

Mom's Gift by Alice Cusner

At our first meeting, I embraced the spirited and intense young woman who would eventually become my daughter-in-law. What was it about her shy smile, or the worldliness hidden in that look in her eyes that drew me to her?

A few weeks before, my 20-something year old son had excitedly called to tell me about being introduced to this young lady. He spoke about her with an anxious clarity, suddenly awakening to his first glimpses of what his future might look like. He had never met anyone like Etty and he wanted to bring her home to meet me.

After our unexpected hug at the front door, Etty sat down at my kitchen table. I was preparing our dinner, and when I asked her to tell me about her family, I suddenly knew why her demeanor had somehow drawn me to her so intensely. We shared a very important life event.

Both of us had lost our mothers when we were very young. My mom had died in an accident during a time when it wasn't at all fashionable or common for people to seek counseling for grief. My dad was never one to talk about "feelings", so I just kept my pain deep inside me, occasionally letting it out when I would see a mother and daughter shopping together, or when I brought home one of my new babies from the hospital, and would have given almost anything to see my mom holding my little treasure. My everyday life was busy with a husband, kids, and work, and I didn't have time to talk about the past very often.

But here was this innocent young girl whose mother and whose childhood had been stolen from her by disease, telling me the story of her family. I stopped chopping vegetables, wiped my hands, and sat down beside her. I told her that I had lived through the same thing that she had endured. We realized that my dad (and hers) had remarried within a short time of becoming widowers, and that the type of woman each had chosen the second time around was nothing like our moms. We each felt that our dads were unable to understand our pain, and that we had to find our life's path alone.

This situation was the turning point in my grief for my mother. I was finally able to share my thoughts about a subject that my husband of 30 years, none of my adult children, and few of my friends could relate to. I was able to help this young lady by validating her feelings because they so closely mirrored my own. I could assuage her grief and my own by sitting side by side at my kitchen table more than three decades after my mother was gone. I was finally counseling myself by counseling her.

Etty mentioned to me that her older brother was married and was the manager of a wedding venue in her hometown. She was very close to her older sister who was a homemaker and very protective of her younger brother still in high school. We talked about college, clothes, friends,

makeup...it was an easy conversation that I secretly wished I could have had with my own mom. I imagined that Etty, too, was feeling the same thing.

I believe that Etty, in her hunger for “mom” had found a connection with me. I had reached that moment when my mother’s death had finally given, not just taken away. Her passing could let me relate to Etty, this wounded child sitting in my kitchen. I could finally use my own tragedy to bring strength to this young lady who was, is, and will always be bound to me with ribbons of unconditional love.

The dinner went spectacularly, with food, wine and conversation flowing happily and naturally well into the evening. A few days later, my son called to get my opinion of Etty. I could only tell him that I thought she was wonderful (I was afraid to gush), and then, of course, I answered his question by posing the same one to him. “I don’t know if I’m getting in over my head,” he said, but I could hear the smile in his voice. I also knew that Etty wasn’t dating just for fun. She wanted to start her own family. And I was pretty sure she wanted to do that with my son.

A few weeks later and with my penchant for advance planning in full swing, I used an alias when I called Etty’s brother and booked a date for a wedding at his facility. I picked the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, knowing that my West Coast family would appreciate a wedding devoid of the possibility of snow and with a Monday holiday to continue the celebration.

Many months later, my son and his fiancé Etty were trying to pick a date for their wedding, knowing that the venue would be at her brother’s hall. Imagine my surprise when they told me that their first choice, the Sunday of Memorial Day was already taken. I told them not to worry. Mom would help them work it all out.