

“MY LOVE,” MY MOTHER HAD texted the day before, “tomorrow your mother will feel like a bird at least for a few minutes.” She’d said she was excited and happy that my dad was giving her the jump for her seventieth birthday. She was finally going to fly. I’d freaked out instantly and cried.

The next day I went to the bar because of my mother. Any other snowy Friday afternoon, I would have stayed home, but when I got invited to the happy-hour—an easy excuse to have a drink while my mother jumped off a plane—I grabbed onto it with suspended hope that it would help me think of something else.

A group of women acquaintances, some of them friends, were getting together for an impromptu goodbye party. It happens a lot in our husbands’ line of work, which becomes our line of work, too—the life of diplomats and their spouses. Someone is always coming and going, and sometimes it’s on a whim so that all we can manage to pull together is a happy-hour.

I wasn’t happy, though. The truth is, thoughts of my mother flooded my mind even on the short drive, and as I parked the car and walked the two ice-cold blocks to the pub, jumping over snow piles on the side of the road, it was her, I thought about. Today the geographic vastness that separates us is evident, even in the weather. In Ottawa, where I live, her birthday falls on a freezing, dreary, short-lived day; in Punta del Este, the seaside Uruguayan resort my parents call home, it is a warm summer day, the sky a cloudless, bright blue—a perfect day to jump.

For the longest time, I’d hoped she had been joking about going through with this crazy

idea of jumping off a plane when she turned seventy. It was irresponsible, unnecessarily risky, stupid even, and I had deemed it unfit motherly behavior from the start. My mother is out of shape, and she has already survived two heart attacks—one of them, less than three years ago. I know that when tragedy strikes, it doesn’t come knocking at the door; it barges in, unannounced, without invitation. I know what it’s like to almost lose my mother. I know that I’m not ready.

So that morning, her excited text read differently to me. In my mind it said, “I may die tomorrow jumping off a plane on my seventieth birthday. It was your dad’s gift! He will watch me fall to my death. It will happen at seven.”

I didn’t answer her right away. Even in my pathetic, middle-aged, cry-baby fit, I knew better than to tell her how I felt. How could I crush my mom’s dream? My mother, who has always encouraged me to pursue whatever dream I thought up. My mother, the first person I call when I need encouragement. My mother, who is lovable and warm, talkative and fun, impulsive but wise, the person from whom I seek advice.

A part of me wished I could have told her right there and then how cool and exciting I thought this was, how as I get older, I realize to a greater degree what I’ve always known deep down—my mother is the best person I know. Instead, her jump became about me. Not about what she would gain, but about what I would lose.

I saw the two white check marks turn blue on my phone screen, letting her know that I had read her announcement. If I didn’t text back soon like I always do, my mother would interpret my silence. If I called, she would hear the fear in my voice. When it comes to me, my

Jump

Adriana Añon

mother is all-knowing. “What’s wrong?” she asks. And even recurrent reassurances that everything is okay she detects to be false when I’m not happy. I don’t know how she does it. I’ve lived away from my mother for over twenty years, and normally, I think it’s a blessing to have someone love me so much, have someone who can decipher my moods by the first “Hello, Mami.” But not today.

Instead, I tried to find consolation with my brother—a bad idea from the start. My brother, who is four years my senior, deals with my fear of losing my parents with little patience. He lives an hour and a half away from them, while I live on the other side of the world. His ruthlessness is a way of reminding me that near or far, I have no control over my parents’ destinies and neither does he. Sometimes, when I call my parents and they don’t answer, I call my brother and say,

“Hey, have you talked to Mom and Dad today?”

“No,” he answers.

“Do you know if they had some appointment or something? Because I tried them on the landline and they didn’t answer.”

“They were probably killed in their sleep last night,” he says.



image info

Then I call him stupid, and a few minutes later he texts back with a location, or makes my parents call me so I know they’re okay.

Still, on the morning of the jump announcement, it felt right to share my feelings with my brother.

“Don’t tell ANYONE what I’m going to tell you,” I texted him. “I’m scared and I’ve been crying because I’m worried about losing mom.”

He laughed it off and texted back that we’re all going to die one day, and that it’s better to do what we love while we’re still alive. “Great, thanks,” I thought. He also texted that he would rush over after work to be able to see her jump. I made him promise to call me as soon as it was over.

An hour later, when I thought I couldn't stall any longer, I answered my mother's text with a bunch of lies: "I couldn't text sooner because my cell ran out of batteries, and then I was busy doing stuff." When that was out of the way, I continued lying, pretending to be cool. "Hey, are you going to wear goggles, because I've always thought it'd be horrible if you got something in your eye when you do this." And then I meshed in one truth, "I'd close my eyes the whole way down."

"Yes, they'll give me goggles," she texted back.

"Do you have to take extra heart medication? I think maybe you should."

"Not at all," she replied.

"Did you speak with your cardiologist?" the fear made me honest.

"I'm happy," she said.

Yes, but, "Your heart will beat fast."

"My cardiologist does adventure tourism, and he thought what I'm doing was genius."

Well that's just super. She had to get the one adventurous cardiologist. Didn't anyone see the danger?

"That's great, Mami. I'm happy for you that you have this dream and you're gonna make it come true." I didn't say I was terrified.

My mother makes things with her hands. She's a quilter who works dexterously over her cotton creations on her armchair, but long ago when we had very little, she embroidered our burlap curtains with a bright turquoise cotton thread that made them beautiful. My mother is an outstanding cook who scented my childhood with the smell of baking. She has soft pink cheeks that feel like velvet when I kiss her, and always smell soapy.

When we talked on the phone in the afternoon,

she told me some people were calling to wish her luck as if she were going to die. I ignore this comment. When she mentioned my dad was being a pain, I limited myself to say he might be nervous. I'm sure he's nervous. Then later on in the afternoon, my mother texted me again.

"Do you think this is crazy?" she asked.

Here was my window of opportunity. My chance to tell her it was crazy and please don't do it. For me! Don't go through with it! This was my moment. I could throw in the grandchildren for extra dramatic effect. My mother loves my kids. Don't do it for them!

Or am I supposed to do what she's always taught me to do? Am I supposed to be generous? Am I supposed to let go, the way she's always let me go, live my life, and make my choices? Am I supposed to cheer her on, the way she's always cheered me on.

"Yes, Mom. I think it's totally crazy, but I also think it's super cool."

"I think it's something I've always wanted to do," she wrote back.

Then she forwarded me the detailed account of what the jump will be like. This was what the "experts" said: "We jump from an altitude of three thousand meters. It takes us about twenty-five minutes to fly that high. Then we jump. It's a free fall for forty seconds at approximately two hundred kilometers an hour, and then we open the parachute and fall flying super tranquil for about six to eight minutes until we reach the ground."

"I love how it says 'super tranquil' as if it was easy," I texted back. "I would never jump off a plane unless, like in the movies, it was going down and I had to jump or die. But you know what, Mami?" I wanted her to know I understood. "Sometimes, during production

week in the theater, when I'm about to go out for a scene, it feels like my heart is going to explode. I love it. It's really exciting. Like a great reminder that I'm alive."

"That's great," she texted back. "I want to feel the same thing, but I want my heart to beat with joy."

When I arrive for the happy-hour, the corner pub is warm and lively. I'm greeted by a diverse group of women who today are not dressed in formal attire, the way I usually see them in cocktails and national day celebrations. Today we are just women, sharing a pitcher of beer and eating nachos with our hands. We are here because one of us is going home, back to her warm sunny country, her family, and her newly refurbished apartment overlooking the ocean. All these women have moved around the world, and among us there is a communal understanding of these moving moments and the chaos they entail.

My cell phone remains on the table.

We engage in fluttery conversation about what we did over the New Year's holidays, who went home, who stayed, what's next. At some point there is quiet, and I make my mother's birthday and her jump public, minus my fear, which I only share with Maria, sitting to my right. Maria has a larger than life warm personality and a motherly way. "It's gonna be fine," she reassures me.

When we are engulfed in conversation, the screen on my phone lights up.

It's my brother calling.

"Hi, Guaz," he says in his familiar way. "Mami just came down, and everything is okay."

"She's okay?" I ask to make sure, the loud surroundings meddling now with what I really want to hear.

"It was great! She's fine. She's here now," he says passing the phone to her.

"Hello, Love," my mother says.

"Hola, Mami," I weep into the phone. Not public-place-full-of-people kind of crying. I mean I really weep. Decorum has abandoned me. The women around me have suddenly stopped talking as they watch me disintegrate.

"Well? What's happening?" one asks as the rest hold their breath.

And I hear my mother on the other side. "Don't cry," she tells me. "I'm fine. It was amazing."

I can't speak through my tears, but I manage a thumbs up while trying to hear my mother's words and report to the women in simultaneous translation. "Best thing she's ever done!" The women are relieved. "She's so happy she did it!" My relief turns to joy as I hear my mother's elated account. And to think I'd hoped she wouldn't do it.

"Don't cry," my mother tells me. "I'm okay. You have to do it, too, one day. Don't wait as long as I did." I laugh at this.

"I'll call you later, Mami, and you tell me everything. I have to hang up now because I can't stop crying and I'm in a public place."

When I hang up, Maria holds me and gives me a motherly kiss on my wet tear-sodden cheek. She says, "You really were worried, weren't you?" I nod, aware now that the nacho-stained napkin and my sleeve are no match for the torrent of emotions. "Let's have a toast, everyone. To my mother!" I say and we click glasses. "To your mom!"

My mother who jumped off a plane, my mother who flew like a bird, my mother who in her old age continues to show me how to live. ❖