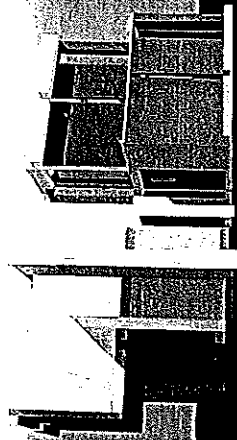


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Jody Lisberger

In the Mercy of Water

The first time I see Annabel jump from Simmons Bridge, she looks like a sliver in the air, a splinter of falling light. It isn't just her long legs outstretched, locked at the ankles, toes pointed toward the water that make her look sharp and invincible, or the evening sun that lights up the whole side of her body, but her bony arms pressed skyward as if in prayer. Not that she wants us to think she's asking for something. Not Annabel. Never ask. Merely proceed.

Even as she prepares to jump, she makes certain to look as if she were simply responding to Billy's instructions. "Jump way out. Beyond the rocks and the broken branches. See them?" Together they peer over the edge of the railroad bridge, forty feet down into the gorge. Billy keeps a foot on the rail. To feel the vibration, he says. Just in case.

"One last thing," he adds, still out of breath from his own leap. He points to the ragged timbers jutting from the abutment. "You gotta jump like you mean it. Straight and clean. Yeah?" He touches a hand to her shoulder.

Damn you for listening to him, I want to call out to her. And damn you, Billy, for telling her to do it. But I only watch as Annabel curls her toes over the edge of the trestle, crouches, and without so much as a glance toward me, thrusts forward her arms and leaps, hollering not "Geronimo" but "Oh shit" as she goes down, a knife into the dark pool.

When she comes up, her laughter is beyond exuberant, almost hysterical.

"What a rush!" she yells to the four of us—me, Megan, and Betsy standing on the rock ledge and Billy making his way back from the first opening in the trestle, not far from the overhanging rock. She must see our eyes fixed on her, mesmerized by her bare scissoring legs, her pale arms sweeping in slow circles.

"Did you go deep?" Billy yells.

What is he thinking? Would going deeper make a difference? She shakes her head.

"No way!" She cups her hand around her mouth like a megaphone. "Too cold down there!" Her lush Southern accent rings out over the river, so unlike the flatness of our Connecticut voices. She laughs again, then strokes toward the bank, as if proud of her own happiness.

"Anybody else?" Billy looks at each of us. He pauses the longest on me. "You got the nerve this time, Julia?" His voice has a swagger to it.

He keeps his eyes on me as he bunches up his T-shirt and uses it to towel off his chest, flexing his muscles as if he's the next Rocky. And what

if I do jump, I wonder. Is it his nerve or mine I would be testing?

"Show him who has the balls," Annabel had said earlier. "Jump."

As much as I love Annabel's bravado, I hate Billy's more. He never used to be this way. "No thanks," I tell him, turning away.

"But Julia," he says, grabbing my arm, pulling me to one side. We used to ride the school bus together. "Those girls are losers, and you know it. C'mon, jump."

I shake my head, just like last week up at Hound Rock. Only Billy and Annabel jumped then, too. Hand-in-hand in the dark, over the sheer rock face. "We'll hoot like hyenas as we go down," they'd said. But on the bank below, Megan, Betsy, and I heard nothing until their heads erupted from the black water and their laughter spewed out over the river. In the moonlight, I saw Billy raise Annabel's hand high in the air. Not as if she'd won some strenuous bout, but as if he, by declaring himself her judge, was declaring her his prize.

"So, what's the problem this time, Julia?" Billy says. He sweeps his shirt along his muscular arms. He thinks we spend our days admiring his pectorals, his abductors, his *biceps brachii*—the muscles we learned last year in tenth grade. To a certain extent, he's right. We watch every bulge, every curve, though we aren't about to admit our fascination. We tell each other how much we hate him. Swear he'll never have us. He's our pact, the thing we'll resist together.

Down below, on her belly, Annabel inches along the flat rocks, thick with slime.

She pushes aside the foliage on the bank to make her own path, ignoring the trail already there. The thought of her bravado buoys me.

"I'm just in awe of that bulge in your shorts, Billy," I say, loud enough for Megan and Betsy to hear. I wish they would laugh with me. But they don't. They sidle toward each other, Megan with her T-shirt stretched over her hips, a book under her arm. Betsy with her curly hair pulled high in a ponytail, always asking, what happens when you hit the water? Does it hurt? As if she would ever jump.

Billy looks down, as if to hide his own blush, before he stares back at me. "You're scared, aren't you," he says. He flashes that boy-beautiful smile.

I could answer all sorts of things. Like this jumping crap doesn't give me a rush the way it does you. I can't be bothered. It's stupid. Leave my friends out of it. Or, yeah, it scares the shit out of me. But admitting fear would be as bad as pretending I don't like sex.

"No," I answer quickly. "I just don't feel like jumping."

Billy smiles and leans close. "If you don't plan to jump, Julia, why do you come? To see me—or her?"

He stares at me with his ice blue eyes, eyes that say, I nearly had you once. But it won't happen again. Even if we kissed and touched in ninth

grade. Even if he fingered me wet between my legs. Let me touch you. Another of his instructions. He's not going to "have" me again.

"None of your business," I say.

"Is that so?" he taunts.

Behind us, Annabel parts the brush.

"That was incredible!" she says. She tilts her head to one side, hitting her ear to clear out the water. She jumps a few times. Her breasts bob. Surely she knows they call attention to themselves. Billy picks up her towel. He goes behind her, draping the towel over her shoulders and rubbing her back. Blood runs down the outside of her calf.

"That blew my mind, Billy," she says, craning her head around. The breeze brings goose bumps to her arms. Her nipples poke through her tank top.

"You're hurt," I say, gesturing toward the blood, expecting her to be grateful.

Without looking, she leans down and brushes her hand over the cut. "Just a stick, Julia," she says. "No big deal."

Billy squats. Fingers the cut. "No big deal, Julia," he says. *Don't make big deals, Julia.* "She'll be fine." He runs his hand the length of Annabel's body as he stands up.

"You gonna jump now, Julia?" she asks, her voice softer than usual.

"No thanks," I say. Without another word, I pull a shirt over my bikini and head home.

I WAIT A FEW hours before I call Annabel. My mother's gone out on her usual Friday night date, so I have the place to myself. She knows Annabel is coming over—knows she comes over a lot, which Mom thinks is fine. One of the girls. Some new blood. I try to sound casual when I ask Annabel about her plans for the night, but I can hear the edge in my voice.

Annabel chuckles. "You upset about something, Sugar?" She speaks low and gentle, full of her charm.

I take a deep breath. "You coming over, or are your other attachments too pressing?"

Annabel snickers. "Who'll be there?" she asks. She makes no secret about not wanting to be around adults. Her own parents stayed back in Tennessee, as she puts it. Not dead yet, though they might as well be. When she first arrived at our high school in November, she told everybody she'd been on her own for a year and a half. Waitressed in Memphis, trained to be an EMT in Richmond. After that, an internship in Little Rock as a homicide photographer. "Got tired of wading in blood," she said. "Tired of seeing red. Figured I ought to come north. See what makes you Yankees so yellow." She grinned as she spoke, so full of confidence, nobody doubted a word.

it in my fist.

"My, my, we are mean tonight, aren't we," she says very softly. I take a deep breath. "The night you told me about your mother, you said—" I pause to get it right, hardly expecting the lush Southern drawl that comes out of my mouth. "I—don't—like—boys."

"Oh, do that again," Annabel says, grinning. "You do it so—"

"Annabel, stop it," I snap, feeling a blush rise on my face. "You know what you said," I tell her curtly, as if I can erase my blunder. And I know she knows because she cocks her head to one side as if daring me to remind her of the story she told me last week, hours after her jump with Billy, while she and I sat alone on Hound Rock listening to the water suck down the channel. She told me about her mother, who kicked her out of the house, not because of the girls, but because of Annabel's hair, her clothes, her sassiness, never able to admit the truth Annabel yelled and yelled at her. I'm gay, Mother. *You hear me?*

We don't raise our voices in this house, Annabel Sue. I can't hear you when you are yelling.

I'm gay, Mother! Annabel had turned to the moon, screaming at the top of her lungs. *Can you fucking hear me now?*

"So what do you want me to tell you, Julia?" Annabel asks. For a moment, I wonder if she's going to remind me how I took her hand and stroked it, telling her how sorry I was. As if my mother and I would ever have that conversation. Or my father, who's too busy assuring me life goes on like normal. But instead she pushes up from the sofa and walks over to the mantel. Picks up the picture of me and my mother on Atkins Hill. "Something about your mother, perhaps?"

I shake my head. No, Annabel, I want to tell her. This isn't about my mother or yours, but about me. My quivering body in your EMT arms.

"Annabel," I say in a warning voice. "You—told—me—you—told—your—mother—you—were—"

"You, you, you, you, you," Annabel says, a glint in her eyes. "You, you, you, you," she says again, a little louder, and then again, chanting as she sets the photo back, picks up our glasses, and carries them into the kitchen. She thunks the bag of ice onto the counter, hacks the cubes with the mallet, clinks the spoon as she dissolves the sugar. Then silence. The silence of cracking ice. When she re-enters, she holds out our glasses like offerings, the mint wreathed on top. I shake my head. She sets them on the table, in the same rings of water.

"I ever tell you about my daddy?" she asks, quiet and nice, as if we were starting over. She sits down, pats the sofa for me to move closer. I don't budge. She leans back and pulls up the blind. "Now where do you suppose my daddy was," she says, "while my mother graced me with her kind words?" She looks out the window as she speaks, as if she can siphon her

story from the moon.

"Annabel," I say, full of impatience, "I don't want to hear about your—"

"Milo fields," she says. "You know milo, Julia, don't you? Early-growing Southern crop? Drought resistant—" She pauses a moment, as if to savor her own mimicry, then reaches out to touch my cheek. I push her hand away.

"He was looking out over the milo fields," she continues, a false cheerfulness in her voice. "Leaning against the porch pillar, next to my mother. Now wouldn't you think he would have said something to comfort his daughter?" She pauses a moment, as if waiting for an answer, but, before I can say anything, lets go with a sharp cry that seems to come from her ears. "But it was my mother who spoke," she says, her voice getting higher and tauter. "How well I remember her words. *Your daddy's been down at Buddy's Pool Hall. Down there playing with the boys. Now isn't that nice?*"

Annabel's voice has become so tight and shrill, I want to put my hands over my ears. "Stop it," I want to yell at her. "Enough of your story. What about my story?"

"Annabel, what were you doing with Billy?" I ask one last time.

She reaches out and presses her fingers to my lips, then stands up and goes to the mantel, stares at the picture of me and my father.

"You know, you don't look much like your daddy," she says. Her voice has an odd tremble in it. "Not like me and my daddy," she says, her pitch getting higher and thinner again. "Why, we're spitting images. High forehead. Round chin. Ears that curl like fiddleheads." As she speaks, she touches each of these places on her face. "Why, some people say I'm the son my daddy never had," she says, turning around and starting not only to laugh but to rock back and forth, tears in her eyes, catching her breath, until it isn't laughter at all filling that room but something more like the scream of an engine about to explode.

"Annabel," I shout, hoping the suddenness of my voice jolts her back. Or have Megan and Betsy been right about her craziness all along?

Slowly she quiets. Wipes her eyes. "Can you believe that?" she says softly, sitting down. "The son he never had! Oh, my, my, my." She starts to laugh again. Except this time it isn't shrill but gentle.

"You know what?" she says. She speaks so quietly I have to lean in to hear her. "All those years my mother knew my father was fucking the boys." She shakes her head slowly. "And look who she asked to leave. Now isn't that a pretty picture?" She blows air soundlessly through her lips.

For a moment I sit still, my eyes cast down. "I'm sorry," I want to say. But I can't summon up the words, can't stop myself from thinking, from knowing—in the moment of uncertainty—I've judged her. Just like the rest of them.

I can still picture her standing in the cafeteria line that first day, running her hand through her bristly hair. I was immediately in awe. A girl who could drive fast and rescue bleeding people. Who lived without her parents. Who wasn't afraid to go where she wanted, make some money, and rent her own little place. She could do whatever she damn pleased.

In January, she dared me, Megan, and Betsy to swim with her in the Sound. I never thought she'd do it. But she plunged right in. Clothes and all. Megan and Betsy helped me pull her out. Annabel, her lips blue, her limbs stiff, laughed with a touch of hysteria all the way home. Megan and Betsy started saying she was crazy.

On Valentine's Day, she proposed we drive my mother's jeep up the bank behind Kmart. "Just you and me," she said. I let her take the wheel. She gunned it up the incline, shrieked with laughter when the jeep bounced down the other side.

"Aren't you ever scared?" I asked.

"Scared?" She spun the jeep around the lot. "Sugar, if I got scared, where would I be now?"

BY THE TIME Annabel arrives at my house, a cool breeze has washed away the humidity. I've gathered fresh mint from the garden and made mint juleps, something Annabel taught me to do last weekend. "Real Southerners put the mint on top," she instructed. "Bury their noses in it while they drink. Like this." Only she pressed her nose not into her drink but into mine. Then she kissed me on the forehead.

"C'mon, kiss me back," she said. "On the lips. It's what you've been wanting all along, isn't it?"

"Anybody home?" she calls as she comes to the screen door. She lets herself in, checking each room as she strides down the hall. As if she doesn't know my mother goes to the movies with an "old friend" every Friday night. Nothing serious, Mom tells me. *Just friends.*

As she comes into the kitchen, I can smell the vanilla she's dabbed on her wrists. She's wearing my favorite T-shirt. Teal blue, V-neck. But I don't say anything. Not even hello. I need to know first what she's doing with Billy. She must know that from the way I hand her a drink without a word and gesture toward the living room. Nothing like our usual laughter, singing to the music, touching. She has a little jaunt as she walks, as if nothing can hurt her. She smiles when she sees the Scrabble board on the coffee table. Without a word, she too settles onto the sofa, just as we have for many Fridays before this, turning ourselves inward, drawing up our legs Indian-style. I reach behind the sofa and pull down the blind. Still saying nothing, I open the Scrabble board across our knees, and hold out the bag of letters.

Grimacing, as if this wordless duet were her idea, she first lifts her glass

in a playful toast. I wait for her to drink before I take my own sip, savoring the sweetness that fills my mouth, the cold that numbs my head.

Our letters clack as we play. Her Q-U-I-L-L on the center pink star. Her smirk. But I'm lucky, too. An S on top of her quill. My own seven-letter S-C-E-P-T-E-R. I watch her face tighten up.

She leans over the board. "S-q-u-i-l-l!" she says. "What the hell is that?"

I smile. The moment seems almost too perfect. "Blue, bell-shaped Northern flower," I say, as if I were reading straight from a dictionary, though I can hear the edge in my voice. "One of the first to bloom after the snow melts. In case you didn't know."

Annabel stares at the board. She blows a stream of air through her lips. A long whistle without sound. "So why don't you just out with it?" she says, looking up.

"Okay," I say, but I don't plan to rush anything. It's nice to hear her nervous for a change. As if she's scared I might test her in my own way. I take a sip of my drink. The mint presses against my nose. I breathe it in as I look around the room at the quilts my mother has hung, the photos she's placed on the mantel. Me and her skiing. Me and her apple-picking on Atkins Hill. Me and Dad in our tennis whites. "No need to banish this photo," my mother said. "He's still your father."

"So what were you doing with Billy?" I ask, trying to sound calm but firm. I put my glass on the table, my letters next to it. Didn't she ask me to kiss her?

She smiles as she runs her hand through her hair. "Oh my—" she says in her honeyed voice. "Do I detect a little—?"

"Annabel." I feel myself fighting against her. "Why do you let him put his hands all over you?"

She pauses and chuckles. "You mean why don't I put my hands all over you? Is that what you want?" She reaches over and plucks the mint from my glass. Tickle it around her lips like a feather.

On the mantel, the Waterbury clock strikes ten.

"Tell me, Julia," she says leaning closer. "You ever been with a boy?" She looks at me with wide eyes. As if she doesn't know already. As if she herself didn't confide, "Anybody can turn a girl on. Any fingers will do the same."

"You told me you don't like boys," I say, focusing on the trickles running down the mint juleps, the circle of water around the base of each one. "On a glass table, water doesn't matter," my mother says. "But on wood it stains." I should be getting coasters.

"Is that so?" she says. "And when did I tell you that?" She picks up the board and folds it on itself, the letters stuck inside. As she swings her legs around, she tickles her mint on my nose. I grab the sprig and close

"And about Billy?" she says, turning to face me. "People do things for the oddest reasons. You know what I mean?"

She must see my eyes grow wide with alarm.

"Oh, girl," she says suddenly. She takes my hand. "Girl, girl, girl," she says low in her throat. "C'mon. Let's forget the Billy stuff." She points out the window. "Look. The moon's full. We can jump, just the two of us, if you want."

I pull my hand back a little. Does she think we can just forget?

"You can jump with your eyes closed," she whispers.

I try to imagine going over the edge, seeing the water below me, as if it could swallow me. Hide me, at least for a while.

"I'll hold your hand. All the way down," she says more urgently. She tightens her grip.

For a moment, I close my eyes. Will our laughter spew out like hers and Billy's? Do I want that? I take a deep breath. If I don't jump now, will I ever?

"What is it?" she asks.

So much I could tell her. Of my timidity. My fear of heights. My not knowing what's down in the darkness. Any darkness.

I feel her fingertips on my eyelids, light as air. "Sometimes when you jump," she whispers, as if she were reading my mind, "it makes everything easier. Just look at me." When I open my eyes, she shrugs, as if to say, "Am I all that bad?"

"So what do I wear?" I whisper.

"Oh, goodie," she says, grinning. "Nothing with girls. That's half the fun."

"Sorry," I say. "I'll wear my bathing suit."

"Okay, then. Who cares?"

ON THE PATH TO Simmons Bridge, I listen to the wind and try to quiet my heart. Next to me, Annabel can't stop prancing. "Step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back," she chants, accenting the word each time she stomps where the shadows cross.

When we come to where the bridge takes off from the land, I walk ahead a few steps and stop. I look down. The water shimmers in the space between the ties. I put one foot on the rail.

"The train doesn't come through till morning," Annabel says.

I look at her and pause.

"Believe me," she says. "It's my life, too." Without another word, she takes my hand and steadies me as we move along the tar-streaked ties. I rest my other hand against the girders as we walk, glad to feel the solidity of the welded joints, the bumps of fused iron circled like numbers on a clock. We walk past several openings in the trusses, far beyond where Annabel

jumped the first time. "We want to be where it's deepest," she says. She must see my pinched face, my small worried eyes, so unlike hers.

When we get to the center of the bridge, she helps me take off my T-shirt. Holds onto my sleeves as I pull out my arms. Loops the shirt over my head, uncatching it from my ears. She folds and sets it down on the rail.

"Don't worry," she says, reading my mind. "I'll come back and get the clothes afterwards. Now can you slip off your shorts?"

I do, looking down into the water as it sweeps by the concrete pilings. You can't tell it's pulling hard, but it must be.

"Okay," Annabel says, resting her hand on my shoulder. Does she feel me shaking? She points down into the gorge. "You don't have to jump out far here. Just straight down. Okay?"

I nod, staring over the edge into a sheen so black and taut it gives the illusion of stillness, of safety.

"But first you have to let go of the truss," she says. Then she chuckles. "But oh-la-la, what a suit to wear!" She runs her finger along my bikini bottom. "It'll wedge so tight between your cheeks, even floss won't pull it out! Won't that be something?" She laughs, meaning for me to laugh, too, I'm sure. A moment of distraction. "But wait a sec," she says. One foot at a time, not even needing to hold onto the truss, she slips off her cutoffs and underwear, folds them, and lies them on the rail with my clothes. Slowly she takes off her T-shirt, her breasts pure white in the moonshine, her tuff scanty and almost blonde, nothing like my own.

"Later, Mahvin," she jokes in a mock Boston accent as she sees me stare. Then she grows serious. "Now remember," she says. "We have to jump at the same time. Because if one person jumps and the other drags—" She points to the wooden beam running along the trestle. "That could do a number on a person. Yes?"

I nod.

"Okay," she says. "Eyes open or closed?"

"Closed," I whisper.

I KNOW NOW WHY Billy and Annabel never hooted when they jumped off Hound Rock. Having your heart in your mouth makes it impossible to cry out, the rush so extreme it's a wonder your heart doesn't burst. But I don't have time to worry about my heart. At the count of three, together Annabel and I leap off that bridge, holding our hands tight, sucking in our breath, our bodies cleaving the air until we cut into the water, let go our hands, and feel the coldness swallow us. I don't open my eyes. I let the water take me down. I feel it wedge my bottoms and yank my top. My head aches with cold and pressure. Only when I stop going down do I open my eyes, see the blackness everywhere, and begin kicking, pulling to the surface, my lungs exploding so desperately into the air, it takes a few seconds before my hoots ring out over hers. ■