MEMBERS ONLY FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

My Mother Gave Me an Unexpected Gift — After She Died

It's too late to say 'thank you,' but I wish I could

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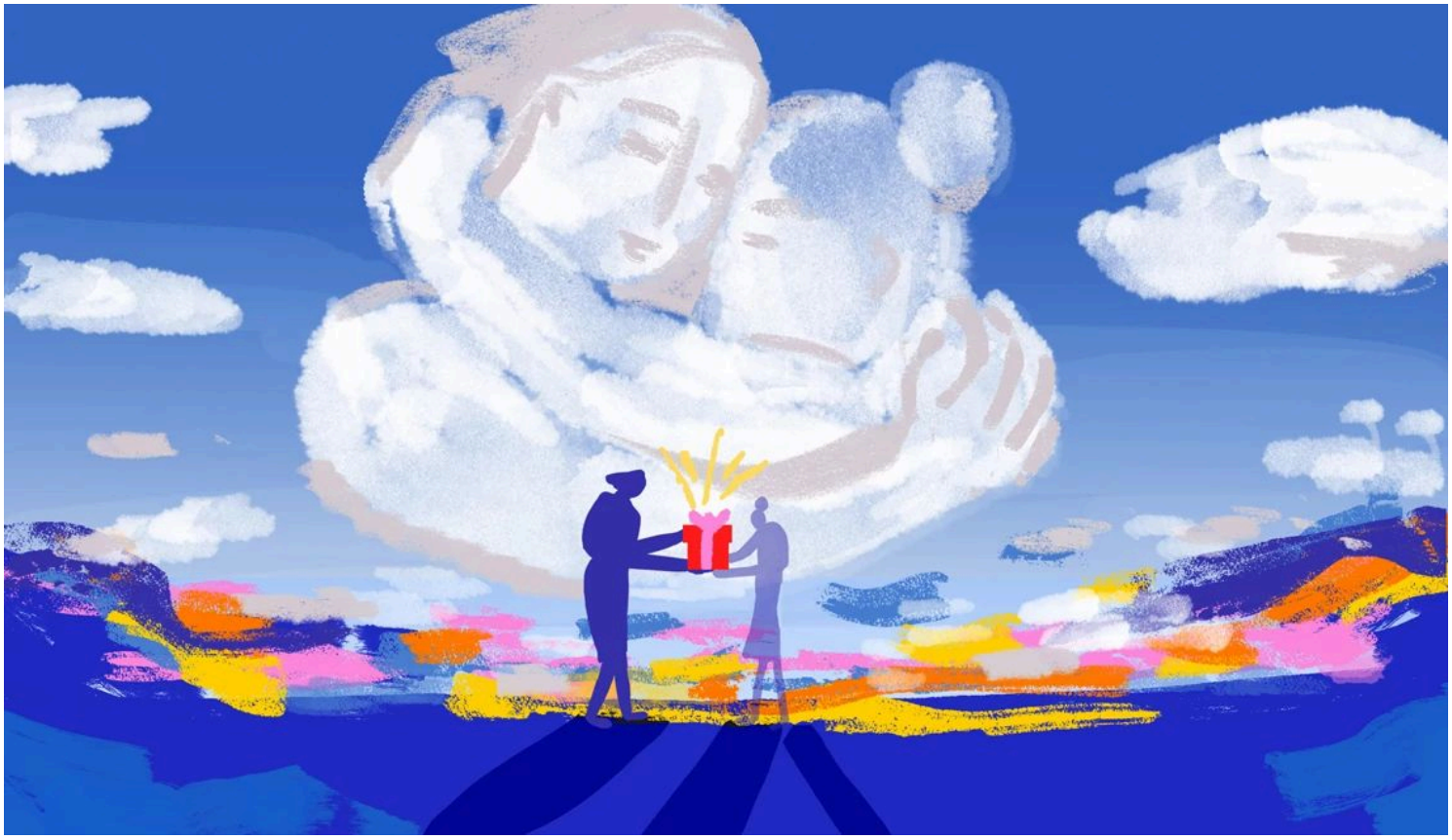

Author Caitlin Kelly shares how much a final act of thoughtfulness from her mother meant to her, despite years of emotional distance between the two.

A D'AQUINO

I was Cynthia's only child — a daughter whom, it often seemed, she didn't know how to mother.

She kept her life mostly secret from me, growing up amid both privilege and emotional chaos. She'd had a difficult childhood with a volatile, wealthy mother who married six times. Eager to flee, she ran off to Canada at 17 after a Park Avenue wedding to my father, whom she'd met in the south of France. They had known each other for barely six weeks.

My father, a filmmaker, traveled often, as far away as Japan, and despite their early happy and creative time together — running a Vancouver art gallery and a few years in London — my headstrong parents later had terrible fights, divorcing when I was 8. I spent most of the next few years at boarding school, returning home on weekends to Cynthia's apartment. We both loved movies, and I would happily go with her to the theater to watch two or three in a row. She worked as a magazine writer and editor, which gave us some fantastic moments, like the time, for a story about kids and baking, a friend and I were instructed to have a flour fight in a test kitchen. A photo of us sitting on the floor, well dusted and dazed with sanctioned mischief, is one of my favorites.

Caitlin Kelly, age 7, with her mother, Cynthia, in Toronto.

COURTESY RON KELLY

My mother was beautiful and glamorous, but also an alcoholic later in life, and suffered from bipolar disorder. I fled her care for good when I was 14, after she had a terrifying manic episode in Mexico, where we were living. She'd driven me and two young friends into a deep ditch in an unfamiliar industrial city at midnight, far from friends and other family members.

My father got me on a flight to Toronto, and I stayed with him until I finished secondary school and went to the University of Toronto. I never lived with Cynthia again, too scared to allow her access.

But I did follow one piece of my mother's advice: Save 10 to 15 percent of your income every year. Journalism, the career I chose, rarely pays well, so I spent money cautiously. For years I wore only clothing from consignment shops.

My mother and I stayed in each other's lives, but mostly at a distance. She traveled the world alone when I was in my early 20s, but paid my way so I could visit her in Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica and Fiji, countries I couldn't afford to visit on my own. I settled in a one-bedroom apartment in New York, near where she grew up, while she finally settled in British Columbia, where I was born.

So our visits were rare, usually once a year, supplemented with letters and a few phone calls.

But Cynthia was never much interested in discussing feelings, mine or hers. I tried only once to raise the subject of what happened in Mexico, but she wouldn't acknowledge how frightening it was for me, nor did she apologize. When things were good, we'd just go out for a burger. We were two feisty and highly independent women who more easily enjoyed playing a ferociously competitive game of Scrabble than saying "I love you."

No matter how often we tried for a closer relationship, meeting up so infrequently made it difficult. On one visit to New York, she arrived drunk, and we fought bitterly on Christmas Eve. She returned home the next day without a word.

There was a hidden reason for some of this, which we only discovered in the summer of 2003: She had a slow-growing and massive brain tumor on her left frontal lobe, a meningioma. I traveled to Vancouver for her six-hour neurosurgery, from which she had a remarkably speedy recovery. The neurosurgeon told me that the tumor's location and duration had long affected her behavior and

Mom and daughter play Scrabble on the author's balcony in New York in 2006.

COURTESY JOSE R. LOPEZ

made her aggressive and hostile. For a while, I enjoyed a calm, kind mother, before alcohol recaptured her attention.

My cross-country visits remained rare, the final one in 2011. We had endured too many frustrating times, and by mutual, unspoken agreement, we finally gave up on our tattered relationship.

In 2020, she died at the age of 85, sitting in a nursing home armchair, watching television. We hadn't spoken or written since that last visit, nine years earlier. I didn't cry when the phone call came. Mostly I felt relief, along with gratitude for her quiet, easy death.

Border restrictions were in place because of COVID, so I couldn't travel back for her cremation, which she had prepaid for. Her executor sent me a portrait of my great-grandmother and a few other pieces of art Cynthia owned, along with three boxes containing her very few belongings.

They included thick photo albums full of photos of her friends, none known to me and none identified. Because of her secrecy, I had no way to contact her few remaining friends in England and Australia for any celebration or memorial.

That was the end of our story, I thought. So I was stunned when, in June 2021, I got an email from the attorney handling her estate, since I was sure she didn't have one. What of hers could possibly be left?

The answer was $140,000 in Canadian dollars (about $103,000 U.S.), along with two more pieces of art Cynthia had long owned — pieces she knew I loved, one of them valued in the low five figures, and both of which she had enjoyed in her nursing home room.

Mom and daughter in British Columbia.

COURTESY CAITLIN KELLY

She could have left her estate to her friends, like the one she had made her executor. She could have left it to charity. True to form, there was no explanation of why she left it to me. I thought she hated me.

I'm still shocked by her unexpected generosity and wish I could find a way to thank her. I've kept her ashes nearby, tucked inside a basket in my living room, guarded by a small wooden angel she loved. I joke to friends that it's the first time we've shared a space and not argued.

I've only spent a bit of that money, buying two things I had long wanted. Cynthia traveled the world alone for many years, never afraid of a disappointing outcome. So in June 2022, I flew to San Francisco, rented a car and spent a month alone driving south to Los Angeles. I enjoyed lazy beach afternoons, savored the legendary beauty of Highway 1 and Big Sur, and caught up with 11 friends along the way. And I now wear a vintage Cartier watch — a daily, practical luxury I had always wanted but never would have bought otherwise.

Cynthia knew how to live frugally, saving money really hard for many years. She also knew that the greatest gift she could give me was the gift of choice, of options, of financial breathing room, especially later in life. That final act of thoughtfulness, despite the emotional distance that had separated us for so many years, meant a lot to me.

Call it a posthumous hug.

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Caitlin Kelly is an editor and writing coach who has contributed to The New York Times, Reuters, Financial Times *and other news outlets.*

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