROSEN WAS A STERN, patriarchal presence, white-haired, firm-jawed, sure of everything, especially himself. After his insurance company paid the \$100,000 to my grandparents to settle their lawsuit, he shrugged it off. “It’s not costing me a thing,” he told the papers. Rosen returned to Pennsylvania. In 1982, the state medical license board charged him with the repeated shackling, beating, sexual molestation and neglect of his patients over a 20-year span. In 1983, at age 80,

Rosen lost his medical license.

Rosen’s aides were often former patients or young people who were just starting out and in need of direction. He armed them with abusive methods and set them loose on the most severely ill and out-of-control patients, a disastrous combination. Former aides described him as being alternately charismatic and terrifying.

Thus the monster who had held my mother’s legs down during the beating was a 22-year-old psychology student from New York. She testified that the other therapist never meant to kill my mother, though she did tell him that he was applying too much pressure to my mother’s stomach with his knee, and asked him to stop.

Two of the letters I’d sent the woman were returned to me, unopened. I didn’t

know what happened to the third. After much searching, I found a post office box for the man. I wrote him a short letter that gave him the option of laying the blame for mother's death entirely on Rosen. I promised never to bother him again if he did not respond. I told him I would not even use his name in the story. He could trust me.

After dropping the letter into the mailbox, I had a dream that my mother was standing by a pool, naked and bruised with a bag taped around her head. Then someone I couldn't see shoved her in.

THE AUSTEN RIGGS CENTER CLINIC is a stately brick structure, white with cheerful green shutters, set on a cleanly mowed swath of grass along Main Street in Stockbridge. Patients live in residences on the premises but come and go as they please, an open environment that surprised me when I arrived after finally winning permission to view my mother's psychiatric records.

"It will be tough reading," said the archivist, handing me a three-inch-thick book that included a decade's worth of

encounters with pimps and drug addicts.

I was totally thrown. She seemed as familiar to me as the crazy lady in the park. I actually felt furious at her for returning to me this way, in such lousy shape, after all those years. I then started to remember a visit from her when I was 6 years old.

My mother appeared suddenly in the spring of 1977 and spent a few hours with me before disappearing again. At the time, my Dad and I were living in Charlottesville, where he was attending graduate school. I have only the faintest memory of the reunion: My mother gave me a plastic horse and a Caran D'ache paint set. We went swimming in a lake together. She was a good swimmer, just like me, which pleased me.

The day after my mother left Virginia, I put my head down on my desk and cried, but all the while I was thinking, "This is what I'm supposed to do." Inside, I felt empty. I told my father, and he said I had cried because "it didn't make any sense."

Now, in these psychiatric files, I was meeting my mother again, and it still didn't make any sense.

treatments. She had been through hell. So had my grandmother.

According to the file, Bea met privately with the therapist and in cold, clinical language revealed that my grandfather had beaten her on a regular basis. She told the therapist that she was disclosing this only to provide information for Claudia's therapy and to illustrate the general stress in the household. Bea was insecure about her ability to be a mother, obsessively reading child-rearing books and practicing them to the letter, eerily similar to my mother's anxieties with me. She felt that she could never connect with Claudia.

Then I came to this: "The patient brought in a letter which she has written to her daughter explaining why she cannot be with her at Christmas." My mother told Story about "her continuing feelings of guilt and shame over the postpartum depression and feeling that she at one time wanted to disown the daughter by putting her up for adoption or aborting her . . . She cannot get it out of her head that Lynn is an innocent, and never asked to be born,

The man had a soft voice that cracked as he gave his name and phone number and said, "Call me." By the end of the message, the man who had killed my mother was crying.

details from Riggs and the hospitals that came before. I sat down and plunged in.

"Ms. Ermann arrived punctually for the consultation, accompanied by her mother," the session notes from November 1977 began, "and together they were a striking contrast. Dressed in a heavy winter coat, a big, dark, tall somewhat awkward woman, older than her years, not-too-well coordinated and looking on the edge of being disheveled in a Bohemian way, Ms. Ermann looked not at all related to the mother, a tall blonde, Manhattan matron in her late fifties, I would imagine, elegantly dressed and coiffed and looking every inch the rich New Yorker accustomed to riding in limousines."

The first thing out of my mother's mouth was an obscenity-laced, graphic summary of being raped the previous year in the Bronx. She went on to detail her difficult life in a loud, self-consciously world-weary manner, as if she had told it many times to many therapists and knew exactly where to pause for maximum shock value. Interspersed with the apparent traumas were colorful descriptions of her past sexual

"Could my mother have made any of this stuff up?" I asked Austen Riggs psychologist M. Gerard Fromm as we sat in his light-filled office with its comforting palette of rust and forest green. Fromm, who had just started at Riggs when my mother was a patient, had read the file at my request. He explained my mother's diagnosis: schizoaffective disorder. He said it could be characterized by a thought disorder, an "inability to think straight." Maybe, I thought, she wasn't the best chronicler of her own life?

As the 1977 sessions progressed, her psychologist, appropriately named Ian Story, would note that my mother's colorful presentation was a screen for a deep sadness. "She comes close to crying, but has indicated that she has great trouble with tears." But she did cry.

As I read on, I cried with her. She described the rape, which had happened in December 1976. The missing days were a complete blank at first, which had terrified her. Her mental condition subsequently deteriorated rapidly until she was incontinent and catatonic and had to be admitted to a hospital, where she underwent electroshock

and she has always hoped that she could have a future together with Lynn."

I couldn't believe I was reading those words.

Deeper in the file, I discovered the records from Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, where she'd voluntarily admitted herself 10 days after I was born. She'd begged to be taken to the hospital. She was clutching me so tightly that I had to be pried away. She spent the next two months at Mount Sinai while I stayed with my father. When she returned, she was unable to bond with me at all.

It took her several years before she felt ready to see me again. Of the first hours we spent together at the Virginia lake when I was 6, my mother recalled that she was "pleased and surprised" that I was such a "happy and well-adjusted little girl." She told the doctor that she had been afraid something in herself might come out in me.

My mother began to talk to the therapist about dreams she was having. Her father would appear, and she told him he had to leave her or she could not be a good mother to her own daughter. She told the doctor that she had loved her father dearly,

despite what he had done to her.

There was another revelation. My mother did not cut off contact with me after our last visit because I said her apartment was messy: "The patient thinks that the reason the visit did not go very well was that [name whited out but obviously Eric] became seductive and flirtatious with the 7-year-old girl, and this made the patient angry and anxious." She went on to say that I was also being flirtatious with him, which was absurd. But then my mother revealed her true feelings: She could not see me without seeing herself as a little girl. She said she was 7 when her father began to sexually abuse her. She and her mother would always be competing for her father's attention, which made it impossible for the two women to develop a close bond.

Of course, she made my father choose.

The doctor from Mount Sinai had described my mother raging at my father and me in a totally deluded and paranoid state. Perhaps, I thought, she had to leave because she was so threatened by me that she feared she would harm me.

Fromm's conclusion after reading the entire file was this: "Your mother saved your life when she gave you to your father."

In April 1978, Ian Story went on vacation for two weeks, and my mother could not handle the separation. She had a breakdown. A few days after the therapist's return, she learned that Eric had died. She talked about feeling that she was "bad" and perverse. At one point she said, "I am dead." She started a pattern of falling asleep in bed while smoking, mirroring Eric's death. Eventually, she again became incontinent and catatonic, beyond the capacity of Austen Riggs, which was unequipped to handle severely psychotic patients. Story checked her into a nearby facility, where he continued to treat her, intending to return her to Riggs once her condition improved. But my desperate grandparents decided to pull her out of Austen Riggs and put her in the care of John Rosen.

THE CALL CAME AT 8:07 A.M., and I lazily let it go to voice mail.

I played it back, and stood frozen. "What is it?" asked Jonathan, to whom I was now engaged.

I couldn't speak. I played it for Jonathan. "Oh my God," he said.

The man had a soft voice, and it cracked as he gave his name and phone number and said, "Call me." By the end of the message, the man who had killed my mother was crying.

"It must have been difficult for him to

call me," I said to Jonathan, who agreed.

When I called the man back, our conversation was brief. He agreed to be recorded on tape, and I agreed, as I promised in the letter, not to publish his name. "What I want to tell you," he began, "is that what happened wasn't Rosen's fault. It was mine . . . It was my fault." He thought about my mother often, he said, and I believed him.

He explained how he had come to work for Rosen. He'd been a drifter and a sometime musician. Rosen had taken him under his wing and trained him as a therapist. With Rosen's encouragement, he had gone back to college and gotten a psychology degree, all while working for his mentor.

I'd wondered in my letter if he was just a kid at the time of my mother's death, like the other attendant. But he wanted to tell me that he wasn't. He was 31. My mother's death, he said, had nothing to do with Rosen, who was out of town. He'd been entirely too aggressive with my mother, whom he hastened to add was in no way violent but was weak and emaciated.


They were doing some kind of reenactment where he was holding her down and trying to get her to talk about her own mother, who he believed had hurt her deeply. I didn't ask him about the bruises, or the swimming pool. I wanted to see what he would say. Instead he launched into a spirited defense of Rosen, whom he still worshipped as a healer of schizophrenics.

Listening to him, I didn't feel angry, just sad. For, in the end, Rosen had hung him out to dry. He finally stopped and said: "You have an agenda. Ask me questions!"

I didn't want to. I had as much truth as I was ever going to get. I felt like all the anger in me — I hadn't even known it was there — had dissipated as my mother's life came into focus. It had been such a sad, long death march, with such little relief.

I'd had a completely different life. I was getting married to a man I loved and who loved me. I finally understood that my mother wanted me to be the happy, healthy girl who had so delighted her when we swam together when I was 6. She would not have wanted me to cling to her dysfunctions, to the suffering and pain of her life, or to her death. I knew that much about my mother now. I knew that she had, in the only way she could, been a mother to me.

The man who had killed her was waiting for me to confront him.

So I said: "I forgive you." 

Lynn Ermann is a writer living in New York.



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