

When I Am Dead, Let Someone Tell Him Of My Suffering

by M. F. Sullivan

Susan's boss had asked her to write a song of her own, but her mother was keeping her from it. She felt miles behind the dead woman. Like she should have been an instant success in all ways like her mother had been.

How old was her mother when that happened, again? Usually she avoided thinking about her Uncle, but now she tried to picture herself in his study, staring past him, focusing on the books on his desk rather than his face. Freud, and Jung. Big blue and red omnibus volumes. In the present of 1979, Susan frowned at her cat, then rested the cool surface of her notebook against her forehead. At the same time, in the past of 1972 she breathed cologne and wine as he said, "You have a voice just like your mother's. It's beautiful, Susie. I'm so proud of you."

But no memory is static. It flickered as Susan viewed it, briefly intersplined with a far worse, far noisier vision that gave her the need to shower. This was why she didn't think about him. The heels of her palms grinding into her eyes, she let her mind clear to a pinpoint, let it fill with static, anything to get back to the calm of the study. Then, she was there, breathing slowly, and he was saying how her mother was a soprano, the most beautiful woman in the world. How all the men loved her. How she had a great big future, full of singing and success, and she threw it away because she was very, very sad.

"Why was she sad," asked Susie, still without looking at her Uncle.

"Because we loved each other. But that sort of thing—people think it's not okay."

“Did I make her sad?”

“No, sweetheart.” His touch on her cheek summoned another terrible jump-cut and her face burned. Then, her leg burned, and she opened her eyes back in 1979 again to find Reginald the cat had taken her foot for an appealing target. She felt claws, maybe even teeth, sink into her flesh, felt something pierce, and, gasping, she tore her foot from beneath the bed and rolled away. The cat darted out with that insane look in his eyes, one slightly smaller than the other, and his ears pinned back in devil horns.

People couldn't scare her, but this cat could. Susan hopped up and snatched a stuffed mouse from the corner, then tossed it into the living room. Originally, she intended to shut the door after it, but once the cat caught its toy and contorted around on the floor, she started laughing. She followed him into the living room and put on a record, an opera she liked. A gift from a friend. As she reached down to try to extract the toy for another throw, the cat relaxed. She threw it again, and it was a more exhaustive exercise, she found, than it would be with a dog. Dogs, at least, had the courtesy to bring toys back once they had their way with them. But she could understand why cats don't fetch. She wouldn't either.

Suddenly, while watching the cat dart away for the element of surprise before her next throw, the answer about her mother came to her. Twenty-four. By twenty-four, her mother had already starred in two incredible shows, one of which somebody had a recording of. Mr. Everson had brought it to school for her to listen to once.

“I taught your mother,” he said, two years before he unexpectedly helped expectant Susie get out of Chicago with no one the wiser. “She was my favorite student. A really talented young woman.”

Mr. Everson's office was easier to picture: a big glass box in the corner of the choir room, overflowing with albums, instruments, songbooks, and lacking in any organization. Susie watched the record, her mouth agape just slightly, the spinning vinyl unveiling the powerful sound of a voice she'd wanted to hear her whole life. There was an orchestra, too, but somehow it seemed she couldn't hear it.

“What play is this?”

“It's an opera, *La Traviata*. This is Violetta's aria, when she's alone in her room after a wild party. She's just met a man who loves her.”

“What is she singing about?” Susie looked away from the record, instead regarding Mr. Everson in his threadbare slacks and elbow patched jacket, the uniform she imagined every music teacher wore worldwide.

“She wants to accept the love of this man—Alfredo, but she's afraid. And that's him singing,” he said as a man's voice joined her mother's. “That's his voice calling her to love. She's been lead into an affluent lifestyle by people who think of her as just a pretty decoration, but she's afraid to give up all the riches and— pleasures of her life.”

Her mother's ghostly voice rose to its height and warbled down, down, then back up. It was as if she could see it dancing in her mind, magenta and saffron and cyan wisps curving over a background of black. “Does she ever love him?”

“She does. That's why, though they end up together just a while, she eventually leaves him. For his own good. So his father convinces her to do, anyway.”

Susie looked back to the spinning record then, while Susan watched it now, her ears filled with the crash of the orchestra. She tossed the mouse into her bathroom, and both she and the cat darted to retrieve it, but she skidded to a halt to find a cat meowing confusedly and the mouse nowhere to be found. She had seen it bounce off the sink and past the toilet, but as she stooped to look, it was like the toy had bounced to another dimension. Nothing behind the tub, under the tub, in the tub. Nothing between the wall and the toilet, nothing in the sink or in the cabinets. It was gone, and the cat was busy telling her how upset he was.

“I'm sorry, baby,” she said with a shake of her head. “I don't know what happened to it. I'll buy you a new one when I'm out later, okay?”

As she patted his head, the cat swiped at her. She hissed until he ran under the couch. Alone, she paused, baffled by the empty bathroom. Like a sock in a laundromat drier, that toy. That cat was lucky she had money those days. Sighing, Susan returned to her bedroom, to the notebook and pen. She lay on the floor and thought about what Miles, her boss, had told her a few days ago.

“I love to hear you sing, kid, but you know what I'd really love? I'd love to hear you write a song.”

“I've never really written my own songs before,” she'd told him, sitting there in the club's dressing room and smearing on green eyeshadow for the stage.

“No time to start like the present! You're so quick, I've never known a girl with a mouth like yours. You can't tell me that you aren't able to write some things down and put it to a little tune.”

“Maybe,” she said, bolstered by his encouragement. Bolstered by the knowledge that her mother had never written her own songs. She'd sung the songs of dead men, and maybe in front of a stage of hundreds, but Susan did a show every week, often twice a week for a crowd of fifty plus. And she was only twenty. Yes, she'd been lucky that Miles had found her, and that he had been more encouraging than exploitative. But that wouldn't have happened if Susan hadn't been talented, hadn't been trained since a young age to sing the way her mother was.

She was ahead in the race after all. But no matter how far ahead she got she would always feel like her mother was with her, in her, whenever she was in front of a microphone. And, though her mother had never written her own songs, what little Susan had written felt guided by something outside of herself. There was a shadow cast over her life that she was forever trying to escape.

Where did her mother go wrong? What happened? Augusta didn't put her head in the oven because she couldn't be with her brother. There was more to it than that.

Again, her Uncle. She felt— not repulsed, but betrayed when she considered him. It had been four, almost five years since she'd seen him, spoken to him. But he was the person who'd known her mother

best. Maybe if he could see past his narcissistic need to make himself the center of a dead woman's universe for five minutes—maybe Susan could learn something, then.

But maybe she wouldn't. Maybe he would cry when he heard her voice. Suppliant and tragic, like always, her Uncle, his sadness self-serving. It was hard to hate a man who hated himself so much, after all. But she wasn't sure enough time had passed to forgive him, or that enough time could ever pass for that. She wasn't sure she could speak to him like a civilized human being. Now, out of his care, an adult five years removed from him, she could not trust herself to call without laying into him, giving him some things to think about.

There might be rewards to restraint, though. She might learn something. Susan left her bedroom in pursuit of the phone only to stop just before it. There, between the legs of the telephone stand, was a little gray mouse. Startled, Susan picked it up and found it was most assuredly the one thrown into the bathroom. She'd only bought Reginald the one, after all. On hands and knees, she checked to find the cat still beneath the couch. The mouse clutched in her fist, Susan observed the spinning record, and Augusta's tremendous personification of Violetta, recorded at the age of twenty-two. A year later, she would marry a construction worker. It would be eight months before Susan was born, which was three months before her husband found her dead in the kitchen.

Susan regarded the toy, then threw it into the middle of the floor and watched the cat bolt out to grab it. Later, in her bedroom, she returned to her notebook, and wrote a song for her mother.

