

Lost in Flight

by ReadWorks

When Eleanor's father died, she took to the beach with her kite. From that afternoon on, her days were steady and predictable: she woke up, ate breakfast, took the bus to school, walked home, dropped her book bag in the front hall, and lifted her kite from its hook on the wall. She took the steps to the shore lightly, as though she might somehow slip and fall, but when she hit the sand she ran. As far as her mother could tell (and she watched her daughter go to school, come home, and go to the beach every day), the only thing that changed was what the tail on the kite looked like. That changed as reliably as Eleanor's routine did not.

The first afternoon, when her mother hung up the phone and made warm cinnamon milk and cried with Eleanor at the kitchen table, the kite wasn't finished. The glue from the last construction session the night before had set and dried, but it needed string and it needed a tail-something Eleanor could watch wriggle and tumble in the air, her father had said. The rambunctious end to a steady sail, he'd said. It's what makes watching a kite fun: that two parts of the same item can move so differently in the same ocean breeze.

So Eleanor had chosen a long, silver ribbon from a box of Christmas supplies as her kite tail, and had set it next to the drying kite when she and her father had finished almost everything, in anticipation of tying it on the next day. Like a shimmering Lookdown fish in the sky, her father had said of the ribbon, and Eleanor thought of what that shiny, skittish fish would look like flitting around the air, and laughed.

Her father was a boatman and worked on a fishing vessel that docked in the wharfs downtown. He woke up at half past three in the morning and left home for days at a time sometimes; other times he woke up as early but made it home in time for a late lunch. He had missed more of Eleanor's birthdays than he had attended, but on her tenth birthday, he promised he would make every day he was home for the next two weeks a little celebration: a fortnight of happy birthdays, since he had missed so many before. And he presented her with hand-drawn plans for a kite, and set up a table in the dining room with supplies, and they started that night on building something together.

It took them almost all of those promised two weeks to finish everything. As he expected, Eleanor's father worked long hours nearly every day, and some nights he came home much too late to build the kite, or do anything but eat a sandwich and kiss his already sleeping daughter goodnight.

The nights he did come home early, though, he and Eleanor worked together, taking a break only so he could cook dinner. Eleanor's parents would toast one another with squat bottles of root beer while she finished her homework, and then she and her father would reconvene over pencils and wood glue for just a short while before bed. It was better than a goodnight story. It was better than TV before bed.

The kite was almost finished. It was finished, really, except that the wet adhesive had to dry, and Eleanor had to tie on the spool of string and attach her silver ribbon tail. That was the plan that night, when she and her father stood back from the table and smiled. That was the plan when he woke up at 3:30 the next morning for work, and it was the plan still when Eleanor woke up at seven for school. It was still the plan when she arrived home that afternoon, opened her door, and walked into the kitchen.

Her mother hung up the phone as Eleanor dropped her bag by the table. All the words that haunt a scenario such as theirs filled the kitchen: accident, slipped, tangled, swept, time, breathe, late. The kitchen smelled like cinnamon. Eleanor felt emptier the more she sipped her drink. She abandoned her mug and got the kite.

When her mother looked out the window, she saw her daughter's ponytail and rust-brown shoes but no silvery trail of the ribbon that Eleanor had been saving for the kite's final touch. Instead, Eleanor had tied a handkerchief of her father's to the bottom of the kite, and the dusty, blue rag hung limply at her hip until she launched the kite into the wind.

And every day after that, Eleanor came home and sought another piece from her father's laundry basket -a T-shirt, a tank top, a knit hat-until her mother started cutting pieces from old pairs of work pants and strips from jackets, leaving them in a basket near the door. Eleanor changed the kite tail every day, and put the flown scraps in an empty drawer in her parents' bedroom. It went on like that for a month.

As the weather turned from summer to fall, its docility showed signs of a growing edge. Storm season, people said, but Eleanor managed to fly her kite anyway. Somehow she always made it home, to the beach, and back before rain fell.

It was an afternoon weighted with threats of thunder and hail. Before Eleanor traded her backpack for the kite, her mother handed her a raincoat, and Eleanor knotted a scrap of yellow flannel for the tail with her hood up and her fingers drowning in coat-sleeve.

The rain had not started yet, but the wind was strong. Waves smeared into the short rock jetty down the beach, and sand blew in heel-high cyclones. Eleanor knelt, then leapt up to launch the kite.

Kite string ran off the spool almost faster than Eleanor could catch it, and when she did she heard the kite pop against the tug. It flew for only a moment before it snapped. The wind downshifted as Eleanor shouted in shock. Her kite shot up and then seemed pressed down, grazing the water before hitting the jetty, tearing fabric against a boulder.

She ran toward the rocks. She may still have had time to free the kite, as long as it stayed stuck-but it did not. The yellow flannel kite tail got sucked into a wave as it broke and receded from the jetty. The kite resisted, but not for more than a moment. Another wave loosed it from its post, and the next washed it away.

Eleanor came inside when the rain began. Her mother asked her what had happened to the kite, and Eleanor shook the water from her raincoat as she hung it up. She untied her shoes.

"It drowned."