

Her Slender Hand in Mine by Jill Quist

It's odd, isn't it, that after you have your first child, I mean *immediately* after, people ask when you plan to have the next. They don't do that when you get a new dog.

People constantly asked me after Sophie was born, "Now, when are you going to have your next one? Are you hoping for a boy?" And then they gave me a great deal of unsolicited advice about early motherhood, why I needed to have a second, how soon that should be, and on and on and on. I usually nodded, smiled, and zoned out. I could numb out and go far, far away if Sophie was at my breast. I would look deeply into her "old soul" eyes and privately we would forge our own path in the world.

They never believed me when I said we didn't want any more children. They said, "You think that now, but you'll change your mind. People always do." My husband said he didn't want any more kids either, that he felt occasionally overwhelmed with the one we had. I knew I wouldn't change my mind about more kids, and it wasn't for practical reasons. I could never love the next child the way I loved Sophie. I could never split my love in two. How had my mother managed six of us without having her favorites? Oh, she had them alright, and I wasn't one of them.

I fell in love with Sophie a little more with each marker of her development. When she started teething. When she learned to hold herself upright in a sitting position and clapped her hands. When she slept through the night. When she said her first word, pointing her dimpled, chubby hand toward the sky, "Coco," for the Concord, a supersonic, tailless aircraft that flew above our backyard every day at precisely four o'clock in the afternoon. "Coco," she would cry with amazed excitement. "Coco." I couldn't believe how bottomless this love was. She would always be my favorite.

The reflection of Sophie and me holding hands stared back at us from the polished picture window of the village toy store, Scrivener's. A reflection of mother and daughter, walking and chatting. Sophie's slender, ungloved hand in mine.

"Where are your gloves?" I asked. "Your hands are cold."

She answered, "I don't like wearing them. I like the feel of your hands more."

"Let's at least zip your jacket up." I said, kneeling before her to fasten her zipper. While I was down there, I wiped her runny nose.

"Mom, I can blow my own nose. You don't have to wipe it anymore."

"Well then, why don't you?" I smiled to remove any sting from my words.

Looking back at the window's reflection, I saw another mother and daughter walking together across the street. And another, coming out of the cheap and cheerful town diner, this one with an additional child, a son. And still another walking on the sidewalk behind us, pushing a pram with twins. There were swarms of us. We all looked the same, but did we feel the same way, with the same intensity?

Sophie played with my fingernails, just as I used to play with my mother's, running the pads of my fingers along the polished smoothness of each nail, tracing the rounded ends, as if trying to find the answer to some mystery there.

"Your fingernails are so long, Mom. How come mine don't grow as long as yours?"

I remembered similar moments with my mother. Back when I still worshipped her the way Sophie worshiped me. Back when I wanted to become her when I grew up. When would that change for Sophie and me?

For a moment, fear gripped me. I didn't want this feeling of our mutual love to change. Not ever. I didn't want her to feel the rage toward me that I felt towards my mother. How could I save this moment—unblinking and unblemished—for an eternity of tomorrows? I didn't want us to ever be so angry, or hateful, with each other as I was with my mom. I wished I knew the exact moment that things changed in my relationship with my mother. When did the anger start? Why had it lingered? Could I put an end to it?

I was angry because...oh, I was angry because, and because, and because.

When she hosted my wedding, she disinvited my father at the last minute, too late for me to take alternative action and find a different way to invite him. How could she have done that to me? I hated her for that.

She forged our signatures to release the trust fund, our entitlement, to herself. Our grandparents had always intended that the trust would go to us kids when we reached twenty-one, and she would get the interest payments. But she forged our signatures, dissolving the trust into her own care.

She gave our trust fund money to my stepfather, Ed, to start his business. Predictably, the business went belly up. So did our money.

She never got psychiatric help for Patrick, my brother, even when it became obvious that he needed it. She didn't get him help in high school when he dropped out and got involved in petty theft; when he drove into the telephone pole trying to kill himself; when he opened fire in Martinsville, leveling a heinous assault against her and Ed. If only she'd gotten him the help he needed. Things might not have ended as they did, his life condemned to drugs and drinking and crime by his errant bullets. If she'd gotten him the help he needed, Patrick might have stood a chance.

She never set boundaries about the guns when Ed moved in. They were always available, locked and loaded, out in the open. Available to be sold underground. Available for target practice. Available for domestic violence.

Because she was manipulative. Because she played the victim her whole life and modeled the role for me. Because she never accepted accountability for her choices or actions.

I was angry for all these reasons. And there were probably more that I had forgotten. I didn't want that to happen to Sophie and me. I wanted to freeze this sacred moment of us together, walking down the street, gazing in shop windows, looking forward to hot cocoa and blueberry scones at the village bakery shop. I wanted to freeze this moment between my daughter and me, when she still needed to confide in me everything that was important to her, when she needed to slide my fingernails beneath hers. When we still walked side by side, her slender hand in mine.

The epiphany occurred the next time I met my therapist.

My appointments were always scheduled in the early evenings after work, my brain on fire with happenings at the office. The gossip, the deadlines, the breathtaking speed with which I was

reinventing myself and the business. My therapist's office was inviting. It was one of the reasons I selected her. Some therapists have institutional, cold offices. Susan's was small and intimate, with room enough for a loveseat upholstered in an earthy-toned corduroy, throw pillows of mixed paisleys and stripes, and throw blankets, encouraging you to kick off your shoes and put your feet up on the furniture. She had an oversized armchair facing the loveseat, a low coffee table, and a writing desk in the corner. Healthy looking plants perched everywhere.

I told her about my walk with Sophie and my dread of losing our present closeness, the way I had lost it with my mother. I asked her if there was any way for me to preserve what I had with Sophie.

She said, "There is, but you're not going to like my answer."

A half dozen unattractive thoughts whizzed past, but I only answered, "Try me."

She said, "It's important to keep in mind that children learn more from what you *do* than what you *say*. Sophie is going to learn how to behave from the way *you* behave. For you to preserve your present closeness with Sophie, you need to learn how to be friends with your mother."

I cringed openly. "Ohhhh, nooooo!"

"I told you that you wouldn't like it."

"But how do I do it?"

"Start small. When you're with your mother, treat her as you would your ninety-year-old next-door neighbor whom you've mentioned. Engage her in small talk. Ask her how she is. Ask about her health, her garden, her plans for the weekend. Keep it safe and cordial. No politics! What's your neighbor's name?"

"Jean," I said.

"If you can, try to picture Jean when you're talking to your mother. Start by doing it when you're on the phone. Pretend you're talking to Jean. If your mom asks you any questions about your life, don't go deep into your responses. Stay light and neutral. The way you would with Jean."

"Okay, I think I can do that."

"Once you master that, you can build on it. You can do it when you see your mom in person. You need to open your mind when you visit her. Remember that she has a life too. She has a past, and

memories, and secrets. She may not be walking around in the narrative you've built for her. Her narrative may be different. If you make her feel safe, she might be ready to share some of that. Even if you think you already know her stories, ask and listen again."

"It's her neediness that gets to me. On the other hand, she never received the love she needed. And she never had the coping tools she needed to mend from her traumas—her alcoholic parents and their early deaths, her brother's death during the war, her miscarriages, the death of her baby son, a loveless marriage. She had to endure so much. Mostly, she persevered by denying her pain or assuming the role of victim."

"Right, she's had her own struggles. You're not responsible for solving her problems. She just needs to be heard. She needs moments of empathy. If you try working on your relationship with your mother, it will be a good investment in your future with Sophie."

"It's hard because my mother is so bitter."

"Yes. She's bitter. She has a lot to be bitter about. Remember, when you're talking to her, she's Jean, not your mother. Ask questions and listen."

"And you think it will help keep Sophie close?"

"I think you have a better shot at keeping her close by acting out your compassion than if you act out your anger towards your mother all the time. There's only one lesson Sophie can learn from your anger."

"Mmm. More anger. Makes sense."

I nodded. I thought about my next-door neighbor Jean. How hard could it be?

Tensions between my mother and me eased after that. Eventually, I didn't even think about Jean when I talked with my mother. We talked about what annuals she was planting in the springtime and whether the deer were eating her bulbs, what new recipe she was trying for butternut squash, what books she was reading. I offered to help her put up and decorate her Christmas tree. She criticized me less often and didn't mention my latest hair style. When she did, I was able to shrug it off. Sometimes I even laughed.

When I talked with my mother, I would close my eyes and remember the reflection of Sophie and me in the toy store window and all the other mothers and daughters mirroring our image. I wondered how many of us would make it past adolescence with these fragile relationships with our daughters.

Only one of those relationships mattered to me.

I imagined Sophie's slender hand in mine.

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