

The
PEARL
in the
ICE

CATHRYN CONSTABLE

Chicken
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C, M, R, S

Also by Cathryn Constable

The Wolf Princess

The White Tower



*for whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves that we find in the sea*

E. E. CUMMINGS,
'MAGGIE AND MILLY AND MOLLY AND MAY'

*But a mermaid has no tears,
therefore she suffers so much more.*

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN,
'THE LITTLE MERMAID'

*The great depths of the ocean are entirely unknown
to us. What passes in those remote depths – what beings
live, or can live, twelve or fifteen miles beneath the
surface of the waters – what is the organization
of these animals, we can scarcely conjecture.*

JULES VERNE,
TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA





1

Torn nail, gashed shin, ragged breath.

Marina Denham, twelve years old and slight for her age, hung from the branch of a London plane tree in the garden of her father's house in Hampstead.

She looked up at the blue sky through the lace of green leaves; one of the new airships of the king's fleet floated slowly above her, serene and silent as a cloud. What would it be like, she thought, to be the pilot of that cloudship, sedately patrolling the skies over the rooftops of London?

When I am grown, she thought, and no one can tell

me what to do, I will keep the sky safe for the king! I will be so brave that if an enemy bullet tore a hole in the skin of the ship, I'd climb out and fix it myself.

The dry, stale air of a London summer rustled through the tree. Who was she fooling? She knew she wasn't one for floating in those large, slow airships. 'Perhaps I'll go to sea instead . . .' She called up an image of herself as a battleship commander being saluted by her men, as a shrill bosun's whistle was caught by the brisk sea air . . . She liked the idea of being on a boat. All Denhams were good on boats, apparently. Although she had never been on one; had never seen the sea. Couldn't even swim.

'Got stuck, Denham?' jeered the boy in the tree next door, a copper beech. 'Why not give in?'

Her thoughts were quickly capsized.

Marina pushed her leg over the branch and then levered her body upwards, hidden once more amongst the leaves. Hand out, feel for the broken stump, swing to a sitting position and then slowly stand up to edge along the branch towards the trunk. This part, near the top of the tree, was always tricky. The danger was that you could be too confident and miss your footing. Or too desperate for victory and slip at the last moment.

The boy's blond head emerged from the leaves. *Now*

she would surprise him!

‘What took you so long?’ she asked.

‘But – when?’ His dirt-streaked face scrunched up in puzzlement. ‘How did you . . . ?’ He looked down. ‘Impossible.’ He shook his head and blew his hair out of his eyes. ‘I swear, you would have been burned as a witch in—’

‘Days of old,’ she interrupted. ‘Sadly for you, there was no witchcraft involved. Just skill. You were beaten fair and square, Edward Mount. No spells required.’

‘Even so –’ Edward lowered himself to sit on the branch as if he were riding a pony – ‘I don’t understand how you beat me every single time.’

‘That’s because the female is the superior gender of the species.’

‘Hah! You wish!’

They sat in friendly silence for a while, staring at the backs of their houses through a veil of shivering late-summer leaves. One of the bedroom windows of Edward’s house had the curtains firmly drawn, even though it was hours until dusk. Edward’s mother was meant to have a baby any day now. The shutters on the library window of Marina’s house were shut, too. But they had been shut for months, ever since her father had accepted the command of the HMS *Neptune* and

had locked himself away to prepare for the journey. Today he was leaving for the coast. In an hour. Perhaps less. And even though he had spent most of the last seven years at sea, so she should have got used to being alone, Marina felt the tug of a sad, lonely sort of sickness.

‘Are you packed?’ Edward said.

‘Don’t let’s talk about it.’ She pulled a leaf from the plane tree. It was as broad as her hand. She rolled it up and put it in her mouth as if it were a cigar. She must look awfully smart with her head tilted back against the trunk of the tree and her legs in their sailcloth trousers stretched out along the branch. She must look just like the illustration of the ‘new woman’ in Ivy’s *Society News*.

‘The *new woman* wears satin pantaloons and a turban. She neglects the pianoforte to smoke cigarettes of Turkish tobacco and rings her soulful eyes with *kohl*. The *new woman* is mistress of her own destiny. When she speaks, the world listens.’ (How that last sentence made the hairs on the back of Marina’s neck stand on end. She found it hard to make anyone, even Ivy, their housekeeper, listen to her.)

Marina turned to see if Edward could see her looking so very *new*, lost her balance and nearly toppled into the froth of green leaves below.

‘You’ll be forced to wear a skirt,’ he added. ‘No more

dressing like a boy.’

Trust Edward to puncture her plump, inflated dream. ‘I wish I didn’t have to go.’

‘Have you spoken to your father?’

Marina chewed her lip. All these dreams of being a ‘new woman’ who could speak up for herself dissolved when she spoke to her father. When he looked at her, his small intelligent eyes focused intently, his quick mind already formulating a reply; it was as if he had the power to steal her voice.

‘He’s been too busy getting ready for his command,’ she mumbled. ‘He locks himself away in the library. Ivy has to leave his meals on a tray outside the door.’

‘Understandable,’ Edward reasoned. ‘It’s a big job, commanding a battleship. And the new class of dreadnought at that.’ And under his breath, with great admiration, he whispered, ‘All those *guns*.’

Marina didn’t share Edward’s fascination with gun turrets and bore sizes and how many shells could be launched in a minute, so she always ignored him when he started on about them.

‘When’s your father leaving?’

‘Six o’clock for the train to Portsmouth.’ Marina felt her chest get tight. Everything was changing. ‘The *Neptune* sails tomorrow.’

‘It won’t be *all* bad,’ Edward said. ‘At your new school.’

‘Easy for you to say! You get to go to a school with lessons in a forest and . . . and . . . boys and girls are treated the same. And you’ll do painting and sculpture and . . .’

‘But you’ll have a lovely time doing embroidery!’ He laughed. ‘And French composition. Although how anyone thinks it’s possible to turn *you* into a lady . . .’ He snorted as he waved at her legs in their navy trousers. ‘Hell will freeze over first.’

‘I’ll run away,’ she whispered. She had never said this out loud, although she had thought it many times.

‘Bit extreme,’ Edward replied, unfazed. His sensible, easy nature was the thing that Marina most liked about him. She found that she was always interested in and usually surprised by his views, even if they were very different from her own. (Apart from when he wittered on about the guns on dreadnoughts.) Neither of them tried to convince the other of something: they simply enjoyed each other’s company without question.

‘Could you write to your mother?’ he offered. ‘Ask for her help?’

‘I wouldn’t know where to send the letter.’ Marina swallowed.

‘She won’t come back?’

‘It’s been too long.’ Marina shrugged. ‘She left when I was small. You know this – I’ve told you.’

After a thoughtful silence, Edward said, ‘Maybe she went home. Have you ever thought about that? My mother did. After the baby before last. She said we were all too noisy and spoilt and she couldn’t think straight. She didn’t come back for . . . for . . .’ He squinted as he tried to remember. ‘It was a long time, anyway. When she did finally come home, Maudie cried and told her that all we’d had to eat was cold sago pudding. Which was true. Father can’t cook and Cook had given her notice and gone to work for the Stanleys. And then Mother cried. Even Father got his handkerchief out and blew his nose.’ He shook his head. ‘Barmy.’

‘My mother won’t come back now,’ Marina said, trying to sound as if she didn’t care. ‘It’s been too long.’ Another thought. ‘I’ve grown so much, she wouldn’t recognize me even if she did.’

‘Bad luck,’ Edward said, and she was grateful for his sensitive reply. She knew that being the sort of boy he was – straightforward, helpful and decent – he wouldn’t bring up the subject again.

‘Even so, I wish my father wouldn’t go away. I wish he wouldn’t send me to that wretched Ladies’ College.’

‘What can’t be cured must be endured.’

‘You’re not a vicar, so you can stop preaching.’ She swung her leg over the branch to try and kick him. Pointless as he was too far away, but she needed to show him how annoyed she was.

‘Marina! Marinaaaaa!’ She jumped in surprise at the sound of her father’s voice, bellowing from the house.

‘My father’s leaving.’ She threw herself into the dancing sea of green and gold leaves.

‘Don’t worry, Marina.’ Edward’s voice followed her. ‘School can’t possibly be as bad as you imagine. Nothing ever is.’