

My Mom's Secret Life

BY MELISSA T. SHULTZ ● FROM babble.com

I was certain I knew everything there was to know about my mother—or at least everything a daughter wants to know.

She watches the detective show *Bones* twice a day, hates board games and bland food, loves coral lipstick, Hollywood tell-all books, and George Clooney. She's prone to offering unsolicited opinions, has no qualms about telling a brain surgeon how the ganglia really work, and goes to the movies with her sidekick Marilyn. I know this stuff because we talk by phone, every week. That, and my sister fills me in.

It wasn't always this way. When I was a teenager, we spoke very little. I figured she could never understand what it was like to be a



kid. Now a parent myself, the mirror has flipped. At least my generation has tools to help bridge the gap—tools like Google and social networks—at our fingertips.

When I joined Facebook, I took every security measure possible. It was months before I added a photo, then several additional weeks before I sent friend requests. One day, I found myself looking up everyone I've ever known, including my mother.

To my surprise, I discovered she has a Facebook page with a fabulous photo that makes her look >>

GO FIGURE

76

percent of parents with kids on Facebook have friended their teens. Twenty-nine percent of these teens would prefer to immediately unfriend their parents.

Source: a joint AOL-Nielsen survey, August 2010

coy, even playful!

How could this be? My mother is not playful; she is my mother. She makes chicken soup and tells me how to get stains out of tablecloths.

Who took that photo? Who are these people writing on her wall? I wanted to know, but I didn't ask. Instead,

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I went with the flow and Googled her.

And up came her name.

Seems my mother has finally found an outlet for her commentary. She reviews books online, where her preference for fiction surprises me, especially titles with dark, tawdry themes. Pity the authors she doesn't care for; the word *annoying* comes up more than once in her reviews, some of which are picked up by other sites and reverberate across the Internet.

But books are only

the beginning. She belongs to several "meet-up groups." What are these? On one of the sites, she answers the profile question: Which of these words best describes you? *Talker.*

Listener. Icebreaker. She replies *All*. Then she goes on to note that in her opinion, people are defined by their

experiences. Some of which, I find on another site (which I have also never heard of), lead me to The Bomb:

My mother is registered on an online dating network.

Her code name—is that what you call it?—let's just say, think *Gone with the Wind*. Why did she pick *that*? I want to know, but I dare not ask. After all, I am spying. Instead, I go further undercover and register to read more. And there she is in living color, my mother, looking for "a date, a friend, an activity part-

ner," noting that she raised a family (finally, something I do know), has had several "vocations," and now watches her grandchildren with "great amusement." What does that even mean?

When I get to the part about how she likes "witty dialogue with dinner," I find myself wishing it weren't noon so that I could swish back a glass of wine. Now I'm certain I've been talking to someone else's mother, not mine, for all these years. The woman who thought my father hung the moon is saying, "Bring it on. I'm ready." There's more. She both coordinates classes for seniors and takes classes for seniors—on everything from psychology to art history—enters writing competitions, and answers trivia questions. Online. With the computer my brother gave her.

"Have you Googled Mom?" I asked him soon after.

"Why would I >>

Google Mom?” he answers—a man who, when Googled, fills up dozens of pages and who lives only minutes from our mother.

Thousands of miles from his home, using my computer, I show

Can you blame anyone for looking? And if you don't look and you miss something big, how awful would you feel later?

Would she have gotten out and met new people and stayed

Will we talk to one another differently? Share more? Hide less? Will they like the new me or prefer the me they thought they knew? The one who says, “Pick up your clothes, dinner's ready, and everything will be all right,” or the one who has friends from an online meet-up group?

But mostly I wonder whether the Internet can take credit for people like my mother creating new versions of themselves, or whether that new version has been there all along, and I just never thought to ask.

When she comes to visit this weekend, I will—face to face. I just hope she'll send me a friend request when she gets back home. ■

Can the Internet take credit for people like my mother creating new versions of themselves?

him. He laughs till he can't speak.

The thing is: Where do I go from here? Just because I can, is it right to keep tabs on my mother? Really, the whole concept behind “parental controls” on the Internet needs to be rethought. Who are the controls for? The parent or the kid with the nosy parent? What about the parent with a nosy kid?

connected to peers simply using the telephone and snail mail? I'd say, no way. And from everything I've read, the older you get, the more important it is to have communities, friendships, and hobbies. As I approach my 50th birthday, I can't help but wonder how the Internet will someday affect my relationship with my own kids.

WHO KNEW?

Eat for Good Citizenship

A family meal beats social networking and neighborly chitchat as the No. 1 way to increase civic responsibility, says a joint study by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship. Those who eat regularly with their loved ones, says the report, are more likely to vote, get involved in community activities, and volunteer.

