

My boss taught me to stop trying to impress everyone.

BY MEREDITH MARAN

"CAN I SEE YOU for a moment, Meredith?" asked my boss, a man I'll call John. He guided me out of the conference room where a few dozen employees milled around, waiting for a meeting to start, and into his corner office. He closed the door, thereby triggering a heart-thumping Pavlovian response prompted by childhood memories of visits to the principal's office.

What have I done? I wondered frantically. I loved my job at John's green retailing firm. And I adored working for John, a Buddhist known for the spare, surprising pearls of wisdom he dropped on the company's forklift drivers and executives alike.

John gazed at me—pityingly, I thought. Finally, he spoke. "You know, you don't have to work so hard," he said. I stared at him uncomprehendingly. Was he reducing my hours? Laying me off? "When I see you in a group," he added, "you work so hard at impressing people." He paused as if awaiting my flash of enlightenment.

Speechlessly I reviewed my behavior over the past half hour. I saw myself in the conference room, being my usual New York, type A, extrovert self, flitting around, bubbling at one coworker, then the next and the next. I bristled. That's not me trying to curry favor, I thought angrily. That's me being me.

"You have so much to offer," John said. "Why don't you try sitting still and letting other people come to you? That way, they can discover the real, wonderful person you are for themselves." Relief washed over me. My boss wasn't firing me. In fact, he was complimenting me. Well, sort of, anyway. And as I thought about it, I realized he was right.

My effervescence—the quality for which I was loved and admired (or so I believed)—wasn't born only of good cheer and a friendly disposition. It was also sparked by my insecurity. Under the guise of connecting with people, I was actually beating them to the conversational punch, setting the terms of engagement, controlling how much of me I let them see.

John stood up and offered me his hand. I let him pull me out of my chair. I followed him back to the conference room, face flushed, mouth shut. Years later, I don't recall much about that meeting, but I've never forgotten John's advice.

Nowadays I wait for people to come to me. At parties and meetings, I am friendly but stationary. After a lifetime of believing I had to convince people I was worth listening to, it's not easy to do. But ever since that day, I have tried to remember that I don't have to beg for people's attention, which has made me a more contented person. Buddha-like, even.

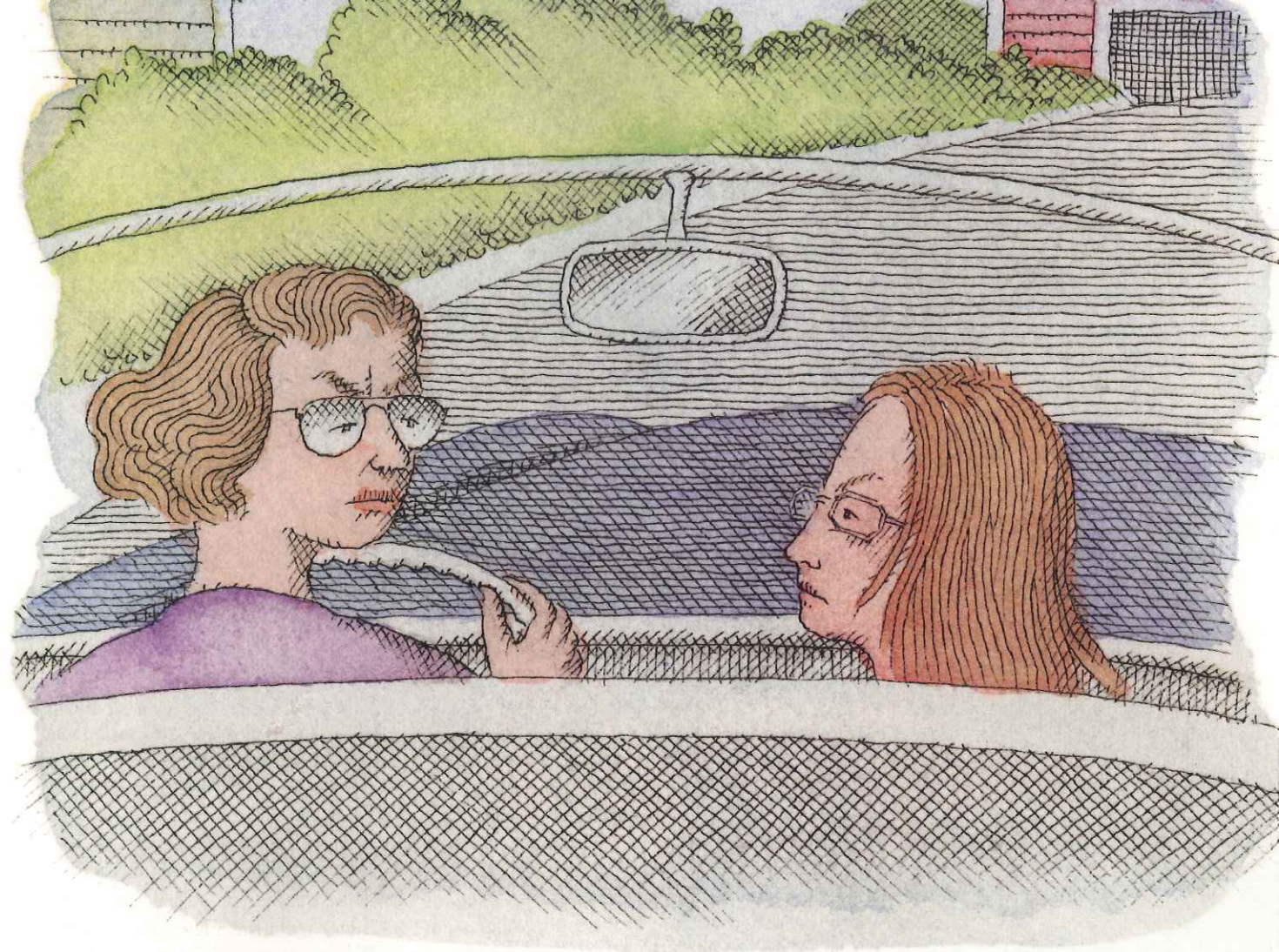
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My mother told me she hated me.

BY MARION WINIK

WHEN I WAS a girl, I fought bitterly with my mom and often said terrible things to her. I am sure I told her I hated her on several occasions, but after one of them, provoked beyond belief, she said she hated me, too. The conversation—who knows how it started?—occurred in her blue LeMans convertible, in the driveway of our suburban New Jersey home, after my orthodontist appointment. She had smooth, salon-styled hair and green-lensed Ray-Bans. I sported octagonal wire-frames, chubby thighs, and messy everything. And both of us were in a fire-breathing fury.

It was perfectly understandable that I hated her. I was in the seventh grade, and there is no better time for mom-loathing than that. But she hated me back? Were mothers allowed to say that? Were they allowed to feel that? Was it true—even in part? The danger of putting certain things into words is that they never go away. They cannot be unsaid. I already believed I was unlovable, and now I had new evidence to stew over.



What kind of vile creature is hated by her own mother?

"Oh for God's sake, Marion," I picture my mother saying, with a heavy sigh, "still with the melodrama?"

She wouldn't remember that this event happened, and she might even claim that it never did. But look: My mother's words on any topic had terrible power over me. No matter how much I disagreed with them, how fast I flew to the opposing camp, how vigorously I discredited her values, her pronouncements and commandments felt inescapable.

Of course, in the end I realized what I had always known: She did not hate me. In fact, her love for me and my sister was the most important thing in her life. From her example, I learned to be direct, and I'm grateful for that. But I'm also more gentle, because I learned from her mistakes—like this one.

Adolescence ended, and my conflict with my mom ended, too, though the last embers didn't die out until years later, when I

started having children of my own: initially, a pair of boys, who are now 24 and 22. I will not say their adolescence was simple, but it did not involve the kind of code-red engagement that can happen between mothers and daughters. And my mother—or "Nana"—was there to help: baking lemon bars, treating the boys like princes. One day she even stopped criticizing me altogether. And that was a very good thing. "Helpful criticism" from one's mother is an oxymoron.

I hadn't thought of that awful conversation in the LeMans much until recently. These days I am raising a dear, beautiful, and funny 11-year-old girl who sometimes says terrible things to me. Occasionally, in the heat of her hormonal mini-diva rage, she says she hates me.

Guess what I never say and never will.

Marion Winik is the author of First Comes Love and Above Us Only Sky. She lives in Baltimore.