

My Mother's Spirit

by L.J. Davis

Prologue

Nobody noticed the little black haired girl sitting silently on the long hospital bench that lined the hospital corridor. Everyone was in such a panic, trying to focus their efforts on the woman.

Two hours before, the ambulance had brought the woman to St. Anthony's Hospital. It was pretty apparent to the emergency room staff that she was not going to make it. This trauma case involved the crash of a hot air balloon.

No one knew why the balloon suddenly lost altitude but it plummeted to the ground with the woman who they were

valiantly working on. Yes, they worked on the woman to save her life. That was what they were supposed to do. But they were not only trying to save her life, they were trying to save the lives of her family.

The doctors and nurses would grieve her loss as some failure of their own human inabilities but they would go on. They would tend to new patients, manage horrific traumas and try to live life. But, they knew that, for the family of the woman, it wouldn't be that easy.

What hurt the most was having the knowledge that by saying the words, "I am sorry, she's gone," it was not an ending for the family but a beginning. The beginning of sorrow and hurt and, more often than not, of illness. It was well known in their field that the families of trauma victims and survivors were more vulnerable to sickness.

So, they went through the paces. They stuck tubes in one end and stuck monitors to another. They gave her oxygen despite the fact that she would probably not live more than two hours. Her body was broken and it was a simple truth that she was bleeding internally with no hope of mending the numerous bones, blood vessels or organs that had been shattered when her balloon hit the ground.

As the doctors and nurses and other attendants worked precisely and patiently on the woman, the little girl just sat

on the bench. Her mind was blank. She didn't really know what to think. She would glance in towards the room and then quickly glance out towards the corridor. She felt that any minute someone would come out and scold her for looking in.

She didn't really know what had happened. That morning, she and her father had been feeding the crows. It was a Sunday ritual to go out back behind the barn and try to entice the crows to come down by offering them treats. Every once and while they would be able to get a couple to come down off of the roof of the barn but, usually, they just sat their staring like they knew something no one else knew. Today, they had just enticed two to come down when a great breeze blew through the valley and all of the crows alighted into the air. She watched them as they set off on some secret mission and wondered what they had set out to do.

She heard her mother say that she was going to take up the balloon that she and her father had been preparing that morning but that was all she could remember. Everything else was cloudy and now her mind was simply blank. She didn't understand what was going on and all she could think about was that she really wanted a cheeseburger.

Suddenly, the room that had been so full of people, began to slowly empty. One by one, nurses and doctors gathered

up their instruments and quietly left the room. When the little girl again ventured to sneak a peek, she saw that only two people remained. She could see her father and wondered why he looked so sad. She couldn't remember when she had seen her father look sad before. Even when she dropped milk on the floor or carelessly left her toys lying jumbled in the family room, her daddy would always tell her to clean up her mess with a smile. He was always happy. He told her that it was because he loved her mommy so much that he never thought about anything bad. He must be thinking about bad things now, she thought, because he looked like she felt when her mother wouldn't let her go balloon riding. He was standing up but leaning gently towards the bed on which her mother lay. She could see his face clearly.

The other person in the room was her mother's best friend, Lucy. She could barely make out her outline. She was standing on the opposite side of the bed from her father. Every once and while, she could see her hand reach out to grab her mother's. She had beautiful hands. The little girl hoped that one day she would have hands like her.

She sat like that, watching, for a long time. Her father never sat down and he never glanced towards her. It seemed like no one noticed her at all. Suddenly, she saw her father

move. It wasn't a casual move but a jerky one. It was as if he had seen a ghost. He no longer looked sad but puzzled. It was then that she realized that her mother was talking. Even though she was out in the hall, she could hear her mother's words clearly, as if she were standing right beside her. The little girl shuddered. "It's you," she heard her mother's voice say quietly. "Oh my God. Baby. I am so glad that you know how much I loved you." Then, it was quiet. She suddenly felt very sleepy and as she slowly drifted off, she glanced back to the room in which her mother had just died and saw her father and Lucy holding each other tightly as if they would never let go.

Chapter One

“My most poignant memory of my mother was when I saw the ambulance people place her broken body on a long white cot and lift her into that screeching ambulance. I will always remember that, even at six years old, I knew my life was changed forever.

As my father raced after the ambulance down that road, all I kept thinking about was the balloon. It was her favorite. She used to ride in that balloon for hours by herself, even though my dad would get angry with her, telling her that she should never ride alone.

He would say, your mother always did what she wanted. She was careless. But his words were never filled with anger or remorse, just a weird sort of feeling which was admiration and, of course, love.

I don't know why I kept thinking about that balloon. I can still see it in my mind to this day. It was simple, white with a picture of a red rose on one side – the rose was her favorite flower. My parents named it Belle because it was the belle of their fleet of 10 hot air balloons. It was the first one they had ever bought when they started their hot air balloon business.

If you asked my dad he would say that they gave up everything to raise me in an environment free from greed, pressure, and success. Both my parents graduated from Ivy League law schools and ended up practicing law in Southern California. They worked hard for some time. But, then, my mother found out she was pregnant.

When my mother found out she was pregnant with me she supposedly took my father's hand, led him out of the doctor's office, and made him drive her to her mother's house. My father told me that my mother said only *her* mother could truly understand how those words, "You're pregnant," made your senses alive.

I was born during the times when woman could have it all—career *and* family. And my father said that for six months after my mother went back to work, she tried to do it all. But, in those days, you could not be competitive in the marketplace if you did not commit your every waking breath to THE JOB.

As soon as the corporate wolves sensed you were down, you were dead. You were eaten alive by the very people who spoke so fervently about their *family* benefits packages and *dependent care* spending accounts.

When the realities of family impeded upon the workplace (the need for time off to take care of a sick child, the desire to

create flexible time to be home with loved ones, the craving for a good, quality life that involved being nurtured by friends and family), the good old boys retreated within their cold corporate facades saying, "Your commitment level is not what it used to be." Or, "Joe stays til 9:00, but you only stay until 5:00." Or, my favorite, "You're going to have to make some hard choices."

What choices did my mother have? On the one hand, society told her she could do it all, but on the other hand, society slapped her in the face for trying. I think she came to the conclusion that it was all an illusion. My dad said it became very clear to her that in order for women to get away with their suffrage and women's rights movements, a sacrifice was required to be made. A sacrifice that was basically equal to selling their souls to the devil: their children.

Oh, women could have children, they could even use the corporate health care insurance to pay for fertility planning and in-vitro fertilization, *but* they could not put their child's needs first or they were unproductive, ineffective, and not pulling their weight.

If a woman had a meeting and her child was sick, she attended the meeting and let daycare take care of her child.

If she was needed to meet with a client the next day, she missed her child's sixth grade graduation.

Women innocently made this Satanic pact to give up the health and well being of their children by simply signing their name to the bottom of the company employment application. Not only did my mother have to deal with this madness, but my father also continually had to make choices between job and family. Until one day, they went for a balloon ride.

I was nine months old at the time and my mother was experiencing a great amount of stress at work. So, to put things in perspective, my father said, they drove out to the Temecula wine country and took a balloon ride while my grandmother watched me.

My father said that as they sailed over landscape, *the look* came over my mother's face. He said, the only other time he had seen *the look* was when my mother found out she was pregnant with me – it was a look of serenity, of peace, of pure freedom.

From that day on, their lives changed and improved. Both my parents quit their jobs and bought some land in Northern California. From their savings, and with a lot of help from their respective families, they began purchasing their own hot air balloons; first the Belle, then Serenity,

Victoria (for my mother's mother), French Dip (for my father's favorite sandwich), and the list goes on. They lived a very happy life, relishing each day because they could spend it with me and with each other, until that day when Belle fell from the sky.

Now, I am a grown woman. No, I take that back. I am an angry grown woman. How could I not be? When I was six years old, my mother died. I never got to know her. I never got to understand what made her tick. What she liked. What she didn't. There is so much anger inside me and I don't know how to make it go away. It's not that I feel cheated because my mother wasn't there to help me learn how to use make-up. I feel cheated because she wasn't there. I am angry because she just wasn't there. Somehow, I feel like I am less than a woman because I never felt her love. I am sure that she loved me and cared for me. She wouldn't have quit her career if she didn't want to give me everything she could. But that's not the point. When I am alone at night and I'm thinking about the past, I'll try to reach back and pull a memory of my mother to help deal with some issue in my life and I have nothing. I hardly have anything to point me in the right direction. Isn't that what mothers do? They help their children, especially their daughters, learn how to make their place in the world. I hear all the time, my girlfriends

say how they can turn to their mother when they need perspective. Don't get me wrong. My father is wonderful. I don't think I would be the person I am today if I didn't have him. But, a woman needs a mother.

There are times in my life when I don't know who I am. I can be driving in my car and suddenly this feeling takes me over and I feel like I've been abducted by aliens. I see my hands on the steering wheel, I see the side of my face in the rear-view mirror, but it seems like I'm not who I think I am. I'm not really Jo Cambian. I'm someone else. I don't know how I can make you understand. I guess what I am trying to say is that even though I live in this beautiful world, even though I see butterflies flying past me, and I smell the scent of roses in my garden, even though I listen to the most fabulous music and taste mouth-watering chocolate, even though I can touch my husband's mouth and know how it feels to be kissed with passion, I don't experience any of it because I don't know how. My mother would have taught me how. She would have taught me how to see the joy in life that I just am not able to see without her. A mother has an influence on you, whether it is good or bad, that is just undeniable. I can see it in my own friends. Even in my husband. A mother shapes who you are through her words and actions. But my mother didn't get a chance to help shape

me and I feel like I am a bag of skin and water without bones.

I think my time's almost over. I appreciate your time listening. I think I do have a lot that I need to get off my chest, literally. I just don't know what good it can do now. I think that this is good. So...at this point, I've met with you and now it's just a matter of time before I start my first chemo treatment. I'm really optimistic. I think that with the advances they've made in breast cancer research, I've got a good shot. My doctor says that since I have no history of this kind of cancer in my family that it might be a good sign. Thanks for your time, Dr. Callery."

Jo Cambian rose slowly. She felt like she had just spilled her guts to a stranger who probably did not care a damn about anything she had just said. She was so tired of staring at her consoling face that she thought she would smack her if she didn't get out of there immediately. As she made her way out the office door, her fingers fumbled in her purse. She was trying to find her car keys. All she could think about as she walked down the hall, glancing thoughtlessly at the women who sat in the waiting room was how she was going to tell her dad. He was a strong man. That wasn't the problem. She knew he would have the strength for whatever happened down the road but she just didn't want to be

another emotional burden. She knew too that he had always looked forward to having grandchildren. She hoped that everything would work out in order to make that come true.

As she headed out the main hospital door, her head turned at the sound of an ambulance screaming towards the emergency room. She shuddered. Every time she heard that sound, it brought back the memories – the only memories that she had of her mother. She got in her car, put the key in the ignition, turned it and started the engine. She paused for a moment, looked into the rear-view mirror and gave herself a queer sort of smile. “God, I look like my father,” she thought. Then, before she glanced back to make sure no one was coming, her tears came and she said desperately, “God, I am only thirty-four.”

Chapter Two

Why is life so hard? Have you ever wondered why life seems so incredibly hard? It is like we are all just swimming upstream, against a current that never ebbs. Every day of our lives is a battle.

How do people go on when their lives are filled with such incredible adversity? Everyday, you hear about people whose children are murdered by a stranger or the star student who becomes disfigured in an automobile accident and cannot show her face in public because people will stare. Yet, somehow, some way, these people go on.

How do they do it? They say that tragedy brings out the best in some people and the worst in others. One man whose son is killed by a drunk driver dies ten months later of brain cancer while another man who loses three limbs in a motorcycle accident goes on to become an inspirational speaker. How? What makes them different? Why do some people become burdened by life and others transcend it somehow?

Take my own father, for example. At the age of three he was literally abandoned by his mother. His father had just

come back from World War II and his mother just decided to leave. She had no reason. For years, my dad didn't even know where his mother was. When he finally found her years later, she had remarried, had four kids, and had never told a single soul that she had had another family. She had never told her second group of children that they had brothers. She never acknowledged her grandchildren. In fact, she begged my father never to tell her other children because they "just wouldn't understand." She hoped somehow that my father and his brothers would just go away.

My father's two brothers couldn't handle it. They slowly withered away – one from cancer and another one from heart disease. They died in their early 50s. They let what they considered to be the single greatest tragedy in their lives get to them so much that they killed themselves with the grief.

But, my dad was different. When he finally talked to his mother, of course he was angry. He stewed and steamed about it for days and weeks, but he moved on. He didn't let it ruin the course of his life. Here was a man whose mother had left him when he was three, whose father he had to carry out of bars when he was 14 because he was too drunk to get home by himself, and whose wife died when he was

36, yet, he still lived and loved every damn day of his life. I cherish him for this. We are so different. My father has the unique ability to live in the moment. Every living day, he is wherever he is. He doesn't look at the past, glances marginally at the future, and lives every day like it is going to be his last. I wish I could be more like him.

My problem is that I overanalyze things. I take things apart. I have to know how things tick, why things happen the way they do, what makes people do certain things, what makes them feel the way they feel. But, I never come up with any a-ha's. Whereas my dad takes what comes, feels it, and lets it pass by, I take what comes and let it affect every piece of my being.

The other day, for example, I was driving and I noticed a young boy walking across the street. He was a punk – plain and simple. He crossed right in front of another car with no regard for rules or even for his own safety. It was like he was saying, "You're going to stop for me, all right!" At just that moment when he walked in front of the car, the man inside the car honked. He honked loud and he honked long. The boy was startled for a few moments but quickly gained his punk composure and yelled insolently, "Beep, beep to you old man!"

If you had this same experience, you probably wouldn't have given it another thought, but all I could do for the rest of the day was analyze it. I thought about the boy and the man and the reasons why they did what they did. I thought about how fate had brought them there at just that moment. The universe stopped during that second and they connected. They connected in a bad way.

All I could think about was the boy. What if he came from a family that didn't care and that was why he was a punk. Maybe he had an alcoholic father or mother, maybe his sister was pregnant and on crack or maybe his parents worked so much that he came home to an empty house. What if the man who had honked had started this boy down the road of self-hatred? Maybe the boy would go home and cry because the honking just nailed home the fact that he was a loser. Maybe the man would go home and not think a thing about it while the boy was sitting there crying himself to sleep. What if the boy ultimately killed himself all because some man honked his horn at him?

I know. This is crazy talk but that is what I do. I think about things. I look at it from all sides and every which way. My mind is always tearing things down and putting things back together. I can't help it. I don't know why I do it. I just do.

That's what I am doing now as I drive down the dirt road that I have driven on a thousand times. The road towards home. I am sitting here analyzing how I am going to tell my father that I am going to refuse chemotherapy treatment. I am working on how I am going to word it. The tone I will use. The reaction he will have. I wonder what he will say and I go over it and over it in my mind. Will this be the final straw? Will this tragedy become his undoing? Will he finally break down and wallow in misery.

I would. I can say that loud and clear. I would. I would be angry and hurt and mad and frustrated and I would try to bargain with God and make promises that I couldn't begin to keep. I would do anything not to break down but I would anyway. There is only so much tragedy that one person can take. I admit it – I can't take any sort of tragedy. I admit to anyone listening that I have been affected by tragedy. I know that this tragedy is part (no most) of the reason why I have a tumor growing in my breast. I couldn't handle it and I have let it get to me for thirty-something years. It's grown like a fever in my heart. It pulses and plunges me into deep, dark despair. I have never been able to get over my mom's death and it hangs over me like a shroud. I am one of those people that I don't understand. I am one of those people that has one thing happen to them and they fall apart. I freely

admit it. Believe me, I have spent a lot of time analyzing this part of my life. I wish I wasn't this way. I wish I had my father's spirit. A spirit that would let me fly amongst the clouds. A spirit that would plunge me into the light. A spirit that takes the best part of a moment and throws the tragedy away. But, I don't.

There is a part of me that doesn't want to die. I am not scared of death but I do love life. But, there is another part of me that does want to die. There is a part of me that is tired of having to deal with emotions, of having to analyze why people do what they do, and why the world moves the way it does. I seek clarity yet know that none exists. What could possibly happen in my life to help me deal with my mother's death? I have never been able to find the cure. All I know is that no one can create this clarity for me. My father has done the best he can and that is a lot in light of the fact that I am so stubborn. I know that I am the only person who has the answers. I am the only person who knows the truth but I block it out because I don't want to feel any more pain.

I didn't even know my mother so I don't understand what my problem is. My father raised me. My childhood was wonderful. I AM a strong woman. But, I can't seem to get over this one thing. I wish I knew how to let it go.

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Jo talked to herself for quite a long time. As her car traveled up the road towards home, her mind never quieted. It worked and worked for a long time trying to make sense of the turmoil that forced its way into her soul.

It was the end of the day. The sun was suspended over the hills, just waiting to go down for the night. There was about an hour's worth of light left in it. When a car traveled up that hill, the only thing the passengers could see at first was a big barn in the horizon. As the car got closer, the sign which read, "Ballon de Corbeau" would slowly come into view. For tourists, dusk in the mountains was incredible. Clustered around the open field which lay a quarter of an acre away from the barn, which housed the office of the small balloon business, were five or six balloons in various states of descent. Some had already landed and were being tethered to the ground. Couples were exiting with looks of exhalation on their faces. Children got out of the balloon's gondola with a mixture of fury and fluster. Older couples reveled in the fact that they finally had experienced something that they had always dreamed of doing.

For the people who worked the balloons, the end of the work day came as a comfort. Everyone was safe, everyone was sound, and everyone hurried furiously to get back home. They went through the paces, thanking customers,

deflating equipment, and putting things in order. For them, it was just like any other day.

As Jo's car trudged gravely up the hill, it went unnoticed by most. Jo pretty much came and went as she pleased. She worked harder than most of the hired hands. She was up at dawn, worked past lunch, and didn't go home until well after eight. She lived and breathed balloons. Oddly, though, she never went up. It wasn't a big deal. No one thought the less of her but some did wonder why. She got the balloons ready, she handled the finances, and helped her father generally manage the business, but she never went up. No one had ever seen her in the sky, even Paul who had worked for her father for over 30 years.

Jo was always headed off this way or that so when the car came into view of the barn, no one really noticed that she was back, except her father. He had been watching for her. He could tell what kind of mood she was in by the way she drove her car up the hill. If she sped up the hill, he would quickly slide back into the barn and hit the john or some other hideaway. If she took forever to get up the incline, he knew that she was thinking about something. Today, she drove up that hill like he had never seen before. The way she was driving the car up the hill reminded him of times when

she was caught doing something naughty. It was then he knew something was wrong.

She had told him about the cancer. It had been several weeks before when she had approached him about it. When she told him, it was like everything clicked into place for him and he was overcome by a feeling of inevitability – of fate. He had been waiting for something to happen. He just never knew what form it would take. How it would manifest itself. He knew that she had never gotten over her mother's death and that the time would have to come when she would be forced to face the emotions that she had denied herself for almost thirty years.

He didn't know what she was coming to tell him but he knew he would take in stride. He always did. Sometimes he felt like he was too distant although he didn't mean to be. He didn't know why but he had this unique ability to feel the emotion, embrace the grief or revel in the happiness, and then move on. It was almost as if his heart felt completely but then his mind, devoid of all the usual defense mechanisms, simply categorized the event and moved on. He hoped that she didn't think that by doing this he didn't care. He had never cared for anyone more – except his wife. It was easy to love his Jo because she was so much like her mother.

He glanced out of the barn window and saw her get out of the car. He could sense that she had something difficult to tell him.