

Susannah Kennedy
THE CONCERT

The next days I waited. Confiding in a few friends, I waited. Niels, a psychiatrist, confirmed what we all knew. If we reported her, even tied her arms together and wrestled her to a mental hospital, no judge would keep my mother on a closed ward. She could charm anyone.

Niels had called her when he landed in California. "Jane, we won't play along with your plan." She wanted to meet over lunch -- to hand over documents, as if this were a business transaction, as if to make us complicit. It felt dirty. On the phone she repeated her manifesto of that last weekend: "Nobody should allow themselves to grow old." Niels offered, again, to talk if she needed help. I could tell she was pushing him away. A few more exchanges.

"Life is going to be good when I'm gone, you'll see," she volleyed.

I caught Niels' angry fling of the phone receiver as he hung up. At a certain point, talking makes no more sense.

She WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND, I wager. Even at 75 herself. ... though I have Dad's long-lived DNA, would live way into my 90s most likely, my emotional make up sees no common sense in that. Of course, I take joy in the moments of togetherness but the hours, days, weeks of real life have no hold on me anymore. ... I went to Target for a helium tank to practice. [Jane's Diary, March 20, 2014]

THE DAYS STRETCHED INTO WEEKS. My nights were uneasy. I tried to remain calm. Niels tried to enjoy his vacation. But when the calendar showed March 30, my insides chilled. Exactly 3/4 of the way through her 75th year and seventy-five was 3/4 of a century. She would choose today. Or she'd joke about it later, mocking my intuition.

The kids played a little tennis in the park. We went for a walk along West Cliff, had some salad for lunch. I lay down for a nap, Niels beside me. I couldn't rest. Agitated. Mind racing. Imagining. A jump from the Golden Gate Bridge. A drive to the ocean. Guns. Pills. Always, always, with the thought she might just show up on our doorstep for dinner, pretending it had all been a trial run of something in the distant future. "Did you really take me seriously?" she'd say, cocking her head.

A text came through from Germany: our cat Caesar had died. Poisoned. A neighbor's dog found him in the shed. Did Jane's spirit travel half-way around the world to kill our cat? The air churned around me. I couldn't rest. Whirling air. Lightspeed. I had never felt like this. Like gravity was loose. Like the ceiling and walls of my bedroom were porous. "Niels, I can't rest. I feel odd."

We got ready for the afternoon concert, put on by Zoe's school. Normal life. Familiar faces. A strings performance in a neighborhood church. Smiles as we gathered to listen.

My phone was vibrating. Brrrrz. Brrrrz

Why didn't it stop? Kathy, Nick's first violin teacher, was in the midst of a Rachmaninov piece up on the altar. Sunshine lit the stained-glass windows, tall and wide and side lit. Brrrrrz. Brrrrrz.

I looked down. My linen dress was wrinkled.

"Unknown."

All these past weeks I had jumped whenever a telephone sounded. Anticipating. Panicking. Would my Mom tell me it was all a big misunderstanding? Would it be the Coast Guard, having found her body adrift near Baker Beach? Each time it had been mundane. "Oh, Hi. Sure, I'll bring a salad to the potluck."

Brrrrrz. Brrrrrz. I knew this was it. Piano notes. I suddenly remembered to breathe. The little boy in front of me squirmed. The copper designs behind the altar held my eyes. Organ pipes. Where was the organ? The phone blipped once. A message. Niels glanced at me. I looked straight ahead.

Just another 20 minutes. Just another small segment of time to sit here, quiet and bored on this apricot-cushioned chair, surrounded by regular parents watching our children. Violin, cello, viola, piano.

Twenty minutes to be still. Before everything changes forever.

After the applause, we all filed out.

Outside the entrance, I turned myself to the side, pressed the voice-mail button, caught the sound of a man's voice. "This is the San Francisco Medical Examiner's office."

Niels saw my body tense, saw me turn away, nodded to my friend Lizzie. People know in moments like this. "Come with me, let's go play with Isabel and Sammy," Lizzie urged Zoe, leading her away in the opposite direction. A glimpse of my daughter's puzzled concern. I had to focus. A quick bob of my head confirmed to Niels, who took my arm so I wouldn't stumble on the way up the hill. Why was the sky so vast?

I tried to concentrate on the number the message said to call, tapped the phone screen. Ringing.

A man answered. "Office of the San Francisco Medical Examiner."

"Hello. This is Susannah Kennedy." What was I supposed to say again? "I just got a message."

The man's voice slowed, the timber lowering. "Are you the daughter of Jane Kennedy?"

A tiny "Yes." A squashed whimper. That's not me.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but the police were called to the Pacific Heights Inn this morning where they found your mother's body." I flashed to the red sign on Union St., had passed it by a thousand times. It was the first place I'd lived in San Francisco, at age 6, with my father and mother. A cheap motel room, brown kitchenette. They'd been apartment

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hunting. I had started a new first grade.

I began to shake. I was the only person alive who would recognize that connection. Why didn't she choose some other motel? What was she telling me?

"Could you please confirm your full name. We need you to come in and identify your mother." A few beats went by. I could hear the other parents in the lower parking lot.

"What? Are you sure?" This wasn't right. She had been so deliberate with her planning. "She wanted her body to go directly to UCSF."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry but when someone is found deceased alone the body cannot be released without an autopsy."

Nothing made sense. What were her words from that weekend again?

"But, but she killed herself!" Breathe. It sounds like I am trying to convince him of something. Am I? Breathe.

"She made her plans known." I knew. I should have done something.

"Yes, there is no doubt, ma'am." He hesitated. "It says here there were signs in the room and on the bathroom door as well as a note on her body indicating her wishes. But this is procedure."

Niels was leading me over to a grassy knoll. His hand was warm on my skin.

The phone voice continued. "Come to the San Francisco Hall of Justice, ground floor, around the back, the medical examiner's office."

"Yes, sir."

The sky was whirling. Roiling. A hurricane circle. A still day invaded by wind. It makes no sense, but this is the way it was. A comet, a spirit ghost whhrrred by. An arc, and then whoosh, it was gone, a cacophony silenced, an aperture in the air closed shut.

"Mommy!" A little girl voice squeezed out.

The eucalyptus trees kept watch; the gravel crunched.

Then I crouched down. And wailed.

Her last diary entry:

May I be successful in this awesome venture and may news of my death be quick and sweet. [Diary, March 27, 2014]

*From **Reading Jane**, a memoir based on the story of a daughter reading her mother's secret diaries after her suicide.*