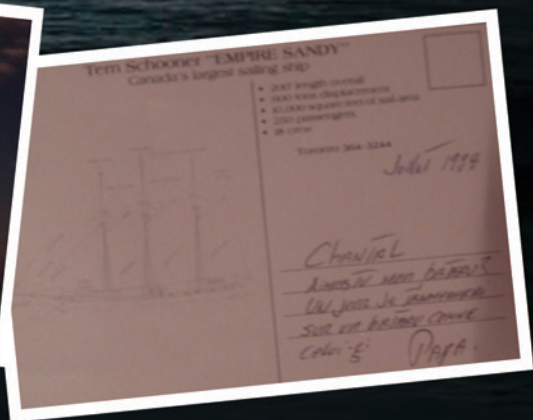


A Father's Promise



by Chantal Bellehumeur



All the telephones within Mr. Jacobson's big Westmount home rang, startling the quiet owner from his good fictional law novel. Mr. Jacobson inserted an old bookmark, made by his only child fourteen years ago when she was in kindergarten, between two pages near the end of his new paperback. He then gently put the thick book down on the long glass coffee table right beside his favourite mug, another fine art piece from his daughter. The strong coffee inside was now cold, as it had been completely forgotten while Mr. Jacobson was reading.

With old age slowly creeping up on him, Mr. Jacobson often forgot to bring one of his three cordless phones into the room he was going into. This was one of those times. He slowly got up from his comfortable black leather reclining chair and slowly walked towards the big kitchen to go answer the nearest phone. His navy blue slippers dragged on the hardwood floor as he moved forward because when he felt lazy he made no effort to properly lift up his feet to walk. Mr. Jacobson was still in his comfortable tartan print flannel pyjamas and dark cotton dress coat despite the fact that it was nearly noon. He rarely ever had time to himself, so when he didn't have to rush out the door he lounged around the house. Sometimes he made use of the exercising equipment he kept in his finished basement to stay in shape, but he much preferred to just sit back and relax nowadays.

Mr. Jacobson didn't make it to the receiver on time, but he wasn't annoyed. He knew who had called because he recognised the phone number on his caller ID. Mr. Jacobson called back his nineteen year old daughter Emily right away. There was no answer, so he recorded his usual missed call message; "tag, you're it!"

Because of his job as a lawyer, Mr. Jacobson was usually quite serious by nature. However, he knew how to joke around and have fun when it was appropriate. He had made his daughter laugh quite often during her childhood. Of course, Emily rolled her eyes at the same bad jokes and pleasantries when she became a teenager, but he never held it against her. She had started liking his silly sense of humour again.

Mr. Jacobson made his way back to the large living room, dragging his feet again. He looked at the cordless phone still in his right hand and noticed that he had a new voice mail. Emily had left him a nice message. Mr. Jacobson smiled as he listened to his daughter's pleasant voice, happily inviting him to a Father's Day diner party at her apartment.

After taking a quick look at his busy agenda and contacting a client to reschedule a business meeting, Mr. Jacobson called his loving daughter back to let her know that she could count on him to be present at her party. The dinner would not only be for him, but he knew it was still important for him to be there. The last thing he wanted was to disappoint Emily.

For the first time since Emily's birth, Mr. Jacobson would be sharing his daughter's attention with another man on Father's Day. Back in January, Emily had given birth to a beautiful baby girl. She and her fiancé William Mancini named her Nadia. It would be William's first Father's Day and Mr. Jacobson knew that Emily wanted it to be special. He had been informed that her guest list included William's parents and three brothers as well as her own mother, who was no longer married to Mr.

Jacobson. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson had gotten a divorce nearly two years ago but had remained civil towards each other. Mrs. Jacobson never went back to her maiden name.

Mr. Jacobson thought it would be fun to look at old family pictures and share his best memories of fatherhood, so he brought most of his albums and shoeboxes full of pictures to Emily and William's Cote St-Luc apartment. He was the last guest to arrive.

Five month old Nadia had apparently just fallen asleep, but Mr. Jacobson was reassured that the apartment buzzer had not waken her up. He could see that she remained undisturbed, all bundled up in the comfort of her father's arms. William told Mr. Jacobson that he believed Nadia was dreaming about milk because she kept doing suckling motions in her sleep.

Mr. Jacobson wished his tired looking son in law a Happy Father's Day and William wished him the same. Emily gave her father the same greeting, followed by a weak hug and a quick kiss on the left cheek. She then took the present and card her father had brought for William, to be opened later. Mr. Jacobson had noticed that his daughter was hardly ever her perky self since giving birth and mentioned it. Emily admitted to being completely exhausted from the night feedings and random bouncing around her and William had to do with Nadia to keep her from crying. Wanting to make himself useful, Mr. Jacobson offered his help to Emily. She refused and pleasantly ordered him to go join the other guests in the living room.

While Emily left for the kitchen, Mr. Jacobson followed William to the living room and shook hands with the Mancinis. Polite Father's Day greetings were exchanged.

William sat himself on a couch, right between his parents. Mrs. Jacobson was already seated beside Mrs. Mancini so it was a tight fit. Mr. Jacobson was about to sit down on a plastic fold out chair like William's two older siblings, but William's younger brother got up from the loveseat and offered him his place. When Emily joined everyone, she sat in a wooden rocking chair right across from her father. She slowly rocked herself back and forth. Mr. Jacobson figured it was probably just out of habit.

While everyone waited to eat dinner, munching on delicious appetizers made in advance by Mrs. Jacobson, the group began to look at some of the glossy pictures from Mr. Jacobson's collection. They all attentively listened to Mr. Jacobson when he felt the need to tell a story about one of the many photos featuring Emily. She almost always had a happy smile on her face, but sometimes people had captured her when she was not as pleased.

Everyone laughed when Mr. Jacobson, encouraged by his former wife, told them about Emily's first and only ballet recital. She had been a little bit chunky as a child, and had a protruding round belly at the time. Plus, she was not very graceful back then and lacked patience. It was a well known fact that she also hated classical music. Mr. Jacobson remembered very well that Emily had not been all that enthusiastic about doing her dance show. On stage, she had shown to be unimpressed with her fellow dancers, all dressed in different animal costumes. Emily had chosen to be her favourite, a killer whale, something her father knew she started regretting years later because him and Mrs. Jacobson never stopped teasing her about it.

As Mr. Jacobson watched William giggle at the pictures of Emily's four year old self in her animal

outfit, he got the feeling that William would not let Emily forget her ballet costume choice either. Emily snatched the photos from William and put them back in her father's organized shoebox. Everything was placed by year, from earliest to oldest. Emily announced that she would find a more flattering picture of herself as a young child. Mr. Jacobson knew it would not take her long.

While Mr. Jacobson talked about a more successful dance show of Emily's, one in which she showed off her cool jazz moves, he noticed that Emily found something of interest. She pulled out a slightly yellowed post card. Mr. Jacobson knew that his daughter was now looking at a magnificent picture of a sailboat floating on calm waves under a sky full of fluffy white clouds. He watched her flip the post-card to the other side, knowing that it was addressed to her. He let her silently read the message on the left, which was neatly written in black ink. Mr. Jacobson remembered writing:

Dear Princess Emily,

I am having a lovely trip but I wish you could be here with me right now.

I promise that one day I will take you on a boat similar to this one.

Love, Daddy.

"I don't remember receiving this postcard", Emily finally said, interrupting her distracted father's story. Mr. Jacobson clearly recalled stopping by the post office to mail this special postcard to his daughter. Emily was holding the postcard up and Mr. Jacobson could see that it had a Canadian stamp on the top right corner as well as proof that it had been mailed. "What is this?" Emily curiously asked her father. Mr. Jacobson leaned forward, took the postcard from Emily, and smiled. "I thought I lost this..."

Everyone waited for Mr. Jacobson to speak again.

"Dad?" When Mr. Jacobson heard his daughter's voice, he woke up from his brief daydream. "I wanted to put this in your birthday card when you turned eighteen", he finally said. Emily asked her father why, but before he could answer she exclaimed "of course!" and started to laugh.

Everyone looked at each other in confusion. Eventually, Mr. Jacobson explained that he had gone to Toronto on a business trip. During that time, he had lunch with a client on a sailboat. He sent Emily the postcard because she really loved boats. Emily had been five at the time.

Mr. Jacobson told everyone that when Emily wasn't pretending to be royalty she spent the majority of her childhood acting out stories that included her going on adventures in a boat. "Emily had a very big imagination", he said. Mr. Jacobson then added that he had noticed Emily using the play structures in parks as her ships and that she was almost always the captain when her friends joined the make-belief games.

Of course, there was more to the story than that. Mr. Jacobson looked at Emily as though to ask if she wanted to continue, but Emily told her father to go on. She could not help herself from interrupt-

ing several times to say things though. In fact, she eventually took over most of the story.

Every summer, the Jacobson's family went to the Old port of Montreal to see the Tall Ships when the annual boat festival was being held. Every single year after having sent the postcard, Mr. Jacobson always verbally promised his daughter that one day they would travel together on a ship.

In the past, the Jacobson's had done many fun trips together to popular Canadian and US cities. As Mr. Jacobson pointed out, they did not always end up sleeping in fancy hotels or doing extravagant outings. Mr. Jacobson remembered some of the rides Emily had gone on in a few amusement parks, the museums as well as zoos and aquariums they visited, the walks around historical sites, the hikes in the muddy forests, the camping grounds they slept in... Emily told everyone that she vaguely recalled most of the things her father mentioned but that her childhood memories were not that clear.

"I remember flying down South a few times as a teenager," Emily said. Mr. Jacobson nodded his head in agreement and added that they had done exciting things such as swim with dolphins, go snorkelling, and even scuba diving in the corals. They had never really travelled on a boat though. The closest they had come to doing a boat trip together was going to the Thousand Islands. Mr. Jacobson remembered Emily pretending that the famous Boldt castle they visited was her own. Emily confirmed that she remembered too.

"I also recall whale watching for two hours in Tadoussac," Emily said before telling everyone about the awesome trip. Mr. Jacobson remembered being on deck with Emily and hearing her announce that she wanted to become a marine biologist because she really loved animals; especially ones from the sea. Her career choice eventually changed, but Mr. Jacobson knew that Emily's love for animals remained.

Mr. Jacobson had always shown support towards his daughter, no matter what she claimed she was going to study. He had been so proud of her when she had received her acceptance letter for University that he framed it. Emily had informed Mr. Jacobson that she was pregnant shortly before graduating from high school and had to put a hold on her post secondary studies. That had disappointed him, but he became proud of the fact that Emily was a very good mother, as expected.

The silent thoughts of Mr. Jacobson were broken when he heard Emily telling everyone about the baby whale and its protective mother they had been lucky to spot on their Tadoussac trip. Emily felt that obvious bond had been amazing.

"You're a wonderful mother," Mr. Jacobson blurted. He then looked at William, who was lightly caressing Nadia's tiny bald head and added, "You're a wonderful father." Everyone else in the room agreed and both new parents said thank you.

Mr. Jacobson realised that him and Emily had completely drifted away from the story everyone wanted to hear, so he went back to the subject of his promise to Emily.

A few weeks before his daughter's eighteen's birthday, Mr. Jacobson gave Emily an early gift; a trav-

el package for two people to go on a seven day Caribbean cruise. The idea was for him and Emily to travel together on a ship, as promised.

With Mrs. Jacobson's signed and notarized permission, Mr. Jacobson flew to Orlando Florida with Emily. They stayed at a fancy hotel overnight, sleeping in separate beds of course.

Emily often cuddled up with her father when she was young, but Mr. Jacobson noticed that she had grown out of that phase shortly before she hit puberty. By then, Mr. Jacobson had taken a bit of physical distance from her as well.

Seeing Emily turn into a woman had been very hard for Mr. Jacobson; especially when she started dating. He didn't like it when boys looked at her because he knew exactly what they were thinking. Emily was very beautiful, just like her mother. She had natural auburn hair that curled nicely, and green eyes. Having lost all of her baby fat, she had a very nice figure and attracted a lot of attention from the opposite sex.

Mr. Jacobson wanted Emily to cover herself up when he saw her in a string bikini during their vacation. He tried his best not to give guys dirty looks for eyeing his half naked daughter while she applied sunscreen lotion all over her body.

Taking a little break from her father, Emily was able to enjoy the outdoor heated swimming pools with majestic waterfalls as well as the private beach complete with hammocks hanging from tall palm trees.

Mr. Jacobson stood on his own for a while with his bare feet in the warm sand. He took off his short-sleeved shirt, exposing his hairy "gorilla chest" as Emily called it. Eventually he decided to try working on his tan but ended up burning instead. He had forgotten to take off his sunglasses so ended up with a funny racoon look.

After lunch, a bus took them to Port Canaveral and they embarked on the largest ship Emily had ever seen. The fold out map Emily was given showed that it had twelve long decks. Most of them had sleeping cabins on them, but the top decks held a few restaurants and bars, a dance club, a casino, a chapel, a cinema, a big theatre, a library, stores, a spa, pools, hot tubs, a gym, a photo studio, and an art gallery. Emily had the chance to visit everything at least once during her trip. She even passed by the kids club out of curiosity, but obviously did not ask her father to sign her up for it. Mr. Jacobson was not as curious about everything like his daughter.

Soon after boarding the ship, Mr. Jacobson and Emily discovered that the top decks were full of lounge chairs; some of them were by the three pool areas and others near much quieter areas of the ship. Mr. Jacobson spent a lot of time lounging in one of the quieter areas with one of the novels he had packed. Unlike Emily, he did not really like the selection of books from the ship's library.

Every part of the ship was nicely decorated, including the double cabin Emily shared with her father. The small bars of soap in their private bathroom and even the toilet paper squares had the ship's logo on them. Every day, housekeeping would leave them good fruity candies as well as fresh white towels

made up in the shapes of various animals. The first one had been an octopus, followed by a swan, a monkey, an elephant, a dog, a ray, and a rabbit.

Popular Hollywood movies played regularly on the giant screen by one of the outside pools and many fun activities were on the ship's agenda, including bingo. Each guests received a free game card. Emily won twenty dollars while playing with her complimentary card. She bought a few more cards and ended up collecting another money prize. Mr. Jacobson lost the only game he played, but won the bid for the antique item he wanted during an auction. Free champagne had been served along with an assortment of fancy hors d'oeuvres.

The buffet style breakfasts, lunches and snack bars included in the cruise package were amazing, not to mention the self-serve soft ice cream dispensers and fountain drinks always available. The only thing people had to pay for were alcoholic beverages as well as all refreshments inside the theatre.

There were entertaining stage shows every single night after the six o'clock diner. For those who had arranged for a later meal, they could catch an earlier show. More often than not, spectators had the chance to meet some of the talented performers and even take pictures with them or obtain autographs. Mr. Jacobson and Emily never missed opportunities when they came, even if they were exhausted from a long day or surprisingly hungry from being used to eating all the time and needing to keep up with their food intakes.

For supper, a wide selection of entrées, appetizers, main courses, and deserts could be chosen from a fancy looking menu. Mr Jacobson and Emily always sat at the same round table by one of the restaurant's giant floor to ceiling windows, giving them a breathtaking view of the blue ocean as well as the clear sky. They were assigned waiters for the duration of the cruise, who got to know their personal preferences in things such as types of drinks or kinds of bread. A nice family of four shared the same table and waiters every evening. At first it had been a little bit strange, but everyone soon became comfortable with each other. They actually ended up keeping in touch for a while after their vacation. On the ship, they mostly talked about what they had done earlier in the day.

There was a list of excursions to sign up for each time they docked somewhere. The first place they all went to was a small island in the Bahamas, privately owned by the cruise ship company. Mr. Jacobson had signed up his daughter to snorkel with rays in a secluded section of the clean beach. As explained by the female animal trainer before letting everyone go into the clear water, the stingers of each ray had all been filed down for people's safety.

Emily really enjoyed herself. She took a lot of pictures with her waterproof camera. Unfortunately, they did not turn out so well. The way the dozens of grey rays moved in the shallow ocean water made some sand lift up and linger, which caused unclarity. Luckily, the photos Mr. Jacobson had taken of his daughter feeding the large rays came out great.

Mr. Jacobson quickly found some of the ray pictures inside one of his album pages and passed the book around while Emily informed everyone how slimy the creatures had been and described how their mouths felt like vacuum cleaners when they took dead shrimps and scallops directly from her bare

hands. The trainer had given the food to all participants after briefly explaining the feeding procedure.

Emily witnessed a male scuba diver hand feed some big tropical fish of various colours when her and her father were sitting inside a mini-submarine within the ocean, right beside the Caiman islands. Soon after passing by a couple of old sunken ships that were badly destroyed, they went back to the surface where they were handed snorkelling equipment which included a snorkel attached to an adjustable mask, swimming flippers, and a thin orange life jacket.

A warning was given that sharks were sometimes seen in the parts of the ocean they were in. Since sightings were very rare and Emily knew for a fact that sharks did not generally attack humans, she had no problem jumping inside the cool water wearing her wet suit and borrowed gear. Mr. Jacobson and a few others needed a bit of convincing, but eventually ended up following Emily's brave lead.

The excursion group independently swam right above the dark corals and hundreds of colourful fish.

Emily explained how she had been slightly freaked out when she suddenly found herself above a part of the ocean where she could not see the bottom or any life form. Emily also remembered having forgotten that she was snorkelling rather than scuba diving and getting salt water in her nose from putting her head too far underwater. Mr. Jacobson laughed because he had made the same foolish mistake.

On the small island, formally known as Tortuga, they bought cheap bottles of rum to bring back home. Emily also purchased herself a small wooden treasure chest that locked with a tiny metal key. She loved boxes and old style keys. Emily decided to act like a pirate since it seemed to be a major theme on the island, and searched for a treasure to put inside her antique looking chest. Jewellery was dirt cheap on the island so she ended up buying a nice golden chain with her green coloured birthstone dangling from it.

Coincidentally, the cruise ship employees organized a big outdoor party on one of the outside decks the evening of Emily's eighteenth birthday. Many people in beachwear happily moved their bodies to the sound of tropical style music, played by a live band. An impressive line up of long tables full of assorted foods and decorative ice sculptures had been set up. The night ended with explosive and colourful fireworks and the morning started with more festive music; this time from a DJ.

"Do you remember me wanting to do our dance together?" Mr. Jacobson teasingly asked his daughter. "You two have a dance!?" William curiously said as Emily threw a crumbled paper napkin at her father. Mr. Jacobson knew by his daughter's action that he had just embarrassed her again, but it was all for fun so that did not stop him from telling William that Emily had asked him to marry him when she had been four years old. "A girl's first love is always her father", Emily defended herself. The two other women in the room both laughed and said that they had no recollection of ever wanting to marry their fathers. Mr. Jacobson went on by saying that Emily was special and had insisted on a proper ceremony, including a slow dance.

Mr. Jacobson felt the need to tell everyone how he had pretended to get married to Emily just to humour her. He held the fake ceremony in his living room, with Mrs. Jacobson acting out the part of

the priest. Mr. Jacobson had given Emily an inexpensive ring with a fake white gem from a toy store. It had made her very happy. However, Mr. Jacobson had unwillingly angered his new “wife” when he started dancing the twist instead of the traditional waltz afterwards.

Seeing Emily’s face turn slightly red encouraged Mr. Jacobson to get up and do a demonstration of his dance. “This is what I did during the ship’s Caribbean party”, he said, still doing the twist to no music. Emily was now shaking her head in disbelief but Mr. Jacobson saw the smile that had grown on her face. “I asked Emily to dance with me, for old time’s sake, but she just laughed and left me on the dance floor.” Giggling, Emily told her father to sit down, which he eventually did. She then explained that she had gone to get some food from the buffet.

When they returned to their cabin from the party, a small plate of chocolate dipped strawberries with a happy birthday message was waiting for Emily. It was a present from the kitchen crew.

Mr. Jacobson gave Emily a present that day too; a lovely silver bracelet with a small metallic boat charm hanging from it. Over the last year and a half, Emily had collected other nice charms; a seashell, a dolphin, a whale, an angelfish, as well as a ray.

They returned to the private island in the Bahamas, but this time they relaxed on the beach under some giant parasols, collected small seashells as well as white sand, and even participated in a sand castle contest.

As her father was speaking, Emily got up from her rocking chair and got her travel scrapbook from the nearby bookshelf. She then showed everyone a picture of the giant sand castle they had built, along with other pictures of them having fun on the beach. A few portraits showed Emily as a mermaid with a sand tail done by her father, or Mr. Jacobson buried in a hole with only his head sticking out of the wet sand.

Mr. Jacobson continued by saying that they had gone in the surprisingly warm water to try cooling off from the burning rays of the sun. “Several large fish swam among us. They were very easy to spot because the water was incredibly clear. Somebody shouted that they had seen a barracuda, but it turned out to be a false alarm.”

Back on the ship, the captain made a joke by announcing that they were heading straight for an iceberg, and soon added that it had quickly melted. It had been very hot that day, even when the sun came down. The air conditioner on the ship stopped working. Since it was formal night, men were sweating in their suits. Mr. Jacobson did not keep his dark blue jacket on for long, and loosened his matching tie. He undid the top buttons of his white dress shirt. Emily wore a black strapless cocktail dress, borrowed from her mother, and was boiling too. She did not wear the long evening gloves she had packed, and kept her hair tied up. Many people changed out of their formalwear before the end of the night. By early morning, cool air finally started circulating in the vents of the ship again. The outside temperature also went down and there was a light breeze.

Their last destination was Mexico. Mr. Jacobson signed up for a jeep tour, and ended up being one of the drivers. He took Emily as one of his passengers, and followed the guide and three other tourist jeeps on a dirt road around Cozumel. They made a stop to see the Maya ruins, which had been both fun and educational.

A random souvenir shop in the middle of nowhere was visited as well. Mr. Jacobson bought huge sombreros for him and Emily; he could not help himself. Once the hats were on their heads, Mr. Jacobson attempted to sing a Spanish song in a horrible voice. Emily's eyes grew wide open and she jokingly pretended not to know him. That is, until it was time to get back on the road.

A spicy Mexican lunch was served at a beachside restaurant surrounded by cactuses. Musicians played their guitars and maracas while people ate. Mr. Jacobson was not able to finish his meal because everything he put in his mouth burnt him. The only thing available to drink was bottled water, and taking a large gulp of the liquid deeply worsened things for him. It was the same for Emily.

They were able to do a bit of swimming afterwards, although Emily found the water kind of dirty compared to the other beaches she had recently visited. There were loose seaweeds floating on the dark water. Some of the dead plants got washed away to shore. Emily preferred to venture on the tall coral rocks that stuck out of the cold water. She found two small crabs and excitedly pointed them out to her father. Mr. Jacobson told his daughter to be careful as though she were a child. Part of him refused to accept the fact that Emily was an adult. Yet, another part of him wanted to celebrate.

Emily drank the first legal alcoholic beverage of her life, a strawberry margarita that came with a cute little decoration umbrella, inside a popular Mexican bar. An oversized cardboard ruler at the entrance had a sign above it that read: "You have to be this tall to drink" and a giant plastic frog in summer clothing pointed to the four foot and a half mark. Emily placed herself right against the silly ruler to prove that she was tall enough, even in flip-flops. She usually wore shoes with heels.

Emily had not grown at all since the trip, but Mr. Jacobson still had trouble believing that his baby had become a mature and independent woman. At least Emily had never outgrown their tradition of going to see the Tall Ships in the Old Port. He hoped that Emily would always want to go with him, and start including Nadia in future boat festival outings. William seemed to know exactly what his father in law was thinking.

At the end of Mr. Jacobson's and Emily's story, William told Emily that they should keep the family tradition by going to see the Tall Ships every year with Nadia, starting this summer. He then looked down at his precious baby girl, who had just woken up from her nap. In a whisper, he promised Nadia that they would go on a fun cruise together some day. Although Nadia clearly did not understand what her father had just said, she smiled.



Chantal Bellehumeur 2013

(I would like to dedicate this story to my father. I love you!)

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Original postcards that
inspired the story

