

An exclusive excerpt from



READING JANE

A Daughter's Memoir



SUSANNAH KENNEDY

A Day on the Bay

1977

THE BACKDROP TO SAN FRANCISCO IS THE BAY, with its blues or grays, the weighted-down Chinese freighters plowing under the bridges, the iconic *doooooop* foghorn from Alcatraz. It brings wind and sea lions and crabs.

Fishermen earn their success by knowing what is under the water—the currents and the poisons. But in my mother's world, the ones who like to think they owned the Bay were those who sailed upon it. The captains with their sloops and their yawls, their slips in Sausalito or in China Basin or, finest of all, in the St. Francis Yacht Club, nestled for almost a hundred years along the northern San Francisco waterfront.

After the divorce, my mother was entranced by those sailors. She often beckoned me to that yacht club's proximity. To walk nearby, to sunbathe on the Marina Green, to encourage me to get a job as an "Explainer" at the old Exploratorium, housed in the cavernous Palace of Fine Arts across the street. Again and again on the weekends she led me past the boats, sometimes as a prelude to hiking across the Bridge, mostly to just hang out on the grass and people-watch. Frisbee tossers, guitar players, and runners stretching.

As I read the diary entries in 1977, I wonder about this focus of

hers. Was she unconsciously inoculating me, a homeopathic walk-by, so frequent exposure would ensure the moneyed class would brand itself onto my brain? If not her, then me?

In April 1977, she met a handsome divorced man named Royce Covington. Royce took her sailing, and then to dinner at the coveted yacht club.

“I felt at long last like I was not looking in anymore,” she writes.

On Opening Day on the Bay that year, an April day known for its boat parade to mark the beginning of the sailing season, she was invited to accompany Royce and his “happy-go-lucky” daughters on his 36-foot sailboat. Either I was not invited, or it was my father’s visitation weekend. But I, aged thirteen, wanted to go out on the Bay, too. My father had grown up sailing on the Long Island Sound and the Atlantic. Later he would own a sloop and teach sailing in Key West. But in 1977 he was politically radical, involved in civil rights, and known more for his frayed “Save the Whales” T-shirt than for his once-natural Brooks Brothers suits.

His self-image was all off kilter. He thought himself a lifetime boatsman, but the only sailboat he could afford that year was a kind of lowest-budget portable catamaran. Perhaps he bought it in a moment of make-believe—this time he would manage to get his life back on track.

My father had remarried when I was twelve, in a Golden Gate Park ceremony with a justice of the peace. Harriet was a wiry 50-something science writer. She was friendly enough to me, but when she laughed between cigarette draws, she coughed, and she had squishy puffy bags under her eyes that made her look old. They moved from charming, tasteful apartment to charming, tasteful apartment—always located around Coit Tower. Neighbors sometimes called the police. Supposedly my father once split open Harriet’s head. Evictions came for disturbing the peace “with their drunken brawls,” a diary entry of Mom’s mentions.

I was ambivalent about spending time with my father. When he was sober, he was a scholarly, engaging conversation partner who followed the news and had been all over the world. But, at 50, his face

looked gray and baggy, the lines of virility still there but bloated, a little like an old famous actor. His skin had taken on that bitter drinker smell. His knees were too pink, his beer belly too evident. I never saw him do a day of cardio in his life.

He often promised something to me and then forgot. I was used to it. He embarrassed me, but my mother gloated too strongly, and I felt protective of him.

This day, upset that he had been spending so little time with me, I requested we try out his new Go Boat, the low-budget catamaran. He grudgingly arranged to put it on top of the beat-up green Volvo and drive with me over to a marina in Sausalito. I guess he wanted to show off with something that he remembered being second nature to him, once practiced to his core. He wanted to make his daughter proud.

The afternoon started off fine. It was cold and gray, and never warmed up, a typical April on the water. The breeze was strong and exhilarating as we zipped over the whitecaps. There were so many boats out, skippers eager to start the sailing season with a good adventure. I remember wondering if I would see my mother out there, though I was sulky because I knew Royce and didn't like him and his oh-so-perfect daughters. I spent most of the first hours perched in my white Irish sweater and yellow sailing jacket on the canvas platform strung over the pontoons, shivering, but also thrilled. It felt good to be sharing the outdoors with my dad.

The little boat had been heeling hard, part of the fun. Then I heard, "Move to the starboard!" My father was yelling. I threw myself to the right on the platform to be a counterweight to the wind. But we heeled too far. Suddenly, I was in the water. The cold made me draw quick breaths; my wool sweater was quickly sodden. My feet were slipping out of my beloved leather deck shoes with their non-marking soles. Gone. *Mommy will be mad.* I clung to an upturned hull. I could see my father's dark hair bobbing a few feet away, his mustache above water level, his puffy drinking face calling at me to hang on to the hull. I remember feeling heavy with wet clothes. Waves whacked against my

ear. He wasn't there anymore. It was just me and the Bay. Suddenly his face reappeared. He grasped the sheet to lever the hull over against the current. The boat was upright again. Did he pull me onto the canvas? Did I haul myself up? All I remember is that it was freezing, and we were soaked. The wind had shifted, and it was slow going. I wanted to be home. We barely spoke. We hunched silently on the canvas, looking toward Sausalito in the afternoon gray. It was taking forever. I was shaking. Probably so was he.

Then we heard a posh voice call, "Shall we give you a tow?" It was Royce's sloop, coming on the opposite tack, slowing down and pulling around, with my mother on it and the two friendly daughters and other ladies in hats. Humiliation filled me. I watched my father's face. I could see his impulse to reject their offer of a tow. He would make his own way home, thank you. I saw Daddy take in my sodden clothes and the chilly wind.

"Yes," he nodded. "Thank you."

My mother tossed him the end of a yellow towline, which he tied around our mast. Royce ignited his motor, and our little mini boat caught the momentum and started west behind them.

Whenever I think of that day, I flash on my mother standing at the bow under her voluminous straw hat, pulling in the line and waving goodbye. All her 6 foot 2 inch length clad in a blue and white bikini; showing off tufty blond pubic curls on top of long, tanned legs, waving to us. That image can't be right. April in San Francisco is too cold. Yet it sticks, drawn from a catalog of summer sails. I hated her showing off.

My mother wrote in her diary:

A long and adventurous day on the Bay. We sailed all around Angel Island and eventually tied up with the wonderful 57-foot-deep racing ketch, *Lightning*, owned by the Karrs. We had our chicken and quiche and wine and coffee and cookies... About 3:30 we headed back to the St. Francis Yacht Club for a Mariachi party on the deck. On the way we ran

into Alan and Susannah in the Go-Boat. They had overturned and were righted again but freezing. We towed them a short while. (April 24, 1977)

Did she offer to take me on board with Royce? I suspect no, awful as that feels now that I am a mother and imagine coming upon my child sodden and cold. I'm guessing she both wanted her stylish afternoon to continue uninterrupted, and wanted to ensure I received a message about my father's caretaking limits. Even if she had offered, I don't know whether I would have accepted. I already knew the patterns of power between them. I would probably have chosen loyalty to my father's failed attempt to do something good for me.

On the catamaran, I turned stalwartly toward shore as we neared Sausalito. We made it back. We tugged the boat out of the water; packed it on the car, drove back to my father's apartment, heat blasting over our feet. I remember finding Harriet transfixed to a television movie, sniveling loudly, her eyes bloodshot, her nose snotty. She barely noticed us. I had a shower to get warm.

I don't remember ever talking to my mother about that day and she never asked. Just as with my grandmother Gummy's death, I suspect I vied for myself. It would take years for me to learn that there was another way, that some parents make a point of reviewing the good and bad of a day with their children, that there are explicit dinnertime games or the telling of the day's "roses" and "thorns."

At bedtime, my mother always called to me, "Don't forget to say your prayers." Maybe this call embodied the same intention. But the child at the table is accompanied while the child in prayer is alone. Certainly, I tried to ensure my children never witnessed a drama or had an argument or a heartbreak without me circling back to inquire if they were okay. They were never supposed to worry that I didn't acknowledge them.



Reading Jane: A Daughter's Memoir By Susannah Kennedy

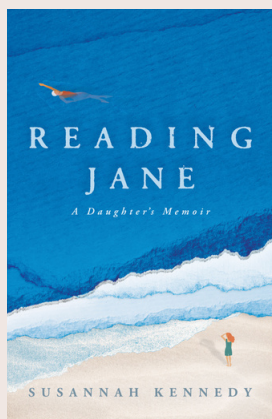
Jane is to the world a charismatic personality – opinionated, an inner-city teacher and public activist, a lover of Italy, proud and successful – who thrives on a carefully crafted life narrative. Susannah, her beautiful only daughter and her intended protégé, senses the stricter, darker truth, and fights to resist the control imposed on her by her mother's narcissistic tale, especially as Susannah becomes a mother herself.

But then Jane at 75, healthy and fit, chooses suicide, leaving her daughter with grief and the unwelcome gift of 45 years of hidden diaries. Daring to “read” Jane after her death is like unlatching Pandora's Box.

For a year, Susannah twists and turns to the truths she uncovers, comparing what she remembers with what her mother put down in words. As Susannah Kennedy re-lives her life through her mother's eyes, she grapples with the ties between mothers and daughters and the choices parents make.

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