



## **The Only Child**

**By**

**Jayne Martin**

It is the summer of 1972. The Vietnam War continues to play out in our living rooms, while five bungling burglars have been caught breaking into Democratic Headquarters in Washington, D.C., and the country hears the name Watergate for the first time. *Ms Magazine* makes its debut to a generation of women hungry for change, and “The Pill” has made chastity a thing of the past. When I graduated high school, my mother took me to our family doctor and got me a prescription. The era of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” is still going strong and thanks to her forward-thinking, I am an eager participant. That’s my mom. Always looking out for me.

The midday sun casts its warm glow down on the churning waters of the San Francisco Bay, while a solitary gull cries out from overhead. Cradled in the bucket seat of my powder blue, 1967 Triumph Spitfire, I merge with the other traffic coming from Marin County and pull onto the Golden Gate Bridge. It is a crossing I have made countless times since moving to the wooded village of Mill Valley. Rising up before me is the city of my birth, its skyline gleaming brightly against the crisp, blue sky. But today I feel no right to the pleasure its beauty brings me. Today, I am making the one-hour drive beyond its borders south to the suburb of Redwood City and the hospital where my mother now lies dying.

Four years earlier, an inoperable, malignant tumor was discovered on her spine. She was only 51. “Terminal” was the word the doctors used; a term my then 19-year-old mind could not attach – refused to attach – to the often fraught, single mother who met every challenge in caring for us with a steadfast, “There’s always a way, Jayne.” I would take her at her word this time, as

well. We had only recently separated; me to my first apartment and freedom as a young adult, her to her first moment of freedom since I had been born. The years immediately preceding had been painful for us both; that often volatile time when the child fights to rip free from the parent and the parent fights to hold on and neither are left whole.

My aunt's phone call to me that morning left no room for ambiguity.

"Hurry," she said. "Your mother hasn't much time." She could not even now hide the reproach in her voice. In the last year of my mother's life, warfare had broken out between my mother, her mother and her two older sisters with me, the spoiled daughter, the ungrateful daughter, the selfish daughter who did not make anywhere near enough time to visit her critically ill mother, at the center of their battles. And it was true. The more her illness advanced, the more I allowed denial to seduce me.

Downshifting, I pull into the right lane, exiting the bridge and entering the artery that will take me out 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue, through the city, and down the highway to Sequoia Hospital and my mother's bedside. We have only recently become friends. I don't want to lose her.

My mother was 32 when I was born. As the story goes, she had run off with my father, a handsome charmer ten years her senior, when she was just 17. The two of them traveled the country as the mood struck them, a lifestyle my father would have been happy to continue. My birth would mark the beginning of the end of their marriage. Whatever his faults, he was the love of her life. I would have a big gap to fill.

Traffic is light. The road ushers me along quickly, too quickly. On my right, the Stonestown shopping center comes into view; Sears's and Macy's loom tall on each end with See's Candies and Kinney Shoes among the several smaller shops nestled like children in between. I remember that I have a photo shoot for a catalog the following week and I have not

yet bought the wigs that I will need. When I told my mother that I wanted to be a model when I grew up, my dream became hers, too. I could have said that I wanted to fly to the moon, drive race cars, or even be a writer and her response would have been the same: You can be anything you want to be. It so thrilled her now each time she would open a newspaper, catalog, or magazine and find her daughter's face looking back at her. At the last moment, I yank the tiny car's steering wheel to the right, ignoring the angry blare of horns as I cut across two lanes and pull into the parking lot.

Inside the large department store, with its artificial light and artificial music, there is comfort in the anonymity. A cheerful woman, not much older than I, is eager to help me transform into someone other than the child struggling to keep death at a distance. And so I linger, tucking away my blond tresses and slipping into the sophisticated brunette who takes her mother to an elegant dinner for her birthday; the fun-loving redhead, arm-in-arm with her mom, window shopping; the excited young woman with the light brown bob watching her mother shed tears of joy as she learns she will be a grandmother.

Back on the road, 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue empties onto Highway 280 South, a wide expanse of asphalt that had been newly-cut into the pastoral countryside where horses still peacefully graze alongside the steady din of modern travel. Decades later, I will live in such bucolic place and have my own horses, something that would have pleased my mother, herself the daughter of a horse trainer, but at this moment I can see no future beyond today.

Road signs bearing the names of towns rise like spirits from my past: San Mateo – 1.5 miles. I am six years old when my mother and I finally have an apartment of our own. Prior to that, the two of us had bounced around San Francisco from one relative's home to another, with

intermittent attempts at reconciliation with my father, and me clinging to the only constant in my life.

San Carlos – 5.3 miles. After a second marriage lasting just five years, we are once again on our own, but it is here we will remain throughout my school years. It is here that the cancer now siphoning off her life will bide its time.

I check my gas gauge: A quarter of a tank. I decide I can make it and turn on the radio. The first iconic notes of the Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," the drug culture anthem of the day, rise above the steady hum of the engine. When Grace Slick belts out "Feed your head," we all know what she means and I smile, recalling a time several months earlier when I brought my mother a Baggie filled with marijuana to help ease her pain.

She is living in a small apartment; a functional space of white cheerless walls and gray carpeting. Drapes are closed to keep out the prying eyes of neighbors who pass by on the shared walkway just outside her front door. Late afternoon sunlight enters through the window of the small, adjacent kitchen that no one ever uses for cooking. My mother's bed is lengthwise against a wall in the living room area and placed lovingly about are photos of me at every phase of my life encased in frames, large and small.

She sits up in bed, her slender frame cushioned by several pillows. The woman, into whose arms I could always go to ward off the woes of the world, now feels small and frail in mine. Her hair, light brown and finely-textured, softly frames her face, and I see she has applied lipstick for my visit. An old record player sits on the floor and, though I'm certain now my mother would have preferred listening to Johnny Mathis, or even Elvis, it spins out the LPs of Santana, Janis Joplin and, ironically, The Grateful Dead, as we break into fits of pot-induced laughter. We eat from a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, licking the grease from our fingers

and washing it down with Coca-Cola and, for this short while, we're just a couple of stoners having a good time.

Redwood City – 2.2 miles. *I'm coming, Mom.* I press down on the gas pedal and the car surges forward.

At the hospital, I step into an elevator alongside a woman no older than my mother. In her hands is a bouquet of baby pink roses and rising out them, a balloon: "It's a girl." Two floors upward and the elevator doors open onto a brightly-lit hallway abuzz with the activity of those tending to matters of life and death. A cacophony of sound overtakes me and then, just as quickly, I hear nothing. My feet feel as if I am walking in sand, while life continues all around me, oblivious to my presence. Is this what death is like, I wonder.

At the entrance to the ward, a few windows look out onto the parking lot to the east, but the sun has already begun its journey to the west. Rows of beds line the walls to my left and right, each encircled to varying degrees by a long, yellow, hook-draped curtain; small vessels containing those, like my mother, awaiting departure.

In the middle of the room, my grandmother stands at the side of my mother's sisters. Her weathered cheeks are wet with tears. The three women eye me guardedly, as if bracing for strong winds. We were a tight alliance, my mother and I. Despite the wounds we inflicted upon each other, let no one else dare take up arms against either one of us. By the end, we are all bloodied.

Across this vast chasm of hurt, we now face each other, none of us knowing how to bridge its divide. My Aunt Mae turns her head to her left, where one of the curtains completely encloses its occupant – my mother. Her expression says it all. She is gone.

They watch intently for my reaction. A fist has tightened around my heart and ripped it from my body, but I do not cry out. It will be days before the tears will come and they will come in private. For now, I cannot move. I cannot breathe. I am shocked; she did not wait for me. I am relieved; she did not wait for me. I am grateful; her suffering is finally over. I am alone.

Behind that curtain, I imagine her lovely jade green eyes closed now as if in slumber, her hands resting comfortably at her sides, or maybe gently placed across her chest.

A nurse with concerns of her own walks past me. I reach out, touch her shoulder.

“Can I see my mom?” I ask, indicating her bed.

She shrugs. “If you want to,” she says and walks on.

*Well, of course I want to.* I want to hold her hand one more time and say good-bye. I want to kiss her sweet face, and tell her I love her. I want to rest my head on her breasts, and beg her to forgive me the cowardice that kept me from her side.

And so I move to her bed and reach out for the curtain. It slides open easily, but there is no “Sleeping Beauty,” no fairytale good-bye. Her neck is arched back; her mouth and eyes opened wide, as if her last living moment on this earth was a howl of agony.

I step back, quickly turn away.

\*\*\*

Darkness and fog have settled on the bay as I make the drive back across the Golden Gate. All is silent except for the sound of ships passing below calling out to each other in great mournful bellows. With one hand on the wheel, the other on the gear shift, my feet pressing and releasing the pedals as needed, I am but a passenger in a body that I cannot feel.

Much later, when my mind finally allows sleep to take me, I will have a dream that will reoccur throughout my lifetime: *A black, starless sky merges with a still body of water, creating*

*the illusion of one. Lit only by a single beam of moonlight, the bare arm of a woman reaches from beneath the water's dark surface, creating a gentle circle of ripples. In her hand, an infant held high and safe from that which its mother could not survive.*

My mother poured all that was good, wise and strong from her into me so that I would thrive, and when she had nothing more to sustain herself, she left. The forgiveness I sought from her would take a lifetime to find for myself.

Now, at an age that far exceeds that which my mother would ever see, I still long for her.