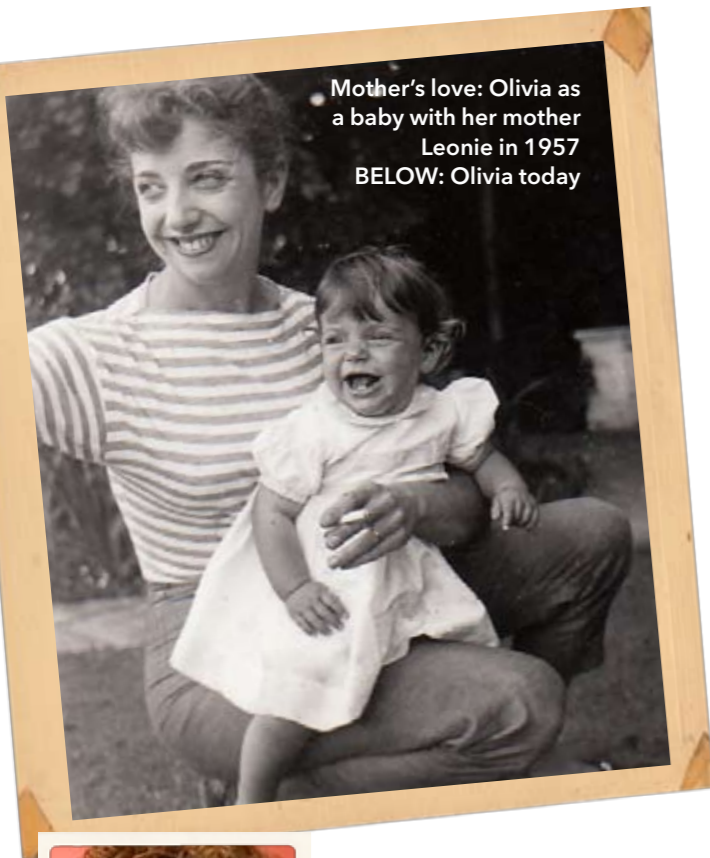


# 'When I missed my mother the most'

Author Olivia Lichtenstein lost her mother when her first child was a baby. Here, she describes how she missed her mother's guiding hand during her own journey through motherhood - but how she still remains an inspiration to her

Mother's love: Olivia as a baby with her mother Leonie in 1957  
BELOW: Olivia today



**ALL CHILDREN TAKE THEIR MOTHERS** for granted and expect them to be available whenever they need them. It's only when they're gone that you realise how much you depend on them.

At the age of 58, my mother fell ill and died five days later of a ruptured aortic aneurysm. My own first child, Oscar, was just nine months old. She'd longed for me to have a baby and as soon as I turned 30, the ticking of my biological

clock deafened her. So when I fell pregnant just six weeks into a new relationship, she was delighted and immediately began knitting a cardigan, an act that was extremely uncharacteristic of her. She loved her brief time as a grandmother and was far more tender and loving with him than I remembered her being with me.

Leonie, my mum, was impossible to ignore: vibrant, noisy and colourfully dressed in provocative low-cut tops and artfully slit skirts that revealed her shapely ballerina's legs - she'd even do the supermarket shopping in absurdly high heels. She always said to someone's face what others would say only behind their back. She had a fierce and uncompromising intelligence, strangely coupled with the timidity of the immigrant. Her parents were from Lithuania and much of the family had remained in the old country. With the shadow of aunts, uncles and first cousins who perished in the Holocaust, and the untimely death of her own father when she was five, she knew the worst not only could, but did, happen. These events instilled in her an oppressive anxiety that meant she lived her life on the brink of disaster, always fearful that nothing good could ever last. She expected a great deal of her friends and family. If they didn't match up, she had no compunction about telling them so. It wasn't always easy being her daughter.

In the brief nine months we shared after the birth of my son and before my mother's death, I grew closer to her and began to understand her better. I would take my son to visit her and we



Provocative: Olivia, right, with her mother in 1977, remembers her vibrant dress sense

would spend happy hours delighting in him together. On one walk through her neighbourhood, she bumped into someone she knew and proudly showed Oscar off, saying: 'Isn't he delicious? And he's all mine!' I didn't mind her appropriation of him as I could see the pleasure he brought her. She would look after me while I fed him and let me rest while she cared for him; I was conscious that we had embarked on a new stage in our relationship. She never tired of telling me how happy I had made her by making her a grandmother.

After losing her so suddenly, I missed her firm hand holding me steady on the first bewildering steps of motherhood. It was a lonely time and it's a loneliness that has never left me. After the first terrible weeks of organising her funeral with my brother and father, and trying to reinvent a life that no longer contained her, I felt utterly lost. My partner and I got married 12 days after her death, in a desperate attempt to do something life affirming. I'm not sure it was the right thing to do - it only accentuated her absence. Photographs don't always tell the truth and, although we are smiling in our wedding photos, I remember all too well the utter desolation I felt on the day that my mother wasn't there to see me marry.

I became obsessed by the need to have another baby, as though the creation of a life that had some of her DNA could somehow compensate for the loss of her. I went on to have three miscarriages before the birth of my daughter, four years after my mother's death.

When Francesca was born, I felt my mother's absence all over again, remembering how she had been with me in Oscar's early months. I missed her most acutely one afternoon as I watched Oscar playing on the swings in the park, a place I had often visited with her. It was a warm autumn day and I sat on a bench and cried thinking about all the fun she had been denied in not being there to watch her grandchildren grow up.

I often wonder what she might have told me. Was I and am I doing it right? Elsewhere in my life, have I made the right

*'After losing her so suddenly, I missed her holding me steady on the first bewildering steps of motherhood'*

decisions? Am I the woman she would have wished me to be? I can still clearly hear her voice in my head: now and then there's a sharp intake of breath - her expression of disapprobation - at other times words of encouragement and approval. I now appreciate what a wise person she was, always ready to listen and offer advice. She would ring me daily and often I would be curt on the phone. Even today when the phone rings, a part of me wishes she was on the other end. I long for the very things that once annoyed me.

But although I miss her presence, I still remember the important lessons she taught me - to work hard and not to take myself too seriously, never to give up and to roll with the punches. She taught me to do and be whatever I wanted. For



Proud grandma: Leonie had just nine months with Oscar, pictured here in 1989



FROM LEFT: The family when Olivia's brother, Conrad, second from left, received his doctorate in 1986. Olivia, left, with her daughter Francesca in XXXX. Leonie and Oscar in 1989

all that, there are many things my mother never told me - she thought she had all the time in the world to tell me them.

The deafening silence of her absence also spurred me on to write my second novel, *Things Your Mother Never Told You\**. I wanted to explore the notion of a relationship continuing after a mother's death. What if she were still around you, watching and guiding you and what if you found out a secret about her life after she were gone; would it change you and what you felt about her? Lilian, the mother in my book, is inspired by my mother, but her story is not my mother's own.

For several years after my mother's death, I was full of rage at her for having left me - an irrational, but not uncommon response to sudden death. I felt robbed of the opportunity to put right the wrongs that existed in our relationship. I've since forgiven both her and myself. I am who I am because of her.

Now, as a mother myself, I'm aware that I have tried in my relationship with my own daughter to repair some of the hurt that existed between my mother and me. I want to tell her that she should never settle for second best, that she should pursue her dreams. I want to tell her that I'm always here for her and that I don't want her to feel that I'm her responsibility. I am careful to do all I can to ensure the harmony of our relationship. Most of all, I hope I have given her all the confidence she needs to be her glorious self. □

\* THINGS YOUR MOTHER NEVER TOLD YOU, ORION, OUT NOW