

Parachute Girl

Ada Petitpain, Jack Bohanan, Stella Nulty and Dizzy Sullivan step out of a sticky Queens twilight onto the westbound Manhattan IRT, where they'll change for the Third Avenue El and make their way to Coney Island. They'll stroll the boards, toss a few baseballs, drink a pitcher of watery "near" beer, and dance a jitterbug or two at the band shell on the Luna Park pier. They hope a few hours of hurdy-gurdy glamour will slake the parched sanctimony of Prohibition, and make them forget they're flat broke and a long way from seeing what Mr. Roosevelt's New Deal has to do with them.

Braced for a scrap of breeze on the clanging metal platform between cars, Ada breathes in the Aqua Velva Jack has splashed on for her. He's handsome in the way a girl feels in her knees, lean and athletic, quick to laugh and just as quick to take offense—but not to her, never to her. Feet planted firmly, he steadies both of them as if he, too, feels the dizziness she blames on the heat. She likes that his hand encircles her waist, the protection of that, but as much as she is drawn to him, she knows how suddenly all that can change. Hadn't her father become a stranger when he drove off with his dental assistant, abandoning her mother and sixteen-year-old Ada?

Talk is impossible out here and from behind her blowing chestnut pageboy, she admires the deep-water blue of Jack's eyes, set wide in a broad Irish face. Even in this he's the more decisive of the two. Her eyes, a peculiar shade of hazel, too close together in her opinion, need the changing light to decide whether to be gold or green. She leans against the solid wall of him knowing he won't let her fall.

Tenement windows flicker by like cards in a thumbed deck. A thin man in an undershirt raises a fist to an unseen person; a woman burps a baby. Ada wonders what people see when the train cars rush past the windows she and her mother clean with ammonia and newspaper

every Saturday—a bitter woman bent against the loneliness, a grown daughter carrying the shame for two?

“Never fall in love with a good looking man,” Kitty Petitpain tells her every chance she gets, “they’ll leave you with babies and bills and your heart in your mouth. Yes, even your precious Jack.”

She shakes loose her mother’s warnings and remembers the night Jack won his first big basketball game. “Marry me,” he whispered into her hair up on the hot roof, adrenaline and victory coming off him in waves. Asking again on a carpet of pine needles next to a freezing stream near Bear Mountain. If she marries anybody, it’ll be Jack Bohanan, *if* she marries at all.

She knows firsthand how good looks can come to grief; her father was movie star handsome. But Jack isn’t just attractive, he’s kind. Times are hard and he never shows up empty-handed—canned peaches, oranges, milk, a loaf of Silver Cup bread and when he’s feeling flush, gardenias for his “two best gals.” He’ll lose an argument if it means keeping the peace. He’s made it clear he won’t allow her fears to put him off. The grin that lights up in him at the sight of her is something a man can’t fake. He knows she’ll never leave her mother behind. He understands he’s getting two for one and loves her enough to accept it.

Still, if she tells him what she knows as certainly as her own name, and she’d better do that soon before the whole world can plainly see for itself, will he still want to marry her? Worse, will he marry her out of duty, blame her for destroying his dream of playing pro ball? How long will it be before he drives off with a cloying stranger as her father had done? She can’t forget her mother’s keening through the thin bedroom wall, dreams of college disappearing with her father’s money. The look of triumph on that hussy’s face as she sat outside in his fancy car, touching up her lipstick and tapping her foot, waiting for him to dole out a few dollars for the rent. She’d rather be alone than humiliated like that.

“He’d eat dirt for you,” Stella tells her as they operate the keypunch machines they are told will revolutionize business. “Any fool can see that.”

“Sure, they’re all madly in love and the next thing you know, they’re gone,” Ada argues.

“Jack’s not your father, Adie. Besides, most girls would kill to be in your shoes.”

Easy for Stella to say, Dizzy can’t believe his luck. How a shy skinny kid with four-alarm hair, a fondness for the ukulele, and a wobble from the slightest whiff of alcohol can be loved by the fizzy, fun-loving blonde who could have her pick of all the Sunnyside boys is beyond him. He waits for Stella’s defection like a man under a sentence, accepts it as inevitable, but to his amazement, it never comes. Why can’t she see in herself what is so obvious in others?

Up on the rumbling track, Ada hopes there’ll be an opportunity to wander onto the moonlit sand and go as far as decency will allow before the lurching ride home to her mother’s scrutiny. The thought of it makes her shiver. She draws closer to Jack, tucking herself into the crook of his arm.

Still. She can’t forget the girls huddled in the corner of the coffee room, one crying, the other consoling—*You’ll be as good as new by Monday*. She’s heard about women who help girls in trouble. Would she consider such a thing? If so, could she face Jack and her mother afterwards? If she doesn’t marry Jack, would she be able to hold her head up and raise a baby alone? Could she bear giving it up for adoption? She can’t imagine ever being *good as new*. She tidies her stack of cards and tucks them, encoded with her fears, into the keypunch machine’s automatic feeder.

She’s told no one, not even Stella.

She’d planned to tell him at the beer garden in Jackson Heights, but he stood her up. She’d waited for hours in her prettiest summer dress, avoiding her mother’s pursed lips, the unspoken *I told you so*.

“A date’s a date,” she’d said when he finally turned up.

He begged her to let him in.

“Don’t be like that. I got a chance to make some overtime pay and grabbed it.”

“And what else will you grab, when you get the chance?”

“You’re always looking for the worst in people, Ada.”

“Well, I’ve seen it, haven’t I?”

“Not in me you haven’t,” he said.

“You’re a man, aren’t you?” she snapped, slamming the door between them.

Inside Kitty stood at the ironing board pressing shirts for the widower up on the boulevard. Avoiding her mother’s eyes, Ada stared into the scorched garden her father had coaxed out of the hardscrabble city plot they didn’t have the heart to keep up.

“He said there was no way to let me know he’d be late. They had him working in a file room after the switchboard operators went home.” She knew how gullible she sounded.

Kitty pushed down hard on Mr. Callahan’s cuffs. “Your father loved me, Ada. I know he did. But men leave. Better to find out now, before you end up like me.”

It was wrong to assume the worst. Jack had never given her a reason to doubt him. Even so, no one can leave you if you do it first.

The following Sunday Jack rang the bell as Ada was dressing for Mass.

“Meet Rusty,” he said, scratching the ears of the massive red Chow-Chow he’d plucked from the pound. “His specialty is guarding pretty girls.”

They both knew the dog was as much for Kitty as for Ada, a peace offering from the boy who meant her daughter no harm. She leaned down to let the animal sniff her palm and stroked its fiery ruff.

“It’s hard work courting two women,” Jack said, smoothing her bed-tossed hair.

Rusty nuzzled them with a wet snout, winding his new leash around their legs. Why was it easier to give your heart to a dog than to a man who clearly adores you?

The train rolls past Sheep’s Head Bay, out along Brooklyn’s spine past the battery and the marshy flats toward the cool, murmuring ocean, steel wheels urgent on the rickety old track—*tell him tonight, tell him tonight, tell him tonight.*

Jack came up with the Coney Island idea in the graveyard of Trinity Church, where he eats his nickel lunch from the Automat, and smokes a Chesterfield in the shade of a Sycamore planted by some Dutch Burgher, free of his Stock Exchange mail cart for exactly one

hour and not a minute more. Here he dreams of playing for the New York Knickerbockers, and not having to tip his cap to gin-soured men in seersucker suits.

Nights and weekends they bounce out to the boondocks in Dizzy Sullivan's rumble seat where the unfairness of his poverty slams the ball home every time, turns his lips into a thin hard line after a bad call. A sports writer for the *Journal American* called him Jack The Ripper and his playing style "a lethal combination of moxie and elegance." Ada knows it's fury that gives him grace and speed, a pickpocket's touch. She sits center court where he can see her laughing and cheering him on, covering her eyes when the punches fly, bringing him back from the brink. She tries not to think about that temper turning on her.

At least he's not out on Rivington Street where raw-boned men line up for donuts and a cup of coffee from the soup kitchen. Twelve dollars a week isn't much, but between the two of them, it's twenty-four. He could move in with her until she was able to go back to work. With a little luck and the basketball winnings he squirrels away, they might have enough for a place of their own.

If he still wants her.

Dusk is settling into soft purple as they make their way through the turnstile at Stillwell Avenue, and down a steep platform into salt licked air. Jack steers Ada through the crowd. Dizzy clutches Stella's outstretched hand. Luna Park lights up the sky.

The Cyclone looms above. Cars inch along its narrow wooden track up to the top of a stomach-lurching peak, then plunge down the other side, one piled on top of the next one like dominoes. Beyond it, the Ferris wheel makes lazy turns in a sea breeze. A carousel with painted horses and a brass ring spins wildly, a blur of color and sound.

They are strolling up the midway, eating cotton candy and discussing which of these thrills will get their meager budget when the Parachute Jump comes into view, the cries of riders tethered to unfolding silk mushrooms, shrill as breaking glass.

As they were leaving Kitty slipped a dollar she couldn't spare into Jack's pocket, "for ice cream," she'd said, giving him a conspiratorial

wink. Furious at this shameless bribe, Ada pretended not to see. If he were going to throw her over, a little ice cream money wouldn't stop him. Now he's waving his windfall at their friends, declaring this new adventure, "my treat."

He's generous. Not like her father, making them beg.

Dizzy shoots Stella a lopsided grin.

"Whaddaya say?"

She pulls him toward the ticket booth.

"Last one down buys the *Cracker Jacks*!"

She doesn't want to spoil their fun, but the thought of plummeting to earth in that contraption makes her queasy. Even the gentle rocking of the Ferris wheel fills her with dread. Life is dangerous enough on solid ground.

"Nothing to it," says Jack.

Dizzy and Stella rocket down first, Stella's blond bob standing straight up on her head, Dizzy's big knuckles bloodless. Electric with fright and relief, they drift down the last few feet for a soft landing.

Jack tugs Ada toward the gate. "C'mon, kiddo."

"I'll just stay here and watch. Somebody's got to remember how silly you all look."

"Don't be a chicken, Adie," says Stella.

"It's a real thrill," Dizzy adds, blushing furiously.

Stella is right, she *is* a chicken—afraid to trust Jack, afraid to get hurt, afraid to go on a stupid amusement park ride. What's worse, they're her mother's fears, not hers.

"I'll be right there with you," Jack promises.

She lets him nudge her straw bag out of her hands and onto Stella's wrist and march her up to the gate, where a boy no more than twelve smokes a cigarette, takes ten cents from his dollar and dispenses two tickets from a cigar box.

"I'm only doing this to prove a point."

She presses her skirt over her knees as another skinny kid in a grimy cap buckles her into a larger version of a metal playground swing. Before allowing himself to be strapped into his own seat, Jack plants a kiss on the tip of her nose. The boy draws a steel bar across her lap and clamps it into place.

A clanging noise, then the seat lifts.

Hands sticky from spun sugar, she grips the safety bar, heart pumping with nerve. Jack blows her a kiss from the other side of a gigantic and slowly opening umbrella and, in an uncharacteristic act of bravado she returns it, taking a hand off the bar long enough to wave at Stella and Dizzy whose up-tilted grins follow her off the ground.

Up, up, up Ada goes into a lurid swirl of lights. Soon Jack is nothing more than a white V-necked sweater dangling from the other side of the contraption, Dizzy and Stella two dots, yellow and red, on the receding ground. The sound of metal creaking against metal accompanies her ascent to the tip of a needle piercing the soft twilight. She relaxes her grip. A calliope plays somewhere. Screams torn from the top of the Cyclone hang on a perfect quarter moon. The temperature drops deliciously.

“Just like flying,” Stella had said, eyes glittering with dare.

More like floating, Ada thinks, feeling lighter than she’s been in weeks.

Suddenly, Jack is plummeting to the ground. A cloud of silk blooms above his head, a landing, then his face tips up to her. Hadn’t Stella and Dizzy come down together?

Ada steels herself for the fall. Now it comes, a rush of wind and a drop that takes with it all the air in her diaphragm. *It is a thrill.* But just as the parachute should have opened its wings, slowing her descent, there’s a grinding sound, like bone on bone. Ada is jerked back up, and falls another few feet. A hard yank and then silence. One cable is still secured to the pole, but the other snaps and twists in the breeze. The safety bar opens as well, no stronger than a matchstick. Half way down, she hangs over the noisy pier.

At first, she assumes this is part of the ride, a way of giving customers their money’s worth, but the searing pain ripping through her right shoulder says otherwise. One of her freshly polished white pumps lands on the boardwalk with a crack. To keep from sliding out of the seat, now wobbling at a sickening angle, she clings to the cable that still holds, wondering how long before it, too, breaks away.

Jack dives for the controls and is wrestled by one of the boys working the sticks.

Dizzy runs for a beefy cop twirling his Billy club at boardwalk bullies.

Stella is still clutching her handbag. "Get her down!" she screams at passersby. "Somebody get her down!"

Despite the frantic scrambling below, Ada is calm. Panic seems far away, something she isn't part of. She wonders if this strange detachment is what one experiences just before death. The clouds, muted by dusk, give the illusion of being solid, a cushion she can count on if the cable gives way. Against her legs, bared by the skirt that has slid up to the tops of her thighs, the air takes on a soothing texture, like bubbles in bathwater. She can see Carnarsie in the distance. The Brooklyn Bridge straddles the silver ribbon of the East River; Manhattan blazes like a ballroom. Under a paring of moon, a dark sea laps at Long Island. The awful loveliness of her predicament moves her as nothing ever has.

On the ground, the emergency gathers steam. Flash bulbs pop. People shout and crane their necks, pointing to the spot where Ada's legs dangle, one shoe gone: the other still clinging to her toes. The undamaged cable puts her body at a crazy angle, which produces a spasm of pain in her spine. She tries to change her position, but the movement causes the seat to spin again. Parents cover their children's eyes as a squad of policemen arrive and set about clearing the area. A pair of parachute technicians, Ada presumes, summoned from their supper tables, one with a napkin still tucked into the neck of his shirt, works on the hay-wire machinery. An ambulance glides through the crowd and stops at the gate, its motor running.

The loose cable dances in a stiffening ocean breeze. Despite the fire in her shoulder, Ada clings to the other. She has begun to weep, not in fear, but in absolute certainty that if she can't hold on any longer, the stars will break her fall. As the minutes tick by, the occasional gull swoops by to see what all the fuss is about. She imagines it cawing to the others: *it's not a big sardine, just a girl with her dress up over her head.*

And there is Jack running in circles below. She's sure she hears him shout, "That's my girl up there with her bloomers on parade."

But even as the words form in her brain, she knows she's made them up to keep herself from hearing his ragged terror at the prospect of seeing her fall to her death. If she lives, she'll tell him she could smell hot dogs all the way up there. "Yes," she'll say, "that high."

It helps not to look down. But she can't avoid seeing what looks like a large net being dragged into place. The ambulance driver stubs out his cigarette on the running board and waits for instructions. Jack barks "Hurry! Hurry!" as the men struggle to position the net under the swaying cable. Ada is no expert, but it doesn't take a degree in engineering to figure out that the force of a body falling from such a height will tear straight through *that* flimsy thing. She squeezes her eyes shut. If she's going to fall, she doesn't want to see it coming.

A small flutter under her heart, like a leaf unfolding; Ada blinks hard, but the infant staring back at her in the dusky clouds does not dissolve the way a hallucination should. The baby's eyes are indigo silver dollars peering out from a pointy cap, arms tiny bracelets of fat. Ada leans toward her, but now the image breaks up, the motion causing another dangerous lurch.

Other pictures flicker on the swaying scrim: Jack in a crisp white middy, waving to her from a long gray ship. Kitty, wizened and frail; rabbit's eyes flared with fear. *Don't send me away.* Ada brushing her daughter's hair, a freckled teenager with her father's black lashes.

Are these angels, she wonders? Am I dead?

She has no idea how much time has passed, but it's getting harder and harder to hang on. Jack's voice is an electric current rising up through the din below.

Hold on Ada!

The pain in her shoulder sharpens; her hands are bloodied from the thick cable. If she lets go, the awful throbbing will stop. It would be easy to slide down to the edge of the seat and somersault into empty air, taking her trouble with her. What stops her is the powder blue suit she bought on lay-away *just in case*. If she hurries, it may still fit. She sees her mother, pinning with work-scalded hands a spray of white roses to its lapel, giving God her ultimatum, *if he hurts her, so help me...* And there is Jack bursting with pride as she walks toward him.

A fire truck squeals to a stop at the edge of the pier and soon a massive ladder sways into position beneath her. Do they think she might burst into flames? The fireman scrambling up towards her is a boy really, his neck too skinny for a man's collar.

I'm coming to get you miss!

She measures the empty space between them and wonders if he's an acrobat.

He makes a grab and misses, setting the seat in motion. After a few more tries, she's still beyond his grasp. Her voice a painful croak: "I'm getting tired."

The sight of her shoulder poking up through her blouse where it shouldn't tells him he needs to push out wide, lean into the thin air and make another try, a gamble that might end badly for both of them. He catches the edge of her skirt and holds on, drawing Ada closer to the coil of rope clipped to his coat.

When he feels the solid flesh of her leg, he pulls the harness off his shoulder and tosses it in a wide arc that lands just right. And just like that, after what seems like hours, but couldn't be more than thirty minutes, she's strapped in and tucked neatly under his arm like the loaf of marble rye she buys at Sussman's Bakery.

It strikes her funny that her rescuer wears boots and a big rubber raincoat with all that water around them, and no real threat of getting wet. As they descend into the crowd, she clings to his skinny neck and sees the glint of a St. Christopher medal against a clean white undershirt. She pushes away a terrible thought. *Are they disappointed I didn't fall?*

On the ground, the pain swallows her whole. Her back burns, each rib and disc a band of fire making it hard to breathe. There is blood where the safety strap has cut into her skin; her hands are rubbed raw and her shoulder doesn't seem part of her body. Someone has made off with her lost shoe as a souvenir.

To Jack she is the most beautiful sight he's ever seen, more beautiful than the Grand Canyon where he'll take her if she ever says yes. He doesn't yet know the girl who came down isn't the same one who went up. But there is no mistaking his gratitude for her pulsing life,

his astonishment that she's managed to hold on all that time. When his composure crumbles and his voice cracks, Ada smiles through the pain.

"On second thought, Mr. Bohanan, I *will* marry you."

Tears stream down Stella's cheeks. Dizzy keeps a death grip on a fistful of Ada's skirt as she's lifted onto a litter bound for Coney Island General. There her shoulder will be set, her ribs taped and her cuts dressed; a gash between her thumb and forefinger will require ten stitches. Nurses and orderlies will ask shyly for her autograph as a sedative does its work, wrapping her in a baffle of soft voices and clean hands.

Before Jack jumps in and the ambulance door closes, a photographer elbows his way through the crowd. "Hey, *Daily News* here!" he shouts, flashing his press card at the police and amusement park officials who have cordoned off the area with chairs from the boardwalk. "You're too pretty to have gotten flattened," says the man, straightening his hat, which has gone askew in his rush to get to her.

Ada lets him take her picture even though she knows she looks awful, and when he sets his camera back into its case, flips open his notebook and wets his pencil with the tip of his tongue, she pronounces her name carefully, giving him the explanation she's given a hundred times to the nuns at Mary Queen of Angels—"Petit is French for little and *pain* means bread. Not *pain*, as in what I'm in now, but *pahh... Peh-tee-pahh.*"

"Our readers want to know what it was like up there," he asks with a sly wink at Jack who strokes the back of Ada's good hand. "Were you scared?"

"It's hard to be scared when the whole world is at your feet."

"That's my girl," Jack says.

"Will you sue?" asks the reporter.

It would never occur to Ada to call a lawyer and claim her back was ruined and her neck in a perpetual state of whiplash because of faulty maintenance and a kid who was too busy smoking to notice things were not working properly. Nor will she blame a lifelong fear of flying on that ride, even though she knows perfectly well it is.

She bristles at the reporter's impertinence.

"Heavens no."

After Jack has assured a distraught Kitty that her daughter will be home faster than she can take two trains and a bus to get to her bedside, he steps out of his shoes, climbs into Ada's narrow cot and lies alongside her. He keeps his voice low, careful not to wake the sleeping patients on the other side of a thin curtain in the open ward.

"If you had fallen, my life would have been over, too."

Her ribs are taped so tightly, she can barely breathe. Talking is painful. His wet lashes against her skin are cool and comforting. She caresses his cheek with a clumsy bandaged hand.

"I bargained so hard with God, I don't think I have any luck left," he says.

"Oh, you've got plenty of that," she assures him.

"Was it the emergency talking or did you really mean it when you said you'd marry me?"

"Are you getting cold feet, Jack Bohanan?"

"No, but why now?"

"Let's just say I saw you from a whole new perspective." Then so softly he has to lean in close to hear her, "You'll be a good father."

She doesn't say she's seen their baby girl, fat as cream. Or that seeing the end gave her the courage to begin. There'll be time enough for that.

"I'll never hurt you," he whispers into her hair.

"I know," she says, believing it for the first time.

Ada sits in her mother's sun-washed kitchen at the white enameled table with its border of stenciled cherries, Rusty's wet snout in her lap, tail beating gladness into the linoleum. There'll be no shirts washed and ironed for strangers today, no subway token palmed in a white cotton glove, no jolting subway ride with Stella to their keypunch machines. Today there is only the luxury of oranges and buttered toast, the pinch of bones knitting.

Kitty pushes a stack of papers across the table.

"My own Betty Grable."

Ada blushes to find herself on the front page of the *Daily News*, skirt billowing around bare legs, all the way up to the new pair of bloomers she'd been forced to buy when her old ones began looking like Swiss cheese. A headline screams *Gams Over Brooklyn!*

"It's a good thing I taught you to wear clean undies or the headline could have been *Too Bad About The Underpants.*"

Ada hugs her sore ribs.

"Ma, don't make me laugh."

Kitty puts on her glasses and starts reading.

While Coney Island goers looked on in horror, Miss Ada Petitpain (that's Peh-tee-pahh) of Sunnyside, Queens, went out on a lovely limb at the Luna Park Parachute Jump, dangling by a thread between life and certain death as rescuers worked frantically to get her down. "It was quite an experience," said Miss Little Bread, after a daring rescue by New York Fire Department's James Donahoe of Coney Island's Ladder 11. Nathan's Famous promised the plucky gal a year's supply of hot dogs and there was talk of a Hollywood contract. When asked if she would consider a screen test, the pretty miss said, "I think I'll marry my Jack and keep my feet on the ground from now on."

Kitty presses the paper with the palm of her hand.

"What changed your mind about marrying Jack?"

In the hospital, he promised they would face Kitty together, make her understand. But what can Ada say now that will convince her he's the reward, not the punishment? Certainly not that instead of a lived life rewinding on its spool, the future laid itself at her feet. What evidence does she have, save hallucinations and hysteria, there'd be a baby girl they'll both mother, a terrible war from which Jack would return and because of his good heart, Kitty would have the peaceful old age she deserves? How can she say that on certain summer nights when her own daughter is afraid to jump into the wide blue ocean of her life, she will say, "I'll catch you if you fall." After all the humiliation and heart-break her mother has endured, how callous it would be to say, what's going to happen will, whether we're afraid of it or not.

Ada gathers up her mother's fear in bandaged hands.

“How many men would love us both?”

What she doesn't say, will never say, she knows Jack will go first, a long hard season of loss, and when it's her time, she'll feel his hand on hers, his voice urgent: “Come with me parachute girl, I've missed you so.”

She'll hold this close, its promise bitter and sweet, like this morning's perfectly sugared coffee.

