

## Honor Thy Mother

by Peggy Christie

The wail pierced the heavy blanket of sleep that enfolded Deirdre. She was startled into consciousness so suddenly that she almost forgot where she was. But when the next desperate cry sounded from the other end of the house, she remembered all too well. Slipping out from beneath the covers, Deirdre reached over and lit the bedside candle. Pulling a wool shawl around her thin shoulders and pushing her feet into her slippers, she carried the candle and a dark glass bottle to the door.

Walking out into the hall, another mournful cry echoed down the dark passage. Weakly, Deirdre called out. "I'm coming, Mother."

She approached the open doorway on her left. Deirdre could hear the pitiful sobbing that wracked her mother's disease-weakened body. Since the spring, Margaret (Maggie to her friends) McIntyre had been slowly but surely wasting away, her body being consumed at a steady pace by cancer. And in 1818, with very little in the way of trained, or even sanitary, medical practices, Maggie's only relief was through drug-induced oblivion, which Deirdre carried in the glass bottle.

Now, in the heart of Winter, Maggie was nothing more than a skeleton in a bag of skin that was sallow and milk-white at the same time. If she studied her mother closely, Deirdre could almost make out the exact contours of Maggie's skull and the hollows of her eye sockets. Her hipbones jutted up from the concave surface of her lower abdomen. Her fingers had withered into knobby claws, not unlike the black and leafless tree branches tapping at the bedroom window. Her feet, next to the stick-like visage of her legs and ankles, looked swollen and distorted, her only features to appear bigger since the disease took over.

Standing in the doorway, studying her mother's emaciated face, Deirdre sighed. Through her pain-ridden delirium, Maggie slowly turned her head to look at her daughter. Reaching out weakly, Maggie whispered urgently to Deirdre. "Oh, Pamela. Come quickly. The horses are running through my room again. You know how that will upset Papa."

Shaking her head sadly, Deirdre was used to her mother's addled brain. If the pain wasn't causing her hallucinations and confusion, it was the opium-laced compound the doctor prescribed to keep her "comfortable".

"No, Mother, it's me. Deirdre."

Angrily, her mother argued. "I don't know any Deirdre. Who are you? Why are you in my house?"

"I'm your daughter. You've been sick and I'm taking care of you, remember?" she asked, exasperated at having to explain again.

Maggie frowned but recognition dawned on her sunken face. "Oh, Deirdre. There you are. Where have you been? I've been calling you for hours."

Deirdre sighed and shook her head. Her mother's sense of time was completely distorted by the pain. What was actually only minutes seemed like hours to Maggie. An hour felt like a day. That's what pain did to a person. That was its sole purpose. It sucked up thought and reason so it was impossible to decipher anything except when it hurt and when it didn't. There was no more day or night, light or dark, asleep or awake. There was only pain or no pain. It gobbled up birthdays, anniversaries, the turning of the seasons, and even time itself just as the disease was feasting upon her mother's flesh.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Deirdre reached for her mother and propped her up on the pillows. Making a feeble attempt at the bottle still in Deirdre's grip, Maggie's trembling hand was not quick enough to snatch the medicine from her daughter. In fact, Deirdre smacked the back of Maggie's hand like you would a child who was trying to sneak a cookie before supper. Maggie moaned. Deirdre's voice was stagnant with contempt and irritation.

"Mother, be patient. I have to measure this out precisely. Do you remember what the doctor said? No, of course you don't. We must be very careful not to give you too much. It might kill you and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

Deirdre gave her mother a sharp pointed look, conveying the warning with her eyes, as well as her words. Maggie shook her head back and forth, fearful that Deirdre might delay further in relieving the pain. She watched her daughter while she measured out a spoonful of the dark liquid as a greedy vulture would watch a man on the verge of death, struggling through the desert, knowing it was only a matter of time before it could feast on his flesh. As Deirdre put the bottle on the bedside table, Maggie unconsciously reached out for the spoon. When Deirdre turned back, she bumped into her mother's hand and spilled most of the medicine on the white bedcovers.

Unable to contain it any longer, Deirdre's rage boiled to the surface. Her mother cringed into her pillows, as if it were possible to melt into and beyond them, out of the room, to escape her daughter's wrath. Deirdre screamed. "Mother! Look what you've done! How many times do we have to go through this? Every day it's the same thing. You cannot administer the medicine yourself. You are too sick and weak. Do you not think me capable? Have I not been taking care of you for \*almost a year now?\*"

With each word she leaned closer to Maggie. Her last words brought her inches from her mother's face. Deirdre's own face was purple with hatred. The last 10 months of caring for her mother had taken its toll. She hated her mother for being sick. She hated having to cook her meals and then clean up her vomit when her stomach couldn't digest the food. She hated cleaning out the chamber pot after her mother was able to get out of bed and the soiled bed sheets when she couldn't. Deirdre no longer had a life of her own and she hated Maggie for it.

But the worst of it all was Michael. Michael was the love of her life and the most beautiful man she'd ever known. He was the first and only man to fall in love with her and propose marriage. She emphasized the 'was' in her mind because Michael was gone. He'd wanted to get married last March and move out west to take over his uncle's cattle ranch. But when Maggie took ill, Deirdre was the only family she had to care for her, so she couldn't go.

She begged him to wait out the year. Maggie surely wouldn't last through the winter and then they could go away and be happy together – forever. But Michael had to take over the ranch right away. His Uncle had died in January and had no family. Michael was the rightful heir but if he didn't claim the ranch by April, the local bank would buy out the mortgage to it and sell it to the highest bidder. It was his best chance at a future and he had to take it.

The last Deirdre had heard from him was in July and he and his new wife were doing well. Sorry things turned out this way, he still loved her but he hoped she understood, and so on and so on. Thinking back on the day she received that letter, Deirdre remembered hearing her heart shatter like a crystal goblet dropped on a marble floor. Her soul grew dark that day and she turned her love for Michael into hatred for her mother.

Deirdre grabbed her mother's wrists in her hands. She squeezed until Maggie whimpered from the new pain. She squeezed harder until Maggie was silent. Her tear-filled eyes searched her daughter's for a hint of mercy and compassion but found none. Deirdre's eyes were dark and almost unreadable with anger. They were alien to Maggie. But understanding finally dawned on her and she realized pain was not her greatest fear now. It was Deirdre.

Deirdre released her grip on Maggie and walked to the end of the room, leaving the spilled medicine to soak into the bed sheets and the thinly coated spoon just out of her mother's reach. Maggie didn't even attempt to reach for either the spoon or the bottle on the table. She only watched with trepidation as Deirdre paced back and forth along the foot of the bed. Every now and again Deirdre would look over at her mother, her eyes squinted in disgust, as if she had just discovered a dead rodent in the pantry.

Suddenly she stopped pacing. She quickly turned and walked up to the foot of the bed. She put her hands on the footboard and studied her mother for several long minutes. Just as Maggie was about to ask her what she was doing, Deirdre's mouth curled up into a sly cruel smile. It lasted only a moment and then her features softened with sympathy and, seemingly, guilt. But Maggie had seen it. She saw the cruelty hidden behind the mask of the dutiful daughter. Gazing up at Deirdre as she approached the bedside, Maggie knew she would be dead by morning.

"Oh, Mother. I am sorry. I...I don't know what's come over me. Can you ever forgive me? Here, let me get you some medicine."

Deirdre opened the bottle and measured out another spoonful for Maggie. Clutching her hands to her chest, Maggie never took her eyes off her daughter's face. She swallowed the syrup with an audible gulp and Deirdre smiled sweetly. Maggie mirrored the smile but not the cunning behind it. If Deirdre was to be her deliverer from the pain, so be it. There was nothing she could, or wanted, to do about it now. Resigning herself to the inevitable, she reached out a trembling hand to her daughter and brushed a finger along her cheek. Caught off guard by the sudden display of affection, Deirdre's anger was diffused as a frown creased her brow.

"My darling. I know this hasn't been easy for you. You've given up your own life to care for me and I will never forget it. You are my only child, Deirdre. I love you very much. Do what you feel you must. But know this: if you go through with it, you will never be at peace, in this life or the next."

Deirdre coughed nervously and stammered out a reply, blinking rapidly and looking everywhere but at Maggie. "What are you talking about, Mother?"

Maggie did not answer. She only cupped her daughter's cheek in her hand and smiled. Tired from the pain and the medicine making her drowsy, she dropped her hand to her lap and closed her eyes. As sleep pulled at the corners of her consciousness, she mumbled her final words to Deirdre.

"No peace, my darling daughter. Now or ever. No... peace."

As Maggie relaxed into painless sleep, Deirdre tensed with anger, and not a little fear. She clenched her hands into fists and pounded them against her thighs. It was impossible. How could she have known her intentions? The idea to kill her mother had only occurred to her minutes ago. It's not as if she had been planning this for months. Of course, being raised in a strict, Catholic

home, murdering her mother would leave quite a stain on her soul. But it really would be a mercy killing, Deirdre reasoned with herself. Maggie had suffered so long with the pain and Deirdre could release her. Surely God would understand. If He didn't, well, then at least Maggie wouldn't be the only one freed from this misery.

She stopped hammering her fists. Leaning over, she spoke softly in Maggie's ear. "Mother? Are you awake?"

Upon hearing her daughter's voice, Maggie frowned and whimpered softly in her sleep. But in just a few moments, her face smoothed and relaxed and she even smiled a little. Deirdre's lip curled up in a vicious snarl again as she slowly pulled one of the down pillows from behind her mother's head. Fueled by her frustrations, and the incredulity that her mother knew what she had planned, she pressed the pillow over Maggie's face.

At first nothing was happening. Deirdre expected her mother to thrash or struggle in some way. Just as she was about to reposition the pillow, Maggie twitched. After applying a bit more pressure, Deirdre watched as the feeble twitching turned more violent. Maggie's hands clawed at the pillow as she struggled to push it away. Her legs, even in such a weakened and atrophied state, thrashed with a strength Deirdre thought impossible. She threw her whole upper body over the pillow as she was afraid her mother might actually succeed in slipping out from beneath it.

Eventually, Maggie stopped kicking. Her arms fell at her sides and her body was utterly motionless. Deirdre kept the pillow over Maggie's face long after she lay still. Shaking from the effort, Deirdre slowly pulled away the pillow. Her mother's eyes were half closed and her jaw sagged open. Without really thinking, Deirdre reached over and smoothed her hand over Maggie's face, pulling down on her eyelids.

Closing her own eyes, Deirdre breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Looking back down at her mother, a small gasp escaped her lips. Maggie's eyes were open. Deirdre pulled the eyelids down again only to watch in horror as they slowly opened again. After trying to close them a third time, a small smile tugged at Deirdre's mouth. She quickly walked to the front hall and grabbed her change purse. Shaking her head and laughing softly, she pulled out two silver coins. Rubbing them together as she walked back to her mother's room, she scolded herself for being so skittish.

Placing the coins over her mother's eyes, Deirdre smiled. "There we go, Mother. Isn't that better?" Shaking a finger at her mother's corpse, Deirdre scolded the dead woman. "You shouldn't scare your daughter like that. For a moment, I almost believed you were still alive. Then I'd be forced to kill you all over again and the good Lord knows how exhausted I am from the first effort."

Adjusting the wool shawl around her shoulders and sighing in contentment, she picked up the candle on the bedside table. Walking to the window opposite the bed, Deirdre hummed quietly. Putting the candle on the small wooden table beneath the window, she gazed out into the night. Deciding to get a breath of fresh air she leaned over to push open the window. A small corner of the shawl dipped into the flame of the lit candle. It was half-eaten by fire by the time Deirdre realized it. The upper portion of her nightdress was also quickly engulfed.

When Deirdre released her first agonizing scream, her hair was set afire, along with her kerchief. It seared directly to her scalp, which quickly blackened. Soon all the layers of her clothing were on fire and clung mercilessly to her body. Her skin sizzled and cracked, her flesh bubbled. The small table she leaned upon for support caught fire and added to the blaze. Deirdre whirled and spun, hoping to put out the fire, but it was too late. Her screams echoed throughout the house until her vocal chords melted and slid down her throat like a boiling glob of oyster flesh.

In her final pain-racked moments, she turned towards her mother's corpse. Her bloodied and blistered mouth opened in a silent cry of rage and she flung herself on the deathbed, tearing and beating at Maggie's body. The last thing she saw, before her eyes exploded from the heat, was the angelic perfection of her mother's face, haloed in fire and burnt bedclothes, smiling in the sweet repose of peace and retribution.

In time, Deirdre slumped and lay quietly on her mother's breast. Her suffering subsided into a more annoying vibration at the back of her skull than actual pain. She felt as if she were floating in a lake of warm water, weightless and adrift. She was angry at having to die but, she thought to herself, at least I'm free. I'm free. Then everything went white.

The wail pierced the heavy blanket of sleep that enfolded Deirdre. She was startled into consciousness so suddenly that she almost forgot where she was. But when the next desperate cry sounded from the other end of the house, she remembered all too well. Slipping out from beneath the covers, Deirdre reached over and lit the bedside candle. Pulling a wool shawl around her thin shoulders and pushing her feet into her slippers, she carried the candle and a dark glass bottle to the door. A single tear trailed down her cheek as she knowingly played out her eternal punishment once again. Weakly, Deirdre called out. "I'm coming, Mother."

THE END