



fiction contest winner



ICARUS summer

BY CATHERINE ELCIK

A week before his six-year-old daughter Izzy was killed, Dominic was on the dock at his lake house blowing air into her water wings. Izzy stood watching Dominic's puffed cheeks grow bright red.

"I wanna jump in for real," she said, adjusting the straps on her new bathing suit. "No wings."

Izzy was small for her age, but Dominic had watched her jump in with floats on her arms ten times that weekend, and he figured she was ready to try it by herself. He taught her how to block her nose and scissor-kick back to the surface once her toes went deep enough to hit cold water, then he stationed himself at the end of the dock as Izzy backed up three steps, ran to the end of the pier, and jumped.

For a second, Izzy was flying—one hand in the air, the other blocking her nose. Then there was a splash and Izzy was nothing but bubbles for two, three, five seconds. Dominic watched for his daughter. He expected that when she resurfaced, Izzy would cough and sputter, and he was prepared to jump in to rescue her. But when Izzy's head popped back up, she laughed.

"Did I splash big?" Izzy yelled as she doggie-paddled toward the ladder.

"A perfect ten," Dominic said.

At night, Dominic and Izzy read the books his ex-wife sent for the two weeks Izzy was scheduled to spend at the lake with her father—all fairy tales about cartoon animals in bright, primary colors who were too shy to face the very fear they conquered on the last page. In Izzy's favorite story, a kid in a cape was left in charge of a jungle full of wild beasts. When Diane first started bringing books like these home, Dominic told her he thought they were silly.

She'd set her jaw. "Only about a hundred parenting experts disagree with you, Dominic," she'd said.

Before this summer, Izzy was afraid of the three Ds—deep water, dogs, and the dark. But in the three days since Dominic picked her up, Izzy had jumped in over her head and stopped acting like every dog she saw was venomous. After they finished reading, Dominic kissed Izzy goodnight.

"I'll leave the light on in the hall," he told her.

"You don't have to," she said.

As Dominic flicked the switch, he thought maybe Diane was right about the books after all. Thankfully, she was his ex now and he'd never have to admit it to her.

The day before the accident, Dominic was washing his car when Izzy rode over to him on her bike, climbed off, and kicked at her training wheels.

"Take them off," she said.

Dominic told her that the first time he rode without trainers he was so busy thinking about the missing wheels he forgot how to brake and barreled straight down the path to the lake. "I hit the big boulder and flew right over the handlebars," he said. "Split my knee open and cracked two teeth."

Izzy put her hands on her hips. "So?" she said.

Dominic laughed. Last summer when Dominic suggested they try taking Izzy's training wheels off, she'd begged him not to, but this year it was no big deal. "So," he said, "maybe we can start by loosening the training wheels first."

Izzy looked at her bike and shook her head. "I still want you to take 'em off," she said.

After some quick work with a screwdriver and a reminder about wearing her helmet, Izzy set off on her first two-wheel ride. Dominic ran beside her, guiding her with one hand on her banana-shaped bike seat. After fifty feet, Izzy reached back and swatted at her father.

"Let go," she said. "Let go."

Dominic stood at the side of the road as Izzy pedaled to the end of the street without a wobble. When she turned to come back, Dominic expected her face to be all worried concentration; instead she smiled.

"You look like you've been doing this all your life," Dominic said as his daughter whizzed past him.

Izzy rode to the stop sign and back three times before she stopped in front of Dominic and leaned on her left leg. "Can I

go down Main Street now?" she asked.

Dominic shook his head; the sun had set a few minutes before and it was getting dark. "Tomorrow," he said. "I'll tune up my bike and we'll go together."

Izzy put her foot on the pedal as if she was about to take off, and Dominic put two hands on her handlebars.

"I want to go down Main Street," Izzy whined. "Let go of my bike."

"Tomorrow," Dominic said.

Izzy growled and stomped into the house. She didn't speak to her father the rest of the night—she even went to bed without a story or a kiss.

When Dominick checked on Izzy before he went to sleep, he looked at her face in the moonlight, and wondered how many kids were lucky enough to go from four wheels to two without learning how rubbing alcohol stings scraped skin.

In the morning, Dominic got up before Izzy. He wheeled his old ten-speed bike into the driveway, turned it upside down, and started to oil the joints. When the phone rang, his hands were covered in grease. He called up to Izzy's open window.

"Iz, can you get that?"

She didn't answer him.

"Hey, Izzy," he yelled louder. "It's probably your Mom."

The phone kept ringing, and Dominic wiped off his hands and went in to answer it himself. On the other end, a woman from the hospital apologized for taking most of the night to track Dominic down, him being a summer resident and all. The woman cleared her throat. She sounded

young and nervous as she told Dominic that there'd been an accident. A young girl on a bike. A truck.

Dominic stared at Izzy's closed door at the end of the hall; he'd left it open when he checked on her the night before.

"Sir?" the young woman said.

"She wears her helmet," was all Dominic could think to say.

Dominic stayed silent as the doctor told him it appeared that Izzy fell under the semi's wheels, and the truck crushed much of her left side. When the doctor told Dominic that Izzy probably felt no pain, Dominic chose to believe him.

When the coroner uncovered half of Izzy's face, Dominic didn't recognize her. Izzy always had jelly or chocolate ice cream smeared around her mouth—underneath the gunk, her cheeks were always flushed because she never walked if she could get away with running. The girl under the sheet had something sticky on her face and in her hair, but it wasn't jelly or chocolate ice cream. This girl's skin was gray. Dominic stared at the sheet covering where the rest of Izzy's face would be—the half of her head still crammed in the grooves of some trucker's tires—and turned away.

"Yeah," Dominic said. "That's her."

The coroner covered Izzy, then asked Dominic for her name. "For the record," he explained.

"Isabel," Dominic said. "Isabel Elizabeth Richardson." And then, even though Dominic knew it wouldn't mean a thing to the coroner, he cleared his throat and told him: "We always called her Izzy."

As he pulled into his driveway, Dominic felt gutted. Some part of him knew this numbness would fade; he wondered if there was enough vodka in the freezer to help him when it did. He cut the motor and leaned on the steering wheel.

Dominic had heard people say that his life would flash before him when he died, but he didn't know it could happen when it was someone else's life—someone else's death. He saw Izzy as she'd been this summer: running and jumping into the lake without ever once taking water up her nose, sleeping with the lights out without having a single bad dream, petting a bullmastiff with a head bigger than hers and laughing when it licked her eyes and nose, and riding a two-wheel bike for the first time without wiping out and finding out what a skinned knee was all about. Dominic supposed all this might be enough, at six years old, to make Izzy think she was invincible—that sneaking out in the middle of the night to ride her bike was a safe plan. If Dominic had it to do over again, he wouldn't take back any of Izzy's milestones, but he would have made damn sure that Izzy developed the healthy fear that comes from learning what it's like to fall—even if that meant pushing her off her bike himself. ☹

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