



UP
front

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The women on the front cover are sisters. Five siblings from a group of 13. The second one from the left as you're looking at the photo is my mother.

To the left of her is her twin. Jackie and Gerri (my mom) were the babies of the baker's dozen. The eldest female, Madeline, is to my mother's left (your right).

This photograph captures the essence of an America that has mostly disappeared. A celebration of the notion of the American dream. Pretty, bashful Sunday dresses, closed-toe shoes in the freshly cut grass of a proud middle-class lawn, the unavoidable reminder of progress – a utility pole laden with wires - vying for attention with my mom's head.

There's a modern instinct to dismiss such imagery as naively reactionary. Some people nowadays see the sameness of the subjects, their lack of angst, their mix of aspiration and acceptance, as quaint and unsympathetic, or sinister if the viewer is projecting his own self-loathing on a world that has somehow done him wrong. But, if it's true that a picture paints a thousand words, there are thousands more it leaves unsaid.

My mother, who turns 90 in a few days, didn't smoothly arrive in an idyllic suburban scene without friction along the pathway there. Of the 13 siblings, three died before reaching adulthood. Five girls and five boys eventually became women and men. My mother lived in an orphanage; her mother died when Mom was three or four. Caring for so many kids was beyond the scope of possibilities for the grandfather who perished decades before I was born. Neither money nor quality healthcare were readily available; hence the 26 percent childhood mortality rate among the brood.

We overuse the word, but I'm convinced it fits here. These women were heroes in their own unspectacular ways. Absent the opportunity to learn by example, they figured out how to be moms. Each of the five raised children who have gone on to full, beautiful lives. Madeline, Betty, and Jackie have passed away. My mother and indestructible Joan (they pronounce it "Jo-anne") remain.

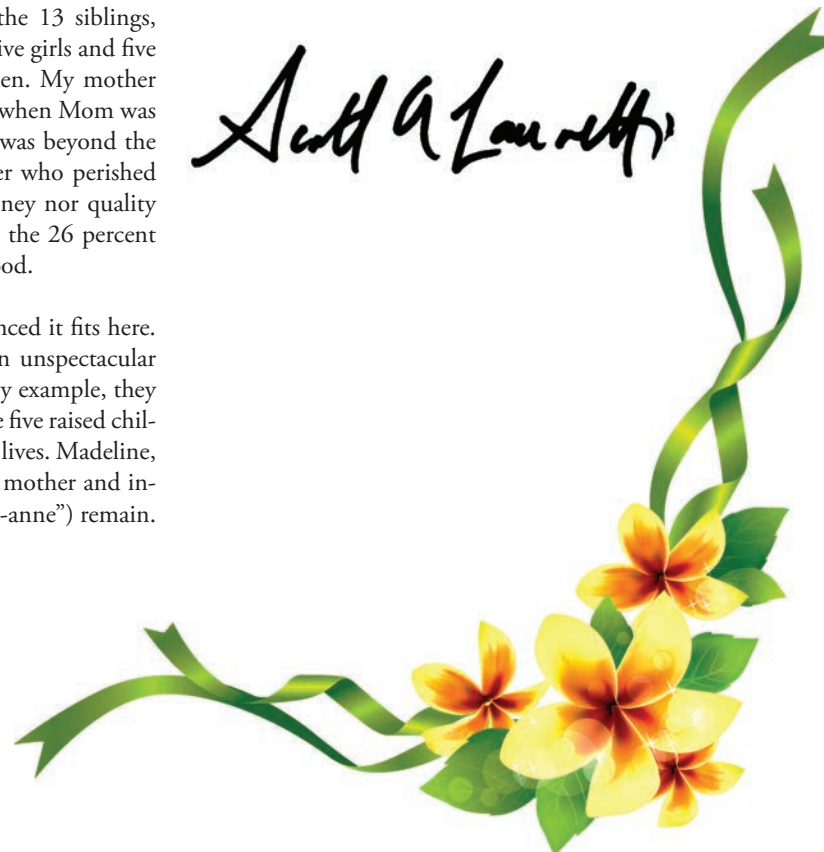
Take another glance at my younger mom. I think she looks like a movie star. She was the good-looking mom and, somehow, that seemed cool to me. But she was also the most single-mindedly dedicated mother I have ever observed – a distinction completely attributable to her spirit and heart rather than genetic serendipity.

I appreciate the irrepressible evolution of the world to its fascinating current state. As a species, we relentlessly pursue what's next and doing so is generally a good thing. Yet, part of me is unapologetically nostalgic for a time when my mother wasn't constantly in pain. When she was often smiling and sometimes glamorous and always moving so fast as to create a colorful blur. A time when she could stand straight and tall and triumphant, arm-in-arm-in-arm with her sisters beneath a clear blue sky.

You probably feel this way about your mom, too. Tell her this weekend, even if it's only in your prayers.

Happy birthday, Mom. Ninety is quite a ride.

Scott A. Laurer



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