

The Half Ship

by

Kate Lahey

The day after the funeral, I woke up late in the afternoon and stumbled into the living room. My sister Carolyn was sipping Drambuie from a teacup and when she saw me, she ducked behind the long white curtains, pulled open the sliding glass door, and stepped onto the balcony.

The curtains bellied out behind her like a sail and I started to follow her, but I knew it wouldn't do any good so I pushed off from the doorframe and wandered into the kitchen where I poured myself a glass of milk and piled a plate with fried chicken a neighbor had brought over the day before. I settled down on the living room couch and gnawed on a chicken wing in the semidarkness, listening to the shuump-shuump- shuump of the freeway traffic.

My mother called a week before she died. "It's your father," she said. "Another goddam woman." Her voice rose. "I told him I couldn't stand it any more, he'd have to leave. And he said all right, if that's what you want, I'll go." She started to cry. "Sweet Mother of God, Daniel, what am I supposed to do with a man like that?"

I promised to give my father a call; I said I'd ask him to think it over. But I kept putting it off, and four days later, some guy called and said he was a colleague of my father's. There had been an automobile accident, he said, and my parents had been killed. I can't remember the rest of the conversation.

I flew into Los Angeles that night, a Wednesday, and Carolyn arrived the next day. The funeral was held early on Friday morning. Some people came to the house afterwards, but none of them seemed to know each other well, and there was an awkward hour before they began to gather up their coats and move toward the door, murmuring so sorry ... call if there's anything ... terrible, terrible.

Carolyn swept back the curtains and shut the sliding glass door, closing out the sounds of the Santa Monica Freeway. "Was he drunk?"

I took a sip of milk and held the cold glass against my forehead. "I asked the doctor at the hospital and he said no."

Carolyn picked up the teacup and swirled Drambuie around the sides.

"I asked him twice," I said. The last few times I visited my parents, my father had been drinking too much and I worried about his driving.

Carolyn drained her Drambuie and set the cup on the coffee table. "God, this stuff is strong. Do you want some weed?"

"You brought it with you? You got that phone call and automatically packed a little dope in your suitcase?"

"Go to hell," she said affably. "Do you want some or not?"

"Sure. I just think you're depraved, that's all."

She shrugged and sauntered down the hall with her arm held languidly above her head, her middle finger wagging in my direction. A minute later, she strode back into the living room, dropped onto the couch across from me, and pushed her hair behind her ears. I watched as she slid the wrapper from a Tampax and extracted a small cotton plug and two neatly rolled joints from the plastic tube.

"Who are you hiding them from?"

"I worry about those dogs."

"What dogs?"

Carolyn held the burning match a quarter of an inch from the end of the joint. "Those drug-sniffing dogs they have at the airport."

"I've never seen any dogs," I said. "I think they just say that to scare people."

Carolyn took a drag, held it, and passed the joint to me. "There are dogs, all right. Not always, but I've seen them in Salt Lake. Maybe I should have wrapped these things in a baggie too."

"Nah. If you're paranoid enough to worry about drug-sniffing dogs, why not go all the way and postulate drug-sniffing dogs with plastic-penetrating noses?"

Carolyn gave me one of her drop-dead looks, but her heart wasn't in it. We passed the joint back and forth, and she curled up in the corner of the couch and leaned her head against the cushions. The light was fading and I couldn't see her face.

"Who will you miss the most?" she asked.

"Maybe you're wrong. Maybe it happened a different way."

Carolyn forced the air from her nostrils. "He was drunk, he had to be drunk!"

I handed her the last of the joint. My parents' car had been driven off the side of the road in good weather and had plummeted into a ravine. That's what the police officer said when I talked to him on the phone. "The vehicle plummeted into the ravine," he said, as if he were reading from a report.

"Maybe he did it on purpose," she said.

"Caro, don't."

"I can't help it." She leaned forward, and her pale face with its broad cheekbones emerged like a moon from the shadows.

I wanted to go sit next to her on the couch, but I was stoned and my legs felt like bags of sand, so I stayed where I was. "Are you crying?" I asked.

Even when we were little kids, it had troubled me to see her cry. I'd never been able to think of anything to say, or I was afraid of saying the wrong thing, so I would simply hunker down next to her and feel miserable. Her nose would run and sometimes she'd send me for Kleenex.

Carolyn pulled a Kleenex from her pocket and snuffled into it. She pushed herself off the couch and knelt in front of the old hi-fi cabinet. I could hear her open the record compartment and flip through my parents' collection of seriously out of date record albums.

"There's something I have to tell you," I said. "It's important."

"Mantovani! I totally forgot about Mantovani and the 101 Strings." Her voice sounded far away. "What do you want to hear? Is 101 Strings all right?"

I groaned. "Do we have to?"

The record chattered down the long spindle. A pause, the amplified scratch of the needle settling into the groove, and then the lugubrious swell of an easy-listening version of Autumn Leaves. Carolyn stretched out on the couch and shut her eyes.

"Carolyn?"

"I'm so tired," she said.

"Do you remember the Half Ship? By the cottage?"

"By the where?" She spoke so softly, I had to strain to hear her over the violins and cellos.

"By that cottage on Lake Huron. There was half a ship in the forest."

She didn't answer for a long time and I thought maybe the 101 Strings had put her to sleep. But finally she said, "I can just vaguely get a picture of it. Was it gray? And wooden?"

"It was gray, but I think it was steel." I knew it was steel. You could cut your fingers on the sharp edges of blistered paint on sun-heated metal.

"Mmmm," she said and rolled over on her side. In the failing light, her red hair spread over the pillow like a stain.

* * *

On a hot sticky afternoon in August when I was about six, my father came home from work early. He carried bag after bag of groceries into the house, put them into cardboard boxes, and loaded the food back into the car. He told my mother we were going on a vacation.

"A vacation? Where?" She was in the kitchen, her arms folded across her chest.

He said he had rented a cottage on Lake Huron for two weeks, and we were leaving this

afternoon. We had to hurry up and get packed.

"All of us? Right now?" she asked.

"Yes, of course right now! Let's go!"

An hour later, we climbed into the car and our house, our street, our neighborhood slid away in the distance and disappeared. I'd never been on a vacation before and I didn't understand where we were going. Carolyn and I huddled together in the back seat, pressed in as much by the airless heat as by the piles of clothes and the prickly slats of the picnic hamper.

For miles, no one said a word, but once we were out of Detroit and there were hardly any houses, just trees and fields, my father stretched an arm along the top of the front seat and threw us a grin. "Well, kids, what do you think? We're on the road!"

My mother smiled and patted his cheek. The sound of those words, "on the road," was so exhilarating, so unexpectedly reassuring, that I bounced in my seat and yelled, "on the road, on the road, on the road!" until Carolyn slugged me in the arm and my mother had to hand thermos cups of lemonade over the back seat to keep us quiet.

It was night when I woke up in the car. We had turned off the paved highway and were jolting down a gravel road hemmed in on both sides by the biggest fir trees I'd ever seen.

"Listen," my mother said, leaning her head toward the open window.

I could hear the gravel crunching sharply beneath the tires and the wind sighing in the trees. And another sound, stronger, and more insistent: the sound of waves surging and crashing against the beach. We pulled into a clearing, and the crunching of the gravel was suddenly louder, then silent.

I opened the door and slid out of the car. The night sky was clear and the air smelled like Christmas trees and rain. Stretching out in front of me, from horizon to horizon, was the lake. Miles of dark water, rushing toward me, gathering and falling, over and over, under a sky that swarmed with a million billion stars.

My father rested a hand on the nape of my neck, and I felt that only the weight of his hand kept me on the ground—that without my father's gravity, I would spin up over the trees and over the waves and reel across the sky like a meteor in flames.

* * *

"Hurry up, Daniel, or it'll be dark." Wisps of red hair had escaped from Carolyn's braids and flickered around her face. She tugged me by the hand and I stumbled along as fast as I could. The crotch of my swim suit was heavy with sand, and I had a stitch in my side, but I knew if I complained, Carolyn wouldn't hesitate to ditch me in the middle of the forest.

We were headed for the Half Ship, the front half of a gray container ship docked in the forest near the edge of the lake. My father had explained why the stern of the ship had been sliced away, and how the ship had come to be surrounded by trees, hundreds of yards from the beach, but all these

years later, I've forgotten the story.

We skidded around a bend in the sandy path and saw the Half Ship in the clearing, its decks open to the air like the exposed rooms of a partly-razed hotel. Just as we were about to sprint across the clearing and board the ship, we heard voices. Carolyn yanked me back into the shadows and we squatted, breathless, in a clump of chicory and Queen Anne's lace. I leaned back against the scaly trunk of a balsam fir and felt the pull of resin on my bare back.

"Look!" whispered Carolyn. "It's them."

My mother and father stepped from the interior of the ship onto the sunlit middle deck. They paused briefly, then strolled along the deck, talking. They didn't look out into the clearing, or even at each other.

Carolyn jumped up and motioned for me to keep quiet. She took a deep breath and clasped her hands against her chest as if she were going to recite poetry. "Some enchanted e-e-evening," she warbled, imitating the lady on our mother's old LP. "You will see a stra-a-anger. . . "

We waited expectantly, but they hadn't heard her; they didn't even glance our way. My father was leaning toward my mother, speaking with an urgency that was completely unlike him.

My mother was tall and slender in those days, with her dark hair pulled into a knot at the base of her neck. She wore a light summer dress and her shoulders were pink from the sun. She turned away from my father, and moved closer to us, closer to the edge of the ship. She was looking in our direction, but she didn't see us.

"Iraq!" she cried. To my six-year-old ears, it sounded like the squawk of a startled crow.

Carolyn pulled back into the shadows.

"It won't be forever, Milly. How long could it last?"

My mother gave a little snort of exasperation. "This is crazy, Frank! You could get killed, and they don't even need you. And anyway, you're probably too old."

"Milly, look at me." He lifted my mother's chin and turned her toward him. "I think this is what it will take. Come on, honey, say yes for once."

My mother tried to pull away. "You promised to choose. If you're going to stay with us, it has to be here. You can't go away."

I tugged at the strap of Carolyn's sunsuit. "What is she talking about?"

Carolyn chewed on the end of her braid and didn't answer.

My father held my mother's chin; he wouldn't let her look away. He said something I couldn't hear and I thought she would cry out, she looked so frantic, but in the end it was my father who pulled back. His eyes never left my mother, who stood perfectly still, staring ahead at nothing.

He waited but she didn't move. It was so quiet. A purple finch dipped across the clearing, and its

raspberry-colored breast flashed like a signal before it disappeared into the forest.

My father stumbled backwards, groping behind him, and sagged against the peeling bulkhead. He covered his eyes with his hands.

My mother turned. "Oh sweetheart." She slid her arms around his waist and nestled her head against his shoulder, but he stared straight ahead, his jaw tilted back at a strange angle. "You'll stay?" she asked. "You won't go?"

After a second or two, he drew his finger along her chin and tucked a strand of hair into her chignon. "No, I guess not, if you're so set against it. But Milly—"

"What?" Her voice rose high and sharp.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Never mind." They turned and left, descending the spiral staircase to the lower deck.

I looked to Carolyn for an explanation but she was huddled next to the fir tree, arms around her knees. She ran a fingernail across a resin blister on the base of the tree and we watched the sap ooze along the bark. After a few seconds, she stood and brushed the needles from the back of her legs.

"Come on, Danny, we'd better go." She took my hand and before I had even stumbled to my feet, she was dragging me through the forest again, along the twisting sandy path. I looked back over my shoulder, but the Half Ship was hidden behind the trees and the light was almost gone.

* * *

Six months later, my father went out to the garage one evening, held a gun to his forehead, and fired a bullet into his brain. All that autumn, all that winter, I had been waiting for something to happen, and when my father tried to kill himself, I felt I finally knew what was wrong.

He didn't die. The bullet sliced cleanly between the furrows of his brain and lodged in the fissure between the two hemispheres. He lay in a coma for six days, but once he regained consciousness, the doctors predicted he would recover completely.

Those nights, when my mother returned from the hospital, she would wander from room to room, talking to herself in a voice too low to hear. Except for that first terrible scream when she rushed into the garage, those jagged whimpers when she knelt on the oil-smearred concrete, her hands fluttering over my father like birds, I hadn't seen her cry.

One afternoon a few days after my father came home, I was at the kitchen table with my mother, drawing pictures of ships and bombers on a large piece of manila paper. It had begun to snow and my mother stirred her coffee and stared out the window at the mottled sky. In the next room Carolyn hummed under her breath as she built a papier-mâché volcano from strips of newspaper and a paste of flour and water.

My father was upstairs taking a nap. We had spent the afternoon playing Chinese checkers. He sat across from me on the bedroom floor in his plaid bathrobe and seemed perfectly happy. He

scooped up a handful of colored marbles, cupped them in the palm of his hand and held them up to the winter light. "Isn't it something?" he marveled. "They're so beautiful!" When my mother came in and told him it was time for his nap, he didn't resist. He tired easily and the seizure medication made him groggy.

I watched my mother swirl the silver spoon around and around in the coffee. She lifted the cup to her lips.

"Will Daddy go to hell?" I asked. In the next room, Carolyn's humming stopped.

My mother set the cup unsteadily in the saucer. "Who told you that?"

"No one. But I thought—"

She pushed her hair away from her forehead and leaned across the table. "Never mind what you thought. Daddy only wanted" She rubbed the back of her neck. "He just wanted to get away from it all."

I picked up a black crayon and drew a thick coil of smoke curling out of each airplane. I pressed hard and the crayon rasped on the rough paper.

I looked at my mother. "If he wanted to get away, why didn't you let him go to Iraq?"

The spoon clattered against the table and my mother lifted a hand to each cheek. Her eyes looked as black as my crayon and a strange sound came from the back of her throat.

Carolyn rushed into the room, her face clenched with anger. "Shut up, Daniel." She cradled my mother's head against her floury chest and glared at me.

"I only wanted to know." My voice quavered and I was afraid I was going to cry.

My mother looked up. She drew me to her side and brushed her fingers against my lips. "Of course you did," she said. "You wanted to know how a man could just, just *spurn* his family and leave them behind." She tightened her grip around my shoulders and when she looked up at Carolyn, her eyes flashed.

"No," I said. "That's not it."

* * *

As soon as he was feeling better, my father quit his job at Ford and made plans to leave Detroit. He had hundreds of resumés printed up and he showed Carolyn and me how to staple a light blue sheet of paper to the back of each resumé so it would look professional and make a good impression. We spent hours at the dining room table, stuffing and stamping mountains of envelopes, and Carolyn and I felt it was partly through our efforts that he landed a job as the quality control manager for a tool and die plant in Los Angeles. The night he got the offer, he took us out for a steak dinner and told my mother she could buy all new furniture as soon as we got to California.

The first time I saw the house in LA, the sun had gone down, and the sky was the deep clear blue of the ink my father used in his fountain pen. Silhouettes of palm trees and lattice-based billboards sank below the horizon as our car coasted off the Santa Monica Freeway and onto the deserted streets of the subdivision.

Carolyn and I scrambled from the back seat and ran inside the house. My mother's new furniture had been delivered earlier in the day, and everywhere we looked, there were angular chairs with detachable cushions and narrow wooden arms, coffee tables shaped like surfboards, and long skinny couches that slunk close to the ground and brushed against our ankles like hungry cats.

"Isn't it stunning?" my mother asked. "It's teak!"

My father gave us a side-eye and pursed his lips in a silent whistle.

"We're making a fresh start," my mother said. She skimmed her fingers along the surface of the new dining room table. "The slate is clean."

* * *

"Carolyn?"

Her breathing was slow and steady, and she didn't answer. In the dark, I made my way across the living room and out to the garage, which looked bigger now that the car was gone.

My father's old Air Force footlocker was over in the corner next to a stack of National Geographics. I lifted the dark green lid, and the smell that drifted out reminded me of the basement of our old house in Detroit, a damp mousy smell of cinderblocks and laundry detergent.

In the top compartment of the footlocker I found my father's Purple Heart, sleek and solid on its grosgrain ribbon; a Bulova watch engraved with his initials; a plastic laminated card that listed seven warning signs for cancer and a framed eight-by-ten bleached-out color photograph taken in Bangkok near the end of the Vietnam War. The photograph shows my father standing in front of a Buddhist temple with a dozen other Air Force officers. His arm is thrown around the shoulders of the officer next to him and he is smiling broadly, his eyes squinting in the sun.

In the bottom of the footlocker, next to an expanding file stuffed with tax records and clippings about the tool and die industry, was a neatly folded pile of Air Force dress uniforms.

I unfolded one of the blue uniforms and draped the tunic over the lid of the open footlocker. I held a pair of knife-pleated trousers to my waist, considering, then unbuckled my belt, pulled off my jeans and slid my legs into the chilly trousers. I zipped up the fly and they fit fine. I was still a little stoned, and I felt self-conscious, standing in the middle of the brightly-lit garage, wearing a pair of pants my father had worn more than forty years ago, but there was a kind of offhand intimacy about it that pleased me, like sharing a beer on a hot day.

The fluorescent lights made my eyes ache and the cement floor was cold against my bare feet. In some part of me that seemed too real to be only a memory, I was climbing out of the airless Mercury into the starlit night, and seeing the wide dark lake for the first time—the waves

gathering and crashing against the beach, the black fir trees rising up on either side of the road, and behind us, the little cottage with its knotty pine walls and plastic curtains at the windows.

I remember everything so clearly. The sound of Carolyn's steady breathing, the prick of the balsam needles against the back of my thighs. My mother, who seemed so insistent and sure of herself, so determined to have it her way. And my father, unwilling to say what he wanted, unable to make any choices, and choosing, finally, to get away from it all.

He'd often told me that he was a lucky guy, that he could always trust his luck, but even he could not have counted on the crazy dispensation of that bullet tunneling into the safe place in his brain. And later, his jaunty moods, his sudden decision to leave Detroit, and his confidence in our new life in Los Angeles—nothing fazed him then. What could he have felt but a sort of dizzied relief, an obligation to test his luck?

I set the photograph on a shelf next to a row of paint cans. I stared at my father smiling in the Bangkok sunshine, and I felt that if I studied his face long enough, I might understand how things had turned out the way they did. But there was too little to go on, a few memories and clues, circumstantial evidence about the sort of life my father made, about the sort of man my mother held onto for all these years. She was a serious woman, my mother, dogged in her opinions and fierce in her affections.

I hitched up the trousers and tapped my feet on the cement floor. The door to the kitchen creaked open and Carolyn stood in the doorway, her hair wild and fiery under the fluorescent lights.

"Daniel?"

I smiled. "Have a good sleep?"

"Tell me the truth."

"I was just looking at some of Dad's things," I said.

"Tell me."

"Here's the picture of him by that temple. Look how skinny he is."

I held out the picture, but Carolyn didn't move.

"She was driving, wasn't she?"

I returned the photograph to the top compartment and closed the lid of the footlocker.

"Yes," I said. "Of course she was."

The End

First published in a slightly different form in Weber Studies.