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Thinking of advice my mother never gave

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Family Voices

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Special to the Sun

The night before I left home 25 years ago, my mother sat at her sewing machine, her lips pursed around a mouthful of pins, doing some last-minute alterations to the clothes I would later cram into my over-stuffed suitcase.

The next day I was to leave for Paris, where I was to live and work, and where I would, perhaps, marry a French count who owned a chateau in some *bois* or other. I was 18.

Recently I spent an evening at my sewing machine, my lips pursed around a mouthful of pins, doing some last-minute alterations to the clothes my daughter, Holly, would later cram into her over-stuffed backpack. She is 19. The next day she was to leave for a 10-week trip through Europe.

As I hemmed and sewed I thought of all that I wanted Holly to know, of all that I had learned in my own travels. I was imagining the worst — a stolen passport, mislaid travellers' checks, misdirected baggage. I was hoping she'd eat properly, that she'd keep warm. I was wondering if she'd be lonely.

As the needle travelled through the fabric feeding through my fingers, I thought of all the advice my mother never gave me. I remember only the curve of her back as she bent to her work, the flash of her fingers as she turned a hem. I remember her silence. And, now, for the first time, I knew all that she had kept so carefully hidden behind her silence and the hum of the sewing machine.

Over the years I've loosened the ties that bind my daughter to me. Bit by bit, hand over hand, I've fed them through my fingers and watched Holly fly higher and higher, freer and freer. From where I stand, always below, always behind, I watch her

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again the line sags, as if at any minute she'll plunge to the ground. But then, in a breath, she finds her second wind and sails higher against the open sky.

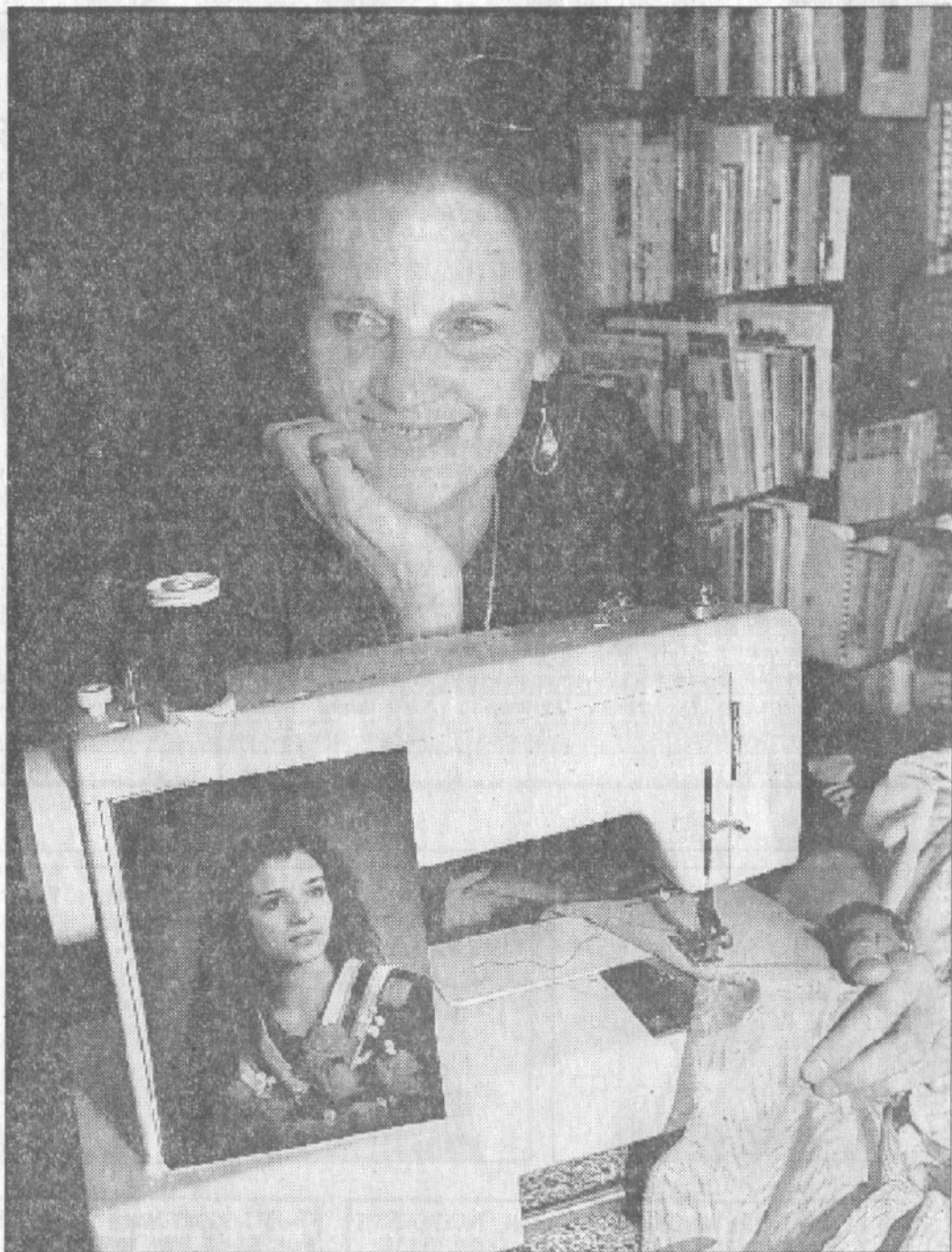
Bent over my work that evening, I bit down tightly on the mouthful of pins so they would not scatter at my feet. And taking my lead from my mother's silence, I bit back all that I would have liked to say to my daughter, but knew better than to voice.

Next day at the airport I gave Holly a long hug before she turned toward the departure gate. I felt her thin shoulders in my arms, her smooth cheek against my face. I kissed her once and then I let her go.

And then I went home to call my mother.

Lois Peterson, 42, lives in Delta and works in a library. These days she spends her time waiting for the mail to bring postcards from Europe.

We'd like to hear your voice — in about 550 words. Mail to Family Voices, Linda Bates, Vancouver Sun, 2250 Granville St., Vancouver V6H 3G2, or fax 732-2323



WHAT TO SAY?: Lois Peterson thought of lots of advice, then settled for a hug and kiss for her daughter

MARK VAN MANEN/Vancouver Sun