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LIKE  
MOTHER,  
LIKE  
MOTHER

*A Novel*

SUSAN RIEGER



BY SUSAN RIEGER

*Like Mother, Like Mother*  
*The Heirs*  
*The Divorce Papers*

# Like Mother, Like Mother

| A NOVEL |

Susan Rieger



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*Like Mother, Like Mother* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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About the Author

*For my grandchildren, Eliza Pouncey, Felix Miller,  
and Dominic Miller*



Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.

—SACHEL PAIGE

# PART I

*Lila*

## Death

LILA PEREIRA DIED ON THE front page of *The Washington Globe*. She also died on the front page of *The New York Times*, astonishing and gratifying *The Globe's* publisher, Doug Marshall. Lila had been *The Globe's* executive editor, the female Jim Bramble, who'd out-Brambled Bramble, her predecessor during Watergate. In 2018, Lila and her Pirates, a gritty band of cutthroat reporters, exposed President Webb's pay-to-play scheme and brought down him and his two hapless sons. Webbgate gave Watergate a run for its money. The Pirates collected two Pulitzers and a George Polk. Lila picked up honorary degrees from Stanford, UVA, and Georgetown.

Lila had retired on January 31, 2023. It was company policy for top editors to step down the year they turned sixty-five. Doug offered her a seat on the editorial board, but she declined. "I've never seen the point of the opinion pages," she said. "All Talmud, no Torah. I want the facts, the red meat. I'll die of boredom and aggravation." Two months later, she was dead from Stage IV lung cancer. Everyone asked if she'd been a smoker. She had smoked in college, at parties. "I was a drinker. I should have gotten cirrhosis. Give it a rest. Bad luck."

Lila was buried in Congressional Cemetery. She didn't want a funeral, only a memorial service. "Hold off a bit," she told Doug, who wanted to make

sure she got the send-off she deserved. “You need to give people time to think about what they want to say. I wasn’t the GOAT. Remind them.”

Lila’s husband, Joe Maier, unstooped at sixty-nine, spoke at the memorial service, along with two of their three daughters, the virtual twins, Stella, thirty-six, and Ava, thirty-five. Her youngest daughter, Grace, twenty-nine, sat mute, in the reserved section, alongside Ruth, her best friend since their freshman year at the University of Chicago. Grace had visited Lila regularly during her illness, but their relationship, never easy, had become increasingly fraught for Grace ever since she published her novel, *The Lost Mother*, in the fall of 2022. The day Lila died, Grace sat with her for two hours, racked by sadness and sorrow. *What was I thinking*, she thought. *Why did I write it*.

“You can talk to her,” the nurse had said, looking in briefly to see how her patient was doing. “She can still hear.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you.” She laid her head gingerly on Lila’s chest and wept.

—

THE MEMORIAL SERVICE WAS MOBBED. Everyone in D.C. who wasn’t a Webbite, and even some who were, wanted a ticket. There was a guest list and a standing room list and a wait list. Rupert Murdoch was invited, over Lila’s dead body, but he wasn’t seated down front. Joe drew the line.

Doug had thought the funeral should be in the National Cathedral. Lila reminded him she was Jewish. “Isn’t there a cross over the pulpit?” She squinted at Doug. “Who would say Kaddish?” She decided on the Kennedy Center’s Eisenhower Theater.

Doug was disappointed. “Why not the Concert Hall or the Opera House?”

“They each hold over two thousand people,” Lila said. “The Eisenhower holds a thousand. Grand is okay, not grandiose.”

“Do you think I’m on the guest list,” Grace asked Ruth as they walked inside the theater. “Just kidding.”

“You’re going to have to make it up with Lila, dead or alive,” Ruth said. She had loved Lila. As with all of her daughters’ friends, Lila had been at her most charming, most engaging with Ruth.

“I thought she’d like *The Lost Mother*. It was funny, people said it was funny. She was the book’s hero.”

“Lila was a hero in life,” Ruth said.

There were ten speakers, each held to seven minutes, Lila’s hand from the grave. “I want stories, funny stories,” Lila had written in the instructions. “No tear-jerking the congregation.” Her sister, Clara, recited the Kaddish, memorizing it for a second sad time. The first time had been at their brother Polo’s funeral. He died in 2000, jolting Lila into a fury of mourning.

“I hate this feeling, like it’s the end of the world,” she had said to Joe at Polo’s funeral. “Is this the way regular people feel?”

“Yes,” he said.

“He was only forty-seven, three months away from retiring.” She blew her nose. “I guess he saw he was running out of time.”

For a month after his death, she had walked five miles a day, getting up at 6:00 A.M. so she’d be done by 8:00.

“What do you think about on your walks?” Joe had said.

“I don’t think. I walk. You know I can’t multitask.”

“How do you not think?”

“I don’t want to think, so I don’t. I walk to breathe. If I can just keep breathing.”

*If she could have just kept breathing*, Joe thought, as Clara finished the prayer.

Over everyone’s objections—Covid was still lurking—Joe’s mother, Frances, attended the service. “It keeps her alive for me,” she told Joe. “The day she died was the saddest day of my life.”

The virtual twins, both visibly pregnant, had also been discouraged from coming, everyone weighing in—Joe, their obstetrician, the airlines. They

wound up leasing a plane, picking up Frances on the way.

“It’s sad Lila won’t know our babies,” Stella said.

“Sad too they won’t know her,” Ava said.

Doug Marshall was the first speaker. He had taken up the role of master of ceremonies. He was used to bossing people and he looked the part. Six-three, once blond, now graying, he was, as Lila often said, “an echt WASP and an echt mensch.”

He told the story about the midnight meeting the day the president’s counsel was fired, when Lila’s Pirates were working the phones, trying to find a second source for the rumor that Webb was going to let his younger son take the fall for the pay-to-play scheme. “Webb is a gerbil,” Doug said, gleefully, his voice rising for the peroration. “He eats his young.”

All the *Globe* stories were funny and fierce and first-person, as much about the eulogists as the deceased. None of them cried openly. Lila had forbidden it.

Felicity Turner, one of the Pirates, talked about a trip to Detroit she had taken with Lila, shortly after the cancer diagnosis. “We drove around her old neighborhood, which had been the site of the worst of the 1967 riots. Lila opened the window and pointed to a run-down brick house, with broken front steps and a sagging front porch. The houses on either side were in better repair, their lawns mowed, their front doors brightly painted. ‘I grew up there. Little House on the Prairie.’ She closed the window. ‘Detroitus.’”

Sally Alter was cleanup, the youngest last. As she opened her mouth to speak, tears trickled down her cheeks. “Lila treated me like a daughter.” She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “Allergies.”

Grace folded her program. *This is satire*, she thought.

Sally told the story about the press conference in early 2018 when Webb attacked the stories in *The Globe*. “I never sold an ambassadorship. Never. Lila Pereira is a lying— You can finish the rest of that sentence.” Sally had been twenty-four, a guppy then. She wanted to catch Lila’s eye. “I called her to see if she wanted to comment. I was interning at Politico. I needed a break. ‘What’s he going to do about it,’ Lila said, ‘put my tit in a big fat



wringer?’ I put it on Twitter and the trolls went wild. Lila hired me six months later.”

Joe and the twins had been affectionate. Joe told the story about Lila’s first day at her first job at *The Cincinnati Courier*, writing obituaries about “sainted” Irish grandmothers. “‘I thought at first the survivors were taking their revenge,’ Lila said. ‘I thought “sainted” was code for “drunk.”’” He smiled, waiting for the laughter to die down. “Lila was like no one else. I never knew what she’d do or say next, but whatever she did or said, it seemed inevitable. She was Detroit to the end. She always had your back.”

Stella and Ava told the story of their first swimming lessons ages two and three. “Lila threw us in. We sank. She fished us out, disappointed. ‘I saw it on television,’ she said to Joe. ‘They were supposed to burble to the top.’” They spoke alternately, taking only a single speaker’s slot, one voice blending into the other. Lila had called them the Starbirds, synching their names translated into English. They had Lila’s last name, Grace had Joe’s. It made sense on the surface. The Starbirds looked like Lila, Grace like Joe.

“I don’t think anyone can tell them apart,” Grace harrumphed, “except, of course, Joe, and maybe their husbands.”

“Lila’s doing, I take it,” Ruth said.

Grace nodded. “For someone who did so little at home, she did so much.”

Grace and Ruth ducked out on the reception.

“I can’t face all the accusatory looks.” Grace shook her head. “I didn’t know she was going to die when my book came out. It’s a first novel. Everyone pillories their parents. Who else is there to write about.”

“I wondered why you didn’t want to speak at the service.”

“I’d have been booed from the podium. I hate D.C. When’s our train?”

Ruth put her arm through Grace’s. “Tomorrow,” she said. “What would you have talked about?”

“Maybe the real story of the swimming lesson, the one in *The Lost Mother*.”

WHEN GRACE WAS THREE YEARS old, Stella and Ava threw her, fully clothed, into the deep end of a swimming pool. They were at the tennis club. It was Memorial Day weekend. The grown-ups were drinking in the clubhouse. The children, at loose ends, were wandering the grounds looking for small animals to torture. Grace couldn't swim. She sank like a stone. Her sisters stood at the pool's edge, watching. Neither one jumped in to save her. They knew how to swim, they were eight and nine, but they didn't want to get wet. They were wearing new party clothes, Laura Ashley dresses and patent leather shoes. They dressed alike. They looked alike. Grace didn't try to tell them apart.

When Grace didn't bob up as they expected, the Starbirds ran screaming to find a parent. Recognizing their panicky voices, Lila sprinted from the clubhouse. Several other parents followed more slowly, drinks in hand, vulture-like. Without waiting for the lifeguard ("Where the hell was that cretin," Lila said later, back in the clubhouse, finishing her margarita), she jumped into the pool and fished Grace out. She was wearing a navy off-the-shoulder cocktail dress and stiletto heels. She walked to the shallow end, thumping Grace on the back.

Her sisters told Lila that Grace had fallen in. Wriggling, red-faced, and spitting water, Grace yelled in fury, "No. No. No. No. They tossed me. They said you tossed them."

Stella and Ava were bad liars. Caught in the prisoner's dilemma, each worried the other would break first and confess. They looked down. They knew to show remorse the moment they'd been found out.

"She followed us out here. We told her to go back to the clubhouse," Stella said. "She wouldn't listen but kept following us."

"We asked her if she wanted to learn to swim," Ava said. "She nodded."

"We said you had thrown us in a pool when we were two and three," Stella said. "We said that's how we learned to swim."

"We asked her if she'd like that," Ava said. "She nodded again."

“I’ve told you before, you may not kill your little sister,” Lila said. “Why didn’t one or both of you rescue her?”

They looked down at their brand-new Mary Janes.

“Take them off and give them to me,” Lila said.

They unbuckled their shoes, dread in their hearts, and gave them to her.

She threw them into the middle of the pool.

The vultures applauded.

“Mikado justice,” Lila said.

—

LILA’S STYLE OF MOTHERING WHEN the girls were young was nonchalant and intermittent, nothing like her spiky and seductive *Globe* personality. She left the girls almost entirely to others. She hadn’t fallen in love with them as babies and didn’t spend much time with them. She relied on Joe, nannies, and au pairs.

“I only want for them what they want for themselves,” she said to Joe at dinner one evening. They’d been married a dozen years. The Starbirds were in preschool. Grace had yet to make her appearance.

“What if they want more of a mother?” Joe said.

“They have you. They don’t need me to look after them. They need me not to harm them.”

“That’s it? That’s...” His voice trailed off. *I was warned*, he thought.

“What do I know about mothering? I didn’t have a mother, and my father...” Lila’s voice faded. She never characterized Aldo’s behavior. She told stories about him, what he did, not what he was. She had no interest in soul-searching, her own or other people’s. She rarely read memoirs. “What do they want from us, our pity, our admiration? I can’t tell.” She only read the tough-minded stories, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. No one pitied Mary McCarthy or Simone de Beauvoir. She wouldn’t be pitied either.

“Being pitied is almost as awful as being scared.” She put down her fork. “It’s insulting. I don’t feel sorry for me. No one else is allowed to.” She paused. “Same thing with hurt feelings. No one hurts my feelings. I don’t allow it. I won’t give other people that power.” She knew she was an outlier on this. She didn’t think, *Get over it, people*. She understood they couldn’t. What she couldn’t fathom was the search for catharsis and closure. “There’s no walking into the sunset,” she would say. Aldo could die, but not her hatred.

She didn’t ask Joe to understand her, only to put up with her. “It’s not personal. I never much cared for young children, not even as a child, except my brother and sister. They were the best. They had my back, I had theirs.” Her voice faded, summoning, unbidden, her wretched childhood. “I couldn’t wait to grow up and get out of Detroit.” She shrugged. “Spilled milk.”

Lila had grown up on Grand Street, off Linwood, in Detroit’s old Jewish enclave. Her family was a relic. After the Second World War, the middle-class Jews, lawyers, accountants, teachers, nurses, had begun moving north of Eight Mile Road, part of the white flight to the suburbs. The Jews who remained, like Lila’s father, were tied to their jobs and businesses.

Joe, gently nurtured in Bloomfield Hills, seethed at Lila’s stories of her childhood. “Your father was out of Dickens, part Fagin, part Bill Sikes. Mostly Bill Sikes.”

Lila took a swallow of wine. “We could have lived in a better house. Aldo worked on the GM assembly line. He belonged to the UAW, he made decent wages. He installed engines, a more interesting job, he’d say, than installing hoods and wheels. He never talked about his work except to curse it and us. ‘Today, I broke my balls installing three engines an hour for eight hours, so you stinking kids can have a roof over your heads and a meal at this table. Are you grateful? No. You take it for granted.’ I tried once to thank him for working for us. I must have been eight or nine. He smacked me. ‘Enough of your sarcastic remarks.’ I protested that I meant it. He smacked me again. There was no winning with Aldo.” She stopped, caught in a wayward

thought. "His father worked the line too...and beat him regularly. 'It made a man of me,' he'd say." She shrugged. "I suppose it made a man of me, too."

Lila and her siblings had belonged to the Linwood Gang. They weren't active members, they avoided the gang fights, staying in at night, but they carried double-action switchblades and knew how to use them. They practiced stabbing small trees. "You had to belong, it wasn't optional. They'd beat you up or rob your house if you didn't. We carried the knives as signs of belonging, like wearing your colors now. Baby Mafiosi."

In the winter of 1980, during a prewedding visit to Joe's mother in Bloomfield Hills, Joe and Lila drove into Detroit for dinner. As they got out of the car, a kid, fourteen or fifteen, pulled a small kitchen knife on them and asked for their money and jewelry. Lila reached in her pocket and pulled out her switchblade. It sprung open, almost twice the length of the boy's knife. He leaped backward. She did a quick slashing movement. "Wanna rumble?" The boy fled.

Joe leaned against the car, his heart thundering in his ears. "What were you thinking?"

"He didn't even have mustache hair."

"It's only money."

"'Only money' to you. Money is never 'only money' to me."

Six years later at a showing of *Crocodile Dundee*, Lila watched Dundee pull a knife on a mugger. "He stole that move from me." She turned to Joe, poking him in the ribs. Joe grunted. "The bowie knife was a nice touch," she said, "but too big for anything but skinning a moose."

To the end of her life, Lila carried a switchblade, testing its action monthly. She was on her seventh when she died. She liked new models, the way Joe liked new cars. "You're kidding me," she said to him when he asked her to give it up. "I'd feel naked."

The girls, when they heard about her knives, were astonished.

"What did you do with a knife when you were thirteen?" Stella was stunned. She was thirteen.

“Mostly, I played Stretch with Clara,” Lila said. “She was taller but I’d win. She hated the knives. She isn’t competitive. She’s a good sport.”

“What do you do with it now?” Ava spoke hesitantly, not sure she wanted to know.

“I carry it in a pocket. All my clothes have pockets. I like to have a knife on my person. You never know when you might need one.”

“Have you ever sliced anyone up?” Even at seven, Grace went straight to the point, asking the question her cautious big sisters shied from.

Lila considered her answer. “Knifing someone is so personal, so intimate. Not like a gun, easy as pie.”

—

ON THE MORNING OF LILA’S burial, Joe went with Grace to the funeral home. He brought Lila’s seventh switchblade with him. He liked the weight of it in his pocket, like the change he used to carry before the ubiquitous cellphone. He’d gone to say his final goodbye, also to make sure they hadn’t embalmed her or made her up to look like an aged starlet. His instructions had been overexplicit.

“We’re Jewish,” he told the funeral director the day she died. “We bury them quickly. No viewing.” He handed him his business card. *I’m a lawyer*, he thought. *He might as well know it.*

Lila had been refrigerated. She looked like herself, her cancer-ridden self, only thinner and more tired.

Joe asked the director to leave them alone. “We’ll be a few minutes.”

“What are we doing?” Grace looked in the coffin, then looked away, her face wet with tears. *Why did she have to die? I needed more time.*

“I’ll never see her again,” Joe said. Stroking her head with one hand, he reached into the coffin with the other and smoothly, stealthily slipped the switchblade into the side skirt pocket of her suit, a navy Armani, Frances’s