

Get the Sea Captain Out of Jail

“I’m worried about the sea captain.” Pompa opened one eye and gazed at Celie from his bed. “Close those window blinds.” Pompa liked his room shaded. Even the TV hurt his eyes.

“What sea captain?” asked Celie, looking up from her unfinished mosaic. She set her scissors beside the colored-paper squares on the table. Nana shut the blinds and continued her phone conversation with the bank.

“The white-bearded one,” replied Pompa, his voice hushed and sandpapery. “I’m sure he’s in jail.”

“Jail?” Celie twisted her glue bottle shut. She didn’t know any sea captain. “Is he a criminal?”

“Not unless wearing a blue jacket with gold buttons is illegal,” Pompa grumbled. “And white sailor’s pants and a captain’s hat. No sweatpants!” Pompa grinned crookedly and squeezed his eyes shut. His hands and arms trembled. His voice rose above Nana’s. “Why can’t I wear jeans? I want to dress like an American. If I had a pair of pants, I wouldn’t need an alarm clock. This hotel has too many rules.”

Nana hung up the phone. Usually, Nana could figure out what Pompa meant. Today she shrugged. “Pompa’s a little restless. At breakfast he called Springton Manor the worst restaurant in town. I’ll ask the aides to shower him earlier than usual. Showers make him feel fresh.”

“Celie,” Pompa whispered as Nana walked into the hallway. “Celie, I need your help.”

Celie approached Pompa’s bed. “Do you want a drink of water?” she asked. Pompa shook his head. “Candy from your stash, Pompa? Nana bought your favorite, chocolate creams.”

“No. You eat them. Put your money in the slot.”

Celie opened the nightstand drawer and nibbled a chocolate cream. “Want your wildflower book?”

“Find the sea captain.” Pompa blinked his right eye, then raised his left eyelid with his fingers. “He’s in jail here. I spied him myself, last night and the night before. The servants at this house don’t care what happens to him. They keep him in prison and feed him soggy egg-salad sandwiches.” Pompa lifted his hand and Celie wrapped her fingers round his. “I need him, Celie. Get the sea captain out of jail. And don’t tell anyone. The managers at this company want to squash our family’s power.”

Nana returned. “Everything alright?” she asked. Celie nodded.

When Pompa fell asleep four minutes later, Celie mouthed, “Nana, can I go for a walk?”

“Sure,” Nana said. “Just stay inside the building.”

Celie headed toward the sunroom lined with caged birds. Why does Springton Manor have a jail? she wondered. Who is the sea captain? Why is he in prison? Why does Pompa need him? How will I get the sea captain out of jail?

Celie glanced into each bedroom she passed. Men and women in sweatpants slept, watched TV, stared out windows. Ms. Maybelle read the newspaper comics. Mrs. Adams strolled the hall, cuddling her baby doll. Mr. Benton called, “Hey! Hey! Hey!” from his walker. Five people napped in wheelchairs by the nurses’ desk.

Celie addressed an aide. “Excuse me. Have you seen a man in a blue jacket with gold buttons? I think he’s a sailor.”

“Not here, honey,” the woman said. “Our biggest lakes are the bathtubs.” She pointed toward a door labeled *Tub Room #1*. Peering inside, Celie saw two showers, a spacious bathtub, and grab-bars on the walls. She’d visited *Tub Room #1* before. It was not a jail.

Celie edged between a medicine cart and a wrap-around walker. The woman in the walker moaned, “Where’s my room? Am I in the right hall?”

Celie tapped the nurse at the medicine cart. “I think she’s lost,” Celie said. Just like the sea captain, she thought.

Entering the gazebo room, she passed the big-screen TV and a gray-haired man and woman holding hands. The opposite door led to the sunroom. Most Saturday mornings the cockatiel copied Celie’s whistled melody: do-re-mi-fa-sol. Today Celie didn’t whistle. She remembered watching birds through Pompa’s binoculars on his nature center tours. “Pompa says get the sea captain out of jail,” she told the parakeets and lovebirds.

Celie jogged ahead to the library. The room held books, desks, computers, and videos, but no jail. She wondered if the library had the book about Pompa’s archaeology dig. He’d found tools and dishes and a soldier’s medal.

Next, she reached the sitting room. A heavy door next to the couch led outside, and in the door’s small window stood five gray metal bars. “This must be it!” yelled Celie. Racing to the door, she yanked it open. Immediately a siren blared. The piercing shrieks hurt Celie’s ears. An aide, Camille, scurried from the hallway, flicked a wall switch, and thrust her head outdoors.

“Who escaped?” asked Camille. “Did Mr. Pruitt go hang-gliding again?”

“I don’t know,” answered Celie, confused. “I didn’t see anyone escape. I opened the door to find the jail.”

Camille blinked. “Jail? Well, it’s true most residents don’t leave. But we try to make Springton Manor as homelike as possible. Now, see this alarm?” She pointed at the wall switch. “If you want to use this door, first ask us to shut off the alarm.”

“I forgot,” said Celie, staring outside. A white fence enclosed a broad lawn, a patio, and

ten umbrella tables. She'd eaten picnic lunches in this courtyard. It clearly was not a jail. "Have you seen a man in a blue jacket with gold buttons?" Celie asked Camille. "A sailor?"

Camille hesitated. "Sometimes the maintenance man, Jim, wears a blue denim jacket, but it has a zipper. And Jim can't swim. Why do you ask?"

Celie sighed. "No reason." She wanted Camille's help in finding the jail, but Pompa had said don't tell.

Perhaps, supposed Celie, I need more facts. She hurried to Pompa's room. Nana dozed in the recliner chair, while Pompa lay in bed, shoving at his blanket.

"What can I get you, Pompa?" asked Celie.

Pompa groaned. "This blanket's heavy as bricks. Stringball Manor wasted its money buying this heavy blanket. Get it off my feet." Celie pulled the blanket off Pompa and piled it at the footboard.

"Anything else, Pompa?"

"A washcloth."

"For your hands?"

He smirked. "For my little toe." Celie ran warm water on a washcloth and gave it to him. Pompa wiped his mouth.

"Celie. Does your mother plan to go to high school?"

"Mama finished college a long time ago," replied Celie. "I think she's done with school."

Pompa squinted. "I suppose she is. How was your trip here?"

"My trip? I drove over with Nana, like every Saturday." Celie knew Pompa had driven old people to appointments, before he started freezing when he walked. Even then he still played tennis.

Pompa seemed surprised. “Oh, you didn’t fly?”

“No, Pompa, that was Aunt Jenny. She flew here last week to visit you, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” He paused. “You know, my son Harvey, your grandpa, bought this lodge in January. All the people working here are his servants.”

Celie recalled Grandpa Harvey’s shoe store. “Okay,” she said.

Pompa fell asleep, then suddenly woke. “Did you get the sea captain?”

“I can’t find the jail,” said Celie. “Are you sure there’s a jail here?”

Pompa grimaced. “Of course. That’s where they throw me every night.”

Celie’s jaw fell. “You, Pompa? You go to jail every night? Why?”

“Because the judge found me guilty. My crime is, I climb out of bed. They have a rule, two feet in the bed. I don’t like their laws. It’s my bedroom. I should be able to make the rules in my bedroom. Those guards, they’re cruel. Except the head nurse. She’s been so kind to me. I need to send her a greeting card.”

“Who’s that, sweetheart?” Nana asked, waking.

“Mrs. Schmoogle.” Pompa chortled at the made-up name. “Emma Schmoogle.” He quit chortling. “Just remember, Celie—watch out for those mounted police.”

Celie swiveled toward Nana, who murmured, “Sometimes Pompa has little dreams.”

Pompa faced Nana. “It’s not a problem for you. You’ve never missed a meal. All I get in the dungeon are candy bars and water.”

“Would you like some water now?” asked Nana.

“From my beautiful bride, yes,” he said. Nana lifted a paper cup and slipped the straw into Pompa’s mouth. He drank three swallows, then waved the cup away. “Take this hat, too.”

Celie did not see a hat. Pompa held out his clenched fist, and Nana placed her open hand

under the fist. Pompa spread his fingers and dropped the invisible hat into Nana's hand. "Celie," whispered Pompa, "the jail is on the third floor. Look there."

"Springton Manor has only one floor, Pompa."

"Then check the basement. There's a nurses' desk in the basement exactly like the nurses' desk on this floor. If the dungeon's not there, search the duplicate building."

"Duplicate, Pompa?"

"Just like this building except up north."

Celie looked quizzically at Nana. Nana shook her head no.

Celie gulped. "Okay, Pompa. I'll try."

This time she headed toward the three dining rooms. All had wide windows with swag curtains and round tables with floral centerpieces. People in wheelchairs or walkers or on their feet roamed through the rooms. A man wheeled over to Celie and handed her a crayoned drawing from a coloring book. Not one of the eating rooms held a jail.

Past the dining rooms, the kitchen doors swung as the cooks hurried in and out. Celie peeked in. The kitchen had large stoves and boxy refrigerators and long counters. It did not have a jail.

Beyond the kitchen was another nurses' desk. "Excuse me," Celie said. "Does Springton Manor have an upstairs or downstairs?"

"No upstairs, dear," replied the nurse, "and the basement's a laundry. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes," answered Celie, "a man wearing a blue jacket with gold buttons, and white pants, and a captain's hat."

"Sounds like a sailor," said the nurse. "Some of our residents served in the Navy long

ago. They mostly wear sweatpants now. Have you tried the activities room? They're making pizza there."

Celie hiked down another bedroom hall. Many people slept, but two men played dominoes and a woman sang. Pompa and I haven't played dominoes in ages, Celie realized. He says rummy and checkers are hard, though they're his favorite games, and now we only pick four dominoes.

Celie inspected *Tub Room #2* and *#3*, four offices, the therapy room filled with balls and bikes, and two storage rooms. She tiptoed down the laundry steps and viewed washers and driers humming in the basement. She could see there was no dungeon.

Finally, Celie reached the activities room. Three men and eleven women sat at round tables, patting dough into circles and sprinkling shredded cheese on top. Some placed pepperoni on the cheese. When Celie was younger, Pompa had baked bread from scratch. But he hated the activities room. The Springton Manor Goodtime Band played there, and they couldn't carry a tune. Celie counted two pianos, an organ, three TVs, stacks of games, and a giant popcorn machine, but no jail.

She trudged past another dozen bedrooms to Pompa's room. Pompa was sitting in his wheelchair. Nana was feeding Pompa yogurt raisins. Celie plopped into a chair. "Finished exploring?" asked Nana.

Celie breathed. "I guess so, but I never found him."

"Found whom?" Nana asked.

Celie looked at Pompa for permission to tell Nana.

"The sea captain!" he blurted. "Those guards with their soggy egg-salad sandwiches threw him in prison, just like they did me! At least they let me out every morning, but I haven't

seen the sea captain since the day after you brought him here, except last night and the night before!”

Nana’s eyes widened. “I brought him? I don’t even know him!”

Pompa scoffed. “You found him in rags. Remember?”

Nana’s forehead wrinkled. “Rags? Is he a homeless person?”

“With my carving tools!” Pompa hollered, his voice hoarse.

No one spoke. Celie cleared her throat. “Pompa? What does the jail look like?”

“Exactly like this room,” he said. “Except the walls move up and down. And it’s on the third floor. And the orderlies give me peanut brittle for supper.”

Celie continued. “Does the jail have a closet like this closet?” She pointed at Pompa’s sweater hanging on the closet doorknob.

“They’re identical.”

“When you saw the sea captain in jail, was he on the closet shelf?”

“I think so.”

Celie opened the closet door, slid a chair in front of the shoes, and climbed onto the chair. Reaching upward, she retrieved an object wrapped in old dish towels, then hopped to the floor.

Celie removed the dish towels and held the wooden figure up. He stood a foot tall and wore a blue jacket with gold buttons, white pants, and a black-brimmed sailor’s hat. Above his thick white beard, his orange mouth grinned. Above his sunburned cheeks, his bright eyes laughed. Feet apart, hands in pockets, he glanced sideways as if to tell a joke. Celie could see the carving marks made by Pompa’s tools.

“The sea captain!” exclaimed Pompa. “Celie, you found him!”

Nana gasped. “You mean the fisherman? Why, he’s been here two weeks! After the first

day, Camille put him on your shelf for safe-keeping.”

“Fisherman. Sea captain,” muttered Pompa. “Call him what you like.”

Celie handed Pompa the sea captain. “I saw something wrapped in dish towels on your shelf last Saturday,” she said, “but I didn’t know what.”

Pompa opened both eyes and examined the figure. Pompa’s hands and arms shook, but his smile beamed. “The face was the toughest part,” he said. “I practiced a lot before I carved the face.”

“You really made this, Pompa?” asked Celie.

“You bet,” he replied.

“You do great work, Pompa.”

“I was hoping you’d like it. That’s why I needed the sea captain. To give him to you. You find him a spot at your house.” Pompa stretched his arm toward Celie, and she took the sea captain from him.

“I’ll take good care of him.”

“I knew you would,” Pompa said. “Tonight in the dungeon I’ll tell the guards to bring me just one sandwich. I’ll say, ‘The sea captain’s out of jail, and he’s gone home.’”