

Ursula Grows Up

New London, Connecticut. 1968.

In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, it occurred to Marilyn that she should have made some kind of arrangement for Ursula. Poor kid, she thought. But that was as far as she pursued the notion. She was too outraged by her own situation to give much thought to her daughter's. And the doctor had even had the nerve to pat her hand! "There's nothing you can do now, dolly," he'd said. *Dolly.*

An attendant bent over her, trying to give her oxygen, but Marilyn twisted away from his grip. This was stupid, all of it. Tubes and stretchers and lying on her back in a moving vehicle. It was only ten blocks to the hospital. She could have walked if she could have managed the stairs. What gave him the right, calling an ambulance without even asking if it was what she wanted.

The attendant held her chin and placed a mask over her nose but she managed to wriggle free of it again.

"No thank you, I prefer to drown," she said, or thought she said. But no one seemed to hear her. How many of them were there, anyway? So many hands coming at her, trying to force her to lie still. Screw you, she thought. Screw you all to hell.

Marilyn grabbed something human, an arm or a shoulder, and clawed her way upward. She'd never said that she wanted to go in the first place. As soon as she could get off this stretcher she was leaving. Let me out right here. No, I'll walk home, thank you. And for a moment she was on the street, flouncing away from the open-mounted attendants who stood by helplessly, admiring her legs.

But they had her; she was down, pinned under a humid weight that was hissing gas into her. She spilled a few tears, frustrated at having lost to them, the hands. The tears slid out of the corners of her eyes and ran down into her ears, but she was too tired now to wipe them away. Anyway, if she moved they would think she was fighting again. All right, she thought. You win, you win. The pain came back, so immense that she couldn't take it in all at once; it was more like remembering suffering than experiencing it.

Marilyn thought, at the hospital they'll give me something to make me sleep, and when I wake up the cancer will be gone. She shuddered and one last tear found its way from her eye to her ear. She followed its course, travelling inward, away from the rude clamor and the oxygen it hurt so much to breathe.

The tear floated before her, troubling her. It reminded her of something she couldn't quite place. A diamond in the rough? A pearl in an oyster? A rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear? But it's not an Ethiop's ear; it's my ear, my own. She felt easier then, as if a responsibility had been lifted. Marilyn let go of consciousness, sinking into the silent refuge of coma.

Sometime later she realized that Ursula was there, in her coma. She couldn't see her, and she wasn't thinking of her or remembering her, but still she sensed her daughter's presence. Marilyn wished she'd go away. She'd felt fine until Ursula had shown up. But now a low, fluttering light kept picking at her.

Ursula? That's enough now. Stop hanging on me. But the light's pull was too strong. Marilyn was sucked through a crack in her coma and was suddenly dreaming.

“Oh, *Ursula*,” she said in her dream. “I was having such a good sleep.”

The girl looked ruffled as always, and there was a dim band of filth around her neck. Marilyn grabbed a washcloth and began rubbing furiously. Ursula submitted.

“I have to go to school,” she said. She tilted her chin upwards, so that Marilyn could work on her dirty throat. But Marilyn looked up too, and they both saw a small red and white airplane. It looked like a cardboard cut-out against the deep summer sky, which was so blue that it made Marilyn’s head buzz. Or was that the plane’s engine? It flew low, just clearing TV antennas as it passed over weathered Neptune Avenue, blistered and peeled to a soft silver-gray that suddenly turned shiny as chrome. Everything Marilyn looked at seemed to light up from within, as if plugged-in, electric.

At the end of the street, the plane descended into the parking lot of Ocean Beach Park, executing a graceful, silent landing, like a sea gull wheeling down from the bright sea air.

“Come on,” Marilyn said. She took Ursula’s hand and they ran to see the plane up close. It was so darling and bright that they had to be near it.

She was being conveyed forward. Were they in some sort of vehicle? The withered hydrangeas by the parking lot kiosk suddenly bloomed Crayola blue. Marilyn’s heart slammed against her sternum and she felt herself running again, now across the sand-strewn parking lot while the heat came back to her in visible waves of green and fuchsia. She could feel the steady pull on her arm that was Ursula trying to keep up. Sometimes it seemed to Marilyn that she was practically dragging the girl, but Ursula never loosened her grip.

But where was the plane? Not in the parking lot after all. They crossed the lot's width and bolted through the pavilion's main entrance, emerging on the boardwalk near the pinball arcade.

Marilyn's heart was pounding; she could feel blood crashing against her ears. Or was that the sea? She looked around her in confusion. What had they come here for? Such a strong smell of popcorn.

"This way," Ursula said, and tugged Marilyn to follow her.

"No, let me rest." But now it was Ursula who led the way while Marilyn threw herself after. They fairly flew over the boards. Marilyn grit her teeth to keep her heart down and thought, I might make it. She remembered there was something ahead of her that she wanted to see, something perfect. Red, she thought it was. Just ahead.

The boardwalk was uneven. She caught her toe as she ran and was thrown forward.

She was frightened for only a split-second. Then she relaxed into her own momentum, letting go of Ursula's hand. She sailed very far and very high, right out of the blue atmosphere and into the airless night of the space beyond. But as the coma closed around her, she heard someone calling from some other place. She couldn't remember; it was no place now.

She heard, "Marilyn? Marilyn? *Mommy?*"

Ursula and the sailor sat at a picnic table on the upper terrace of the Surf 'n Sand Lounge, looking down at the nearly empty boardwalk. Children weren't allowed here,

but it was a Tuesday afternoon, mid-September. The waitress had taken a long look at the sailor with Ursula in tow and shrugged. It was her first table in over an hour.

Ursula looked around the terrace. She had often stood on the boardwalk below, hoping for a chance to attract Marilyn's attention. She knew not to waste her energy if Marilyn was dancing with one of the sailors, so she waited for Marilyn to turn to watch the sunset or for her to trail one glamorous arm over the railing toward the sea, letting her gaze follow. Then Ursula would wave and shout, jumping up and down in her intensity. Marilyn leaned down out of the Bosa Nova music, and the last rays of the sun on the sparkly beads at her throat and in her hair made her a princess.

"Hi, sweetheart," Marilyn would call.

"Throw me a kiss!" Ursula answered. It was a game they played. Marilyn picked up a cocktail napkin and pressed it firmly to her lips, then draped herself over the terrace rail and let it drop, watching as it fluttered down to Ursula.

But she had been littler then. The whole summer had gone by and she hadn't come to collect a single kiss. But then again, Marilyn hadn't come dancing much since the sickness. And now that Ursula was really here, she could see that the blue and red umbrellas were frayed and the surfaces of the white wooden tables were caked with ancient seagull droppings. Still, this place was nothing short of splendid when Marilyn was in it.

It was important to make the sailor realize that she wasn't a child, that she would be perfectly okay on her own until Marilyn got back. She knew she looked younger than she was, and being so skinny was no help, either. But even so, she thought she must be doing okay—after all, he'd brought her to a bar. On the other hand, she'd carried on

dreadfully earlier, crying and crying until he had given her a hard shake. There was no telling what he really thought of her.

Twelve was old, really. Being alone for a few hours or even a few days was no big deal. In fact, it would be easier. She'd have only herself to look after. And when Marilyn came home she'd do a better job of taking care of her, honest she would.

Ursula picked fabric pills off her skirt, secretly studying her companion through her lashes. She thought of him as her mother's boyfriend, though she had never seen him before that afternoon, when he had shown up at their door. He'd worn his dress whites and carried a plastic box with two orchid blooms in it. Marilyn used to have lots of dates with the submariners from Groton, but hardly any had brought flowers.

Ursula had flung open the door and found him. That was as much as she remembered concretely; the rest had dissolved in her great relief. A grown-up! His uniform was so bright and confident and yet humble, polite. She knew as soon as she saw him that he would know what to do, that he would be calm and help her without yelling or making her more scared than she already was. For Marilyn's illness terrified her. She had no idea of what should be done and Marilyn was no use at all, one minute sobbing at the pain, begging for anything to stop it, the next forbidding Ursula to call for help. When they heard the sailor knock, Marilyn twined her hand deep into Ursula's tangled hair, close to the skull. "No," she'd begged, "don't let them take me." Ursula had left a handful of hair and a tiny rag of scalp in Marilyn's hand in order to get to the door. It didn't matter. By then she would have done anything, left anything.

And then it happened and after that the sailor asked her if she was hungry. She nodded yes and he had taken her hand and walked her down Neptune Avenue to

Ocean Beach Park, and they had ascended the stairs to this place she knew so well but had never entered.

Ursula knew she owed a debt to this young man and she felt guilty for doubting him. But calling the ambulance, maybe that had been a mistake. Once you call the ambulance they've got you. That's what Marilyn said. Ursula wished she could remember exactly how it had happened, what it had looked like when the men came and they'd taken Marilyn out on a stretcher down all three flights of stairs. If only she could make a picture in her head, she could look at it again and maybe see that everything was all right. But all she could see was the sailor's uniform and the flowers. What had become of the flowers?

Now he sat stonily, staring out to sea over the terrace balustrade. The waitress came out with another Schlitz and set in next to his first, which was less than half empty—Ursula could see the level of the beer just above the label of the brown glass bottle. It was plain to her that the sailor regretted that he'd offered to feed her. But what was he going to do? She was only a kid, after all.

I should have turned him down flat, Ursula realized. If he starts to feel stuck with me he'll palm me off. And that'll mean...what? Cops or something.

Was it already too late? Did he feel overburdened? He'd bought her a hotdog and a Coke. Had she asked for too much?

"Well, I think I'll be running along now," she said, watching his face. She hoped he'd insist that she remain with him, the way men always persuaded Marilyn that she should stay for just a few more minutes, just one more drink.

The sailor immediately perked up, taking a healthy swig from the bottle. She thought he looked very reliable. He was a thick-necked, red-headed man, green-eyed and freckled. She hoped he wouldn't turn out *too* dependable, the kind of man who couldn't leave things alone until he knew how they ended up. Miss Feirstein at school was like that, always asking Ursula if there was anything she'd like to talk about and if she'd had breakfast that morning. Adults could be sneaky sometimes, pretending to be your friend when all they wanted was to snoop.

"You got any aunts? You know, cousins, anything?" He looked distinctly hopeful.

Ursula tensed. How should she answer this? A lie. But not altogether—her mother had family living around here someplace. They just never spoke, was all.

"Sure," she said, shrugging easily. "I've got two aunts. Catherine and Regina."

"Maybe you should call them. Tell them your ma's sick and you better come over. Huh?"

"I will. When I get home."

She must have looked nervous because the seaman suddenly leaned across the table.

"If you want I'll call them for you."

"No, it's okay. I will. I'll call them later. It's just that they both work and I don't know the numbers. But I can call them at suppertime. They'll be home pretty soon. I can wait a couple of hours by myself."

The sailor nodded and resumed his surveillance of the ocean, drinking his beer.

Ursula knew what she had to do; she had to get up and walk away. So why couldn't she bring herself to leave him? She took a deep breath, then made herself speak quickly, without thinking.

"So I'll go then?"

"Yeah, you better get home. S'long as you got somebody."

Oh, why'd he have to bring that up now? She began to cry once more, and just when she thought she had everything under control. The sailor stood up and then immediately sat down, flushing with embarrassment. He ducked his head, but Ursula saw him glancing about furtively, probably hoping to find a policeman or a social worker or even the waitress—anyone who would take her off his hands. Ursula jammed a paper napkin between her teeth and bit down.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm okay now." But her voice sounded anything but okay.

The sailor slid the full bottle of beer across the table to her.

"Go on," he said. "Take a slug. It'll calm you down."

She nearly gagged on the bitter taste, but she'd acted like a baby enough for one afternoon. She controlled the shuddering and took another long draw.

"Hey hey, take it easy there. I could get in trouble for this, you know." He looked over his shoulder, but they were alone on the terrace except for a pair of dingy seagulls.

Ursula handed the bottle across the table, but he motioned it back to her.

"You keep it," he said. "Just don't let anybody catch you drinking it, all right? God knows what the Navy can do to me if you get drunk."

"I won't get drunk," Ursula said. But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she suspected that she already was. A dangerous relaxation was spreading through

her. She ought to put down that bottle and get out of there before she started feeling too comfortable and told the sailor something she shouldn't. I'm scared. I'm all alone. I need someone to help me. I'm not even sure of my relatives' name: Adams-czyk? Adams-cewizc? Mister, you can't leave me. My mother's in the hospital and I don't even know our real last name.

Stop that, she told herself sternly.

Her mother would have a fit if she ruined things now. Wasn't Marilyn always telling her to be careful? You get in any trouble, and I mean the littlest teeny bit of trouble, and the city will be at our door, calling me an unfit mother. And watch who you're talking to at that junior high. People can be very nosy. You know what I mean."

Ursula knew. But the sailor was all she had.

I'll just sit here a little longer, she decided. I won't say anything at all. He won't mind that; just a few more minutes.

She took some more of the beer, surprised by how much lighter the bottle felt in her hand.

"Your aunts will be home soon, huh?"

Ursula nodded.

"I guess you'll be okay then." The sailor tipped back the rest of the beer in his bottle, and then took the half-bottle away from Ursula and finished that as well. He smiled at her apologetically.

He won't leave, Ursula promised herself. He's going to stay, or he'll take me with him. He won't leave me here. She sat nodding and nodding. She knew she was nodding, but she couldn't stop herself.

The sailor stood up to go. He took out his wallet and put a bill down on the table to pay for the beers, the hot dog, the Coke. Ursula still sat, rocking in mute agreement.

“Okay, kid. You get yourself home and call your aunties. Don’t worry, your ma’ll be all right.”

With a great effort of will, Ursula managed to stop bobbing her head.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely.

The sailor took a dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to her.

This is it, she realized. He’s going to go off and leave me and the buck’s to make it okay.

She shouldn’t have had that beer. She was feeling heavy, unable to think. What if she wrapped her arms around his neck and sobbed her heart out. What if she simply refused to be left? The sailor was watching her, shifting from one foot to the other, waiting to see if she would take this quietly. Cry, she told herself. Cry so he’ll try to make you stop.

But what was the use; she knew what would happen in end. The social workers would come and she’d never see Marilyn again.

“All right,” she said, in a very small voice.

The sailor’s nervous shifting turned instantly to happy anticipation; he rose up on the balls of his feet and swayed.

You *jerk*, Ursula thought. But through the pain of his betrayal she felt a steely sureness form. It clamped over her skull like two strong hands and she knew now that she would keep her head, those hands were keeping it for her. Her vision became clear

and defined as she looked at the dollar bill and made the proper connection, at last realizing the correct response. She knew exactly what her mother would want her to do.

“I’ll be needing more than this,” Ursula said.

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