

THE CHARMER

>> Isabel Eberstadt, right, at Elaine's with Andy Warhol, circa 1964; below, Fernanda in 1990.



TWO BABES

>>Above, Fernanda in 2003; left, as a baby in a test shot for *Vogue* by Frederick Eberstadt, 1961; and far left, as a 15-year-old at the ballet with her Fortuny-clad mother.

AM I TURNING INTO MY MOTHER?

From childhood onward, FERNANDA EBERSTADT tried like hell to be different from her glam, brilliant, dysfunctional mother. Then she took a look in the mirror

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IT IS LATE morning—well, actually, maybe it's more like early afternoon. I am wandering around the house in my pajamas, trying to remember where I left my cup of coffee, when I notice a strangely familiar sound: an aimless, arrhythmic sort of sound that is the shuffle of slippers across a wooden floor.

It is the noise of my childhood, the noise my mother made at odd hours, trailing through our New York apartment, looking for some book hidden away in the back-hall bookshelf or perhaps trying to figure out where she'd put her to-do list. My mother, like me, was a stay-at-home writer, and unless she was going out to lunch, she spent her days curled up in bed with a stack

of books and papers or scuffing about the apartment on undefined quests.

Suddenly I can picture the weird clumpy slippers this otherwise chic woman wore throughout the 1960s and much of the '70s: black suede booties lined in white lambswool and fastened with huge Flintstone-type bone buttons that looked as if they'd come from a mastodon tusk. Bedroom slippers designed to survive arctic exposure, or a Park Avenue apartment from which my warmer-blooded father had insisted on removing all the radiators.

Except that today, it isn't my mother making that aimless slipperish shuffling noise; it isn't my mother who is still in her nightclothes, even though it's lunchtime. My mother has been dead almost four years. It's me.

Do you ever wonder, Am I turning into my mother? Has it already happened, without my noticing? And if so, why didn't anybody warn me, before it was too late?

For me, the question of whether or not I resembled my mother was always a barbed one. My mother, Isabel Nash Eberstadt, was brilliant, beautiful and immensely glamorous: Almost every taste and value I hold dearest came to me from her. Yet the message I always got from both my parents was, Don't be like your mother, because that way lies darkness.

My mother was the daughter of the poet Ogden Nash. She published two novels, 25 years apart, and half a dozen striking pieces about people and places she loved: Haiti, Andy Warhol, the underground filmmaker Jack Smith. She had tiny bones, with wrists as thin as a Somali war orphan's; a long, narrow moon-white face; green-and-black-speckled eyes that gleamed with a somewhat mocking wit; and an absurdly turned-up nose. As a young girl, she'd been intellectually precocious, perhaps a bit geeky, the ugly-duckling daughter of a beautiful mother, and somehow, through sheer nerve, she'd maneuvered that awkwardness into drop-dead grace.

Yet she never lost that initial feeling of being something of a misfit. All her life, she was drawn to fellow misfits,

people who had turned their private madnesses and inadmissible obsessions into art. She had a taste for anarchy that could sometimes veer pretty close to nihilism, an aversion to authority that was—well, decidedly unparental.

In 1954, at the age of 21, she married my father, Frederick Eberstadt, a Wall Street banker's son who, breaking free of family expectations, became a fashion photographer and much later a shrink. Together, over the next half-century, my parents used their money and imagination to create a fabulous life, throwing parties that went down in New York social history and befriending avant-garde artists, filmmakers, musicians and dress designers.

My mother loved the wit and extravagance and in-your-face exhibitionism of high fashion. Her couture dresses—made of white leather, or pink-and-green plastic disks, or feathers—were housed in a walk-in closet the size of most New Yorkers' bedrooms. I knew as a child that other people considered my mother stylish—her discarded dresses weren't sent to the thrift shop; they were donated to museums—but to me her clothes, and clothes in gen-

dressed in the Salvation Army-meets-Walmart look I still favor in leftover protest against my mother's elegance.)

Mothers, I now know, find countless sneaky ways of binding their children to them, of making sure that they are truly theirs and that once they leave home, they will come back. Mothers know they shouldn't do this; they've been told their job is to send their offspring out into the world, free and autonomous, but they do it nonetheless. They lodge the chip in the ear that ensures the child will come home, even if it's just to have her laundry done.

My mother's charms were not conventionally motherly, although she was good at stroking your back if you were sick. She lived in our family apartment like an unhousetrained teenager, skipping meals and occasionally, at nocturnal hours, dipping into the refrigerator to eat honey or caramel sauce straight from the jar. It's proof of small children's desire to believe their mothers are domestic goddesses that although my father was the person who returned home to cook dinner every night, serving up curries, homemade pasta and soufflés, both my brother and I were

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eral, seemed a freakish mystery, somewhere between terrifying and boring.

When she came to find me in my school cafeteria after a fourth-grade parent-teacher meeting, wearing a long sable coat and with her hair teased into a headdress complete with false chignons and a bower of pink-and-purple anemones, I dived under the lunchroom table and prayed that none of my classmates would notice her or associate this apparition with me—a tomboy who, even in school uniform, managed to make sure that her mismatched socks were bedraggled around her ankles. (Little did I know that 35 years later, my own children would be cringing when I showed up at their school

convinced that our mother was the best cook in the world, because once or twice she'd made us cinnamon toast.

In truth, she had an unfamiliarity with the workaday world usually associated with ancien régime royalty or scientific geniuses. Watching my mother try to open a door, or even an envelope, was like watching a butterfly batter itself ever so faintly against a windowpane. My brother once teased her by asking how many people around the family dinner table could tell him how much a ride on a New York subway cost and what form of monetary unit was required. It amused us that this woman who had photographic recall of every book she'd ever read couldn't find her way out of



TALK OF THE TOWN >> Left, Isabel Eberstadt, a glowing presence on the party circuit, at a 1990 publishing event with socialite Jerome Zipkin and writer Bob Colacello; right, with author and investigative journalist Dominick Dunne during New York Fashion Week in Bryant Park, 2004.

a ladies' room. But in fact my mother's sense of helplessness made her massively anxious, dependent on others for the most basic chores—and convinced that they were doing a lousy job of it.

All her life, she suffered from bouts of depression, which kept her for long periods holed up in her bedroom with the curtains drawn and the phone off the hook. As she grew older, the depression gave way to an equally destructive anxiety, an apocalyptic terror of being late for planes or trains or even lunch, or of running out of cash or Kleenex, a rage of nitpicking indecisiveness that could turn a lighthearted family outing into a gut-churning calvary for all.

The physical toll, too, was cruel: In the late '60s she had been treated with an experimental antidepressant that had destroyed her kidneys, while a long-undiagnosed case of hepatitis C, contracted at the same period from a blood transfusion, eventually did in her liver.

From earliest childhood, I thought of my mother as an invalid whom death might snatch away at any moment, while also absorbing something of her own belief that her illnesses were self-inflicted punishment. I was determined to be healthy like my father: a robust, optimistic sort of person. It was better to be a man than a woman. Women stayed in bed all day; men went out for walks. Women

fretted and nagged and made heavy weather of things; men were cheerful.

My mother's gifts, in fact, were rarer than health or good cheer. She was a magical listener, with an uncanny ability to make people feel she understood them better than anyone ever had before. Nothing shocked her: Indeed, the more alien and aberrant your acts or feelings, the more warmly she sympathized (a predilection that occasionally spurred me to be extra wild). She was so good at this kind of interpretive listening, at this reflecting you back to yourself, acid-trip vivid, that you came to feel that nothing was true, or had any value, until you told it to her. You told her your heart's-blood stories, and then she told you what your stories meant, and who you were. I think this is one kind of artistic gift: artist as somewhere between arsonist and oracle.

What she did with me, her daughter, was to instill the conviction that I was a born writer, a carrier-on of the family business, and to provide me with the kind of education she thought might feed my work.

Although she herself had been a straight-A student, she made it clear in an oblique, unspoken sort of way that she did not feel school really counted and that teachers were misinformed busybodies. "Real" life was elsewhere.

I loved sprawling at the foot of my

mother's bed, drawing pictures while she read me *Jane Eyre* or *War and Peace*. She took me to museums to look at Sienese altarpieces and Cycladic figurines, and to the Carnegie Hall Cinema to see Truffaut and Bertolucci movies, and to Robert Wilson happenings down in SoHo, in which an autistic boy standing in a darkened room recited seemingly random patterns of numbers. She taught me to appreciate cured herring, and caviar with blinis, and Paris hotels, both superdeluxe and fleabag, and night trains and transvestites and Ray Charles.

When I was 10 years old and miserable, she let me drop out of school and took me down to live in my grandparents' house in the Bahamas. She did not seem to find it strange that I spent much of the time on my knees praying in my bedroom closet, which I'd converted into a chapel complete with plaster saints I'd won playing Skee-Ball at an amusement park, or writing out the names of all the biblical generations between Adam and Jesus.

It was obvious to me as a child that my mother and I had a lot in common—chiefly, a tendency to prefer imagination to real life. It was also obvious that this tendency could lead to a darkened bedroom with the phone off the hook.

What do you do if you know you're not supposed to be like the person you tragically, maddeningly *are* like? >>

When my father tells me, as he periodically does, "You're your mother's daughter," he doesn't mean I love language, or have a good memory, or can read the printed ingredients on a candy wrapper 30 feet away; he means I am a worrywart, or reclusive, or have no common sense whatsoever.

This fear of not knowing how to manage in the world comes early. I remember thinking very soberly, at age six, "I will never be able to have children when I grow up because I don't know how to tie my shoelaces, so I'll never be able to teach them how to. I'll never be able to have children because I can't tell time." (Who knew that slip-on Vans and digital watches would come along and save my bacon?) And later, "I can never have children because I wouldn't be able to help them

catch a plane before it's even left the city it's coming from, or find myself reduced to existential desperation by the impossibility of ever managing to squeeze all four corners of the duvet back into its duvet cover; every time I stand over my husband, nagging him to set the alarm in my mobile phone for me, or change the lightbulb in the refrigerator, or the cartridge on the printer, I realize with a lick of terror, Yes, it's true, suffragists threw themselves under mounted cavalry and chained themselves to the gates of Parliament in vain, I am my mother's daughter, and you know what? I'm not glamorous or seductive or mischievous or fun like her; I'm just a fretful, backseat-driving pain in the ass like her.

Toward the end of her life, when liver disease was condemning her to a mental fog, my mother got fed up with

mately listened to and understood from inside out. She was unconvinced.

When my mother died in 2006, an entire world felt orphaned.

Since then, I seem to be making a grumpy kind of peace with her influence. Packing crates full of my mother's belongings—books, letters, newspaper clippings, powder compacts, along with a truly hallucinogenic quantity of brand-new alligator handbags and merino tees from Banana Republic—have arrived at my door, and I spend odd weekends sifting through these relics.

The walls of my workroom are now plastered in snapshots of a plump, worried-looking child hugging a Bedlington terrier; a long, elegant 25-year-old in a straw hat as big as a satellite dish; a middle-aged beauty at the opera in a trailing violet tunic.

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with their math homework." (I can recall the spark of relief, years later, in that portion of my brain devoted to reproductive strategies, when my future husband, whom I'd thought good only at roasting chicken, ironing his shirts and making jokes when things went wrong, started explaining to me with immense enthusiasm and conviction the binary principles of a computer...)

For most of my grown life, I've been trying to make myself Not-My-Mother. Trying to pretend to be somebody competent, who can cook and drive a car and pay the bills and talk to teachers. Someone conversant with subway lines. And yet every time I get behind the wheel, or there's a dish to cook involving more than one ingredient, or my accountant is about to ask me a question whose answer will betray the fact that I'm not even sure which fiscal year we're in, this great wave of unreality swallows me, and I panic. It's as if everybody else in the world knows something I don't. And that's when I'm most my mother's daughter.

Every time I arrive at the airport to

her own helplessness. In a fit of manic resolve, this fragile 70-year-old signed up for a typewriting class at a company called Career Blazers. "I want to be useful," she declared to me. "I'm going to take charge of my life: I'm going to learn all about Social Security." Another time, she told me that she wanted to learn how to clean but that Elsa, her devoted housekeeper of 38 years, wouldn't teach her how to vacuum.

By then I was in my forties, living in the French countryside with my own family. Safely beyond the force field of my mother's mood swings, I could now afford a more forgiving appreciation of her rarities. Much of what I was trying to transmit to my own children, I realized—a skepticism toward received opinion; a feeling at home in shabby libraries and trains and museums and art house movie theaters—she had given me. I tried to tell her that anybody could clean a room but that only she could explain to you the complex psychodramas behind Yves Saint-Laurent's clothes or the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror; only she could make a person feel so inti-

I find myself wearing her bathrobes, wondering what ever happened to those clumpy Flintstone bedroom slippers. The things that drove me nuts about her when she was alive now fill me with tenderness. The missing her is a knot in my stomach, a hitch in my breath. In my head, we talk for hours, and there are none of the hurt feelings, the spats and sulks and misunderstandings that in later years, after I'd broken away and made my own family, turned our real-life conversations into such a minefield.

Am I turning into my mother? Not quite. Am I my mother's daughter? You bet. Between the longing and the terror lies acceptance. Lies continuity: a grain of my mother that lives in me, that will sprout one day in grandchildren with a taste for Proust or feathered tunics, or for eating caramel sauce straight from the jar, grandchildren who with any luck will also be able to run a vacuum cleaner and not fuss too much about missing planes. ☺

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