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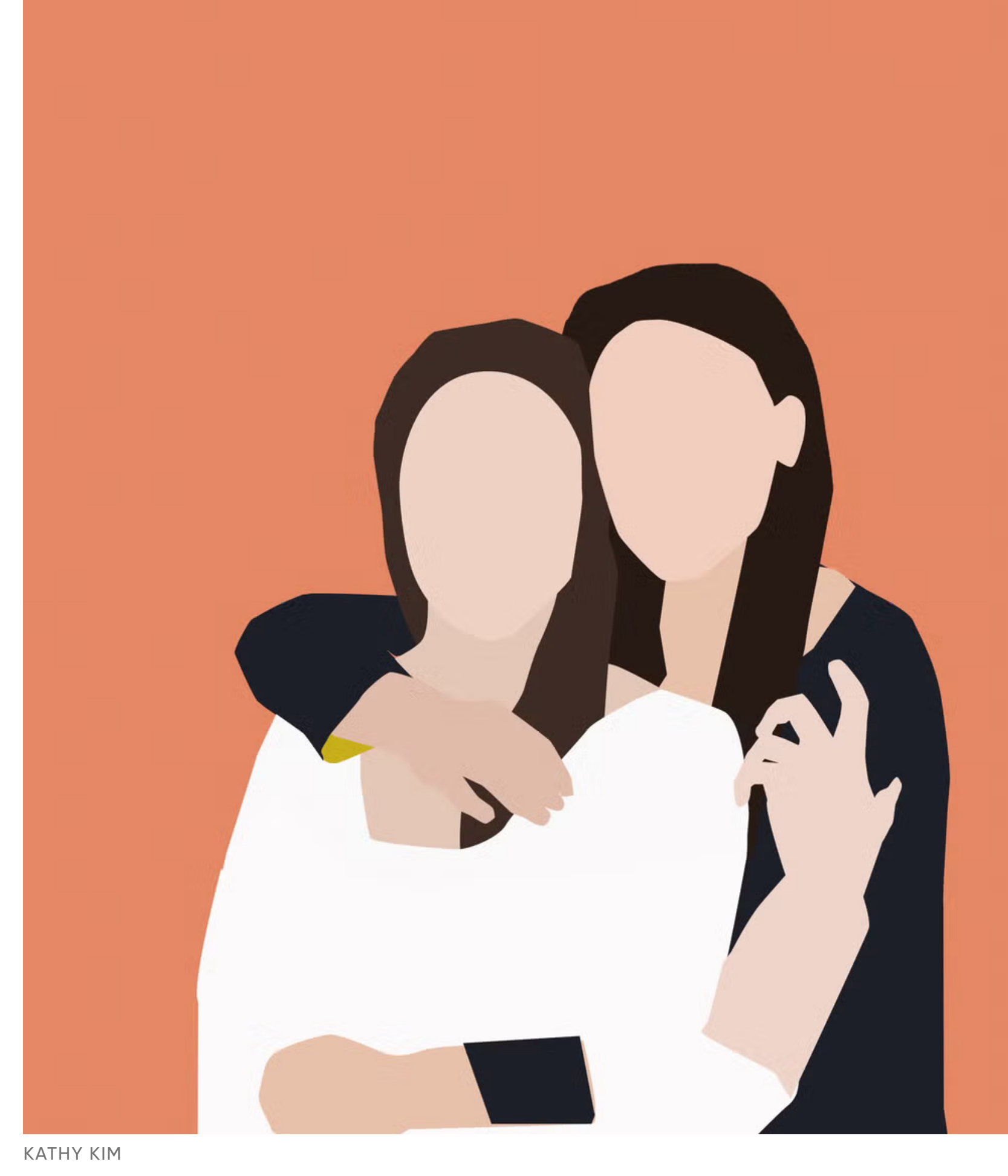


# Being a Stepmom Is the Best Job I Never Wanted

How a troubled tween girl brought me to my knees, and then stole my heart.

By Leigh Grudel Published: Aug 15, 2024 9:40 AM EDT

SAVE ARTICLE



KATHY KIM

When I first met Bella\*, she looked like a beautiful fairy in her faded and creased flower tiara. For two years, I'd been waiting to meet her. I felt like my relationship with her father, David, couldn't really begin until I saw him in the role of dad. He, of course, wanted to take it slow. He only agreed to this meeting because it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for his Broadway-loving child—I had snagged tickets to a rehearsal for the Tony Awards.

As we waited in line for the show, Bella, who was 10 at the time, clung to her dad's leg, half hiding behind him. I tried to engage her with talk of Hamilton, which I knew she loved, but all I got was an occasional weary glance as if I were a monster she needed to keep an eye on. It didn't seem like ordinary shyness. The girl was terrified.

I was 47 when I met David and had yet to have a real relationship. I'd never felt attractive, so I would contort myself into some version of the carefree, cool girl I thought every guy wanted. Like a cheap drugstore costume, the ill-fitting persona quickly fell apart, and with it, any chance of real connection.

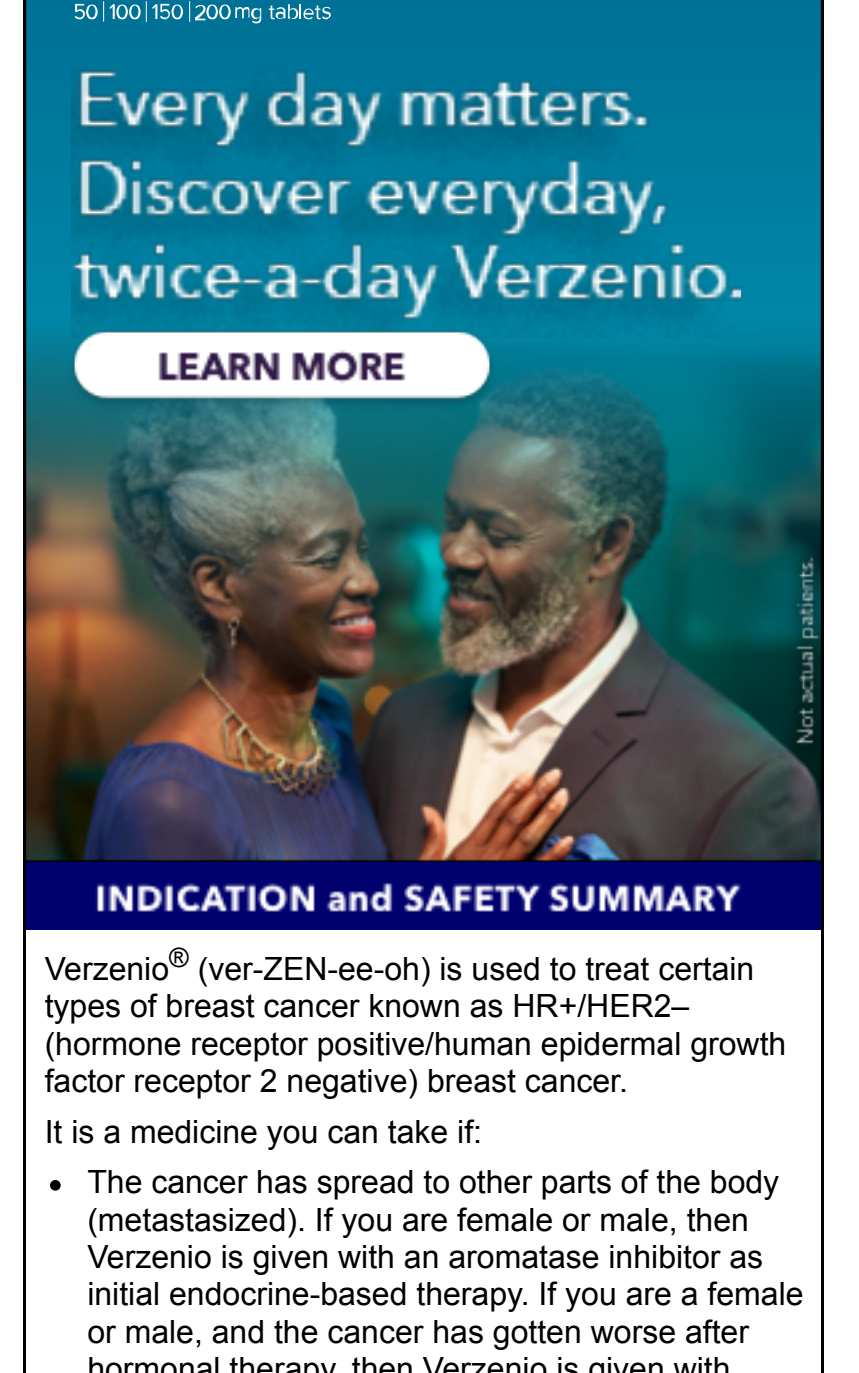
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I didn't do any of this with David. From the start, his actions proved that he meant what he said and promised. At one point, I gained a lot of weight, as if to test him, "knowing" that not even love transcends fat. His did. I fell hard.

I found it attractive that David had a daughter and was very much looking forward to building a relationship with her. Not a maternal one, mind you—she already has a mom. What I was picturing was more like the fun aun, all giggles and hugs with very little responsibility.

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## DEPRESSION RECOGNIZES DEPRESSION, AND FINALLY, I SENSED IT INSIDE HER.

For the first few years, I planned every weekend we had with Bella down to the minute—Chinatown for dumplings, Blick to shop for crafts, the International Spy Museum, all packed into one or two days. David told me it was too much, but I wanted her to associate seeing me with having a blast. It didn't work. She was moody and would whisper to her dad while ignoring me, and the two of them would go off and do whatever bonding activity I had planned without me.

I was failing, and I couldn't believe it. I started to feel sorry for myself for losing my alone time with David. Meanwhile, Bella was truly suffering. She was dealing with so much: the breakup of her parents, living in two different homes, me, and a brand-new middle school.

Over the next two years, she started acting out. It felt darker than your average teenage shenanigans. She was stealing—not just money out of her wallets but my credit cards and from stores. And the lies poured out of her with shocking ease. She told people she had a sister, that she was from Cuba, and that two girls in Brooklyn had mugged her. Most kids lie to get out of trouble, but she was creating different versions of herself.

She started making up stories to pit one parent against the other. There were tales of some ugly exchanges with her mom, but the lies shrouded everything in uncertainty. We never knew what to believe.

She also lied about me. After one of those early visits, she told David that I had pulled her aside and whispered: "I'm going to be your new mom." Something so wildly inappropriate had never crossed my mind; besides, I had already decided I didn't want to be anyone's mother.

This wasn't always the case—I had dreamed of motherhood for most of my life. When my 30s rolled in, I decided to do it alone. I went from scrolling through dating profiles to studying sperm donor profiles. For two months, I researched, planned, and attended Single Mothers by Choice meetings. Then one day, seemingly out of nowhere, my [anxious brain](#) gifted me one of the most freeing thoughts I've ever had: *You don't have to do this.* Years of watching friends and my brother with their kids had woken me up to the all-encompassing reality of parenting. I finally admitted to myself that I didn't want the responsibility. It's a decision I have never regretted.

## OUR BOND MAY NOT BE BLOOD, BUT IT IS FOR LIFE.

Bella's behavior escalated. One night, she didn't come home at all. We found her the next day, thankfully, but all those hours with the police sitting in our apartment gave our brains plenty of time to dream up horrifying scenarios. Even the cops didn't think it was going to end well.

Worrying about her, reprimanding her, consoling her, fighting with her, consulting with her [teachers](#)—it took up all the space. David and Bella's mom constantly talked or argued about what to do. The new love bliss David and I had briefly enjoyed got shoved aside.

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Mostly, everyone thought she'd grow out of it. She was still getting used to the changes, and middle school is notoriously wretched. I thought back to my own middle school years. My misery was directly related to the fact that I wasn't pretty. Bella is magnificent. My juvenile idea about beauty—namely that it is the key to happiness—is the only reason I can give, the only excuse I can make for not noticing what was really going on sooner.

Depression recognizes depression, and finally, I sensed it inside her. To people who have never dealt with depression, it looks a lot like something you should snap yourself out of with a bit of grit and will. Neither of Bella's parents had had experience with it, but I have. Here was the reason that taking her phone or pushing her into jujitsu classes wasn't working. She needed [therapy](#), and at this point, her parents were willing to give it a try.

Bella describes her depression as a feeling that she doesn't belong here. When she says this, she's not talking about this city, this house, or any physical place. She means she should never have been born. It goes back to her relationship with her mother. As Bella has told me, if you hear that you're a mistake often enough, you start to believe it. To her, this is the truth, one that logically leads to thoughts of suicide—not just as a way out of pain but because it seems like the right thing to do. Bella talks about suicide a lot. On multiple occasions, the talk has gotten so scary that David took her to the emergency room, though she was never admitted to the hospital.

The lack of a loving and validating relationship with her mother remains Bella's most significant source of pain, so much so that she is taking space from it. She is in mourning. Some days, she's devastated; others, she seems unburdened, but the internalized damage is done. Bella, now 18, is often paralyzed with insecurity.

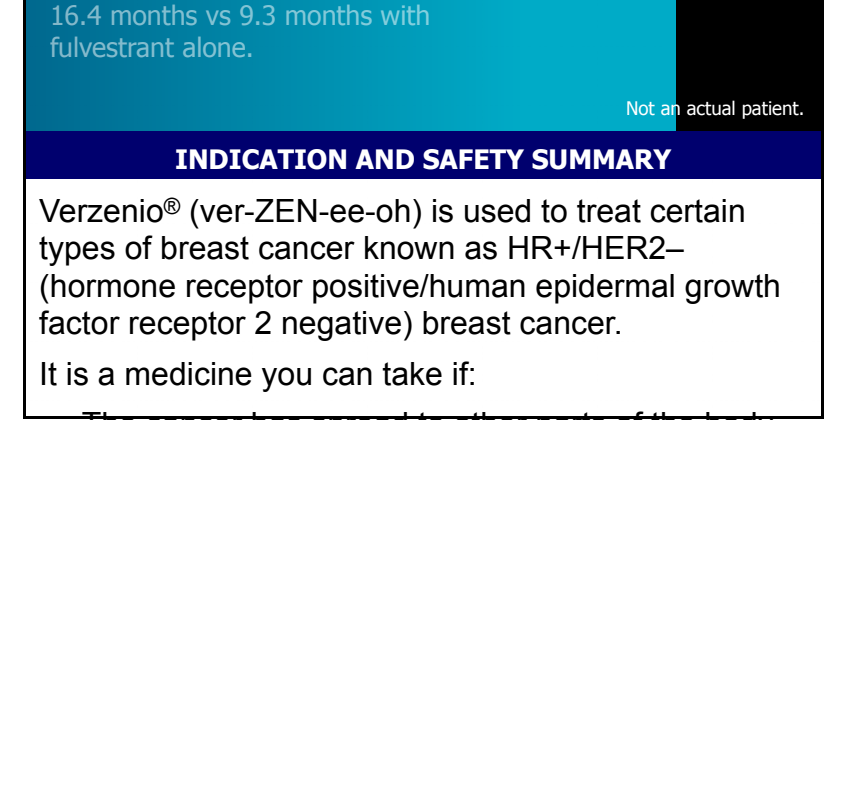
But she moves forward, no longer contorting herself into someone she's had to overcome. I win love or physical pain, like I can't fully exhale. Yet I marvel at her strength and will to thrive.

While all is still not peaceful in our home, she can describe her feelings, recognize the why behind her actions, and calm herself down. In other words, she speaks fluent therapy, like me.

Bella is now my daughter, too. She got her looks from her mother, her ear for music and her talent for bad jokes from her dad, and from me, she's gotten a guide through the terrifying terrain of teendom, insecurity, and depression. Our bond may not be blood, but it is for life. I didn't ask for this. I didn't want it, and nothing in my life compares to how helpless raising her makes me feel. But when she comes in for a cuddle, confides in me, or uses a silly voice to make me laugh, I feel like a mom: proud, overflowing with love, and worried sick.

\* Name has been changed.

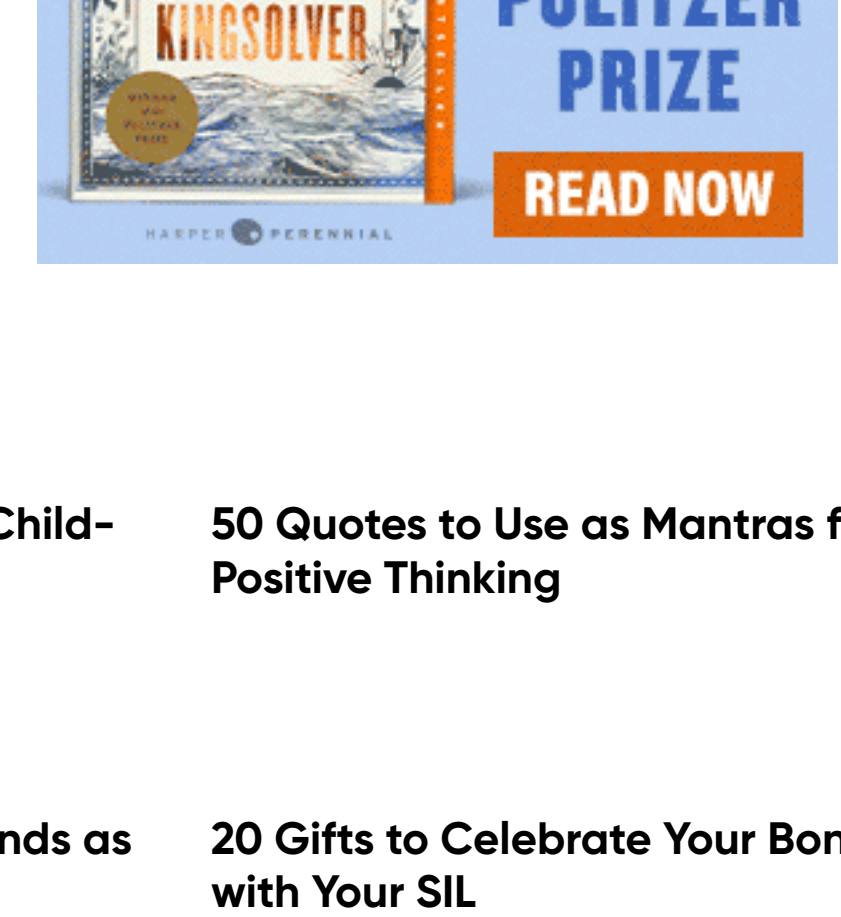
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