



A Portrait of the Artist as My Mother

PRISCILLA WARNER SPENT HER LIFE PUZZLED AND SOMETIMES ENRAGED
BY HER ECCENTRIC PARENT. NOW RIVA'S MIND IS
GONE. BUT THE MYSTERY—AND THE LOVE—RUN EVEN DEEPER

➔ Growing up, all I wanted was a mother in a black sheath dress and a single strand of pearls who could discuss the Vietnam War intelligently at cocktail parties.

What I got was a whacked-out artist in army fatigues, blouses made of flour sacks, and black patent leather earth shoes. A mother who grew up in Hollywood and never stopped longing for that larger-than-life world. A mother who shunned PTA meetings and instead held dream analysis workshops in our basement in Providence,

TOP DAUGHTER

>>> *The author and her mother 25 years ago, at a shoot for Priscilla's then-client, Fred the Furrier. What you can't see is that Riva is wearing her house key around her neck.*

read tarot cards, took mind control classes and regularly announced to strangers that she was psychic.

My mother's flamboyant way of expressing herself embarrassed and confused me even as an adult. Once, out of the blue, she sent me a postcard with

a picture of her face pasted over that of a Native American woman. She'd written nothing on the card, merely signing it Princess Prettyflower.

She mystified others as well. In April of 2002, two paramedics arrived at her home, responding to her 911 call. They encountered a petite 73-year-old woman with a wild mane of gray hair, hunched over a cluttered card table, feverishly working on three black-and-white collages. She introduced herself as Riva Leviten and said she felt like she was having a very bad drug trip. The

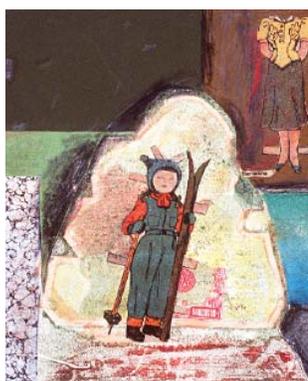
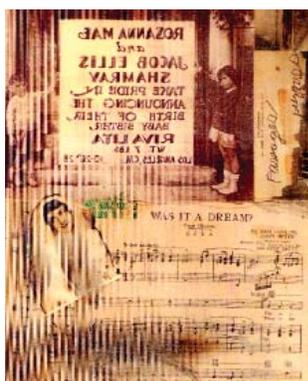
young men were taken aback by that description of what turned out to have been two small, simultaneous strokes, my mother later told me, proudly.

“They couldn’t get over my house!” she said. “They kept asking ‘Do you really live here? Alone?’” My mother had bought her 180-year-old house after my father died. It was her declaration of independence, her playhouse, her stage, her art studio and showcase, crammed with beautiful antique

hurt to discover that she served her visitors fresh croissants, as we’d never been offered much more than stale rice cakes. Riva delighted in running a household for strangers, but when her B&B days were over, we could hardly find a place to sit down, let alone a bed to sleep in, since every surface was piled with frames, artwork and clutter.

Riva’s bedroom, which she had vacated for important patrons back in the bed-and-breakfast days, was called

a most memorable visit. Awaiting them in their guest room was a wicker stroller filled with antique dolls and a few naked Barbies, a plastic parrot hanging from a tall perch and eating a plastic saltine, a ceramic bust of my mother, done by a friend, and the head of a 702-pound bluefin tuna Riva had caught in 1964. A plaque on the wall stated that my mother had broken the record for the largest fish ever boated by a woman in Rhode Island waters.



PIECES OF A LIFE

>>> *A few of Riva Leviten's hundreds of vivid collages (from left): Was It a Dream?, Barcelona, Conquering and Moonstory <<<*

furniture, decapitated dolls, rusty toys and every scrap of paper ever written by or about her. In the front parlor, where the paramedics found her, 27 pieces of her artwork hung on the walls.

All the collages and etchings in that room were black and white. That’s why it was called the Black-and-White Room. Every room was named. Across the hall was the Napoleon Room, where a bust of the French emperor sat on a table draped with clay beads my mother had made years earlier, in a past life regression workshop.

A small bedroom upstairs was called the Poetz Corner, intentionally misspelled in a pamphlet Riva designed when she turned her home into a bed-and-breakfast for a couple of years. My siblings and I laughed upon learning that our undomestic mother had become an innkeeper. But deep down, we were

the Opera Room. For years I thought it was called the Oprah Room, because that’s how Riva pronounced it, with a flourish. Then I noticed the score sheets featured in collages on the walls, and realized she was saying O-P-E-R-A.

My mother probably did fantasize about serving Oprah Winfrey croissants and coffee; she was always expecting a celebrity to pop in to her establishment.

“Don’t breathe a word to anybody,” she once told me, “but a very important person might be coming to stay here.” After promising not to tell a soul, I learned that Steven Spielberg was visiting nearby Brown University, and a woman there thought he would “absolutely love” the Oprah/Opera Room.

Steven Spielberg never did come to stay at my mother’s house, and neither did Oprah Winfrey. But had they shown up, they would have had

“Riva’s house has everything in the world in it,” my son, Max, observed years ago. “Except a husband.”

My children never knew my father. He died in 1988, following a long battle with cancer and many long battles with Riva. After his death, my mother lived alone for 14 years, except for a brief period when she picked up a stray cat. She had dozens of friendships, some lasting the length of a bus ride, others for decades. Many of these people disappeared mysteriously. “We’re not speaking,” my mother would reply when I inquired about someone whose name I hadn’t heard in a while. “It was quite ugly. And I don’t want to discuss it.”

Riva wasn’t big on introspection. Her house was full of books on healing crystals, self-hypnosis and pyramid power, but I was the one who spent years in

a therapist's office, as I battled a terrifying panic disorder. That's where I thrashed out my ambivalent feelings toward my mother, my anger and anxiety about wanting her to be a protector instead of a playmate, and where I learned what the word *narcissist* meant. "You had a mother," my therapist told me. "She just wasn't very maternal."

On my eighteenth birthday, Riva said, in all seriousness, "I've been your mother for 18 years. Now will you be my mother?"

Often, I enlisted friends to hang out with the two of us, to diffuse the intensity of Riva's neediness. She had virtually no relationship with her family in California. Her beloved father had died when she was 24. All through my childhood, Riva would wander into my room, sit on my bed and cry as she read aloud the warm, loving letters he had written to her. I didn't know how to fill that hole in my mother's heart.

As for my grandmother, Riva said only, "She was sick with kidney problems from the time I was a little girl."

"Her mother was depressed and crazy," my father sometimes said, usually when he and Riva were not getting along. And a childhood friend of Riva's once described my mother's home: "It was dark and lonely. Riva's siblings were much older and not around. I remember her spending a lot of time by herself, with her father at work and her mother in bed, sick."

My grandmother came to Rhode Island just once, when I was seven. I remember clinging to Riva as she screamed at her frail mother: "I hate you! I hate you! You're a witch!"

Riva was a drama queen. "I'm in the hell realms!" she announced when things weren't going well, describing anything from her fury over a bad art review to the exhaustion she felt after shoveling snow from her sidewalk.

"My work is extraordinary," she often said, when it had been admired by others or when she'd completed something that had thrilled her. "I'm a success story! It's all happening!"

Even on my wedding day, Riva basked in the spotlight. Before the ceremony, when I froze at the thought of walking down the aisle in front of 200 people, my mother proclaimed, "Don't worry, everyone will be looking at me!" She set up an impromptu exhibit of her artwork on easels near the dance floor.

From the time I was a teenager, it was clear to me that making art fulfilled and defined Riva in a way that mothering did not. The more she matured as an artist, the more complex and inscrutable her imagery became. I didn't want to examine what it all meant. And I cringed when I read the "creed" she pasted on the back of every piece of art: "I act as a channel in this flow process . . . for me it is a personal journey—as an underground stream going from unknowing to total seeing—with a special kind of resulting ecstasy."

After college, I went to work as an art director in New York. The more success I achieved, the more embarrassed I felt by Riva's corny self-promotion and her insistence that she was "different from the rest of the world."

WHEN THE NEUROLOGIST who treated my mother after her strokes asked me to describe her normal behavior, I was at a loss. "That's going to be hard," I said.

Riva had led her life as a blockbuster performance, but now she was beginning to forget her lines. She spent a week in the hospital and several months in rehab. When a physical therapist said she'd need a caregiver in order to return home, Riva accused him of character assassination. I didn't have the heart to tell my mother she'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

A friend introduced me to an outstanding caregiver named Betty, whom I hired to spend nights at Riva's house and several hours a day by her side. Betty drove my mother everywhere. Together, they toured Providence and the surrounding towns, explored restaurants, watched movies, visited doctors and sat on park benches, people-watching.

Occasionally, I envied Betty for her ability to connect with my mother and felt guilty that I'd outsourced Riva's care. But most of the time I thanked God that I had found someone to share the burden of making my mother happy.

I had bought my mother a mother.

While Riva faded, I flourished, designing semiprecious jewelry and writing a book with two other women.

As my world expanded, Riva's grew smaller. She became placid and docile instead of fiery and difficult. Betty often told me how much my mother appreciated all I did for her. "I hate to bother Priscilla," Riva would say. "She has so much on her plate." I paid her bills, oversaw her health care and hired an artist to help her do some printmaking. When Betty informed me that my mother was no longer able to make art, I wept for weeks.

Then Riva was approached to mount one last show in Providence. Betty and a couple of Riva's friends chose the art and made it all happen. The mayor honored Riva with a certificate of recognition. But at the opening, she seemed overwhelmed. Gone was the woman who used to dress up in costumes and cowboy boots to meet her fans.

Her work, finally, spoke for itself. And I began listening to it.

After the show, I searched Riva's house and loaded my favorite pieces into my car. I filled my basement with hundreds of collages and prints, and took refuge there, staring at the imagery that had sprung from my mother's brain. She really was extraordinary.

When I showed my mother's creations to curators, critics and other artists, they validated her work.

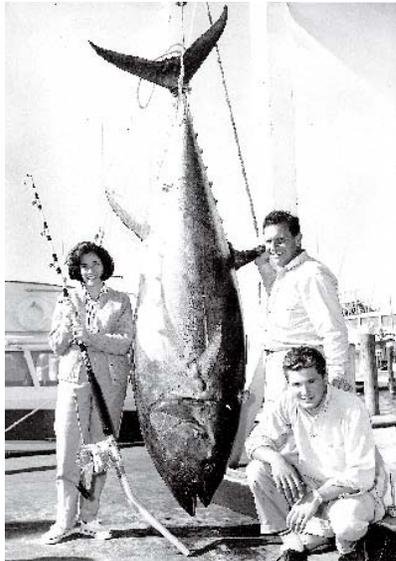
Meanwhile, my mother grew increasingly unsteady on her feet, until one day she collapsed and fractured her pelvis. She spent a week in the hospital and was transferred to a nursing home.

Riva had no idea where she was, no matter how many times I explained that she'd fallen and needed rehabilitation. It was as though a windshield wiper came down every two minutes



FAMILY PASSAGES

>>> Priscilla and Riva in the nursing home, 2007. Riva in 1964 with her 702-pound tuna, along with the fishing boat's captain and mate.



and swept away all that I'd said. "I don't know why I'm here," she kept repeating.

Betty visited her every day. They participated in activities like balloon tosses, word search games and bingo.

Never in a million years did I think my mother would start playing bingo. But then, I never thought she'd stop recognizing family. "Who are these people?" she asked, when I handed her a photograph of me with my husband and kids.

On good days, Betty and I talked about the possibility of Riva returning home. But over time, it became clear that she could no longer live there.

During my next trip to Providence, I explored my mother's house from top to bottom, taking note of the collaged RIVA sign she'd erected by her back door, the handmade prayer beads hanging from a shelf, her Buddha shrine, meticulously arranged on a mirrored surface.

Bereft over my mother's diminished zest for life, I fell in love with every little knickknack she'd bought, made, bartered for or picked out of the trash, every bride-and-groom figurine, cheap plastic toy, mismatched plate and flashy article of striped, flowered or sequined clothing that hung in her closet or lay strewn across her bedroom floor. I admired every painting, print and collage on her walls. I missed the

crazy lady who had driven me crazy.

Betty worked for months getting the house in shape so we could put it up for sale, sifting through mounds of Riva's possessions and art. I made trips to Providence when I could, sorted through my mother's life and cried almost every day. "My mother is gone," I told friends. "And I feel like I am picking through her remains."

A particular silhouette appeared again and again in many of my favorite collages. I had always wondered about the little man with a hat, who sometimes teetered on what looked like the edge of a cliff and other times stood in the midst of chaos. *The Traveler* was scrawled on one piece with this image.

For years my mother had driven to my house in New York, to Provincetown for art workshops, to Boston for overnights with friends, and across New England to museums and galleries. But she is done traveling now.

On one of my recent visits to the nursing home, she smiled up at me from a chair. I bent down, brushed the white hair off her face and kissed her ruddy cheek.

"Priscilla, do everything you want to do in life," Riva said out of the blue.

"I love you so much," I blurted.

"I love you so much too," she said.

"You were my firstborn. I remember the moment I first saw you. I was so shocked. You were perfect." Riva beamed at me. "Your hands, your fingers, your toes..."

I kissed my mother again, realizing that somehow she understood and valued her role as mother. That, in her own way, she always had.

Riva inspired me to be an artist and a creative mother. She taught me to find the beauty in my children's magical views of the world when they were younger and to give them space when they grew older, so they could rediscover the world, creating their own vocabulary and modes of expression while becoming the people they wanted to be. She taught me that pain is part of life and that sometimes mothers cannot protect their children from it.

Riva is no longer the woman I grew up struggling to understand. She is not the woman who forced me as a teenager to parent my own needy parent, who embarrassed and angered me with her self-centeredness. She is an elderly woman in a nursing home who gave birth to me and who lives on in me.

In my dreams, my mother would still be making art, e-mailing me imagery for the rest of my life. But Riva is not up to e-mailing. I have not received a letter or postcard from her in five years. She is incapable of reading this story.

One of my mother's encaustic collages is called *Was It a Dream?* That title, taken from an old piece of sheet music, calls out to me. In the collage, my mother's birth announcement appears backward. A picture of her as an innocent bride, looking forward to happiness, haunts me. *Was It a Dream?* sits on my desk, asking the question I imagine my mother asks herself all the time.

And I ask myself this: What was real and what did I dream during my 55 years with my mother? 🐻

PRISCILLA WARNER is the coauthor of the best-selling book *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding*. Her mother's artwork can be seen on rivaleviten.com.