

SUNDAY life



happiness is near

Losing her mother led *Rachelle Unreich* along a surprising path to the discovery of an extraordinary life.

The condolence I remembered most when my mother, Mira, died was a short sentence, of only three words. A female cousin phoned from overseas and said, “Mother is mother.”

I thought of that for days afterwards. I think of it still. The perfection of those words comes to me whenever I’m trying to describe Mira. Do I mention that she loved to laugh? That she wore coral lipstick every day, no matter what the outing, whether it was going to the butcher or seeing her oncologist? That she hated to cook but was nevertheless famous for her cholent, a meat and bean stew that simmered in her oven for 24 hours? That she was also a Holocaust survivor, a fighter who had survived four concentration camps, including Auschwitz, and a death march?

It is impossible to encapsulate my mother, so vital to me, this way. And then I think of that word, “mother” – someone who loves you, champions you, guides you. One doesn’t need to expand further. Likewise, one doesn’t need to describe how painful the loss of a mother is. Mother is mother.

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In the year prior to my mother's death, our roles had been reversed. Together with my siblings, I had been Mira's caretaker: the person who took careful notes at doctor's appointments, who made sure the correct dose of medicine was administered, who wiped her brow with a wash cloth. And, to distract her from the pain, I decided to interview her. It became a relief for us both, spending hours together while I learnt how she'd arrived at being the remarkable mother I knew.

I was so wrapped up in the busyness of her sickness that I didn't anticipate the gap she would leave behind once she was gone. She had been the main adult relationship in my life for some time, and with her departure, other things slipped away.

I felt sluggish; I could not concentrate. When I visited my hairdresser – asking for the one thing I always request during a dramatic life change: a dramatic haircut to match – I noticed a visible swath of scalp. "What's that?" I asked.

"You're losing some hair," he said. "It can happen after a stressful time."

The pandemic's arrival didn't help. Magazines and newspapers started to fold, or hibernate, and so did my 35-year career as a journalist. Not that I had the capacity to write any articles; the only thing I wanted to write about was my mother, whose story was looming over my head like a cloud. I knew I didn't want to let the details of her life die alongside her.

In my grief, I'd often look through my mother's belongings, trying to find hidden messages, advice – or just evidence of our connection. So, during Melbourne's sixth lockdown, I pulled out a birthday card she had written me years earlier. "My darling daughter Rachele," it began. "I love you more than you know." And later in the card: "Don't lose hope! THE HAPPINESS IS NEAR!"

When I'd first read it years earlier, I couldn't make sense of it. Was it supposed to be a prediction ... or was it a burst of optimism? Mira always startled me with her positive outlook, believing that tomorrow held the possibility of being better than today.

Once, I quizzed her about this: wasn't she traumatised by what had happened to her and to her family in the Holocaust? But she never dwelt on the pain she experienced. Rather, incredibly, she used to say that in the Holocaust, "I learnt about the goodness of people." So many people had helped her during that time, and it was that which she chose to remember.

Re-reading those words during lockdown – "The happiness is near" – I came to understand them within the context of my own life. Her words were not a prophecy but a fact. Happiness does not arrive on your doorstep; it is a choice that you need to make all the time. Happiness is there for the taking, but you have to make the effort to grab it.

And so I did. With so much material at my disposal, thanks in part to those last interviews with Mira, I started writing my mother's story down in what would become my first book, *A Brilliant Life*. I did so with a newly gained, steely determination. I vowed that I would sit at my desk every day, from the early morning, and only leave my chair late at night. I would not stop writing until I had a first draft completed.

I wasn't sure what would become of it – I knew plenty of writers whose manuscripts lay, dusty, in their desk's top drawer – but I felt the spark of my captivating, magical mother within those pages. Mira was somebody who saw the light in the cracks and who noticed beauty in the world, rather than its darkness. For her, the happiness really was near, in every moment. And through her, the

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magic bounced onto the pages of my book, ready to be shared with others.

Determined to let grief go, I reached for happiness in other ways, allowing slices of light into my days. I started noticing when fallen flowers beautified the pavement on my walks; I patted the soft ears of panting dogs when they passed me; I marvelled when I read something so beautifully precise that I would weep. And, sometime during the pandemic, I also fell in love.

I thought of how my mother would have reacted to him: his twinkling blue eyes might have reminded her of the brother she adored and lost in the Holocaust. She would have recognised more similarities: a warm smile, humour, kindness.

It saddened me that she never got to meet him, until I realised one day that she had. When we were both at the same high school, he'd asked me out on a double date. I thought him handsome and smart, but I wasn't sure what he thought of me; there never was a second date. Neither of us can remember why.

But I do know that he must have come to my house to pick me up – my parents were traditional in that respect – and Mira would have made sure to meet him before allowing me to go with him. The thought of this scene brings me solace; I did not know then that he was part of my destiny, but I like to imagine that a part of her did.

Sometimes, at night, I lie in bed and try to summon Mira. I close my eyes tightly and I remember the smell of her hairspray, the softness of her skin. I can hear the lilting sound of her voice, the caress of her well-chosen words. And sometimes, when I whisper into the night and tell her about my love, I feel my mother's happiness land gently on my heart.

The happiness is near. •

A Brilliant Life (Hachette Australia) by Rachele Unreich is out now.



Above: the author as a toddler with her mother, Mira. Opposite: in 2000, when Mira was 72 and the author 33. Mira passed away in 2017.

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