

The Captain's Daughter

On the Wednesday morning before Christmas, Joan Bartell stood at the edge of the Naval Academy's thirty-five foot tower, willing herself to jump. The tower jump was required for graduation, and Joan, an only child, awkward at open rebellion, had spent the last ninety-four mornings atop the platform without any success. Only two days remained to complete the tower test, and failure meant dismissal, a forced resignation from the brigade. She curled her toes against the graveled non-skid tape and peered down. The pool water was the incandescent blue of a high voltage arc and the black tiled "N" on the bottom seemed to waver. Her throat tingled from the chlorine. Up so high the air was dry and sharp and the cavernous hall smelled of pool chemicals, sweat and fear. *Be careful, Joan*, her mother had always told her, and she understood the warning to be ambiguous. *Careful for whom, you or me, careful of what, the past or the future?* She wished to probe her mother, but she knew better. The doctors were adamant that her mother not be upset, which left the mood of the house vaporous and strange, much like the swimming hall with its muted green lights and perky blue and gold flags.

Clutching the rail, she eased forward heel to toe, heel to toe.

"C'mon, Joan, you can do it," Debbie, her roommate, whispered. Debbie stood propped against the guardrail in a blue swimsuit, which matched Joan's. Her hair was streaked with pecan and golden almond highlights, as close to un-regulation both in color and length as she could get away with. She began to weave braids. "Mind over matter," she said.

Joan gripped the iron bar so tightly the blue veins in her right hand faded to sage-green streaks. It always startled her when blood flowed red. The way something internal could alter so radically. Her mother lost consciousness much the same way. One moment listening to Joan and the next, gazing forward with a vacant stare. Five months earlier, while protesting one of her mother's decrees, Joan had begun to choke on her retainer. Her mother had thumped her back and then slumped to the floor, limbs flailing. Her first grand-mal seizure in five years. The Captain, Joan's father, was midway through a Mediterranean deployment, so Joan was the one who propped her mother's head on pillows and knelt at her side for fourteen

minutes ensuring she could breathe. Afterwards, her mother had fallen soundly asleep, but she had been scared to leave the room. She hadn't called anyone; she knew what to do, how little she or anyone really could do.

All through high school, she had read everything about epilepsy she could find—personal accounts, medical journals, texts. *Morbus caducas* and *sacer morbus*, falling sickness and sacred sickness, were the official names, the lyric Latin masking the lack of understanding of cause or cure. After the last seizure, she remembered the guilt and panic mostly, the clipped sound of her ragged breath, the way her own limbs were stiff and numb, then as now.

She stood shivering as she waited for Debbie's punch line.

"If you don't mind, it don't matter," Debbie said while she unwound her hair. She grinned at Joan, a dimple divot on her chin.

"I know, I know," Joan sighed. Debbie minded nothing that she could see. Even the nickname "Treasure Chest," earned when she entered and won a topless contest on a strip of Florida sand last Spring Break. Although Debbie hated the green tinge chlorine gave to her hair, she jumped every day to prove that leaving the tower was a matter of will power. But, in Joan's experience, will power had limits. No matter how many ways her mother tried to control the seizures on her own, nothing helped. She was bound to pills. Five hundred milligrams of toxicity a day. It was a life of compromise, it seemed to Joan, but how else could you live?

Debbie touched her elbow and led her to edge, and Joan thought how odd they must look: she almost six feet and Debbie just over five; Debbie with her wavy hair, a new nut-shade every month; and herself with steady layers, onyx black and lacquer smooth. She wanted to fix on appearance, all that didn't matter, instead of matter itself. But, the irony was, appearance did matter, she knew that for a fact, that appearance was somehow related to matter, the same way Einstein's hair was connected to his brain, that shock-wave style the first clue that he was either a lunatic or a genius.

For years, she had been told she resembled her mother: the same chiseled cheeks, eyes brown as coffee beans, a similar abundance of dark hair—soft down on the arms and legs, upper lips that required monthly bleaches. Sales clerks often commented on their likeness, but as soon as her mother smiled, they recoiled. The medicine had caused her mother's gums to slide down over her teeth so that her smile was pale and pinkish, only the faintest glimmer of white. The reactions were involuntary, Joan noticed, but her mother appeared to ignore them, withheld comment. After shopping, her mother would insist they go eat ice cream sundaes with marshmallow and hot fudge. Some times as they sat there, spoons clanging the silver trays, she would catch a glimpse of her mother's pink teeth and be

tempted to flinch. Instead, she'd smooth her tongue over her own enamel, press it up against the gums, and try not to show her relief.

On the platform Debbie coaxed her towards the edge with soft baby phrases. "Okay, Joan. One more step. Steady. Here we go."

Across the hall was an Olympic-sized lap pool with strings of flags dangling across the lanes. A lone swimmer paddled freestyle laps. Between the edge of tower and the lip of the water was only vast space. She inched sideways, fumbled for the rail. The coach below dropped his clipboard, clamped the whistle into his mouth and blew three short blasts. "Bartell, get down here," he yelled.

"Show him. Jump down," Debbie said. Her voice was fierce. She walked behind Joan and pressed her thumbs into Joan's back, her fingers hugged the curve of Joan's pelvis. "Let's go together. Pretend I'm pushing you."

Joan wrapped her arms around the bar in a pretzel hold. "Stop it. No," she said, "I can't."

"We'll count to three."

Give me three reasons why you want to stay. Those were her mother's last words on the day of their summer fight. Her father was Class of '64 and her mother knew that when Joan returned to the Academy for her junior year, it was 2-for-7, time to re-sign the oath and commit to two more years of school with five follow-on years of Navy service. It wasn't the service that scared Joan. By the time she was ten, she had decided that her father's life had more allure, the way he could sail away from land and home, trusting she and her mother to carry on and hold his place in the world. His deployments had taken him to Crete, Morocco, Istanbul; his whole life, it seemed was a continuous exotic journey. After trips, he arrived laden with bounty—masks from Africa, armfuls of cinnamon sticks, bags of star anise. He talked to her of sextants and azimuths; he laughed on the phone to shipmates about liberty. She knew him as a man comfortable with a ship's radar and navigation aids, but unable to operate the microwave oven or program the VCR in his own house. He called himself a man of the world.

Sometimes Joan considered the Captain an intruder who disrupted her and her mother's routines. Sometimes, she counted the days until he would next sail away, but, mostly, she wished he would stay home. Settle down. Retire. Take up golf or decoy whittling. A local hobby that would keep him occupied, but available. She worried over who would safeguard her mother. If even she, with all her training, could mistake the growing paleness of her mother's face for rage, not the onset of an aura, what might happen when she left?

"C'mon, Joan." Debbie began to unpeel Joan's fingers from the iron bar. The bar slid through her palm.

"One, two," Debbie said. "Three."

Joan gasped and an involuntary scream came from her throat.

Coach McDonald hollered, “Bartell, Young. What the devil is going on? Young, do you want to be expelled? I can make that happen. Bartell, it doesn’t count if you get pushed. You have to do it on your own.”

As the coach yelled, Debbie strode forward and jumped off the tower. She struck the surface at an angle with a slap and a cry, sunk deep and fast, and then, rose and paddled to the edge. Coach McDonald crouched low and extended a hand. From Joan’s vantage, it seemed as if he reeled Debbie, struggling and slick as a fish, up from the water on an invisible line. He patted Debbie’s back and shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” Joan murmured. But the words alone, mouthed to the air, were hollow and unsatisfying, futile as kisses blown from the rail of a ship.

Walking down the spiral stairs inside the tower, she expected to pitch forward. The stairs, unlit, dependent on the ceiling lights far above, were not designed for descent. As soon as she emerged, Coach McDonald greeted her, his face creased to a scowl, his lips puckered and bunched as though they still held the whistle. He was lean with oak-colored leathery skin and gray eyes that seemed to look through, not at, her. She noticed her nipples were erect and cocooned her arms around her chest.

“Two more days, Bartell. That’s it,” he said. He rapped the pen on the clipboard. “You’re going to throw a whole career away over a jump?”

“No, sir,” she answered.

“Then you’re going to jump?”

She stared at the grout. Her feet looked milky white, the hue of surrender. She trusted the administration that the water tests were necessary training measures. The 50m underwater swim, the forty-minute swim in khaki uniform, the floatation training, even the tower jump; there was a cool logic to the design, a progression of images—Navy, ships, oceans, sailors, survival at sea—as if physical endurance, the ability to leap and then stay afloat, conferred unique courage. As if the reflexes of a trained body held heroic impulses. Except that she did not consider herself a hero.

“Don’t look down,” the coach said. He fingered his whistle. “If I thought it would help, I’d let Young push you, but it won’t count.” He paused and waited for her to look up. “Aren’t you tired of this? You’re going to wake up ten years from now and remember ‘I wouldn’t jump?’” His disbelief, exhaled like a noxious gas with his words, hovered between them.

She shook her head. “I’ll jump,” she said without much conviction. The chaplain she had been ordered to visit told her it was all a matter of faith. *Faith in what*, she had asked—*God, the Navy, prescription drugs, physics?* She wondered if faith in the life you wanted to lead was enough.

“Tomorrow,” she told the coach. “I’ll jump tomorrow.”

On Thursday, Joan again refused to jump. That night her mother called and Joan had to tell her that she was busy with finals and might not be able to make it home for break.

“Are you sick?” her mother asked.

She promptly answered no.

“Headaches? Nausea?” her mother continued.

She tried to mask her annoyance, said no again with firmness. She knew the symptoms, the angle of the questions. For years her mother had caused her to wonder if she herself might be the carrier of a latent chromosome for epilepsy. Did her mother want companionship or affirmation? she wondered. Or was a desire for company another side effect of the disease? Maybe her mother needed to think she was not alone. She hung up with vague discontent and the familiar helplessness. She wondered if listening from afar might be the best she ever could do. If that would be enough.

Friday morning, thirty of her company mates escorted her to Lejeune Hall. “Here we go, Jo, here we go,” they chanted, their breath collecting in white clouds as they half-walked, half-marched across the grass crusted and crunchy with frost. Everyone except for her and Debbie was lighthearted, giddy with the prospect of holiday leave and flush with plans. Joan’s eyes were ringed with purple half-moons. She had not slept at all. Her skin was the watery-gray of thawing ice, chapped, peeling.

She and Debbie undressed in silence and when Debbie stepped into her suit, Joan spied her leg, still blotchy and enflamed from Wednesday’s jump. Debbie said nothing. Outside of the dressing rooms, the midshipmen converged, and Zach Green, the company commander, started the chant again, his voice echoing across the pool. Zach played water polo, and his chest and legs were smooth and shaved for aquatic speed. His suit was snug and Joan saw the coiled outline of his penis.

Then she was propelled towards the tower in the midst of muscled bodies. Up, up, up. The guys hooted inside the tower, feet clanging the metal stairs until the whole tube reverberated. Not everyone could fit on the platform at once and Joan remained inside the tower on the third stair. If she could only walk forward with her eyes closed so that she couldn’t see the end, she might make it. “Don’t look down,” someone whispered as if her thoughts were printed on the back of her suit.

Whack. Splash. Whistle. Whack. Splash. The guys jumped on command at even intervals one after another until there was space on the platform for her. “Just stay in line,” Zach told her. “It will seem automatic.”

Debbie gave her a thumbs up. Two more guys jumped, and she inched forward. Whack. Splash. Someone beat on the wall inside the tower.

“Here we go, Jo, here we go.” The chorus started again. She tried to

concentrate on the staccato rhythm. Whack. Splash. Another splash and she was at the end. The guys who had jumped surrounded the coach and shouted for her to come down and join them.

“Go on, Joan. You can do it,” Debbie said.

She walked to the edge, but when she stood there, she felt it again, a tingling feeling that spiked through her limbs like unchecked current. She paused and faced the swimming records, the rows of empty blue chairs, the second-story office windows. She tried to inhale deliberately through her lungs, but the face of her mother, mute and gummy, was pressed in her mind like a damp washcloth on a fever.

She stepped back, squatted. She eased her tongue along her teeth. “Someone else go,” she said, “Please.”

Coach McDonald shook his head and blew the whistle. Another midshipman jumped, and then another. As the remainder of the guys ascended the stairwell, they held up their hands to slap her palm. Soon, only Zach and Debbie remained on the platform with her. “C’mon, Jo,” Zach said, “This is it. We’re not jumping ‘til you do.”

Debbie nodded. “This is your ticket home. Well, you know what I mean.”

Below, the guys were huddled. They whooped and waved, pointed at the water and the clock. Again, she walked to the edge. Debbie and Zach closed in behind her.

“I won’t try to push you today,” Debbie said. She shot her hand forward and drew it back. “Made you flinch.”

“One more step,” Zach said.

She stepped sideways, closer to the edge. The midshipmen below spread out and ringed the pool, their cries coming at her, Dopplered. She shut her eyes so tightly she saw magenta static. “I can’t,” she said. Her voice faltered, the sound of defeat so clear that neither Zach nor Debbie countered her right away.

Debbie tried to smile. “Maybe the Army will take you. Be all that you can be. No water, just a puddle of mud to crawl through.”

“Bartell, you have one minute,” the coach yelled.

“Joan, do it,” Debbie said. “Like this.” She stepped off the edge and disappeared.

“C’mon Jo,” Zach said. He glanced sideways and she could tell he was nervous, skeptical of her reluctance.

Zach stepped to the edge, nodded at the coach and leaped. Midway down he yelled, “Go Navy,” and clutched his leg so that he landed in the water in jack-knife position, churning large waves.

She dipped her neck and entered the stairwell. She slipped away towards the locker room, avoiding the glances of pity. She heard Debbie

snort. She peeled off her suit, rolled it in a dry towel and stepped into her trousers. She pressed her fingers into the buttons on her blouse until she had imprints of small anchors on her fingertips.

Debbie sprayed a fruity rinse onto her hair. "I don't get it," she said. "This isn't even the hardest test."

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"You could have done it. If you wanted it bad enough." Debbie's voice held a challenge, but she ignored her. Debbie wanted to fly jets, to leave the earth all together, how could she expect Debbie to understand the way the past could fetter you so tightly it was hard to walk forward, hard to move at all, never mind jump.

At exactly 3:00, the Commandant ushered Joan into his office and she positioned herself at attention on blue carpet so plush the imprints of her heels didn't fade. "Midshipman Second Class Bartell reporting as ordered, sir," she said. She gripped the outside seam of her trousers, clamped her mouth shut.

"At ease," the Commandant said. "I didn't expect to see *you* here." He sounded almost sad, she thought. He was a full head taller than she was. The skin on his face was etched with brown sunspots, spidery red veins.

"Does your father know?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so." He sighed. "Mind if I ask why?"

She studied the four gold stripes on his coat sleeve, the stars, the colored ribbons on his chest. She wondered why the truth was always so hard to identify, masked by complications, adorned, festooned; why reasons weren't reasonable. Feeling foolish, she blurted out, "I'm scared, sir."

"Scared?" He seemed surprised. "Every day I'm a little scared. Hell, I don't want to serve with anyone who's not afraid in some way for their life. That means they're thinking about my life, too." He paused. "You don't ignore fear; you learn to control it. Name it. Live with it."

She pulled herself taller. He had been scared, she could sense that. Who wasn't?

"You're not doing this just to get out, are you?"

"No, sir."

"I hate to do this," the Commandant said. He spread papers across his desk. "You need to sign these. Go on, read them. They're separation orders."

She blanched. She bent her knees so she would not faint. She had known the outcome from the first day she refused to jump, but hearing the words was still a shock.

"However," the Commandant said. "I am not going to process these

until 1500 tomorrow.” He tapped his watch. “You have twenty-four hours to jump off that tower and if you do it, you can stay.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” she said. She signed the paper, pivoted on her heel and walked out of the office through the long, quiet corridors. She felt a queer lightness. She decided her mother was perhaps the bravest person she knew. How else could she explain her mother’s willingness to eat ice cream and smile at the world, gummy teeth and all?

She did not pack; she sat at her desk and tried to quantify her fears, to list them one by one. It was only a little past four and the sky was streaked with purple shadows, winter’s short light. She listed easy fears first—airplane turbulence, poison ivy, jellyfish. Then, she kept her pen on the paper and wrote in capital letters SEIZURES. What was the prospect of being gone when or if her mother had another grand-mal? What was the likelihood she had caused the last one? What was the chance mutant DNA rested in her, awaiting some random collision like the force of a jump? She filled the page with questions she couldn’t answer and then she stopped and called her mother.

When she said “Mom” the word felt strange on her tongue, rubbery. She couldn’t remember the last time she had called her mother Mom. Before she had a chance to ask any questions, her mother told her she had been to the hospital yesterday. Another seizure. She’d been given oxygen.

“Why didn’t you call?” she asked. “Why didn’t anyone call?” She was surprised at the force of her own outrage.

“What can you do there?” her mother said. “They won’t let you out. I know that.”

“But.” She had no answer.

“I thought God was really ready this time,” her mother said.

Joan gnawed on her cheek. “Ready,” she repeated. She knew she was supposed to ask *Ready for what?*, but she couldn’t. It occurred to her that her mother may not be complaining; perhaps her mother needed to know that someone would listen.

“When are you coming home?” her mother asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “When is Dad coming home?”

A silence followed. They both knew the ship wasn’t due to return until February.

“They changed my medication again,” her mother said and Joan listened to the possible new side effects and asked some questions. Every new medicine seemed to require another one to counter it. By the time she said good night, her stomach was churning. She imagined she felt twitches. Was this what she was supposed to be ready for?

She returned to her room and looked out the window. The streetlights

blinked on in rapid succession and the first star pricked through the canvas of blue-black sky. The Severn River looked like a ribbon of violet coursing eastward towards Chesapeake Bay and the open ocean.

She awakened to snow-dusted fields, white trimming on eaves and shingles. The air was sharp and cold. She walked alone to the pool, avoiding the paths, her feet sinking into the whiteness, her tracks baring the straw-colored winter grass. Lejeune Hall was warm and the heat stung her nose. She donned her suit. Coach McDonald was at his desk; he raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. He padded out of his office. She kept her shoulders pulled back, her spine erect. Once on the tower, she walked with purpose to the end of the platform, curled her toes over the edge, kept her eyes raised. Her arms were peppered with goose bumps.

She looked around at the familiar chairs and flags, the posted swimming records, but the objects seemed sharp and clear, as though the high vantage point offered a clarity she hadn't noticed. She was conscious of the height, her own nervousness, but also something else, something within her, a resolve, which she found brisk and invigorating, but also mildly frightening. As though her own limits were fluid and nothing was settled or determined. She saw a vision of her mother appear like the whitened profile of a woman on a cameo brooch, arms outstretched to child. Was she pushing her away or calling her back? The image dissolved and she couldn't conjure it again.

The coach blew the whistle. She gulped and then hopped forward. She clutched the sides of her suit as she accelerated in a rush of air and wind, her velocity increasing, her eyes pressed tightly together. Her feet struck the surface with a sharp clap; she sank into the wetness and continued plunging downward, deeper and deeper until her motion slowed, her lungs compressed, and she was suspended for a moment in a swash of bubbles. She could see the lights above, an effervescent glow around her, the water stung her eyes, but she kept them open anyway and began to paddle upward.

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