

jumpers



a short story by
e. g. fabricant

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Author's Note:

Jumpers was my entry in National Public Radio's occasional feature, "Three Minute Fiction," in which they invite listeners to submit an original, unpublished story of 600 or fewer words which is "not inappropriate" and fulfills a condition set by that Round's author-judge. *Jumpers* was submitted in Round Seven, concluded November 12, 2011. In each story in this round one character had to come to town and one character had to leave town. Enjoy!

JUMPERS



E. G. Fabricant

Norma cracked the front door, to be greeted by a bright Bay Ridge morning—the kind she used to anticipate, and enjoy. She scarcely noticed the bracing breeze off the Narrows as she labored to get the *Sunday Times*.

Inside, she retrieved her mug and scanned the unfolded front page. *What's today? May 26. She read further and recoiled. OhmyGod. Why can't they just leave it alone? It's been eight months. I can't let Peter see this—*

From above her: “Ma?”

She hid the paper behind her. Peter was midway down the stairs. Knit cap; peacoat; black jeans; boots—with a duffel in his hand.

“Peter? What—“

With the bag, he pointed at the sofa. “Sit. Please.” She obeyed, mouth open; he descended and settled next to her, cradling her shoulders. “Ma”—his eyes found hers—“I enlisted. Marines.” Norma imploded, racking with sobs. Peter squeezed the tremors away, fished into her housecoat pocket and produced the omnipresent hankie. She took it, for all the good it would do

her. She stifled a wail, but only for him. “How...?” “Recruiter, Ma—at school. Put the paperwork through a month ago.”

She snuffled quietly into the leaden cloth. “Today?”

“Yes.” He produced a plane ticket. “LaGuardia to Chicago to San Diego, then a bus to Camp Pendleton.”

For a moment, her gaunt features froze; then, her eyes narrowed. “Just tell me one thing: is this because of your father?”

“Maybe—partly, I guess...”

His mother, struggling to a knee, flailed at him. “*Tell me!* Is this because he ‘jumped’”—she pointed skyward as she spat out the word—“from the North Tower, instead of being burned alive, or waiting around to be crushed under tons of concrete?” Now she cried out, and collapsed into another viselike embrace.

Peter stroked at her until she subsided. “Not Dad, Ma; everybody and everything else. The reporters, the stares, the abuse—at school, on the street, seeing the way they came after you. When’s it ever going to *end?*”

Norma touched his face, kindly. “I don’t know, honey. Because your father didn’t wear a uniform, he wasn’t a ‘hero.’ And, because he made a choice—they assume—he wasn’t a proper ‘victim,’ either. Well, what happened just one September morning doesn’t make somebody a hero, if you ask me—it’s being there, every hour of every day, good and bad, loving and protecting and providing like he did for you and me, for almost 20 years. No complaints—just taking the small rewards of husband and father as they came. *That’s* a hero, Mister!”

“Ma.” He searched her face, cupped in his hands. His

eyes were weary but strong, both well beyond his barely 18 years. “Guys who didn’t lose anybody are going. I loved my Dad and I’ll never stop thinking about him. I’ll always miss him, but that can’t be enough; that’s not the end of it. His life was taken—from him and from us. That’s it, and all of it—attention must be paid, you know? There’s a debt...”

Time passed; eventually, he helped her up and she clung to his wrist.

“What about me?”

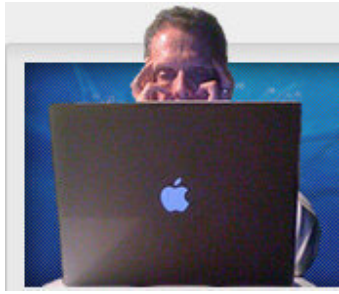
“Uncle Tony and Aunt Edna know; I’ve talked to them. Dad paid the house off. You’ve got his pension and the disability, and I’ll send home as much as I can, when I know what’s what, to help out with—you know...”

Outside, a horn honked. “Well, that’s my cab.”

Norma winced, and bent. “Ask him to send another one.”

“Why?”

“My water just broke.”



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writes and lives in San Jose, California.

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