



CHAPTER SAMPLER

Picture a Girl

JENNY MANZER

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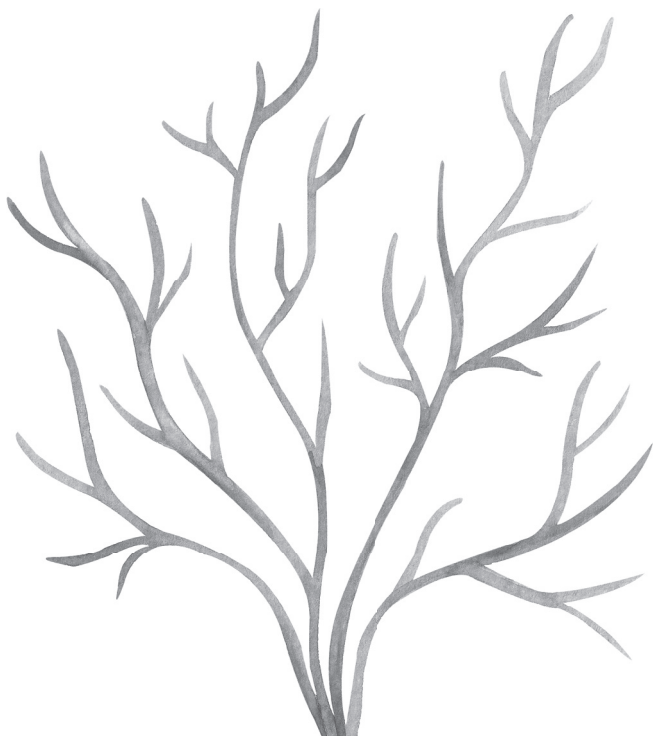
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*To A.J., Briar and David—
who all love a stormy day by
the ocean and a good story.*

Sometimes a story is all you have left.



SUNDAY



When Mama is happy, there is no one who shines brighter. Her eyes sparkle like beach glass, and she makes this snorting sound just before she laughs. Every night before we turn out all the lights in the cabin, she tells us a story. The story could be about me and my brother, Billy, though it's often about some adventure in Mama's life. It's important to listen carefully and not to make assumptions, Mama says.

For example, you might assume that Billy's name is William, but the name on his birth certificate, for real, is Billabong, after the surf brand.

Billabong is also a word from Australia, a place I dream of visiting, where it is almost always hot and there are kangaroos, koalas and spiders and plants that can kill you—and friendly people who say “G’day.” Maybe the spiders and plants don’t mean to kill—they just have a poison inside that gets released when they’re scared.

When Mama’s home, night is my favorite time in the cabin. The dark falls and its edges soften. You can’t see the mold around the corner of the windows, and if all three of us are here, it feels safe. Sometimes the rain starts up, and we can hear it tapping like impatient fingers on the cedar-shake roof. I lie in my bed listening to the waves crashing and Billy snoring.

Sometimes when Mama gets angry, she points to the ceiling of the cabin and shouts, “You’ll do what I say under my roof!” And then she shakes her hands, like she’s releasing water droplets from them. What she doesn’t say is that it’s not really her cabin. It belongs to Mr. Chadawack, or Mr. Chadawacky, as we call him when he’s not in earshot. He’s got a big red face and a scrubby silver beard and a large belly. He wears beige shorts with lots of pockets and thick flannel shirts. Mama pays him a fortune for our tiny cabin, known as number 32. We like to call

it the Storybook Cabin. A creek named Stonybrook runs nearby, but when Billy was littler he called it Storybook, and the name stuck.

Something else you should know: we live exactly fourteen paces from the Pacific Ocean, near Aerie Beach. It's off Better's Bay in the town of Cedarveil. The bay is not called that because it's better, but because someone lost a bet playing cards years ago, and it cost them their fishing boat. I like to know the stories behind things. I save stories the way the tooth fairy collects teeth, Mama says. Mama is really good at two things (three if you count making French toast): surfing and telling stories.

It's Sunday afternoon, so we do what we always do: (1) cabin chores, (2) pack our school lunches and (3) leave Mama in peace and quiet so she can gather her thoughts. Mama has these moods, which she says she inherited from her mother. When she is in them, look out. Most of the time, Mama is a monarch butterfly, bright and black at once, flitting from job to job. When she is in a mood, she becomes that same butterfly pinned to a board, silent and still. It's best to leave her alone.

"Billy," I say. "Fill up the lamp and sweep the floors, okay?" He is lying on his stomach across our crocheted circle rug, reading some garage-sale

X-Men comics. Billy has a lazy streak, and he needs someone like me to remind him what to do. When I was his age, I filled the lamps all the time. We have electricity in the cabin, but it sometimes gets knocked out, so we have to be prepared.

“Why do I have to?” he whines, staring at me with his big brown eyes. Billy is a good-looking kid and smart too. Everyone says so, like the cashier at the Save Easy or Martin Daley, the guy who runs the So Clean Laundromat with his wife, Lila. He plays bass in the local roots-rock band, and Lila gives Billy and me milky tea with sugar and digestive biscuits or even homemade fritters because we help our mother so much.

“Shush up, you two,” shouts Mama from where she lies on her bed. “Mama has a headache from all your shouting,” she adds, even though she was the only one shouting.

I know what’s coming next. She’s going to need her “medicine,” as she calls it, to soothe her headache and her jitters. She peeks over a quilt, looking irritated, her blue eyes fixed on me. Her hair was neatly done in two braids this morning, but now tendrils and strands are poking out. She’s shivering because she’s still wearing a T-shirt that says *Eat. Sleep. Surf.* and denim cutoffs. Her favorite thing to

wear is a wetsuit, and the salty smell of neoprene always makes me think of her. Watching my mom carve a wave on her shortboard is like watching LeBron play basketball—which I sometimes do at other kids’ houses. (We don’t have a TV.) She’s never had any coaching or training. She was just born to surf.

“Billy, bring me my medicine,” she says. I don’t like how she gets when she drinks that stuff, but I don’t like how she gets without it either. The bottle is in the top cupboard, above the kitchen sink, so Billy has to drag a chair over. The wood cabinets are breaking down from the damp air in the cabin, and little chips of wood flake off every time we open the cupboards. They were once painted bright green, like the kitchen table.

“Thank you, lovey,” she says, her mood shifting in a finger snap. Without being asked, Billy brings her the gold-rimmed teacup she likes. It has orange and pink flowers wound around it and once belonged to Mama’s grandmother—supposedly the only posh thing she owned.

“Finish the sweeping, Billy,” I remind him. If we play our cards right, we’ll be free to roam the beach—and still get story time, the best part of the day. The key is that Mama has enough of the drink

to make her happy but not so much that she falls asleep. She started taking it almost every night two years ago, after she hurt her back while unloading bags of flour during a shift at the café. First she took these pain pills for a few weeks, but then the doctor wouldn't renew her prescription. She was so mooney when her back hurt because she couldn't surf. Might as well have cut off her oxygen, she said.

I rummage around our kitchen cupboards to see what there is to make our school lunches. The possibilities include oatmeal, a jar of olives, a tin can of maple syrup, two cans of black beans, a sack of whole-wheat flour and a bag of brown rice. The fruit bowl on the counter holds two red apples and three ripe bananas. I press my finger against a spot on the banana. Brown bananas are as bad a lunch as stinky tuna. It would be better to starve than to pack those. My name, Adelaide Scratch, is strange enough, not to mention my too-long bangs, my too-tall body and the fact that my toes poke out of my runners.

Billy sweeps halfheartedly, gripping the broom like a hockey stick. He glances over at his lunch kit, which I have placed on the table. It doesn't go well when we leave lunches to the morning. None of us like getting up early unless it's to go surfing. Surfing

is the reason Mama moved to Aerie Beach four years ago, when I was seven and Billy was four.

Mama works, for sure, just not every day. Cedarveil is a summer tourist hub on the southwest side of Vancouver Island. We have lots of people here who work around the clock in summer and can't find a job in winter. Mama is somewhere in between. If she surfs all the time, we run out of money and our lights get turned off. I can't wait until I put together enough money to take the Red Cross babysitting course. It costs seventy dollars for two days, and after I pass I can legit make money for myself. That will be the best.

"I can't wait to babysit," I say to Billy, keeping my voice low. I've found a jar of unopened pea butter in the back of the cupboard. It's not my favorite, but it's a strong candidate to star in tomorrow's lunch.

"Why? You always complain when you hafta watch me."

"I don't get paid to watch you. Plus, when you babysit you get to see other people's houses, like if they have big-screen TVs, or what kind of books they read, whether they have a garburator."

"A what?" he asks.

"It's this thing that blends your garbage," I say.

"Like making a smoothie?"

“Gross! No. It makes your garbage smaller—like, liquefies it.”

“That’s why you want to babysit?”

“Of course not. I like little kids,” I say. I don’t want to tell him that I like to imagine having baths in other people’s tubs or filling a glass with ice from a machine that spits out cubes. We only have a stall shower, Band-Aid beige, and a fridge so old that it hums like a power line every night. I am curious about how other people live. When I ride my ridiculously pink bike around Cedarveil in the evening, I always want to peer in and see what people are doing behind their curtains.

Sundays, Billy and I might go to the beach to collect beer and pop cans to return, gather seaweed to dry or play Frisbee—but I hear rain starting up. Mama takes a deep sip from her teacup. Her drink smells awful to me—a mix of cinnamon and turpentine. But it eases whatever was itching Mama, and she rises to the stove. I watch her bustle around the galley kitchen, opening and shutting drawers and cupboards. She finds a bunch of leeks from the farmers’ market in the fridge and holds them up. The leeks are wilted, their limp stalks drooping.

“Still good,” she says, tossing the bunch onto a wooden cutting board. She chops quickly, as if

on high speed. Mama is a whiz in the kitchen, the slicing and dicing, which is why she usually picks up work doing prep at resorts or cafés. People can't help but like Mama, and she gets lots of second chances. It doesn't hurt that she's so pretty, with her deep-set eyes and upturned freckled nose—often covered in sunblock if she's surfing. Plus, if you ever need to move, Mama shows up to help—if she remembers.

I watch her locate a brown paper bag of potatoes with long white tentacles stretching out the top. She quickly chops the tentacles off, her knife slicing into the pale, yellow flesh. By the time Billy is done sweeping and has started his school reading, she's made a potful of leek and potato soup. On the very best nights, she sometimes makes homemade bread as well. But tonight it is just the steaming soup.

We settle around the green table, our spoons clinking in the same rhythm as we eat. I watch her teacup, checking to see if she's refilling it. She gets annoyed if she notices I'm watching how much she pours, so I just use furtive little fish eyes.

"I heard talk there's some new surf contest starting up here," says Mama, stirring her soup around and around so it makes little whirlpools. "One for girls and women, or something. Cash prize to the winners."

“Is that so?” Billy asks, because it’s a good thing to say if you want Mama to keep talking.

“I’ll bet you’d win it, Mama. You should enter,” I say, almost halfway done my soup already. I must be growing again. I’ve got a badger digging holes in my stomach, Mama says. She tells me I’m a natural surfer, but I lack finesse, which is another way of saying I lack skill. So I keep waiting until she has time to help me get more finesse, like her. I just need more practice.

“I’m too old for that now,” Mama says in a sad tone.

“No you’re not, Mama,” says Billy, not sucking up but genuine. “You’re the best surfer I’ve ever seen. For a real-life person, like, not on YouTube.” Billy almost never lies to Mama. He has been known to fudge the truth with others, however. He’s also addicted to YouTube videos, but he can only see them at school or at a friend’s house.

“Thanks, sweet pea,” says Mama gruffly, swiping her bowl off the table. She’s blinking while she runs water to wash dishes at the kitchen sink with the dripping tap, and I know she is sad and touched by what Billy has said—even though it’s the truth. Watching Mama surf is like watching a heron take off and glide, especially if she catches a six-foot wave.

Mama switches on our old radio, and we listen to a show about books. I like the soothing sound of the announcer's voice as she asks questions. The writer is French Canadian, I can tell by her accent, and she usually writes for adults, but she has just published a children's fantasy book called *Caspian's Way*.

"So, did you always want to be a writer?" the announcer asks.

"Not at all," the author answers. "*I never even considered it. The only book we had in the house was the Bible. My parents wanted me to be a dentist—a steady, useful job. But the stories were circling around my head like sharks. They wouldn't let me sleep.*"

Like sharks, I think, imagining their beady eyes and bodies like gray submarines. I make a note to ask my English teacher, Ms. Cranberg, about *Caspian's Way*. I love lying on my bed and reading and listening to the rain. Cedarveil gets a hundred feet of rain every year, and sometimes in winter I think we'll never see the sun. But winter brings the best waves for surfing, so it's a silver lining. Someday I want to be as good as Mama at duck diving into the waves, waiting for the right one, a real bomb. That means a big wave, in surf talk. I've been skipping rope on the patch of gravel by the side of our cabin and doing push-ups on our

carpet because I read these exercises will make my surfing better.

Finally, when we are ready for bed, Mama lies down and pats the space on either side of her. “Okay, groms,” she says. That’s short for grommets, or young surfers. It’s her nickname for both of us when we’re all together. It’s time for a story. Mama clears her throat and begins.