

Hands Free
Jill Duvall

The doors of the elevator pull open, and I step out facing a nursing station. I turn to the right and there is Mom. She stands, toothless and smiling, behind prison bars. I faint.

I wake up to the friendly male nurse holding my hand. “What happened?” I ask.

“It must of upset you to see your Mom.”

No kidding, I thought. Mom is nowhere to be seen. “Can I go see her now?”

Holding onto to my arm, like I am eighty-seven, instead of eighteen, he leads me back down the hall, past the elevators, and to the locked, barred wall. We enter a room at the end.

Mom is pacing back and forth between her bed and a barred window. “Hello, Mom.” She looks at me and says “Hi” back, like a stranger is speaking to her. I start feeling faint again, and sit down.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, terrified to hear her answer. She is dressed in a hospital gown, brown polyester pants and house shoes. She looks frightened and her pupils are weird.

“They’re trying to keep me down here, tethered to the ground.”

Okay, I think, her pupils aren’t just weird; she’s a total freak. I turn to the nurse and ask if I can leave. Immediately.

“Sure,” he says, and I wave goodbye as I jog out of that room. I shouldn’t have come. I speed home in my Firebird with my mind racing, blaring my Jackson Browne 8-track as loud as I can stand it.

In the third grade, Mom had gotten sick for the first time. I rode my bike home, and Dad was strangely home at three in the afternoon instead of at work. He said Mom had to go to the hospital. She was gone for weeks. She missed my dance recital for the first time.

In the sixth grade, while I was at a sleepover, Dad had taken Mom to the hospital again. She didn't come home for months. Granddad moved in with us, so Dad could work.

Dad had explained at dinner one night that she was very sick this time. The doctors couldn't figure out how to make it better. He asked us to pray for her.

When she had finally come home, she seemed brain dead. She didn't remember anything, including the names of the kittens born a couple of weeks before she left. Mom had named them Sonny, Cher, Festus, and Matt. My little brother had named the last one Batman, but we called him BM caused it made us laugh.

In the eighth grade, Mom left again, but was only gone a week or two. While riding down the steep side of Bradley Lane on our ten speeds in spring that year, my best friend Donna and I saw my mother dancing on our roof.

Donna screamed over the rush of wind, "Your mom is probably insane."

"No, she's not!" I screamed back. We never talked about it again.

Up until my senior year, Mom stayed out of the hospital. Some new miracle drug had come along, and Mom had to have blood tests to keep her sane. She was still so freaky that I kept my friends away from the house.

I had no idea what mental illness was, just that Mom was strange and got sick sometimes. That all changed a week before I went to see her at the hospital.

It had been a Friday night and I had gone to a party with Donna at the house of some pot-head friend of hers. I tried to drink a beer for the first time that night, but it tasted horrible. I poured it out on a big houseplant, and held the near-empty beer bottle for hours, feigning a deep love for beer.

Mom was at the kitchen sink when I came home. I said good-night and kissed her cheek. I can't remember if she spoke or not.

I woke up to Mother lying on top of me, screaming, "I know you are drugs. I know it. I know it." I started screaming at her to get off and pushing back at her, but she was too strong to dislodge. Dad ran into the room and had to wrestle her off. He picked her up and carried her to the couch in the living room. I followed and watched him hold her down, while she screamed and screamed. He asked me to call the police, and I remember crying as I told them our address. The police officers were nice, but they handcuffed her. The look on her face reminded me of the look on my collie's face when he got run over by a car.

Jackson Browne is still blaring as I pull into our driveway after my troubling visit to the hospital. I am shaking and sick to my stomach. Dad and the boys aren't home, so I go to my bedroom and quickly fall into a troubled sleep.

In the dream I am two or three. Mom and I have on matching short outfits, and we are walking downtown on the sidewalk. I feel the tug on my arm reaching up to hold hands with her. She is beautiful and I keep looking at her smiling face.

Then the scene changes and Mom waves from the roof as I ride by on my bike. I pull my hands off the handlebars and ride hands-free to show off to her. She claps and I stop my ride to check on her.

Then the dream changes one last time and I am back to eighteen. Dad and I drive up to the psyche hospital in Fort Smith and in the parking lot is, nude and toothless, my mother. She crouches behind a car. I scream at Dad, "I don't want to have an insane mother. I don't want her." I open the car door to get her.

Dad wakes me up just before I reached her.

I start sobbing. “I just had the worst dream. Mom was normal and then she was sick and naked and toothless and wandering around some parking lot. It was horrible.” Dad grabs my hand. “Do you think I can be normal and have a crazy mother? Or will I be like her?”

Dad waits forever before answering. “Honey, the question is not whether you’ll be normal or crazy with a crazy mother. The real question is whether you will be happy or not, with a crazy mother.”

That night I dream I am on my bike again, cruising down the longest hill, hands free. I seem older. Mom is there in the distance, on a roof, waving and clapping. I wave back but, this time, I keep racing on by.