

*Originally published May 11, 2008*

# Thanks, Mom, for all the letters

By SUSAN AGER

Free Press columnist

*Reader comments: "It struck a place in my heart," said Carrie Brown of Gibraltar.*

Mothers, write to your children.

Children, hold onto your mother's words.

Print out e-mails and save them in a box. If you have scrawled Post-it notes stuck to your lunch bags, tuck them in a drawer.

Someday they will bring your mother back to life.

From a cardboard box I've labeled "LETTERS FROM MOM," I pull one at random. It is dated January 5, 1972, my freshman year in college.

"Got your unexpected letter today. You sounded lonesome but I know that by now you aren't. The whole 42,000 kids should be back by now, including your roommates.

"This letter will be short for nothing much is new since Sunday. I got you some more stamps. Have you ever figured out how many stamps you use a week? I also sent your tweezers ..."

When I left for MSU at 17, my mother wrote to me almost every day. My dorm was just 76 miles from our home in Dearborn Heights, but we saw each other only during school breaks. And back then long-distance phone calls were - or seemed - expensive and extravagant, exclusively for emergencies.

I am lucky for that now. If phone calls were cheap or we were affluent, she might not have written.

## **'Hi, Doll!'**

She wrote at the kitchen table, on typing paper she folded in half to make four pages. She wrote late at night sometimes, or very early in the morning, before anyone else was up. Later, when she got a job at Michigan Bell, she wrote during her lunch break, from a couch in the ladies' lounge.

Still later, she pounded out letters on her old Smith-Corona manual typewriter.

She wrote as routinely as she watered her plants. Almost always she began each letter with the nickname she gave me as a baby.

"Hi, Doll! While I'm waiting to get supper going, thought I'd write you a little. Heard you got your rocker. How does it look? Did you switch your desks around yet? Are you unpacked yet? Hope you are feeling better ... I wanted to go shopping this week for a coat but I haven't gone yet. Maybe tomorrow. I kind of liked that navy blue coat at Jacobson's but I'll go to Westland and look around there."

A few weeks ago, for the first time since she died in 2001, I opened the box in the basement and sorted the letters, throwing away most of the envelopes, unfolding them, organizing them by date and clipping each year together.

Then I read them, 207 letters, in the order she wrote them. Over four days, I settled in with her beautiful, Catholic-school handwriting.

I thought I would cry, but I didn't. I smiled. I nodded. I laughed out loud. I relaxed as if in a warm bath.

"Hope you've been taking care to get enough sleep - sleep is better than any beauty creams you can put on. A profound statement by your mother. (I don't get enough sleep either.)"

### **Daily letters of daily life**

These letters do not throb with profound advice or poetic insight. Instead, I hear the quiet heartbeat of my family's daily life on Kennedy Drive.

She writes about the weather. She writes about the grammas, a difficult pair. She writes about my two younger brothers, their grades in school, their first jobs and first dates, their pride in their big sister. She describes everything she buys for herself or the house, always noting how expensive things have become. Imagine, gas 45 cents a gallon.

What surprises me most is how often she concedes she is "down in the dumps," especially as my brothers grow up and need her less.

Did I call or write to cheer her up? I doubt it. In our youth we think only of ourselves and the planets that circle around our own brightness.

She wrote when I got a new job at MSU's student newspaper: "Dad tells us you are now an Administrative Reporter. That sounds real interesting and important. You'll probably rub elbows now with a lot of important people. You'll like that - a lot of 'luncheons,' probably, and maybe even 'teas' and gee, maybe 'cocktail parties.' I don't know how you're going to fit in some schooling. Does it pay any more?"

And when I won a summer internship at a big city daily, she wrote to me at 7:45 a.m.: "Hi Doll - I was just thinking you're still asleep and haven't started your big 'first day at the Chicago Tribune.' I hope you wake up to a beautiful day and I hope it ends that way for you also. I know it will. Our weather here is blah!"

She kept track of my many boyfriends, never confusing an old one for the current one. Only once did she come down hard with advice, when I was weeping each morning to my Dad on the phone from Chicago because I missed my Michigan guy. "I told you before, Doll, if you like the guy that much, forget journalism and school and get married. If you don't want to get married yet, then shape up! ..."

"Believe me, Doll, in a couple of years you'll wonder why you made such a big thing of it. However, if you're going to get sick over the whole thing, come home. We'll come and get you.

"Anyway, we've got a new refrigerator ..."

Already, things were changing. My dad was sneaking calls to me from work. Mom began to complain that Dad told me all the good stuff, the news she had been saving up to write in what she started calling "my dumb letters."

When I moved to San Francisco at 23, I started making phone calls home, just to chat. I had more money than time. She kept writing, but less often. When I was nearly 30, I returned to Michigan for good and we shared everything by phone.

After that, the only notes I got from my mother were thank-yous, for holiday gifts, and one final letter to us all, on the brink of her death, that makes me weep to read.

But I'm lucky I've got all those others, letters my mother wrote to me, her doll, when both of our futures looked shiny and forever, as promising as a new refrigerator.