

MOTHER,
AT DUSK

Nicholas Gordon

Copyright © 2008 by Nicholas Gordon

This story may be used free for any personal or non-commercial purpose. For commercial use of this story, please contact the author at webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

MOTHER, AT DUSK

At dusk, my mother would often turn melancholy and stare out at the flat marshes that lay between our house and the bay.

Beyond the bay was the barrier island, and beyond that the ocean. Clouds often hung over the landscape like enormous white balloons, and at dusk they glowed pink and violet before settling into a darkness that finally drew my mother back to the life within.

As a small child, I couldn't understand my mother's penchant for melancholy, but nonetheless I resented it, sensing correctly that there was something out there that was drawing her away from me, something that, despite my love for her and my desperate efforts to please her, would not allow her to be pleased or happy just with me.

As I grew older, I learned what it was. When my mother was pregnant with me, my father and sister went sailing in the bay. A sudden storm came up, and, with my mother watching from the kitchen window, the little boat struggled through violent gusts of wind to get back to the wooden dock at the end of the path down from the house. My mother ran screaming down the path as the boat capsized, throwing my father and sister into the turbulent water before my mother's eyes.

Their bodies were found the next day washed up in marshes that lined the shore of the bay.

How many times my mother relived that moment I can't say, but I know that at dusk she would station herself at the kitchen window and stare longingly out at the bay, allowing the unlit room behind her to grow as dark as the reality she reached for, the mood that matched her unslaked sorrow.

For me it was like having a rival sibling against whom I was powerless to compete. My sister Rebecca was four years old when she drowned, and pictures of her at various ages in her short life were scattered about the house. I couldn't get away from her.

Not that I was neglected. Not at all. Until I went to college and then settled in a distant state, I had my mother all to myself. At least as far as living relatives went. Or friends. We lived alone in that isolated house on the marshes. My father had left my mother an ample living through insurance and savings, and she never had the urge to go out into the larger world in search of friends or a career. She was like someone obsessed with a beautiful but heartbreaking piece of music, playing it over and over and over, to the exclusion of everything else.

When I grew old enough to realize how unhealthy life was for me in that house, I escaped to places far away, leaving my mother alone with her sorrow. But of course there is no escaping one's childhood. Whether I inherited a tendency towards melancholy, or was injected with it *in utero* at the time of the catastrophe, or imbibed it through all the years I spent alone with my mother, or, most likely, all three, it survived my marriage, my own children, my

domestic happiness, to suffuse my life with a never-to-be-satisfied longing for something I could never have.

And now I was at the little house on the marshes to take my mother back with me. She was getting too old to live by herself, having survived a mild stroke and a broken hip, either one of which might have been enough to convince a less stubborn individual that it was time to live a bit nearer help.

"I don't want help," my mother insisted. "I want to die here."

"You need help," I said. "I want you to be somewhere where I can help you."

"Then why did you move so far away?" she said, repeating an oft-stated complaint.

"A million reasons," I said, repeating an oft-stated reply. "All good. But now you need me."

"I always needed you."

"I mean physically."

"I mean really."

There was, of course, no answer to that. I allowed guilt to suffuse me, painting my earlobes red, while inside the justification tape was playing: Why couldn't you just move on after the tragedy? Live a normal life? Enjoy me? Why did you have to let two dead people pre-empt your embrace?

We both sighed at what it was futile to discuss, and then I went back to what I came for.

"You'll have a nice apartment overlooking a garden," I said. "With a kitchenette. You can cook your own meals or go to the dining room. You can have friends there, you won't be so alone."

"I don't mind being alone," she said.

"They're not out there," I said. "They're as close to where you're going as they are to here."

"I know," she said. "I've been looking at that landscape almost my whole life. It's part of me. It's not them. For years and years it hasn't been them."

She started crying, her tears belying her words.

"You should have left here long ago," I said. "You shouldn't have stayed. You should have started a new life without them, left them behind."

"I knew you were jealous of them," she said through her tears. "But I didn't know what to do about it. You were insatiable. Utterly insatiable. I let you gobble me up. It was no good for either of us. But I tried. Believe me, I tried."

Of course I knew from her tears that she had given in. But it turned out to be a mistake. Heartbroken, homesick, out of her element, my mother quickly deteriorated, lasting less than a year.

On the night after she was buried, I had a dream. I was my own age, and my mother was as she had been when I had come to bring her home with me. At dusk, instead of standing at the kitchen window, my mother went down the path to the rotting dock. I followed her.

The pink and violet gilding of the clouds had passed, and darkness was swiftly settling in. Out of the gray water and sky a small sailboat appeared, heading for the wooden slip, on it my father and sister, whom I could barely make out in the darkness.

The boat came by the slip. My father expertly threw a rope over the left middle post and pulled the boat alongside as my mother clambered in. He and my mother embraced, he at the age at which he died, she at the age at which she had left the house, and then she picked up my sister and kissed her on the cheek.

Without a word to or glance towards me, my father took the rope off the post and kicked off with a vigorous shove of his foot against the slip. None of the three looked at me as the boat disappeared into the darkness.

In the dream, I stood on the dock as they pulled away and smiled and waved, smiled and waved. "Goodbye!" I shouted to my mother. "Goodbye, Mom! I love you!"

But the little family paid no attention to me at all. It was as if I were not there. Were never there. Were simply not.