

THE GOOD ENOUGH DAUGHTER

By Judy Baldassari

10-09

I rest my forehead against the window of the greyhound bus taking me from San Francisco to Sacramento to be with my parents. My heart is longing to go in the opposite direction: back to my beloved city, back to a new found romance. But, my father called, and said my mother needs me. She is having a nervous breakdown, a mid life crisis, we're not sure what, but we're worried and not sure what to do for her.

A tight fist lodges in my chest as I gaze out the window. The scenery is numbingly familiar. I have traveled this route so many times before: over the Bay Bridge, on to the anonymous stretch of industrial buildings on I-80, and then almost 90 miles of small towns and open fields until we cross the Sacramento River.

Having recently graduated from nursing school, I'm now expected to be of some help to my mother, to make her feel better; to make her normal again. I'm afraid I can't. In the last few years mom, who had always seemed happy before, at least to my young eyes, has become increasingly fearful and anxious, needing me by her side.

I have listened to her fears over and over, sitting in their living room with the curtains drawn. Having heard the details of her childhood so many times, her memories are beginning to feel more real to me than my own. Dad has taken her from one specialist to another. It seems no one can help.

I have managed to get a week off work at Children's Hospital to be with her, though I'm reluctant to take on this familial duty. I'm ready to start my own life and disheartened at being drawn back into the dark cave of fears that is becoming my mother's life. Even more, I am afraid of following her into that dark cave and

not finding my way out.

Yet with every turn of the wheels, the Greyhound is driving me closer to Sacramento, closer to my girlhood days: the scenery, the characters, and the parts we played as the years rolled by, mysteriously intermingled with scenes of joy and pain, and scenes of gnawing boredom, as I tried to decipher who I was and who I would become.

Finally we arrive. Stepping off the air conditioned bus I am immediately embraced by the balmy evening air of my hometown, taking me back to those hot Sacramento summers of my youth. The seductively warm nights lured us out of pre air-conditioned homes to backyards, porches, and the velvety night air enhanced by a symphony of cicadas. On the hottest evenings we sought relief by meeting with aunts, uncles, and cousins in nearby William Land Park. Long picnic tables were covered with Tupperware bowls containing fried chicken, macaroni salad and ruby red slices of sweet juicy watermelon, as the adults chatted and we children played under the rich canopy of trees that covers downtown Sacramento.

Dad meets me at the Greyhound station as usual. My dad is a man of his word. A pilot in WWII, he has always been a strict self disciplined man, his own reference point. My brother and I are proud of him, and somewhat fearful.

We drive through the leafy green streets of town out to the flat manicured suburbs where my parents live. Along the way, Dad fills me in on Mom's condition. In the last few years most of our conversations seem to be dominated by how she is feeling that day.

As I walk into the house, mom is standing in the middle of the kitchen looking lost and helpless, her lovely blue eyes filled now with the terrors of her inner demons. My heart turns over at the sight of her. Never have I seen her this

undone. I reach out to pull her closer to me and hold her, murmuring encouraging words in her ear. We begin to sway slowly back and forth to the sound of music playing on their radio.

“Do you remember when you taught me how to dance?” I ask her. “How the two of us twirled around in front of the T.V. set every afternoon with American Bandstand?”

I remember. I was about twelve or thirteen at the time and it was my introduction to the sensual delights of my developing body in the permitted sexual dynamics of dance. We moved with wanton abandon, waving our arms about and shaking our hips to the tempo of Fats Domino’s *Blueberry Hill*, Buddy Holly’s *That’ll be the Day*.

She looks up at me and smiles, her younger self shining through the fear in her eyes for a few moments. She is the child, I the parent, reassuring and protecting her, as she protected and cared for me as a child. Her body begins to relax.

When my brother and I were young, she and my dad often went out dancing or to parties with their friends. As I looked up at them then; mom, dressed in one of her billowing ‘cocktail dresses’, as she called them, dad, tall and handsome in his dark suit, I wanted to be just like them when I grew up.

But now, standing in the kitchen with me, she looks so forlorn. I kiss her cheek and tell her I love her; which I do. Almost too much. We were so very close when I was growing up; I believed I had to tear myself away from her to create a life of my own

Perhaps I left too abruptly for her to adjust, not wanting to admit to myself the full extent of her vulnerability. But it was the only way I could think of to start my own life, my own family, where my mother was not the gravitational star around whom everyone else revolved. The life I longed for and she prepared me

for. Even in her worst moments as she drew me back into her world of fears and distress, she inspired me to leave.

“Go to college,” she told me, “have a career, be independent and enjoy yourself before you settle down.” So I did. I fled to San Francisco to forge a life of my own, independent of my mother’s influence. After graduating from nursing school I stayed in the city, moving to a small apartment on top of a steep hill just below Coit Tower where I met my future husband.

After seeing mom’s sad and frightened face I made an appointment with her psychiatrist, Dr. Johnson. Later that week, I visit his office to talk about her, or so I think. I tell him about her latest symptoms and then I ask him the dreaded question that has been weighing so heavily on my heart.

“Do you think it would be better for my mother if I moved back to Sacramento?”

I know Dr. Johnson. I studied with him during my psych rotation while I was in nursing school. He was a resident doctor at that time, and then began his own practice in Sacramento. I was so impressed with his dedication and compassion that, when my mom began showing signs of serious depression, I referred her to him. Since he knows me from my student nursing days, I think he will take my side in this situation: tell me I have the right to my own life. But he is too good to be swayed by my question. He answers it honestly and simply.

“Yes, I think it would be helpful to her.” he says, watching me with his kind but unwavering eyes.

This is not what I want to hear! To my embarrassment I begin to cry. He says nothing. Finally I speak the words I am ashamed to admit.

“I don’t...I can’t. I just can’t do it”.

He still says nothing. What kind of a daughter am I? My Mother needs me. Finally he says, “My answer makes you unhappy.”

“Yes, it does.” I blurt out from somewhere deep inside me.

There. I have said it; given a voice to my guilt. He doesn’t look surprised or even judgmental of me.

“You are who you are.” He seems to be telling me. I feel something inside me open up; a small glimmer of self acceptance. I am only human, not a perfect daughter, but maybe good enough. I wipe the tears from my face, take a deep breath, and stand up to leave, thanking him and shaking his hand for the last time.

As time goes by, I try to visit my parents often, updating them on my life as I become engaged, married, pregnant with my first son, and then my second. They are happy for me though they don’t participate in the milestones of my life as much as I would like. Mom has months of normal functioning when they are able to travel and resume their previous life together, and months of paralyzing depression. During those months I offer to stay with her for a few hours, a day, a week; whatever Dad needs to get away for awhile. He refuses. He will not leave her side.

It’s not until several years later that I understand. This was the beginning of Alzheimer’s. The disease that took her further and further away from us. She was gone to us long before she died. My father and I still grieve for her; for the smiling, intelligent, loving woman we remember who took care of us all, when she could.

1,592 words