

*I grew up in the suburbs of Upstate New York in a pretty white house in the middle of a long winding road called Bayview Drive. At the top of Bayview, there was an abandoned lot where a house had never been built. The contractors used the lot for their building scraps; broken cabinet doors, sheetrock, and plumbing pipes. Gradually, the neighbors contributed their own variety of household items like vacuum cleaners and bird cages. We called it the meadow. Every year the meadow got bigger and wider and higher.*

One spring Mrs. Pfeiffer, wheeled her orange plaid sofa over to the meadow and left it there. Mrs. Pfeiffer had two Great Danes, who had eaten off one end of the sofa, but it was essentially still intact and it was big enough to fit five kids comfortably, which was perfect because five of us kids comprised the neighborhood gang.

My best friend Fizz was the leader of the gang, because he was the oldest and smartest and had the best ideas of things to do when we got bored, which happened a lot...especially in the summer.

When our mothers had had enough of our whining, they would scoot us out the door and say,

“Go find something interesting to do.”

But they never said what we should do or should *not* do, which to Fizz meant, as long as we came back alive, it really didn't matter.

He'd nod politely to the mothers, grab my arm and whisper,

“Listen, Ritz. I have this amazing idea and I absolutely cannot do it without you.”

Then he'd lead me up the street to the meadow, where all his

amazing ideas were born.

That spring, Mrs. Pfieffers sofa was the crème de la crème of the meadow. Fizz named it Beatrice and as soon as school let out, he decided that we should see what Beatrice was capable of. Mostly, he wanted to try out her castors. Beatrice had small brass castors - the kind that are designed to wheel gently across a living room floor, but Fizz wanted to see how they would perform on pavement, specifically how they might fare going down Bayview Drive at high speed.

For some reason, Fizz always consulted me before implementing one of his “amazing ideas,” especially the ones he considered dangerous. I used to think it was because he valued my wise counsel and respected my opinion, but it was really because if he could rope me in to whatever scheme he had in mind, if it went terribly terribly wrong, which it usually did, I would be equally involved and he could disappear and leave me to blame or die, whichever the case may be. By that summer I was acutely aware of this dynamic.

So when he approached me about the launch of the S.S Beatrice, right out I said,

“No way! Absolutely not. It’s stupid and dangerous and I’m not doing it.”

“Oh, common Ritz. I absolutely cannot do it with out you.”

“Yes you can.”

“I can’t! I need a figure head. I need *you* at the helm.”

“Why can’t Sami do it?”

“Because Sami is too small, and it has to be a girl -like the mermaid on the front of a ship. Without you there is no

mermaid and no ship and no launch. The whole thing will be doomed.”

“The whole thing is doomed anyway,” I told him.

But he wouldn’t listen and he wouldn’t leave me alone. He tried bribing me and flattering me, but I was immovable.

And then he whispered in my ear,

“You can wear your fairy princess dress.”

He knew all about my fairy princess dress. Everybody did. I loved that dress with a singular passion. It was too small on me by then, but any chance I had to wear it, I would. It was beautiful. Pink satin and lace with a matching wand covered in silver ribbons.

“Come on Ritz, you’ll be stunning”

“I don’t know.”

“You can wear my sister’s tiara.”

“Well...”

“Is it a deal?”

“I guess.”

“You won’t regret it.”

It rained a lot that summer. A LOT. And there was never a day when the pavement on Bayview was dry enough for a launch, but after a week of waiting Fizz convinced us that a little moisture on the pavement might actually help lubricate the castors and make for a smoother and more enjoyable ride. In fact, he said, it would probably be much safer overall on wet

pavement. We were so hyped up on the idea by then and my dress was pressed and tiara shined. So, we said *yes*.

Bayview Drive had no bay and no view, but it was a road like any other, which meant that occasionally cars would drive up and down it. So, Fizz stationed Sami Becker the youngest of the gang at the cross street of Bayview and Blackmore so he could let us know if any cars were coming by waving a red sock tied to the end of broom. Beyond that, there were no other safety measures; no idea about how far Beatrice would go, and no plan on how to stop her once she got going.

The day of the launch arrived cloudy with a heavy drizzle. We rolled Beatrice to the top of the hill anyway, and Frankie Dill and Joey Valusi and I piled onto the half of the couch the dogs hadn't chewed off. I took my position in front and adjusted my tiara. Fizz read a few words from Nietzsche –something about staring into the abyss and the abyss staring back, and then pushed us off.

It started out okay, but the drizzle slowly turned into a downpour and the castors had a mind of their own. By the time we approached the middle of the hill we were going fast. Beatrice started listing to the right and then to the left and pretty soon we were totally out of control.

You know how sometimes in a moment of crisis things seem to slow down? Well, things didn't. Things kept moving. Fast. Really fast. In those few racing moments, I could see everything at once. *Maybe that's what happens right before you die.*

Ahead of us at the cross street, I could see Sami jumping wildy up and down waving the broom with the red sock. I could see Fizz running away behind the Valusi's house. And I could see my mother standing in the doorway watching me sail past in

my fairy princess dress and tiara.

So it's the three of us on this runaway sofa. Our fearless leader has disappeared and I'm at the helm. I know we have to find land before we reach the intersection and run over Sami, but my mind has gone blank. Then from some deep primal place inside of me words poured out of my mouth.

"Run her aground, men!" I ordered.

"Bank to the left!" I screamed.

We all leaned left and Beatrice swerved, sailed over the curb and plowed straight into Mr. Patterson's rose bushes. By some strange miracle, we were spared. The rose bushes were not. Needless to say, I got into very very big trouble.

After that, whenever our mothers told us to find something interesting to do, they had a whole list of all the things we were *not* allowed to do: like anything to do with Beatrice for one, or climbing the ladder to the top of the water tower or feeding cherry bombs to bull frogs, *all Fizz's ideas, by the way.*

But our mothers were busy women and they couldn't think of everything and nobody could keep up with Fizz's imagination, so we sweetly promised not to do anything at all and be home in plenty of time for dinner.

Then Fizz would grab my arm and hurry me up the street to the meadow.

"Ritz," he'd whisper.

"I have this amazing idea and I absolutely cannot do without you."