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Adventures of My Teenage Mother, by Pamela Gwyn Kripke

Editor's Note: Pamela Gwyn Kripke has been a journalist for 25 years. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, Elle and Redbook, among others. She is a contributing editor at D Magazine in Dallas. A native New Yorker, Ms. Kripke holds a BA in English from Brown University and a Master's in Journalism from Northwestern University. She lives in Dallas with her two daughters, ages 12 and 13. [Click here to visit Pamela's blog.](#)

OK, she is not exactly a teenager. She is 73. That is a ridiculous age for my mother, not that age really means anything important, unless you are talking about ovaries or teeth. Or electronics. Small appliances can date a person ... the turntable, the eight-track, push-button or rotary.

Anyway, my mother has lost not a step in spirit or zip since she birthed me, going back to school to get her Master's, flinging plates across the kitchen for effect, belly dancing in the basement with a crew of like-minded "women's libbers," in genie pants and vests, coins shimmying on their hips. I have come to call my mother "The Matriarch" since my father died 16 years ago. That is also an insane number. I should say that I do not quantify life anymore than the next Type A+ gal who quantifies life, but numbers make you think. They make you log the journey, assess the growth, or see it missing. Forty-one years since my first piano recital, 27 since throwing the mortarboard to the air, 13 and 12 since my babies were born, eight since the then-husband moved out.

Sixteen, yes, crazily, without Dad. For the daughter, it is a certain story. For the wife, it is something different, from the experience of the child, from that of another woman. For The Matriarch, widowhood has crystallized the path of the sheltered only child who married young (in crinolines, Sassoon cut and precisely lined lids), learned a thing or 900 about tolerance and good will along the way and emerged with a philosophy that makes Oprah look listless. The best part, while worldly and wise, she is still the boys' Lindy partner of choice. Still the best dressed. Still flinging the plates.

It is clear and terrific and inspiring now to understand this, but it didn't start out that way. She began to date men, men who were not my meticulous surgeon father, soon after. Too soon after, for me, not that I was entitled to judge. I couldn't listen to it. I changed the subject, to anything – lentils, even. But my mother persisted, needing me to participate, somehow, in the uncharted earth at her feet. Despite my own loss, I agreed to help her with hers. The party girl was doing what she knew how to do to feel OK. I would have taken jazz classes or written into the night. She went out with boys.

Marty was the first one I met. "You have to come," my mother had said on the phone. "I am

going to make the orange chicken. Do you think I should make the orange chicken?"

Marty had a printing business and a love for opera, Italian only, and Frank, as in Sinatra. Oh, he liked Liza, too, and saw her perform in "Vegas." Mom never used to say "Vegas" without the "Las." Marty told off-color war stories and had fungus under his fingernails and we didn't know, exactly, what he printed. I claimed he was in the Mafia. The truth was, I hated the orange chicken.

My Mother the Widow wore a cat suit. At least it was black. It wasn't as if she forgot that she was married for nearly 40 years; she was just not the mourning type, I guess.

It is a backwards view, observing one's parent this way, particularly as my own daughters approach dating age. Witness to two ends of the spectrum – boy-happy Grandma and Mom, whose suitors include Chris Matthews and Brian Williams – they would do well to wind up peacefully somewhere in between.

My mother whirled around the kitchen island that night, preparing side dishes and dessert, bracelets clanking, beautiful and dynamic. Though disturbing for me, it was part of the process. She would be no third wheel. He would have to like the theater. I already had a dad.

Since then, I have consumed many a Cobb salad with my mother's companions. I have met boys with assorted coastal residences, boys hoping for romance and a little ice cream, maybe. Stunning Swedish boys who sell saunas but, well, sell saunas. And I have met some smart, accomplished and considerate fellows giddy to be on the planet with my mom. One came to the hospital when my girls were born, even saw them walk for the first time. We still visit when we can.

Last year, The Matriarch flew to Austria, via the Netherlands, with her current beau. She trained to Bulgaria, then Romania, returning a month later. I told her to say "no" if Richard wanted to hike a mountain, to stay on well-lit streets and to pack fleece accessories. She said that he had given her earmuffs – mink – so much better.

The flight number I had for the return trip was incorrect, so I spent an hour tracking down her whereabouts on the Internet.

"If the plane crashes, you will see it on TV," my sister-in-law reassured me. That is a helpful approach, I thought, my brain flashing on the image of wrecked fuselage and snowy tundra. And then, on something moving in the distance, coming toward the camera. Mom, The Survivor, shaken, but muffs intact.

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