The Pirate Captain's Daughter

By Eve Bunting

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To my friends, the writers of lunch bunch

Chapter One

I always knew my father was a pirate and I always knew I wanted to be one, too. But I had to stay home to look after my mother, who was sickly. And besides, I was a girl and maybe at fifteen a bit young, though of course I didn't think so.

I suspected my mother also knew my father was a pirate but she pretended to herself and to me that he was still a captain in the Royal Navy. My mother was a proper Boston lady of Scottish ancestry, accustomed to the theater and the opera before she met and fell in love with her dashing naval man—a dashing naval man who'd turned out to be something different.

I didn't suppose he'd ever revealed to her that he and the whole crew had mutinied and that they'd taken over the naval ship and become pirates. They'd found that their three-masted square-rigger was not maneuverable enough and they'd soon spotted a two-masted schooner, attacked it, and taken it over. They renamed her *Reprisal* and exchanged the mermaid on her bowsprit for a dragon figurehead, more in keeping with their new line of business.

How did I know all this? I'd heard my father and his quartermaster, Mr. Trimble, talking in our parlor when I was supposed to be in the kitchen preparing food. Mr. Trimble had a lady friend who also lived in Port Teresa and so he and my father came here together when the *Reprisal* was careened in Cannon Cove for repairs, out of sight of the town.

I added to my knowledge of my father's life by eavesdropping each time they talked and by reading between the lines. I have a talent for both these enterprises. One night I heard my father say, "Maggie knows where it is. She can find it when it's necessary." Maggie is my mother.

"Is it safe?" Mr. Trimble had asked. "There are those who'd have it at any price. Even her life."

"It's safe," my father said in a tone that allowed of no further questions.

I'd slipped away, wondering. What was "it"? Who were "those" people Mr. Trimble was talking about?

My father and Mr. Trimble came today—two jaunty, well-dressed gentlemen, each walking with a swagger, not because they're proud but because that's the way seafaring men walk to keep their balance on the heaving deck of a sailing ship. They were never in naval uniform. My father had explained to my mother that they liked to leave their uniforms behind on the *Reprisal*. I decided for myself that those naval uniforms had probably been tossed overboard a long while ago.

My father always wore fine garments, which I presumed he had taken from some rich man on a plundered merchant ship. Today his trousers were of black velvet, his coat and stockings were scarlet silk, and his coat embroidered with silver. He didn't wear a wig and I was pleased about that. He has such a head of curling black hair, which he ties in back in a braid.

My mother, as usual, was poorly this day. She had taken to her bed the month before and my father looked serious when he came down from sitting with her. He had been with her for a long time, during which Mr. Trimble

and I had little to say to one another.

"Is your lady worse, Cap'n?" Mr. Trimble asked when my father reappeared.

"Aye. The pneumonia has taken her strength. The good doctor Pugliese is not encouraging." My father sighed. "I fear..." he stopped as if suddenly aware of me. His voice changed to what I decided was a false cheerfulness. "Catherine, girl! Fetch Mr. Trimble and me some of that elderberry wine your mother made."

"I'm beginning to have a taste for your good wife's wine," Mr. Trimble said. "It's near as good as a tot of strong Madagascar rum. I reckon it'll do till we get something better."

I thought that was quite rude of Mr. Trimble since he had two or three glasses each time he came. I went in the pantry to fetch the bottle.

Mr. Trimble drank his usual three glasses and then took his leave to go visit his ladylove. My father and I sat in the parlor and talked. He's always been loving to me, tender and respectful of my mother, interesting in his tales of where he's been and the sights he's seen but vague about details. Did he know I guessed his true vocation? If he did he never confirmed it.

Today, just before he was to leave to go back to his ship, he told me, "I'll be gone for three months or more,

Catherine. We sail in two days. I'm loath to put the burden of your mother's health on you but there's no one else to help. Unless we ask your great aunt Louise if she'd be kind enough to come from Boston..."

"I can manage," I told my father quickly. I'd met my great aunt Louise once. She was not at all like my mother, being bossy and prim and prone to sniffing if she didn't agree with you.

"You know how to reach old Bunty Bosun?" he asked. "Bunty can always get word to me. He knows every ship that sails in and out of this harbor." He half smiled. "And the ones that stay clear of the harbor, too."

I knew where to find Bunty. Bunty had been a pirate himself. That was understood. He sat every day on a bench at the dock, barefoot, smoking his pipe, his parrot, Swabbie, on the bench beside him. Bunty couldn't talk, having lost his tongue long ago. My father never explained how that had happened and I didn't want to know. Swabbie did the talking for him. "Avast, me hearties, I'll tell ye a tale," he'd croak in his old man's voice, and he had some sailor words too that scandalized the ladies passing by. Neither Bunty nor Swabbie had ever sailed on the *Reprisal* but I knew my father gave them money. It was Bunty who came to the house once every month and silently handed over the little packets of powder that helped my mother sleep and

stilled her cough. I blessed him, just as silently.

My father was leaving.

"Take care of your mother," he said. He took my face in his hands, hands that were rough and calloused. A pirate's hands that had known ropes and sails and scrubbers. I felt his light kiss on the top of my head.

"*You* take care, Father," I whispered and I watched him go, striding down the hill, his black curly pigtail swinging against the back of his scarlet coat. How I longed to go with him, to whatever new adventure the *Reprisal* was headed for.

I'd never seen my father's ship except in my imagination. Now I imagined her slicing through the blue waters of the Caribbean, her sails like fat white geese, the sky scudding by. I heard the lookout in the crow's nest, shouting, "A sail! A sail!" and I saw the plump, unsuspecting merchant ship coming over the horizon and *Reprisal*'s innocent flag skittering down the mast, the Jolly Roger taking its place. It would snap in the wind and *Reprisal* would lean over, eager to seize and plunder. I visualized the merchant ship surrendering as soon as she saw that pirate flag. There were tales of brutality and bloodshed in pirate attacks. I'd heard them. But I knew that would not be the way of the *Reprisal*. My father was a kindly man. I'd seen the way he was with my mother, how he'd brush her hair,

freeing it from its tangle on the pillow, how he'd read to her, hour after hour, his face so gentle in the candle's light. I remembered the time our long-ago cat, Timothy, had been taken ill and how my father had been the one to care for him, to hand-feed him tidbits of fish. It was difficult for me to believe my father could be cruel. But perhaps he changed when he got on board his ship. Perhaps he had to.

I watched him walk down the hill till he was out of sight, then I went back inside and closed the door on adventure and excitement. When my father left it seemed the shine went out of the world.

That night, after I'd tended to my mother, sponged her dear hands and face and brought her usual cup of warm milk I went early to bed. For a while I read *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* a new book that had great appeal to me since it was based on a true story. I blew out my candle and dreamed one of my half-awake dreams about pirate ships, and desert islands filled with strange animals. I wasn't sure if I was awake or asleep when I heard a noise. It came from downstairs and it was so faint that for a minute I thought I had imagined it and lay back on my pillows. But there it was again. A door opening so gently, or a drawer perhaps. My first thought was that my mother had wakened and somehow stumbled downstairs. How could she? She was so weak that she could hardly get out

of her bed without help.

My father? Come back, afraid to alarm us, coming in silent as a ghost? I had to know.

I slipped out of bed and to the landing outside my room. The dark was all around me. The only sound was the roughness of my breath. And then I heard the footfalls, spaced apart, pausing often as if afraid of being heard.

Whoever it was, they were coming up the stairs. I flattened myself against the wall, glad that the nightgown Aunt Louise had sent was a rather ugly shade of gray. My heart beat furiously against my chest. It had to be my father. I should pounce and scare him as he had scared me. But something stopped me, some built-in alarm. It was too dark for even a shadow but I knew the presence in my house was not my father.

Chapter Two

The air was charged along the landing. Where was the man going? What was that sound? I tensed, listening with every sense. The noise was a small grinding. He was opening the door to my mother's room. My father had said the hinge had need of oil and he'd see to it on his next visit home.

No!

I sprang forward screaming, waving my arms, shouting, "Get away. Go!"

I heard a gasp and I bumped into a figure, still unseen, in front of me. I was against a chest or a stomach, rough cloth under my face, a smell of something sickeningly

sweet, like the scent of the gardenias that grew in my mother's garden. And then I was thrown back against the wall. A hoarse voice muttered something and there was the drum of heavy feet running toward the stairs. I lay against the wall, half stunned, a strange whining sound in my ears and through it my mother's weak voice calling, "Catherine? Catherine? Is that you? What is happening?"

I pulled myself up, my palms flat against the wall. Her door was slightly open where he'd turned the knob. I spoke softly. "I was coming, Mother. I thought I heard you call. I tripped. Wait just a minute." I ran to the window at the top of the stairs and peered down at the street below. There was no one there. Bushes moved at the edge of our garden. Was someone hiding behind them? Where did he go? I strained, alert for any disturbance outside. There was nothing except the call of a night bird high in the Greenheart tree.

"Catherine?" I heard my mother's pitiful voice and that cough that tore through her chest and brought an ugly flush to her face.

"I'm coming." I was aware that my left elbow ached. I hurried to my mother's bedside.

"I was careless," I said. "I should have brought a light so I could see. Are you all right?"

My hands trembled as I held the match to the candle

on her dresser.

"Do you need anything?"

I helped her swallow a few sips of water and mixed up one of the small packets of powder to leave by her bedside should she not sleep again.

"I don't think I called you, Catherine. But sometimes now I'm not sure what is real and what is dream. I was dreaming you and I and your father were gathering shells on Bell Beach. Perhaps I did call out for you."

"Can you sleep again now?" I asked and I smoothed back her hair. "Shall I blow out your candle?"

"Yes. You know you are the dearest daughter anyone ever had?" she asked and smiled her weak smile.

I didn't know it then, but they were the last words she would ever speak to me. If I'd known, I would have sat with her so she would not be alone as she drifted into the forever darkness. But I didn't know.

Before I went back to my own bed I lit the lantern we kept by the stairs and went around our house, making sure all was locked. I found where the intruder had entered. A pantry window, half opened to the air, had been jammed to its fullest width. There was soft dirt or sand on the sill. I snibbed it tight.

I didn't get into bed right away. All my senses were wide awake. I decided that tomorrow I would go and find

old Bunty and have my father come at once. He would know what we should do. I lay rigid in my bed wondering if this was one of the "they" my father had spoken of. One of the "they" who had come searching for "it," whatever "it" was.

I'd send that message with Bunty Bosun early in the morning. I did send it but it was not the one I had decided on. It was the worst message in the world, that my mother had died in her sleep that night.

Bunty crossed himself and then, using his own means, whatever they were, he got the word to my father.

My father came back that afternoon and together we made plans for my mother's funeral. I told him too about the strange happening of last night. "He was going in my mother's room," I whispered.

My father made a small, startled sound. "Here? Someone came here?" There was a moment's pause. His face was tight and angry. The way he emphasized "someone" made me suspect that my father knew who it was who'd entered our house in the dark of night. But then he said in a lighter voice that I knew immediately to be designed to mislead me, "There are men who hang around the harbor, men who are not above robbing and stealing. You must have been frightened."

"I was." I didn't challenge him. Very soon I'd be needing

his good will and support. If my plan worked there would be time later to ask him questions.

At the gravesite next day we clung together and I quieted my sobs against his chest. My mother was buried in the little cemetery at the top of Cob Hill free of her suffering at last. Mr. Trimble came, and Bunty and Swabbie and a scattering of townspeople. Mr. Mulligan who had the shop on Main Street and sold us our provisions every week, Miss Swarton who has been my pianoforte and flute teacher since I was five years old, Mr. Crabtree who tended my mother's garden after she got too ill to tend it herself. We didn't know too many of the island people, my mother always being one who favored keeping to ourselves. Swabbie was mercifully quiet.

My father had suggested I play my flute at the burial. "That piece you composed yourself, the one your mother liked so much," he said.

I nodded. And standing there on Cob Hill beside her newly turned grave I played the part of the melody where my mother said she could hear stars spinning and bears dancing and rain falling silver on silver leaves. I felt as if my heart was breaking.

As we were leaving my father placed a piece of pink coral on the lid of the coffin and murmured words I couldn't hear. He wiped tears from his eyes. Then we left,

leaving my mother behind. I looked back and I thought that lonely coffin waiting there was the saddest thing I'd ever seen.

The headstone was ordered the next day. Together my father and I chose the words that would be chiseled into it:

ELIZA DeVAULT,
BELOVED WIFE AND MOTHER
LET LOVE CLASP GRIEF
LEST BOTH BE DROWNED

The line came from one of my mother's favorite poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

"I will think of this, and her, and the place where she lies," my father said as we left the stonemason's and he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

We walked in silence.

At last he spoke.

"I have asked Miss Swarton if she will come and stay with you nights while I'm gone," he said when we were back home. "I have made provisions to have double locks placed on all the doors and windows. Still, you cannot be alone. When I return we will make lasting arrangements for you." He took my hands. "Catherine, it hurts me to leave you like this, but go I must." He seemed about to say

more but stopped. "Today I will pen a letter to your aunt Louise. It might be more agreeable for you to go to her in Boston."

We were sitting side by side on the settle in the parlor, the shutters closed against the sunlight in respect of my mother's death. My elbow still ached and I rubbed it as if warming myself as I stood to face him.

"I am going, too," I said. "I'm going to be a pirate. Like you," I added.

I saw the shock in his eyes. "You know that I am a pirate?"

"I'm not a child. I have known for a long time. You can let me sail with you on the *Reprisal,*" I went on, for I'd thought it all through. "Else I'll find myself another ship. I would be safer with you, but if you won't have me, a different captain will."

My father's voice seemed to have left him.

I stood, my shaking hands clasped behind me.

"So which will it be?" I asked. "I'm not staying here. Even with double locks. Miss Swarton and I could both be in danger and that would certainly be unfair to her. And now that Mother's gone." My voice broke. Now that Mother's gone sounded like a requiem. "I'm not having Aunt Louise come and I'm not going to her. We would drive one another mad. Will you take me? Or do I fend

for myself?" I spoke strongly, not betraying the tremble inside of me.

He stood too.

"My," he said mildly. "Such big words from such a small person."

He touched my cheek. "Ah, but you can't come with me, Catherine, or go with another captain. A girl..."

I interrupted. "No one will know that I am a girl. I can make myself look like a boy. And I'm not a small person. I am tall, above average in height for a girl. But if you're so concerned, remember, I'd be safer with you as my captain." I paused for breath. "I swear I'll run away. With you or without you, I will be a pirate."