

Skydiving

After her father's death, Toni's mother began to change. It wasn't immediate, like someone snapped his finger and *voila*---she was a different person; rather it was a slow and gradual process. Her mother, who used to be so retiring and homebound, was now stretching beyond her comfort zone and embracing new things. It began six months after the funeral when her mother took up salsa dancing at the local senior community center. She attended classes once a week. One day, while visiting her mother, mostly to see if she was doing well and if the refrigerator was well-stocked or if she needed any errands run, her mother demonstrated the new steps she had learned. Toni didn't have time to protest---she really was in a bit of a hurry---before her mother turned on the stereo, which blasted out salsa music at top volume, and was demonstrating her moves, a shimmying of the shoulders and swiveling of the hips that may have come across as effortless to her, but was actually clumsy and childlike, as though she was counting each step in her head. She looked at Toni with an eager smile flashing across her face.

After salsa, it was whale watching. She took a boat trip down to the Farallones to witness blue whales slice through the chilled waters. For years her mother rarely ventured farther than the city limits of her hometown and now she was adventuring on the choppy Pacific ocean. And though her mother lacked imagination, she signed up for pottery-making classes too and began displaying her clay designs around the house, misshapen things Toni supposed were planters for the various herbs she grew in her kitchen. Her mother pursued these new activities relentlessly, often asking Toni for her opinion about this workshop or that. “What do you think?” she’d ask and Toni responded with a “Well, that’s nice, Mama” or “If it makes you feel good,” though all the while she wondered where this burst of energy to try new things was coming from. She took her mother’s newfound interests in stride. After all, she had spent a better part of two years caring for a husband who was slowly wasting away. But when her mother announced she had signed up for skydiving lessons, Toni took exception.

“Mama, salsa dancing and pottery I can understand. But skydiving?”

“Why not?” she said, grinning. “It sounds exciting. I never did anything like this before.”

“And for good reason. Mama, this is a bit too much. What if something happened?”

“Oh,” she said dismissively. “They say it’s a lot safer flying than driving a car.”

“Yeah, but only if you’re planning on staying in the plane!”

It was a losing battle discussing anything with her mother. Even when her father lay dying and Toni and her husband tried to persuade her to put him in a hospice, Toni struggled for three days to find the best way to broach the subject. And still, her mother refused to be reasonable.

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll like living in those places. They’re too sterile.”

“Mama, you won’t be living there. Daddy will.”

“No? So what’s the point again?”

It was an endless loop of mixed messages, miscommunications, and just plain dullness on her mother's part. Josh complained that Toni's mother was being obtuse, but when Toni told him about her mother's latest adventure, she found little solidarity this time.

"Your mother? Jumping out of an airplane? Now that I gotta see."

"Don't you think it's dangerous?"

"Maybe," he said, shrugging. "But if that's what she wants to do, what's the big deal?"

"She's seventy-two. That's the big deal."

"George Bush was in his eighties when he started skydiving."

"George Bush ain't my mother."

Again, Toni tried to talk her out of it, but her mother was determined and there was little Toni could do but watch from the sidelines and pray.

There was a time, years ago, when Toni might have welcomed this change. When she was a teenager and being cool was the singular purpose in life, she might have been thrilled by the opportunity to tell her friends that her mother did something as awesome as skydiving. All her parents' friends were interesting. They were surgeons, lawyers, business owners, important members of the community. They went on vacations to Europe or, in one case, China. They socialized with politicians, members of the press, local celebrities; won important awards or commendations from the governor and president. They were people, in short, so unlike her parents who never did anything of significance. In fact, her parents were rather boring. They rarely went out or traveled or did anything that was notable. Her father worked for the city's parks and recreations department. Her mother was a housewife. When one of her friends told her that she and her family were vacationing in Barbados that summer, Toni spited her for days. Why couldn't her family travel to the Caribbean? Her cheeks burned with shame whenever she brought her friends over to her house and they noted, not incorrectly, that her parents were

always sitting in front of the TV set. And then there was her mother---the way she tried too hard to please her friends, telling bad jokes or suggesting they bake cookies, as though Toni and her friends were little kids. It was all too much. Toni stopped bringing her friends over altogether.

When she was away in college, she was determined to be anything but her parents. She partied every night, got drunk, and took on boyfriends like a new pair of shoes. During spring breaks, she traveled with her friends to Cancun or Atlanta for Freaknik, partied some more, got drunk, and slept with a guy or two. When she graduated from school, she returned home, found a job at an employment agency, and, every Friday and Saturday night, burned her youth in bars and clubs, meeting and dating men with whom she had brief relationships. Her parents never asked about her lifestyle and whenever she introduced them to one of the guys she was dating, they accepted him with none of the pressure most parents applied to children to marry and settle down. "He seems like a nice, young man," her father remarked about one of her dates, though in truth this nice, young man had once shoved Toni in the face during an argument.

By her late twenties, Toni was burned out, tired of the same night scene, tired of the same relationships, which were growing increasingly unstable. Her last boyfriend before she met Josh had a drug habit that was getting dangerously out of control. Her friends were all settling down, forsaking the single life to the altar of matrimony. She was starting to feel alone.

She met Josh in the same building where she worked. They'd often share the elevator to their respective floors---the fifth for her, the ninth for him. On occasion, they'd glance and nod at each other, but rarely said a word, until one morning, feeling a bit bold, she said hello. That led to a conversation that spilled over into a lunch date. Josh was easy to like. He was funny and confident, but not arrogant. He had a laid-back, relaxed nature that made it easy for her to confide in him, to be comfortable in his presence without trying hard to be flirtatious, sexy, interesting. He was a refreshing change.

They were together for five years before they married. A year later, Tod was born. And without Toni even being consciously aware of it, she settled down into a quiet, comfortable and very middle class existence. Though they had a circle of friends with whom they shared a steady and active social life, they spent their evenings mostly at home, watching television, surfing the Internet, or keeping their tangled household in order.

“You know what happened, don’t you?” she told him one day after checking their schedules to see who could pick Tod up from daycare.

“No, what?” he said.

“We’ve turned into our parents.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“That’s more like a ‘we’re old’ thing.”

“And that makes you feel---what? Sorry?”

She smiled and kissed him, but didn’t answer his question directly. The truth was, she wasn’t sorry. Dull as their lives could be sometimes, it was familiar. Each night when she and Josh returned home to the familiar and comforting things that had become the material foundation of their lives, she appreciated her life all the more. She held Josh from behind, laid her head on his shoulder, and listened to the ticking of the clock, the humming of the refrigerator and computers, the soft breathing of their sleeping child upstairs. The older she got the more she came to depend on that familiarity. It dulled the sharp edges of change.

In the months that followed, Toni’s mother gave her reports about her progress in skydiving class. The first order of training, her mother told her, was learning how to drop and roll once you hit the ground. She had been practicing this at the training school, jumping and rolling around on inflated mats. Of course, they were helmeted and padded up, but the idea of her mother jumping and rolling troubled Toni.

“Are you sure it’s not dangerous, Mama?” she asked one day over the phone.

“It’s perfectly safe,” she assured her. “Mr. Eckhardt says so himself.”

Mr. Eckhardt was the instructor. Toni hadn’t met him, but her mother talked about him so much she felt as if she had known him for years. He was once a stuntman in Hollywood; he had been skydiving for fifteen years and taught lessons for twelve. He came certified. Despite his credentials, Toni was still unrelieved.

The dropping and rolling progressed to higher heights. The students jumped off platforms that were six feet tall, then rolled onto inflated mats. When her mother took the plunge, she landed badly on her ankle. No bones were broken, Josh and Toni were thankfully told by her doctor, but there had been swelling and bruising. He advised her mother to stay off her feet for a week. Toni advised her to quit altogether.

“This is ridiculous, Mom,” Toni said to her after she and Josh brought her home from the hospital. “Are you going to risk your neck to jump out of an airplane?”

Her mother winced at Toni’s retort, but said nothing more on the subject. For a week, her mother hobbled around the house on her bruised ankle, allowing Toni to wait on her. Every day she checked her ankle to see if the swelling and bruising had gone down. Toni thought she had given up on the skydiving lessons. But as soon as she got the say so from her doctor, she was right back at the classes. She had lost a lot of time, and was eager and persistent to catch up. Mr. Eckhardt made special provisions for her, allowing her to do extra jumps and practice sessions during class. When Toni learned what was going on, she met with him and explained that her mother was old and quite possibly senile. She urged him to drop her from his class.

“Are you kidding?” said Eckhardt, a rather short man with a bulldogish physique. “Marie is an inspiration.”

He said that his other students had been tentative about jumping and some were even

afraid of heights. But not Marie. She took to the exercises with passion and balls. He admired her greatly.

“You should be proud of her,” he said almost accusingly.

“I am proud of her,” she replied. But she was also afraid.

One night, while in the middle of giving Tod his bath, Toni’s mother called. “I did it,” she said breathlessly. “I finally did it.”

Toni cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder as she helped Tod out of the tub and handed him a towel. “Did what?”

“I jumped.”

Toni pressed her lips together, kept one eye on her son as he clumsily towed himself dry, and listened to her mother explain how she and her class went up into a rented light Cessna. She was suited up, meaning she had on her skydiving suit, helmet, goggles, boots, and parachute, and was all ready to go. But once the plane took off, she was nervous and sick to her stomach. She began to doubt if she was ready. She was afraid the parachute might malfunction. She looked around and noticed that the other students seated in the bulk of the plane were frightened and nervous too, and somehow that made her feel better. She was the oldest of the students there; she felt an obligation to be a role model.

“Mama, you don’t have to be anybody’s role model.”

“No, no,” she said. “That was just the thing. Once I got over being scared, I was excited.”

Her mother was the first out of the plane. “I can’t even put it into words.”

Still, she spent fifteen minutes doing just that, describing what it felt like to freefall. It was, she said, the most exhilarating thing she ever experienced. And yet Toni sensed by the sound of her mother’s voice that even the words she used failed to describe it fully, that something much more intangible had touched and changed her life and that Toni would never

truly understand it.

“I know what it feels like to fly, Toni,” she said. “No wonder birds love it so much.”

“Mama, first of all, I doubt birds even know what to love. And second of all, they fly because that’s what they’re designed to do. It’s like walking for us...”

“It was wonderful,” she said. “Oh, Toni I wish you could’ve been there to see me strutting my stuff.” She laughed.

“Um, hm,” she said, snatching after her son as he ran naked out of the bathroom, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Is that Tod?”

“Yes, it is.” She started after him, calling his name.

“Give him a big kiss for me. Oh, by the way, you’re all invited.”

“Invited to what, Mama?” She frowned. Tod was running toward the stairwell. Josh appeared and lifted him off his feet.

“The graduation party. I passed the class. There’s a graduation ceremony, a party, and we’re all gonna jump one more time together. I want you to be there, Toni. You, Josh, and Tod, of course. Will you come?”

Toni hesitated. She didn’t know how to answer. In truth, she did. She didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to see her mother make a spectacle of herself. She hated to think of it that way, but that was how she felt. She glanced at Josh and Tod again.

“What is it?” Josh said.

“Daddy? Daddy can we play airplane?”

Toni held the phone against her breast. “It’s Mom. She wants us to go to her graduation and see her jump.”

“Tell her we’ll be there.”

“But shouldn’t we check our schedules...”

“Check our schedules,” he said derisively. “Just tell her we’ll go.”

After Josh went into Tod’s bedroom, cradling him on his arm and making airplane noises, much to Tod’s delight, Toni counted to five, then told her mother that they’d be happy to be there. Her mother sounded thrilled, so thrilled that Toni felt guilty for considering turning down her invitation. She told Toni when and where, then added how happy she was for supporting her.

“I know this kind of spooked you out,” she said. “Me jumping outta airplanes and all. But I appreciate you supporting me.”

“Yeah, sure, Mama,” she said, feeling like a colossal liar.

Later that night, as they got ready for bed, Josh, while brushing his teeth in the bathroom, asked why she was so hesitant about going to the graduation.

“Hesitant?” she said, rubbing lotion on her hands and legs.

“Yeah,” he said, stepping out of the bathroom, his mouth full of toothpaste foam. “What was all that business about checking our schedules? You don’t wanna go?”

“It’s not that.”

He slid his brush slowly across his teeth.

“What if something happens?”

“Like what?”

“Like what?” she said. “Like the plane crashes or her parachute malfunctions.”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” He went back into the bathroom. She heard him spit into the sink, run the water, gargle.

“I’d be a fool if I weren’t,” she said, pulling back the bedsheets. “This isn’t like Mama at all. She wasn’t always like this. She was never interested in whale watching or skydiving. Then all of the sudden, after Daddy dies, she’s off on these little adventures. It’s almost like she’s...”

She stopped. She couldn't finish the thought.

Josh returned to the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Almost like what?" he said casually as he checked messages on his phone. When she didn't answer immediately, he looked at her over his shoulder. "Almost like what, Tone?"

"Almost like," she said, "she wasn't happy before Daddy died."

"Well, she did take care of him. That was pretty rough. We both saw that."

"I meant throughout their marriage."

"You believe that?"

She climbed into bed. "I don't know what to believe. All I know is Mama's changing and I don't know how I feel about it. No," she said abruptly. "I do know. I don't like it. I don't like that she's changing on me."

"How you know she's changed?" He set the phone on the night stand and got into bed.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe she was always like this and you just never noticed."

"Mama, was never into skydiving. That I know."

"Maybe she always wanted to do these things and just never told anybody. You know we don't think our parents are real people, that they had lives before they had us. They're always, Mom and Pops. That's true for everybody. Including us. One day that boy in there is gonna grow up and feel the same way about us as you do about your Mom." He raised his eyebrow. "Scary, ain't it?"

Yes, she thought. It was scary.

The graduation ceremony was held on a bright, windy Saturday afternoon. Outside an airplane hangar, where a white Cessna waited at the end of a long airstrip, Mr. Eckhardt passed

out certificates to his graduates. Josh snapped pictures while Toni's mother held up her certificate, smiling proudly and enthusiastically. After the ceremony, everyone gathered around a table covered with a plastic tablecloth that flapped wildly in the wind. Various people had to protect the napkins and plastic cups from flying off the table and used rocks as paperweights. Toni and her mother stood beside each other, sipping sodas and watching Josh and Tod inspect the plane.

"Thank you for coming," her mother said. "I really appreciate it."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Mom," she said and sipped the cola.

"Would've been nice if your Daddy was here."

"I miss him, too."

"He should've appreciated this," she said.

She frowned. "Should've?"

"Oh, he was a good man," she said, shrugging. "He was just a little set in his ways."

"That's because he knew who he was. He didn't try to be anything he wasn't."

"Not really," she said. "He had his regrets."

"Daddy had regrets?" she said slowly. Now she really wasn't sure of anything. "What did he have to regret?"

"Well, not you. Or me. But he had them. Things he wished he could've done."

"Like what?"

"He always wanted to take up sailing."

"Sailing?" she said. "I never knew that."

"Remember all those sailing books he had?"

She did remember. When she helped her mother pack away her father's things, she thumbed through those books, staring at picture after picture of sail boats on blocks, sailing on

the seas, of men looking rugged and in their element manning them. She figured that since her father worked for the parks and recreations department and had often overlooked the maintenance of the local tributaries that this interest had been merely sparked through research, a mindless hobby to occupy his time. She never imagined it went further than that. She asked why he never pursued his dream.

“Boats cost money. And,” she said with a sigh, “he wasn’t much of a swimmer either. Then he got older and I guess it just didn’t seem like a thing he could do. I know he regretted that. When he got sick, he said to me ‘Marie, I wish I just went ahead and did it. To hell what anybody thought. Just bought me a boat and went out to sea.’”

Toni glanced over at her husband and son. Tod was pointing at the cockpit of the small Cessna, while Josh knelt down beside him.

“Is that why you’re doing all this?” she said. “So you won’t have any regrets.”

“This?” she said, waving her hands at the airfield. She shrugged. “I’m doing this because it’s fun. I like having fun,” she said.

Toni frowned again. Her mother waved to a fellow classmate, excused herself, and approached him. He hugged her mother familiarly, as though he had known her his whole life.

Toni stood alone, feeling the wind shuddering against her. The ground felt suddenly unstable. She set the cup down on the table, went over to her husband and son, and leaned against Josh. She appreciated the steadiness of his lean, solid body like a bulwark or a high levee wall. She wanted to tell him what her mother told her, but he pointed to a pilot approaching the Cessna and said, “I think it’s starting.”

When Mr. Eckhardt announced it was time to make the jumps, the graduates disappeared into the hangar, then returned wearing orange jumpsuits, helmets, goggles, boots, and backpack-filled parachutes. Her mother led the group toward the Cessna, as though a commander entering

the battlefield, and waved to Toni, Josh, and Tod. They all waved back. As her mother climbed into the plane, she held her breath and felt the quickening beat of her heart.

The Cessna's engine wheezed to life, its propellers spinning wildly, its sleek frame shuddering by the tremendous force it took to send the vehicle airborne. After a few minutes, the plane pushed forward, turned, then shot down the airstrip, accelerating with speed. When it reached the end of the airstrip, it lifted, gliding effortlessly and banking into the air. Families clapped and gawked in awe. Toni gripped Josh's hand and gazed at the Cessna, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare. For a long time, the plane flew in circles high above the landing strip, its engine rumbling and chuffing, muffled by the clattering wind. A large knot settled in her throat. She turned to Josh, then glanced at the sky, holding her breath, praying something wasn't wrong.

Someone shouted and pointed at the Cessna. Ten, eleven, twelve tiny figures dropped from the plane, then floated on the air, arms akimbo, legs extended. Josh laughed and clapped. Soon the others followed, applauding and cheering loudly. Toni squinted.

"Which one is she?" she shouted.

Josh took out a pair of binoculars from his bag, looked through them, then handed them to Toni. "There. On the right," he said pointing.

Toni looked through the binoculars, adjusting them, then stared for a long time until someone bearing a resemblance to her mother came into view. Her mother was falling, but yet she seemed in command, her head raised slightly, her arms outstretched like wings, riding the wind.

Tod begged to see, so Toni gave him the binoculars and helped him to direct his gaze. She glanced at the sky again. Suddenly there was an explosion, a puff of blue emerging from her mother's back. The parachute took shape, a hollow mattress gathering wind and air. Toni's mother was pushed upward by the force of the parachute's ejaculation, then began to drift downward, held aloft by the trapped air. As more parachutes opened, the crowd aahed, then

applauded. Toni clapped slowly. A rush of adrenaline filled her. She felt herself being elevated into the air, the ground disappearing beneath her feet. It was a strange and exhilarating feeling, like she was floating above everyone's head, a feeling of lightness that rivaled the tiny bodies of birds. She grasped Josh's hand, then put her other to her heart. It beat furiously beneath her breastbone. She held her breath as she watched her mother fall.

“She's flying,” Tod shouted, smiling up at his parents.

“Yeah, look at her go,” Josh said.

Toni smiled, but she disagreed with Tod. It wasn't flying. It was skydiving, it was surrendering to the elements and letting go, no fears, no regrets. As Josh lifted Tod on his shoulders to get a better look, Toni squeezed his arm and gazed up into the sky while the wind buffeted against her face, thinking it would be a perfect day for sailing.