

My mother never did get to wear that coat, though she did make it through several more springs. Sometimes, though, I put it on, and when I do, I scoop up my baby daughter and tell her stories about her diva grandmother and what she stood for: life, love and eternal laughter.

*Susan Fales-Hill is the author of the new memoir Always Wear Joy: My Mother Bold and Beautiful. She lives in New York City.*

## My mother, the...feminist

By Jenny McPhee

Until I was seven years old, my mother was a housewife in New Jersey. She had wanted to be a writer but was persuaded by her family and 1950s mores to marry one instead. (My father, John McPhee, was actually working for a shipping company when they married, but his ambitions were clear.) When my father left my mother in 1969, the early call of

feminism was barely making itself heard in our suburban town. But my mother, alone and reflecting on her life, began listening to what "liberated" women were saying, and she repeated it to me and my sisters. "There is nothing you can't do," she would tell us. "Nothing you can't be."

Restless after years of stifling her own ambitions, in need of money and aware of the importance of providing

an example, my mother embarked on what fast became a successful career as a photographer. She joined the National Organization for Women and took her surname back. She formed a group that produced acclaimed and influential studies on sexual stereotyping in educational materials and on TV. She would enlist me and my friends to scour stacks of textbooks and count the number of career options illustrated for women (teacher, nurse, homemaker) as opposed to those for men (endless).

I remember hearing adults speak disapprovingly of my mother's "alternative ideas," but her profound life-shaping experience had already become ours, too. My sisters and I dreamed, as she once had, of writing; today all five of us have published books, including one that three of us collaborated on—a book about girls and their wide-ranging pursuits.

When I married, it never occurred to me to change my name. And when I became pregnant with my first child, I made a deal with my husband: He could choose our son's first name if I could give him my last. Now both of our sons share my surname. I get all sorts of responses to this tradition-shattering act, from awe to deep disapproval. I have never felt prouder of anything in my life, and I never could have done it without the constant inspiration of my mother, whose name happens to be Pryde.

*Jenny McPhee is the author of the novel The Center of Things. She lives in New York City.*



## My mother, the...schizophrenic

By Virginia Holman

"Well, my mother is a real nutcase too." That's what I often hear when I tell people my mother is schizophrenic. Then they proceed to tell me about the Christmas when their mother threw a temper tantrum or the time she had an affair. I want to say, "Let me tell you about crazy: Those people on the street gesturing wildly, who wind up in jail for walking around in their underwear—those people are my mother."

In home videos I've seen, my mother, before she developed schizophrenia, was so beautiful she could stop traffic. Glossy waist-length hair; smoky, deep-set eyes and a robust laugh. But that's not the mother I knew. She developed her mental illness when I was just seven years old. My father says her skin literally went waxy and dull; the light disappeared from her eyes.

It was the early 1970s; there was no Prozac, no Oprah. My dad and siblings and I never talked about the fact that my mother screamed at the walls because she thought they were full of poisonous gas. I learned not to bring friends home, and I grew to fear my mother and her illness. I also grew to feel ashamed of her.

Schizophrenia robbed my mother of herself, but it also stole a part of me. I went from being a wild tomboy to a reserved, watchful child. It wasn't until I was in college that I began writing about the things I had dared not speak about when I was younger. As I began to write, I discovered that the feisty girl I thought I'd lost was still swinging inside of me. Today, my mom lives in a nursing home, and although I occasionally still feel the hot shame I knew as a little girl, now I speak up for her rights and the rights of all people with (continued on page 309)



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