Oops, Mom Googled Me

When the writer mocked her Republican parents, she never figured her mother would find out.

By Kerry Madden, KERRY MADDEN is the author of "Gentle's Holler."
July 16, 2006

JUST IN TIME for "google" to become an official verb, my mother learned how to google. About a week ago. She figured it out herself even though, less than a year ago, she thought high-speed Internet access was strictly for impatient people, namely her adult children. When she finally agreed to give up dial-up, it opened up a whole new world: googling.

And so last week, my mother decided to google, and for fun, she googled me. Then she clicked on an essay I'd written called "9 Tips for Surviving the Holidays at Your Republican Parents' Home." It was published in the LA Weekly in 2004.

The only newspapers to grace my parents' door are the San Diego Union-Tribune, the Wall Street Journal, the Catholic Digest and maybe, in a pinch, USA Today. My father, a former football coach, used to hate the New York Times because it had no self-respecting sports page. Now he just hates it for the liberal rag that it is, and he feels the same way about the Los Angeles Times.

So I figured I was safe writing a little 900-word satire for the LA Weekly. I mean, who of my parents' generation and political bent reads the Weekly? The bulk of my mother's e-mails are forwards on moms or kids or dogs or jokes or Erma Bombeck's purple hat musings. I never dreamed she would venture to Google and happen upon the piece in which I liberally trash Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, box wine and the holidays. Now my mother is no longer speaking to me.

My last e-mail from her was something like this: "I googled you and found 'How to Survive the Holidays With Your Republican Parents.' Why didn't you share that one?"

In my guilt, I've sent them summer reading and care packages. But they are silent. They are hurt. They go out of their way to make Christmas special with feasts, presents, highballs — and their ungrateful daughter mocks their politics and religion. So I don't blame them. I wouldn't speak to me either.

The very first time my mother found something egregious I'd written was in 1987, and dark days ensued. I was living with my brand-new husband in my parents' basement. During that time, I finished a terrible play that featured a domineering mother who ropes her daughter into moving in with the grandparents, who are in failing health, while she flees to live the good life.

And I had the gall/lack of imagination to set it in my grandparents' home in Leavenworth, Kan. My mother found the play, read it and recognized every insidious detail, from the Reader's Digest Condensed Books to the frozen OJ cans stuffed with fast-food condiments and A&W's two-for-one Chili-Dog Tuesdays.

It struck a nerve.

Me (strangled): I have to write about what I know!

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It struck a nerve.

Me (strangled): I have to write about what I know!
Mother (devastated): Ha! What do you even think you know?

Me: What do you think Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill wrote about?

Mother: Well, all I have to say is that you put yourself in VERY HIGH COMPANY, MISSY!

The fight disintegrated into slinging accusations and huffy silence.

My father said to her: "If you don't want her to write about you, don't talk to her, because that's what writers do. They write down what we say."

My mother shrieked at him, "How do you know what writers do?"

"Well, I don't exactly, but I guess that's what they do, and we've got one in the family," my father replied.

Now I'm nearly the same age as my mother when she read the lousy play, and I've written many stories, books, plays and articles since that time. Plenty have focused on the politics and religion in my family, but I've never shared a single story that I thought would cause pain to my parents.

But the vitriol of talk radio and talking-head TV and the ghosts of Rush and Bill lingering at the holidays over the years has been painful. So the lively discussions and/or shouting matches tattooed themselves on my brain, and I wrote down many of them to try to figure how it happened.

We grew up on sportsmanship and a positive attitude. Whining wasn't tolerated. Kids who whined got to vacuum, so we learned to "suck it up." Politics weren't discussed when real life was about beating Nebraska or Alabama, but it was a understood that we were Catholics and Democrats, in that order.

It was only when my father retired and Limbaugh and O'Reilly took to the airwaves that my parents became steadfast Republicans, and their newfound fervor for the right was served up along with the turkey.

Without politics and religion, my parents are the most wonderful, generous and gracious people, but throw in politics and it's time to duck behind the yucca tree.

Mother finally called a moratorium on all politics at the holidays after my husband parodied Fox News in a puppet show, igniting a fury — a wine glass flung, buttons ripped, children rushing from the room.

And so I've written down the talk in fiction, drama and essay. I've written it down to understand it … maybe to exorcise the demons. It wasn't to humiliate or hurt them. It wasn't to attack them. It wasn't even for their eyes, but Mother found it anyway, googling. I think I'll send roses next.