Parachute Drop

The girl sees the man with the brown leather satchel once a year. He sells gadgets out of the bottom of that bag; at least that's what her mother tells her. Brushes for your hair, brushes for your bath, brushes for your beard. Her mother says he sends them money, but she doesn't think so. If he did, there would have been more books on the shelf, a new dress for school, maybe even flowers for her mother's empty crystal vase, the red glass one etched in poppies.

In the spring, not on her birthday but his, he wanders back to their walk-up apartment and declares himself a Brooklynite. All those other nights, it's just the girl and her mother, alone together while he "travels."

Last year, he brought the girl a blue and green parakeet in a white wicker cage. She named it Skeeter. Her mother doesn't like all the chatter and bird droppings in the apartment, but he told her it was for their protection. "You don't have a dog, so here's a 'watch bird' for my little girl," he said. "This neighborhood's rolling downhill faster than a loose tire."

Her mother installed a dead bolt soon after he left.

The girl spends the year inside her books. She loves *The Secret Garden* and animal stories, especially about horses. Her mother blames the girl's lame leg on the family upstairs. "Foreigners, they probably brought the polio with them," she says.

When the snow melts, the girl listens to the other kids on the block play Double Dutch on the sidewalk below. When the temperature rises, she watches them dance in and out of the spray from the illegally opened fire hydrant. Envy curls her deeper into her green corduroy armchair, the one by the window.

“Look at those juvenile delinquents in their underwear,” her mother says. “What if we have a real fire?”

On the last day of May, a knock sends Skeeter into a squawking frenzy. The girl’s mother lifts her Sunbeam Ironmaster from the board and shuffles over to the door in her fluffy beige bedroom slippers. She needs to finish the cuffs and collar of her client’s starched cotton shirt before the two o’clock pick-up. She stares her left eye into the peephole.

The girl knows who it is before her mother unlatches the chain. His cigar smoke sneaks in from under the space where the door is warped. He’d been standing out there for a long time debating whether or not to knock. He still has a key.

Her mother lets him in, a crack at a time. His fedora leads the way, extended out front like a peace offering. Her father puffs into the room, a wayward Diesel back into the station. But he looks different to the girl this year. A little rounder ‘round the middle and a lot more well-to-do, dressed all fine in a natty brown suit and matching wingtips.

He plants himself on her mother’s crocheted rug in the middle of the living room like he centers their forest. “You look good, Mary,” he says to the girl’s mother. The girl isn’t sure what he sees; she thinks her mother looks old and chipped.

“And aren’t you all dapper,” her mother says. The girl looks to see if he has on a necktie. Her mother told her it was obvious why he never wore one; he didn’t like anything that tied him down.

“Aren’t you going to wish me a happy birthday?” he asks.

Her mother points to the silver flask in his pocket. She lifts that same peeping eyebrow and arches it into scorn, a signal the girl has learned to heed. “No need, Charles. Looks like you’ve already started celebrating on your own.”

He offers her a swig, but her mother never touches anything stronger than elderberry wine, and only on holidays. He turns to the girl. “How’s my little radish?” he asks. He nicknamed her that because her ginger hair matches her freckles.

Her mother turns her back on him and stands over her ironing board.

“Ready for a day at the beach, sweetie pie?

The girl puts her book down on the yellowed vinyl TV tray that sets over her knees and waits to hear what her mother will say.

“Don’t be absurd, Charles, you know she can’t swim.”

“Not a problem. I got bigger plans than water ballet for today.” The fan whirs overhead. A bead of sweat drips off her mother’s eyebrow and lands on her cheek, an exclamation point to the deep frown that formed. He points at the girl in the chair. “Snap on your leg, radish, and make it snappy.” He chuckles at his own pun.

The girl does as she is told. She tries to hide her excitement but her hands vibrate when she moves her book and the can of Cream Soda off the TV tray and puts them on the windowsill behind her chair. She pulls the heavy metal contraption up from the floor. She fastens the three worn leather straps around what remains of her shrunken limb. She knows if she doesn’t act fast, the only adventure she’ll have this summer will disappear out the door without her.

“There’s a corn dog and cotton candy in your future, baby girl. Hope you’re hungry.”

Her mother pushes that little button on the iron that releases the steam. “Give me the envelope, Charles,” she says. The girl suspects she is the purchase. “Have her back before supper, she needs her medicine.”

“Fresh air, that’s the best medicine, right sweetheart?” He lifts the girl up from her chair like she weighs less than nothing. He doesn’t notice the worn white spots on both corduroy sidearms or how her small body has conformed to the stuffing underneath. Her frame leaves a small but permanent indentation behind.

Her mother goes to the closet and pulls out a plastic poncho. She puts it over the girl’s shoulders. “Could rain,” she says.

Boosted up to her piggyback perch, the girl’s useless leg dangles behind like a red flag warning a heavy load. “Bye, Mama,” she says as her father whisks her out the door. She hears the turn of the deadbolt behind them.

It takes her father no time to ferry her down the stoop and lower her into his shiny, apple red, Cadillac Coupe De Ville convertible. The girl wonders how many brush sales it took to buy this car. She looks back at her mother’s grimace pasted against the bars of the second-floor window and waves both hands with enthusiasm. She feels a little ashamed at how happy she is and how much she welcomes the relief from the heat, the boredom, and the daily routine.

When her father squeals his Caddy’s fancy whitewall tires away from the curb, she stares straight ahead out the windshield. She doesn’t want to miss a single storefront, alleyway, stop sign, or tree along the way. Tailpipe exhaust and a hot wind sweep her bangs into her eyes. She brushes them back with a grin. Her father turns the radio up loud. A man sings a song about a rock and a clock. *When the chimes ring five, six, and seven, we’ll be right in seventh heaven*. She tries to memorize the words, but they go by too fast.

"Next stop, Coney Island," he says.

"Papa, what are we going to do there?"

"We're going to fly, baby, fly."

She feels like they've already taken off when he streaks that Caddy over the solid white line and maneuvers it between two disgruntled taxicabs. One of his swerves sends the girl's good knee into the dash. The black and blue bruise will stick around long after the day ends.

Up ahead, a maze of amusement park signs beckon in bright yellows and reds. One says, "Pony Rides, Five Cents," another, "Girls, Girls, Girls," and then she sees the one that reads, "Freaks Inside" and worries.

Her father parks at the farthest end of the lot, as far away from any of the other cars as possible. "Don't want some jackass backing into my fins. They cost more than your mother's rent," he says, mostly joking. "Hop on out."

The girl grips the handle, opens the door, and swings her body out of the car. Her feet sink into the hot asphalt and she wobbles off balance. She hopes he doesn't notice how weak she is; she doesn't want to be a bother or spoil his birthday.

"Need a lift?" he asks. He cradles her in his arms and carries her through the "Welcome to Coney Island" gate. She reminds herself to tell her mother that he is actually very kind.

The view from his back swirls around her in a sea of parents who lug ice chests and children who clutch helium balloons. She smells the sweet of caramel corn mixed with the sweat of the crowd. The girl is glad her father doesn't hear her exhale relief when they pass the tent that holds the bearded lady and the alligator skin man inside. When he carries her past the Oriole Baths, the girl almost asks him if Skeeter could come next time, but she knows it sounds stupid.

What she's hoping is that her father will stop at the Steeplechase Ride she sees on her left. She wants to cheer for the black horse who is prancing around the track in front of the grown men seated on the bleachers.

"Should we eat first?" he asks her. She wonders what comes second.

He scans the food truck menus, orders, and points her to an empty picnic table. He shows up with two sloppy joes and a strawberry slush in a cone-shaped cup for her. He talks mostly about himself while they eat. Something about the "rules of the road" and the pressure on a man to provide. She feels a little sad for him when he spills mustard on his pant leg close to his crotch. She doesn't dare spit in her napkin and wipe it off. Her mother warned her to never touch or be touched by a man below the waist.

Stomach full of forbidden foods, she waits while he chats up a pretty woman in a flowered sundress who is hawking tickets to a bingo game. Her father hands the woman a business card and a pen. She hands it back with some numbers written next to a tiny heart. The girl wonders if the woman is one of his customers and will buy some of his brushes.

After lunch, she bobs up and down caboose style on his back over the boardwalk. On the midway to her left, barkers call out to her father to throw baseballs at bottles. Secretly, she would love it if he won her a Kewpie doll, but she's too timid to ask. At the next booth, a blindfolded man is throwing a hatchet at a real-life person strapped onto a spinning wheel. She digs her knees into his sides, a jockey move to get him past that one.

On her right, swimmers stroke arm over arm through the surf. Closer to shore, children splash one another from polka-dotted innertubes shaped like puffy dragons and giraffes. She wants to leap off her father's back, run into the water, and drift out to sea until she reaches a

magical island. She read in one of her mother's *Reader's Digest* magazines that saltwater keeps you afloat.

"Here we go, kiddo." He stops in front of an iron gate and lowers her down onto the boardwalk. The metal bar under her clunky right shoe splinters the wooden planks. A sign overhead reads, "Parachute Drop."

The girl cranes her neck to see a giant mushroom-shaped contraption; its steel arms reach out over Coney Island like a patron Saint. Attached by guide wires, rickety metal chairs hold couples who ascend into its outstretched folds. Their voices dim as they disappear into the clouds. She hopes her father doesn't see her tremble. He might take her home.

When they reach the front of the line, the attendant looks at the girl and then at her father. "You sure you want to take a gimp up there?" he asks. "She might not be able to hold on to her leg or her lunch."

Her father blows a circle of smoke into the man's face. "She paid her money, just like everybody else."

"All's I'm saying is she looks a little puny. And, we got the right to refuse anybody, ya know."

Her father cups the smoldering cigar stub into his hand and leans in close. She can't hear what is said, but a five-dollar bill exchanges hands. She waits, her eyes focused down on the yellow and white buttons of her checkered blouse. She isn't sure she wants to fly after all.

Her father gently unstraps her leg brace, sets it inside the ticket booth, and helps her into the empty silver chair that swivels around and stops in front of them. When he squats down in the seat beside her, the base tips in his direction. She tucks her gasp back inside.

"Ready to be my co-pilot?" he asks.

She nods.

The parachute ride's gears ratchet, the pulleys pull, and the girl and her father rise above Coney Island like seagulls hover over the ocean in slow motion. She can see for miles. All the beach blankets and folding chairs blend into colored specks on a sandy white canvas. Children on their rubber toys look like confetti sprinkled on a big, blue, watery cake. His birthday cake.

"Papa," she says. This is my best day," she pauses, "ever."

He reaches over and takes her hand in his. "Thought you might like it up here."

When their chair reaches the top, they are suspended 250 feet over the earth. The wind rocks the chair gently. Organ music plays through a speaker above their heads. The girl focuses on the view and then shuts her eyes to keep the moment, weightless and free.

Without warning, the guide wire trips, the chair flips, and the girl and her father plummet. A rush of air pushes their faces into clownish smiles. The girl laughs with a mixture of delight and terror as the force pushes tears out from her eyes. Half way down the tower, their parachute opens on cue, right when she was forming a scream in the back of her throat. The last few minutes of descent, the girl makes a wish and blows smoke from imaginary candles out into the sky.

When they land at the base, the chair bounces up and down four times wrenching her crippled leg into the cement pad. A sharp pain travels up from her foot to her thigh. The girl doesn't complain or care. "Happy Birthday, Papa," she says. "Can we go again?"

Her father looks at his watch and shakes his head. A few raindrops spot his suit on their way back to the car. He brushes them off and says, "Looks like your mother was right."

The girl's father flips the convertible top back up just in time to keep his two-tone, hand sewn, leather upholstery dry. They drive back to Brooklyn in a cloudburst. Right before the

Cadillac pulls up in front of the girl's apartment, Nat King Cole's voice comes on the radio singing "Autumn Leaves." *Since you went away, the days are long. And soon I'll hear old winter's song;* this one the girl will always remember.