Me, my mother and her anger

Katri Skala's childhood was spent in a house full of fury. Now she is trying to understand why



PHILIP HARTLEY FOR THE TIMES

Katri Skala. Top right: her parents, Peter and Barbara Skala (right), in France in 1960 with Katri's uncle Bob Feldon and Barbara's stepmother, Jennifer Holt

My mother died over a year ago. She was very old, ill, demented and raging to the last. In a rare, final moment of lucidity, she said she loved me and then was gone. We knew she was dying, we wanted her to go; she was so very unhappy. Yet it was still an enormous shock. Death is, no matter how expected. My final visit took place in a pleasantly sterile underground viewing room at the hospital. As tears fell, I thought, possibly even said, "It's over," and stroked her frozen cheek.

What exactly did I feel was over? The phrase is often used to indicate the end of a struggle. It evokes combat. It was not only that the struggle my mother endured in the last years of her life had ended — a struggle against the inexorable decline of disease — but also that the phrase characterised, to me, an element of our relationship.

My mother was born in 1926 in Chicago. She married my father, a refugee from Hitler's Vienna, in Connecticut in 1950. They lived across Europe and the US, but largely and lastly in the UK.

She was a 1950s housewife and mother through the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, right up to her death. Her story is not so unusual. Its outlines have been written in many variations of feminist writing over decades: an intellectually talented, curious and energetic woman locked in the role that patriarchy and society had defined for her. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in *The Second Sex*: "All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception."

I have no straight story to tell about my mother's anger. It underpinned her life, it expressed itself in her parenting, it could often be aggressive. She never hit her children, she simply yelled at us — if we thwarted her will, failed to love her with obedient and tender care, drew boundaries between our adult selves and her mothering.

When we were young we engaged in the usual forms of scrapping, not listening, crying, breaking things, losing things; in adolescence I entered into typical separation quarrels about curfews, schoolwork, sex and rudeness. This behaviour extended well into adulthood as I parried her desire to know everything about my life with continuing silence and bolshiness. I could see that my recalcitrance hurt her; her anger remained unabated.

When her first granddaughter was born, my mother retrieved a box from deep within a cupboard. It contained notebooks from her children's early years. Anecdotes about our first words, our first steps, our first fights with each other and with her. One evening, when all the family were gathered, she put her hand in the box and pulled out a torn-off piece of notepad. It read: "Katri, 3 years old. The other night she was naughty, refusing to get into the bath so I scolded her. She stomped her foot and yelled back at me God wasn't good, because if God was good then I wouldn't be so mad all the time." This story produced a gale of laughter from her and the rest of the family. What struck me was that I had identified at a very young age a salient aspect of her personality and its departure from the Christian doctrine of love that we were being taught daily.

> **Anger expressed itself in her parenting. It could be aggressive**

Last spring I visited the National Gallery in London. My mother had only recently died. I had an hour to spare and I wandered in and was brought up short by two of the most famous Renaissance works depicting Madonna and child: Raphael's *The Madonna of the Pinks* and Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin of the Rocks*. The sanctity of motherhood. The woman Mary who had a child without having sex. The loving mother who became muse, icon — a saint reinvented down the centuries by artists, theologians and feminists.

Where was the fierce mother of my childhood, youth and middle age? Not in any of those exquisite portraits. What was missing from the gallery could be found in Betty Friedan's seminal feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*. Published in 1963 it addressed the condition of millions of post-Second World War suburban American housewives who were doped on Valium and suffering from what Friedan famously termed a "nameless, aching dissatisfaction". Women for whom the traditional female role of housekeeping, childrearing and husband-worship led to depression, addiction, low self-esteem and boredom. In my mother's case alcohol was the medicine and anger the expression. If she was worried, she expressed anger; if she was sad, she expressed anger; if she was frustrated, impatient or crossed, she expressed anger. It informed her marriage to my father. They were lifelong sparring partners.

Much earlier in my life I believed the anger she expressed in relation to me was a consequence of my inability to be the daughter she so wanted. She had planned my wedding by the time I was 18 and had picked out a wedding dress too. I didn't marry until I was in my early fifties. I never had children. She took these aspects of my life as a personal insult. I was to live up to an idealised image, a vicarious embodiment of everything she had wished for her own life: perfect marriage, perfect mother, perfect home, and, what she never embarked on, a perfect career. I managed none of them. Who does?

When I did marry, to a man she adored, we entered a truce. She was proud of my husband. She also felt I was taken care of, safe. She no longer needed to worry about me. The anger, however, found new targets.

In her final years, when she and my father developed a variety of illnesses, including dementia, she raged, impressively, at what was happening to her. A week before her death, as I arrived in the lobby of her block of flats in London, I heard, reverberating down the lift shaft, my mother hollering: "Why are you doing this to me? Stop." Four floors up, I found her being helped by her two loving carers into her favourite chair.

In spite of the combative nature of her relationship with my father, they remained married for 67 years. They died within eight weeks of each other. She did not cross the frontier of married dependency to liberated feminist and working woman. It took her until she was in her mid-sixties to gain a degree, when she was awarded a first in social anthropology from the London School of Economics. The department invited her to do a PhD. She declined, saying to me: "I'd prefer to go back to playing tennis and being a lady who lunches."

For her 70th birthday my brothers and I gave her a residential life-writing course at the Arvon Foundation. Finally, perhaps, I thought, she might "have a go". She greeted the gift with barely contained hostility. But she went, terrified. When my father picked her up several days later she was jubilant: she'd had one of the best weeks of her life. She had been told she wrote hilarious political commentary and that she should send them in to political magazines. Words such as "trenchant", "witty", "informed" and "caustic" were used. They saw in her what she had always had difficulty in seeing in herself: talent and promise.

She never did send them, but published several years later a memoir of her early life, the details of which were known to me: an insecure loving father unhappily married to a depressive, cold mother; prosperity and emotional neglect; her parents' divorce followed by remarriages and drama; my mother, a resentful and dutiful daughter, right up to the deaths of both her parents.

The title of my recent novel *A Perfect Mother* is an ironic riff on the traditional notion of the perfect nuclear family. The novel features as its narrator a middle-aged man, estranged from his wife and living separately to his sons. I wrote against the idea of perfection and certainty. I wrote to embrace complexity and difficulty.

It would be simple-minded of me to imagine that had my mother been born later in the 20th century she would have been a successful journalist and, as a result, less inclined to anger. Many women born to more choice, more autonomy and more rights are angry and dissatisfied. But I do believe that had she recognised her talents and put them to use in the world, my mother might have been less angry at herself and more productive in channelling her formidable intelligence at those targets who deserved her ire. A combat between her and Donald Trump is one I can only imagine and wish dearly that I'd seen. I know who I'd have put my money on, and it's not the guy with the orange hair.

***A Perfect Mother* by Katri Skala, published by Hikari Press, is out now**