

Slipping Out from Under

By Susan Hodara

“My left thumb is identical to my right thumb except for a small pink callus below its joint, permanently hardened by the regular pressure of my lower teeth. I am in my 50s—writer, teacher, wife, and mother of two grown daughters— and I still suck my thumb. The left one, never the right; an ingrained response, I know, from my earliest days.



Photo by Margaret Fox

(L-R) Authors Lori Toppel, Susan Hodara, Vicki Adesso, & Joan Potter.

When my first baby was born, my mother revealed that she had to stop nursing me after just three weeks because of an infection in her left nipple. My parents had come to stay in our Brooklyn Heights apartment to meet their new granddaughter. My mother and I were sitting on opposite corners of the sofa when she told me. Sofie lay across my lap and

pulled greedily at my right breast; my mother perched upright on the edge of the seat cushion, knees together.

I remember her words, innocent, almost chatty, her eyes averted across the living room as she spoke. Of course I have no memory of my own first weeks, but I can imagine: the

very best thing in my new life—my sustenance, my comfort, my reconnection with my mother’s body—suddenly gone. The discovery of my thumb set a lasting pattern: get the need filled, find another way. Though I don’t think about it often, I know my left thumb holds something of my mother for me.

In my childhood memories of her, she is often standing on the sidelines as my father proclaimed, announced, questioned, yelled. She is silent and passive, removed. In the memoir class, after I’d finish reading my work, Joan’s

response was often the same: “But what about your mother? Where was she?”

The fall that our writing group started meeting, my father was declining into the morass of Alzheimer’s disease. Over five years our family had watched him slowly disappear. I talked to my mother on the telephone almost every day, and traveled regularly to Washington, D.C., to visit. Sometimes she cried, from exhaustion or despair.

But the more lost my father became, the more my mother emerged. As I wrote about her and shared my stories in our group, and as I learned about the others’ mothers through the stories they wrote, my understanding started to shift. For the first time in my life, I began to glimpse who my mother was.

I am the only member of our writing group whose mother is still alive, who can still ask her mother questions, compare memories from the past. When I think of the others’ stories—the heartbreaking last days of Vicki and Lori’s mothers, the spreading of Joan’s mother’s ashes—I sense the fragility of the time I have left with my own mother. I have just begun to discover her. It awakens a hunger I can hardly bear to feel.”



Excerpted from *Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance with Our Mothers* (Big Table Publishing, March 2013), a collaborative memoir by Susan Hodara, Joan Potter, Vicki Adesso, and Lori Toppel. Hodara, a

longtime Chappaqua resident, is a memoirist whose work appears in numerous anthologies and literary journals, and a journalist who covers the arts for the *New York Times* and other publications. She and her co-authors formed a writing group in 2006; *Still Here Thinking of You* presents their stories of their relationships with their mothers, from their early childhoods to their mothers’ later years. Available at Amazon.com and StillHereThinkingOfYou.com.



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