

## Jeanne D'Arc in the Flatlands

I first met Jeanne on the last day of eighth grade, under the jungle gym during a tornado warning. It was the last period and the sky had turned a dull shade of yellow. In the sickly light, I could see eyes as pale as the ice that froze over the flooded quarry in winter, her translucent skin spotted with acne. Behind us, the tornado sirens blared from the brick walls of the school.

“What happens now?” I asked Jeanne. I had moved from New Hampshire two months ago and had never lived through a tornado before.

Jeanne shrugged, moving her bony shoulders up and down, like a bird flexing its wings. “I don’t know,” she said. “It’s a Wednesday.”

“What does that mean?”

“Those are the rules. When a tornado hits on Wednesday it can’t hurt you.”

I had never heard of those rules; I thought tornadoes were something that only happened in movies, like *The Wizard of Oz*. The wind flared my skirt around my knees; I felt like Dorothy Gale. The anticipation itself was exciting, the idea that a force of nature could come tunneling over the horizon and toss you around like a rag doll powerless against the wind.

“Do we go inside?” I asked her. The buses had already left; I imagined my classmates huddled inside them, marooned in the middle of the open fields. That was the thing about living here; there were no forests or hills, nowhere to hide. The sense of exposure was menacing. But the back doors were already shut and bolted; we’d left early, sent off with a fanfare of rocket popsicles and a PowerPoint gallery of our smiling faces. I’d stayed, waiting for my dad to pick me up, a dentist appointment that never came.

Jeanne glanced around the playground. There was little shelter: the macaroni slide, the baseball dugout, the dumpster that was already losing bits of paper and trash to the wind. Beyond the blacktop, there was miles of untilled pasture filled with goldenrod and Queen Anne’s lace. We never talked about the people who had been forced off that land, just like we never talked about what the town was before we lived there, as if history was nothing more than a clean slate.

I followed Jeanne out into the prairie. We stepped over crushed stalks of wheat and a Cyclone fence that snagged my skin, leaving a thin trickle of blood. The wind blew hard, filling my ears. Jeanne led me to the end of an empty cul-de-sac. Behind a house with a sagging roof, there was something set into the earth: a scummy pool empty except for dead leaves skittering around the bottom. She climbed down the ladder and lowered herself into the deep end, and I followed.

“Lie down,” she said into my ear.

Jeanne lay on her back, her arms folded under her head, staring up at the approaching storm. I copied her, digging the toe of my sneaker into my cut to numb the pain. After awhile we couldn’t hear each other speak. That was how we became friends, laying at the bottom of the swimming pool, as the tornado kicked up dust above our heads.

Because I was new, it took me months to realize that the other girls didn't like Jeanne, with her unbrushed hair and displaced name. She never spoke in class and wore ratty clothes, a babyish backpack with Care Bears on it. Jeanne lived with her father because her mother had run out on them when she was little, and later her stepmother Denise, a frigid Midwestern woman who wore long denim skirts and baked a lot of casseroles. *Live wire*, Jeanne's father called her, *junebug*. She didn't shave her legs and wore no makeup except for a plum-colored lip gloss that stained her teeth. The other girls wore Uggs in the winter and Aeropostale shorts in the summer, rode horses and did 4-H, had names like Missy and Lauren and Kayla.

In ninth-grade history, Mrs. Lowenhaupt talked about the Cherokee who had been forced to make the long grueling march to the Indian Territory, the land our school sat on now. Jeanne raised her hand and asked where they had been forced to go after that. "We didn't even let them stay here, did we," she said, and Mrs. Lowenhaupt flushed a dangerous red. She met me at my locker after school, snapping her gum. She wanted to know if we could go to her house and make mac and cheese.

At a sleepover that weekend, Jeanne pulled a faded Ouija board out from under the couch. "I found it at a garage sale," she said. "Denise doesn't know or she'd kill me." We rested our fingertips on the flat surface of the planchette, waiting for the lie to begin. At first we asked the usual questions. Husband, children, career, where we'd live. If any of the boys in our class liked us (we weren't sure we liked them). Then we started closing our eyes to ask the real questions, whispering so that only we could hear.

As a joke, I told Jeanne to ask how she would die. She placed her fingertips on the planchette and I left to get a glass of water. When I came back, she retracted her hand as if scalded. She looked shaken and there were tears in her eyes.

"Jeanne?" I said. "What did it say?"

But she wouldn't tell me.

The visions started when we were fourteen. At first they were small things: a fire drill, rain, a dog gone missing. Then it was bigger: a school bus striking a cow, the roof of her neighbor's barn caving in after a lightning storm. Jeanne told me the premonitions came to her in dreams. She showed me the list she kept in the back of her math notebook: the day she dreamed tornadoes would strike versus when they actually did. She was more accurate than the Channel 7 meteorologists, she bragged to me. I tried alone in my room, shaking the Magic 8 Ball over and over again and peering through the hazy little window: *Outlook not so good*. We hid the notebooks under her bed so Denise wouldn't find them and call them witching.

Later, Jeanne would start slipping song lyrics in my locker, written out like little poems. When she asked me to be her girlfriend, I thought it was just another song I didn't know. In the winter, the sun set early and we'd sit cross-legged on her bed to do our math homework, eating the greasy food Denise had prepared. Then we'd go out driving in her father's truck, the moon casting low spokes of light over the fields, and Jeanne would let me drive on the back roads even though I only had my learner's permit. We went to Five Below and bought each other Christmas

gifts for less than five dollars. Jeanne got a paint set; I got hand lotion that smelled like warm vanilla sugar.

After we'd drive out to the prairie and kill the engine in the dark. We'd hold hands and listen to the mixtapes she made me, willing each other to make ourselves feel. Listening to "Pictures of You," Jeanne would smoke Chesterfields from the glove compartment and show me the self-harm scars tracking up and down her inner arms. "I don't do that anymore," she said. "Not since I met you." Sometimes we'd kiss, and I'd use my shirt collar to wipe the lip gloss off my neck before she dropped me at home.

I thought of her later, out in those fields, her voice ringing like it used to off the rafters of the high school gymnasium. We'd shiver in our gym shorts, standing apart from everyone else, passing the shuttlecock back and forth over the net until time unwound around us.

Jeanne picked me up from school in her dad's truck. Sometimes on the weekends we'd drive to Lincoln, about forty-five minutes away, to get fast food and shoplift from the Sephora in the strip mall. On the drive there, we kept the windows down because of the broken AC. Bits of wheat chaff blew in and stuck to my nose, making me sneeze. I loved the slant of the afternoon sun over the wheatfields, the warm hum of the engine, the Joni Mitchell album that Jeanne sang along to softly on the stereo.

In the neon glare of the parking lot, giddy, fingering our stolen goods, Jeanne slipped a silver tube of lipstick out of her pocket and into mine. She didn't even wear the makeup we stole; she just liked the thrill of taking it, of sticking it to capitalism and the saleswomen who looked at us with tight lips. We got hamburgers from Five Guys and ate them on the hood, sucking our greasy fingers afterward. Jeanne slipped her hand into mine.

"Have you been watching the news?" she said.

I didn't like this line of conversation. Lately, Jeanne's thoughts had turned more toward the buzz of politics and war, what was happening in the Middle East, the U.S. occupation of certain countries overseas. Her well-thumbed copy of *A People's History of the United States* sat on the dashboard like the Bible. When she brought it up in class, teachers either tried to argue with her or changed the subject completely. Besides, we kept the TV off during the six o'clock news to eat dinner, and my parents usually kept the channel turned to *Jeopardy!* anyway.

"I haven't really been paying attention."

Jeanne let go of my hand, wiping the salt from the french fries on her sleeve. "What we're doing over there," she said, "is criminal."

I didn't really know what I could do about that, so I kept quiet.

"It's disgusting. It's inhumane. And no one talks about it at all. If I was eighteen I'd go over and fight with them myself. Maybe they'd think twice before shooting if it was a white girl at the other end of the barrel."

"Don't be stupid. What would you even do if you got over there? Go find some insurgents and tell them 'I'm on your side?'"

"It's about their freedom," said Jeanne. "Isn't that what we all want?"

I tried not to think about the war until Jeanne told me the spring of our senior year, over cartons of chocolate milk. We were sitting just outside the cafeteria, our backs against the bleachers. Insects buzzed in the grass. Jeanne had been eating less; she'd gotten thinner over the past year. Her hair stuck out like static from her head.

When she first mentioned it, I thought it was a joke. We'd always made fun of the army recruiters standing sentinel at lunchtime, the boys in our gym class who dreamed of being Marines. War wasn't for girls like us. We were too dreamy, too smart, too different.

But Jeanne was determined. I could hear it in her voice. She said that people were fighting for their freedom, resisting the forces of U.S. imperialism, and that we were all complicit if we stood idly by. She said it was our duty to stand up for the voices of the oppressed. She said we owed it to the Cherokee and everyone who came before them, occupying our patch of stolen land.

What about college, I asked. When was she planning to go?

In ancient Thebes, Jeanne said, the army would encourage men to enlist alongside their lovers. They thought they would fight better if they had the man they loved by their side. We could be like that: two avenging angels of the battlefield, virtuous, dressed in white. There was something very medieval about the concept, our angelic purity, our pale faces stoic above the flutter of banners in the wind.

The afternoon sun slanted over her face, illuminating the flyaway hairs blowing free of her ponytail. I don't want to go to war, I said.

I need you.

She dropped out two weeks before graduation and was gone in the morning without telling me. That Wednesday, there was a tornado and it passed right over the school like no one inside existed at all.

I graduated in late June, standing alone with my parents on the football field while everyone else screamed and cheered and posed for photos with their friends. While the principal read my name I stared out at the yellow prairie, imagining her coming over the fields, her dad's truck trailing a plume of dust. I thought of the day four years before that we had met and for the first time I wondered if that was how Jeanne had felt, the painful silence of separation before she had known me.

Still, I tried to think about the future. I had a summer job scooping ice cream at the gas station, I had an engineering scholarship, I was going to college. I would come home at five, sweaty and exhausted, then drive around by myself or sit on the playground swings and smoke Chesterfields from a pack Jeanne had left in my room. Once I saw Denise in the supermarket, shopping for discounted steak in the frozen meat section. I waved to her and called her name, but she never glanced my way.

Late nights, flies buzzing at the window screens. Sometimes after my parents were asleep I would watch the evening news broadcasts or scan the newspaper headlines, hoping for a

glimpse of her name or face. In July my mother canceled the paper subscription and hid the remote somewhere I couldn't find it. "You've wasted too much time on that nasty girl," she said. But the last four years started to feel like nothing more than a strange dream.

When we were nineteen, my mother called me at college to tell me Jeanne had died. I was studying for a biochemistry exam the next morning with my boyfriend, a dull sturdy boy named Dennis who thought I had been a virgin. I went out into the hallway to take the phone call, and when I came back there were tears in my eyes.

It was on the news the night before, my mother explained. The execution in another country of a martyred American girl. There was footage online of Jeanne in chains, her pale face streaked with dirt. She looked straight at the camera, maintaining unbroken eye contact until the moment of her death. Outrage unfurled across the bright scroll of social media sites, the headlines and hashtags exploding across the screen.

I should have expected it. She had been in prison for almost a year. Yet I felt something in my chest tighten like a fist.

*Little spitfire*, her dad had called her. *Sweet pea*. The empty prairie spun out into the darkness. Driving home, the lights of distant towns glittering in the rearview mirror, I slid the mixtape she had made me into the cassette player, which it stuck and skipped.

Her house was dark, no cars in the driveway. Like she'd shown me, I rolled to a stop behind the detached garage, then tugged on the sash of her first floor window. It opened easily. I climbed in and lowered myself onto her bed in the dark.

Jeanne's room hummed like a living thing. Above me, the ceiling swam with movement. From a rip in the screen, hundreds of ladybugs spun from wall to wall, a dark mass of wings. Like a beating heart, her own tornado. They swarmed the ceiling like moths to a flame.