

She Dreams of Stars

by Thomas Wells

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a story by Thomas Wells

To everyone—you know who you are.

Don't be afraid.

*as it transformed
from pure light
to a slavering maw
rows of circling teeth
I tried not to
but I was anyway
I did not understand
and it wouldn't give me time
though time in this dream
wasn't as important
as I thought.*

There was enough.

Julia Sparks's imagination was wild. She saw things that were not, and breathed them into life. Her pale blue eyes were always alight with a new mystery, lit with a hidden fire. Her laugh was quick and easy, able to convince anyone that they had potential as a comedian.

Recently Julia had been spending a lot of time in her room. Not unusual, one supposes, for a fourteen-year-old. She spent much of it lying on her bed, staring out the window at the sunny outdoors, sidewalks and people walking by. The weight of her years had started to affect her imagination.

Until one sunny, sweltering, August afternoon, when her dead grandfather drove a giant yellow school bus into and through the wall of her room.

It was rather alarming.

It was a skillful crash, making a perfect, bus-shaped hole in the wall—not going as far as to cause any bodily harm to Julia, but causing significant amounts of property damage to the wall. She sat up incredulously on her bed, and picked small pieces of plaster from her hair.

The *details* of the moment are important. In *this* moment, an adventure begins.

The passenger door to the bus swung open, with a loud hydraulic hiss, and the driver door swung open too. Following the general trend of swinging, a green snakeskin boot swung out of the driver door. A body followed it. Her breath escaped her.

The body standing before her was tall and lean, hardened from years of work in the sun. A clean white mustache balanced

itself on a stern upper lip, resting beneath a hawk's nose and clear blue eyes that were magnified behind heavy browline glasses. There were wrinkles everywhere, the good kind that show strength rather than the declines of age, smiles rather than frowns. He wore a green brass button shirt with small white pinstripes tucked into a pair of faded blue jeans without a belt. There was no mistaking the shape of a prosthetic right leg concealed beneath the pants and stuffed into a boot.

He looked her up and down. "My, you've grown a bit," he said, in his strong voice that was commanding and muffled at the same time. It sounded like someone talking through a mouthful of food or cotton, but every word rang out.

There was a moment of silence.

"Would you like to come on a trip with me?"

She thought about her family for a moment. There was a lot of stress. But her family handled conflict in the silent way, with backhanded remarks and sharp glares. Her older brother Michael had left, and they didn't know if he was coming back.

She said "yes."

He said "pack."

She lept up (she hadn't been doing much leaping lately either) and grabbed the essentials—chewing gum, sunscreen, a bathing suit, and a copy of *Moby Dick*, stuffing them all into a muted blue rucksack that she found under her bed. Somehow, an apricot-mandarin orange-prune juice had snuck its way in there as well, which was odd, as Julia didn't remember having seen one *ever*.

Herbert Sparks drained the juice in one gulp and then crushed it in a gargantuan fist. He sized up his granddaughter with an unfamiliar critical eye. The gaze made her feel uncomfortable, like he was seeing inside of her, seeing her core. Herb (as his friends liked to call him) was tall and unearthly, just as he had been in life—he belonged to a class of individuals who appeared to see or understand something that ordinary people just didn't, and found success and adulation no matter what he did. This was simply the person he was. Julia didn't know this, as he had died when she was three years old, but somehow, she sensed it, and saw it.

“You were tiny the last time I saw you.” Herb was not one to mince words.

Julia looked down at her fourteen-year-old self. She nodded.

“Well, you look...”

“...surprisingly not dead?” He said, a twinkle in his eye.

“No time for that now, we've got to get goin',” He raised his eyebrows. “You ready?”

“Where're we headed?”

Herb guffawed with delight, a booming yet somewhat breathy laugh tinged with the tiniest bit of sadness. It was the most mysterious part of him, his laugh—you could never quite tell if he was laughing at you, the world, or a little of both. It was a laugh that concealed things. Julia's laugh was not this way. Her laugh opened doors and shined light.

Herb pointed to the interior of the bus. “After you.”

Julia smiled a little. For some reason, it was like she had

known this man her entire life. Yet, there was something off about him, a little nagging tug in the back of her mind. Maybe it was the whole “dead” thing. They climbed into the bus, Julia assuming the passenger/co-pilot position, Herb as driver/pilot. Herb shifted in his seat, and turned the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life, sounding more like a stock car than a school bus. Julia looked to the rows of seats. They seemed sad, somehow, empty.

Herb pulled out of the ruins of Julia’s room, little bits of plaster, brick, and wood showering down around the outside of the bus. He turned to her.

“Well, as you know, I died several years back.” Julia nodded. “I’m here for a reason. My last will and testament if you...will.” Herb snorted quietly. “I’m here to take you on a road trip. Through time and space. You might learn something, and—”

“You had me at ‘time and space’. And maybe ‘road trip.’”

Julia was always interrupting. Right now, she wanted to be far away from this place. Her mom wouldn’t like the state of her room. Indeed she wouldn’t. Julia also loved road trips.

Years of reading reminded her that it didn’t seem logical (or particularly well written for that matter) that the theme of a journey should be revealed to the character from the outset. Then she wondered where thoughts like that were coming from. Maybe it was the interrupting part of her brain.

She shook her head, and looked back at her old room, her bed.

“Let’s do it.” There wasn’t a trace of hesitation in her voice.

They blasted off down the road.

...

As it turned out, journeying through time and space was awfully similar to a road trip Julia had taken with her parents and brother to Kansas. Scenery whooshing by, the occasional small town. Trees, sagebrush, highway. But as the bus drove, things began to get weirder. The trees grew to colossal size, then shrank down to odd looking blue shrubs. At one point, they drove over the top of a lake, and then what looked like a pool of molten steel. Just as things were getting interesting, Julia felt a tickle in her nose. A sneeze coming on, and she was unable to stifle it. Julia tried to hold it in (she hated sneezing out loud), but this one was coming out, ready or not.

“AH-CHOO!”

She opened her eyes, and there they were.

...

Where was there exactly?

There turned out to be the middle of nowhere. There were the remnants of what might have once been a road, but now all that remained were slight indentations in the dirt and pieces of rubble that might have once been buildings. A few pieces of brush huddled together, like they were clutching each other for warmth and safety, though they looked more like a chain gang slowly working itself to death, the unfortunate fellows at the beginning and end slowly stripped to pieces by the buffeting wind.

“First stop.” Herb said lightly. The air brakes hissed loudly, and Herb moved a lever and the door opened. Julia looked at him questioningly, trying to figure out what exactly she was meant

to do. Herb gestured with his eyes out into the desert. Was he just going to leave her there? Julia shrugged, and jumped down onto the dusty road.

“What do I do?” she asked.

Herb looked particularly enigmatic. “The best question. No good answer for that one. I’m a chauffeur. Also a warning: this adventure—it’s going to be difficult, possibly even dangerous.”

“Thanks for your help,” she said with the sarcastic tone of a fourteen-year-old. He looked down at her over the rim of his glasses.

“That tone of voice doesn’t look good on you.”

And before she could puzzle out what that meant, he was gone.

Silence is a reminder of that which came before, and that which will come after. When one wishes to hear the sound of another human voice, silence becomes a gaping maw of obsidian teeth. But it can also be a comfort and a friend. Julia had spent many months alone recently, and silence was one of her new friends. The simple satisfaction that came from this friendship was that she did not need to speak to remind herself that she was alive.

Julia looked around, disbelieving. She wasn’t quite rolling with the punches yet, and a giant yellow school bus disappearing into thin air with no sound still gave her quite a shock. She pinched herself a few times, and then shivered uncontrollably. She was now satisfied that this was really happening.

A chill wind blew. The silence that pervaded the immediate area was not familiar to her. It was different.

She shivered again. This shiver was not like the first, which had been caused by the unusual events she found herself in, and would have made sense, as shivering is a completely warranted response to teleporting school buses. This shiver, however, was due to the *wrongness* of the place in which she now stood.. Unfamiliarity is not unusual when one finds oneself in a new place, but this was different, this was, again, *wrongness*.

A massive expanse of cracked desert stretched out before her. She walked forward to examine one of the bushes. It was very dead, and appeared to have been so for a very long time. The sun burned overhead with an unnatural heat, drying the pores on Julia's face and neck.

Then the chill wind blew again.

But it was more than a wind, it was a whisper. The wind curled into fingers, and those fingers caressed Julia's face.

She was now afraid.

Julia lived in the world of imagination on a daily basis (she was a voracious consumer of all different kinds of media/stimuli) and she knew from her consumption that invisible-windy-caressing-fingers was never a good sign. She and silence might have been buddies, but she still felt fear.

There was a whisper of something. Julia couldn't quite make out what it was saying, so she listened harder.

*is she allshhhhhhhhhhhhh. I cannnnnntttttttt
beeeeeeeeeeeellllllllll.*

The words were slow and slurred, almost impossible to hear. Julia tried to listen, but then the fingers of wind began to

grab, and she lost focus. “Hey. Hey! Stop it!” She yelled, but the fingers grabbed tighter and tighter, pinching and twisting her skin, her shirt. They were going to take her with them, wherever it was they were going.

Cooooommmmmmmeeeeeee wiithhhhh ussssssssssssssss...

She struggled, and then the hands wrapped around her throat. Her precious air forced its way out of her throat, and was replaced with sharp, icy coldness. Julia began to lose consciousness. Images flashed in her mind’s eye, but they were too quick for her to recognize. As the world began to turn black, she heard, clear and silvery, steel scraping against leather.

The hands relaxed, and Julia fell to the dirt, gasping, the world dim and blurry around her. She looked over and saw a figure cloaked in faded white. The world spun. There were shadows, mixed with the wind, and they were moving towards the figure, all teeth and twisted claws. An emerald-green sword spun through the air, and with it, a warm wind, pushing back at the shadow forms. Some of them dissipated when the wind touched them, but more formed in their place. The figure moved with a cat’s grace, sidestepping claw and shadow, the sword almost alive in gloved hands.

Julia could see that the figure was going to lose. There were too many of the shadow-forms. They grew closer and closer, piling atop one another, overpowering the figure. Julia could see nothing but a mass of shadow and feel a chilling wind swirling through the desert.

Julia wondered if she was going to die, and what that would be like.

“BEGONE!”

The shout was heard first, and then a wave of force hit Julia, and a blue light, and then a FWUMP. Before she had time to think about what an odd word FWUMP was, she had slipped into unconsciousness.

...

She remembered the river. It was cold but clear. Her body was swept down it, any sense of control lost. But her mind was like the water, clear. It told her that she was not meant to die yet, and she must be brave. She shot her arm to the edge of the bank, and her fingertips clutched the very edge of a rock. She did not die that day in the river.

...

“It’s nice to be lying down,” said Julia’s back as her eyes fluttered open. “Indeed,” her neck responded.

She worked her way up to her elbows, massaging her neck. The shadows were gone. Her unusually large ears rang. The figure was still standing where Julia had placed it last, but now she saw that it wasn’t a figure. The hood had been blown back. It was a woman.

She was tall and beautiful, her black hair greying slightly around her temples. She was, in fact, the most beautiful woman Julia had ever seen. Her skin was a rich ebony, her form lithe and strong, almost ageless. Julia tried not to gape, tried not to be disarmed by the foreignness of the woman (she had read about orientalism, naturally) but she couldn’t help it. Whether or not the woman felt uncomfortable under Julia’s gaze, she gave no inclination. Julia’s discomfort sprang from the fact that the woman had no eyes, a dark green blindfold covering them.

Deep scars spidered out from beneath it. Julia did not want to see what was behind it. Some things are better left unknown. The woman approached her.

“My name is Pellea Kingsley. You are Julia Sparks, the one who will save this world.”

Well, she certainly doesn't mince words.

...

Bravery is pretend. It is a pretense, disguising itself as surety and fearlessness. Bravery is none of those things—it is the choice to pretend that one knows what one is doing, or that one has control over a situation. Bravery is trees unbowed by buffeting wind and men and women who don't stop hammering, even when the machine is going to win. The stark refusal to kneel to the reality of human limitation.

Save the world? Julia was glad the woman was upfront about it, but it was rather surprising. She had never been one to indulge in embarrassment or awkwardness. She fluidly stepped into the role of the modest and reluctant hero. She did enjoy a bit of theater, and right now, she didn't have to do very much. She and her brother spent much of their childhood staging performances for their parents, knights and princesses, cowboys and bandits. But her brother grew up too fast, and they had not done a play for a long time. But Julia still remembered how to act. It was fun.

“Me? I don't think so.”

“You have the power to shape the world—” Julia didn't really feel any world-shaping abilities flowing through her, and she raised an eyebrow as the tall woman strode to her and dropped to one knee. “—and I am your guardian.”

Julia knew her next line. “I appreciate your offer of protection, but I don’t really know if I’m the one you’re speaking of.” Pellea looked up at Julia piercingly, or as piercingly as someone blindfolded can look.

“Strange times are afoot. It is not by happenstance that you find yourself in the Desert of the Doomed, and it is not by happenstance that I have found and rescued you. I can sense your power, and I am drawn to it. You have the power to shape the world as you will. The agents of the Sad King seek to destroy you, and what your power represents.”

“What exactly is it that my power represents?”

“Someone he cannot simply bend into submission. Someone with the power to fight back.” Pellea said all of this with such conviction that Julia had a very hard time not being convinced, though she still didn’t feel very superheroic. This woman would keep her safe, blind or not.

“Where are we?”

“As I said before, the Desert of the Doomed, which is part of the Archipelago of the Absurd. It is a small part of the Kingdom, all of which is under the shadow of the Sad King. The souls of the dead unwilling to die are trapped here, forever grasping for life they once lost. I have been searching for you for a very long time. You must be taken to safety.”

Julia nodded. Keep things moving. Without another word, Pellea turned and began to run. Julia had no idea how she chose a direction (she was, after all, blind), but she was running really fast, so Julia started running, trying to keep pace. Her heart beat a slow drum, and her legs pounded the hard earth.

And she caught up with Pellea, keeping pace in the hot sun, her red sneakers kicking up tiny clouds of dust. They followed the path of the old road until it was gone, and still they kept running. Julia thought her muscles would burn and her breath would simply become unmanageable, but the more she ran, the better she felt. Eventually she forgot that she even had legs, and began to think about other things, like the fact that there was no sun lighting this place, and how straight the horizon line was. She felt that they could run forever, and never even see a change. Which was more than likely true, considering the place was called the Desert of the Doomed.

Pellea stopped. Julia skidded to a halt, immediately feeling her legs again, and discovering that they were *awfully* sore. “We will stop here for the night. Our attempt will be made on the marrow.” Pellea sat down in the sand, taking a meditative position, and became motionless, stiff as a board. Julia assumed she was sleeping, and tried not to wake her, plopping down on the dirt and opening her backpack.

She pulled out her copy of *Moby Dick*, and turned to the place she had left off, in fact had been leaving off for the past year. It was a chapter in which Ishmael described his classification of whales. Her father had suggested the book to her, that she should read more “classics” and less “disposable popular nonsense.” He was a very smart man, so Julia assumed that *Moby Dick* would have some profound effect on her. She painstakingly worked her way through the novel, but when she arrived at this place in the novel, she invariably fell asleep. It didn’t matter how much coffee she drank, the minute Ishmael stated:

Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me. This fundamental thing

settled, the next point is, in what internal respect does the whale differ from other fish. Above, Linnaeus has given you those items. But in brief, they are these: lungs and warm blood; whereas, all other fish are lungless and cold blooded.

Fall Asleep? *No?* She hadn't even got to the part with Captain Ahab. She felt like she knew him intimately, though she had never actually read about him. Books are funny that way sometimes.

Julia was at the point of her usual attack of narcolepsy when the lights went out. It was awfully odd. The sunlight turned off, as if a giant hand flicked a giant switch somewhere. Julia looked around. Her eyes were slowly adjusting to the darkness, and she saw that Pellea was still seated across from her, unmoving. Julia scrambled to her feet, ignoring the protest of her legs, and looked up at the sky.

At that moment, Julia remembered the long nights she had spent with her father and brother beneath the lens of the expensive telescope. Her father and brother loved looking at the tiny celestial bodies, but she found their stellar cartographic efforts a little boring.

When you are used to seeing the night sky as the aforementioned map, seeing it as a sophisticated choreographed dance number is a sobering experience.

Hundreds of different points of light and shape danced to a music that only the heavens understood. They swept about the sky in magnificent formations, forming the constellations that she was familiar with, and then acting out their stories: Orion stumbled blindly about the cosmic stage, holding his eyes; Cancer scuttled about, examining tiny pieces of sand; and

hundreds of other individual moments in mythistory, seeming so old and foreign yet intimate and familiar, an old friend almost forgotten. *They have a life of their own*, thought Julia.

Then the stars seemed to become aware of her watching. Many fled from view (they were shy), but some stayed, and though they had no faces, Julia sensed an intense curiosity emanating from them. She took in a deep breath as one of the stars grew closer. It got larger and larger until it was the size of the full moon. Her grandfather's face was matted over the top of it. He wore a face of quiet bemusement. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Herb winked at her. Then a voice spoke from a great distance. It wasn't her grandfather. Julia searched for the source, unable to find it until Herb gestured to his left with his eyes. A tiny green speck. Julia couldn't tell if that was where the voice was coming from, but something about it told her that it was.

"The stars think you're quite interesting." The voice was tinny, and it sounded very familiar. It didn't really say much else, and Julia thought this was a rude way to introduce one's self.

"Um, thanks, I guess," she said, frowning. "You have a name, or do you just pop out every now and then and snootily tell random girls that they're interesting?"

The star laughed in a tiny voice. It sounded like wind chimes blowing very softly. It was adorable, and that made Julia a little angrier than before. She glared at the speck. The little green light zipped around the sky, becoming almost too difficult to follow. Suddenly, the other stars began to move again, and they formed a giant smiley face. Julia softened a little.

"We're sorry to have offended. But yes, we have seen many many humans, and most of them we find—well—uninspired.

Personally, we don't really know how you stand yourselves. Soooo boring all the time. Always *whining*."

Julia tried to get angry, but the star was not completely wrong. Quite a few people she knew spent most of their time trying to convince themselves that they were alive, desperately reaching for something to hold onto, something to keep them anchored to the earth. Missing pieces, assembled poorly. Though there was truth in the words, she felt compelled to defend her fellow bipeds.

"Well, you don't seem that much better, all flashing lights, dancing and glitz. THAT would get boring. You can't have fun ALL the time."

Planet Herb nodded approvingly.

"Ah, once again, the sign of a limited level of consciousness. You *can* have fun *all* the time." With that, the green star made a whistling sound, and the stars around it formed into a little man, who began to sing, in a surprisingly authentic voice, Frank Sinatra's "I'm Gonna Live 'Till I Die." The little man swept his way across the sky, his tiny suit and tie whooshing around him, and Julia had to admit, he did cut a rather handsome and svelte figure. She tried to remain unimpressed, but it was hard. They were pretty good. Her head bobbed, and her feet tapped. When the song was over, she clapped. The stars separated again, and Mr. Green (that's what she was going to call him) returned.

"Alright, that was pretty good." The star bobbed and made a "no duh" sound.

"So, why'd you come down to talk to me?"

Mr. Green took on a tone of mock seriousness. “We’ve come to extend the invitation to a party. No, not this one,” the star said as Julia’s eyes flicked to the heavens. “It would be a little too much for you to handle. No, this party is very exclusive, but you are invited, as our guest.”

“But I don’t even know you!”

“But we know you.” Julia thought about that for a moment, and it made her a little uncomfortable. Voyeuristic stars were a little unsettling. What else had they seen? “Just think about it. When you get to the party, you’ll know it, and we’ll be there to invite you in, if you want.” Julia said, “ok,” but before the words had left her mouth, but the giant star with Herb’s face in it and the tiny green one were gone. The sky was completely black, which seemed far more fitting in the silent desert.

Something fishy was going on here, but Julia couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She suddenly realized that she was extremely tired, and fell right to sleep, the darkness of the sky pulsating above and around her.

...

She remembered one of the bad days, when she had been too afraid to ride on the boat. She told herself that it didn’t matter, but it did. It still did.

...

She awoke, staring at the sky. The pale blue of the previous day had returned. Not a single cloud to be found. A delicious smell, deep, earthy, and almost savory reached her nostrils. She sat up and looked to see Pellea roasting something over a fire. She moved close and saw that the fire was burning without any fuel, and a flat rock which served as a griddle floated inches above

it. The food was round and grainy, and looked quite similar to hamburger patties, though these were more of a sandy color. The magical fire didn't seem to require any concentration on Pellea's part, and she hummed quietly as the food cooked.

"What's that?" Julia asked.

"Sand burgers."

Julia considered this for a moment. That sounded rather unusual, but as far as the course went, it was par. Never mind the blind swordswoman who could do magic, or the talking stars, or the giant doom desert. Sometimes you just go with it, and Julia just went with it. They sat in silence for a few moments, and then Pellea finished. She produced two smaller flat rocks from underneath her cloak, and scooped a sand burger onto one and gave it to Julia. It sizzled a little bit on the rock, but Julia mustered up her resolve, and took a bite. For a moment, it tasted like the delicious falafel sold by the man with the cart down the road from Julia's home, but then that taste was gone, replaced with a new one—a sand castle that had been hit with a tidal wave. Kind of like her mom's polenta. She grimaced and swallowed, not wanting to offend Pellea. She smiled.

"Mmmm...It's very good."

Pellea nodded. "We've almost reached the end of the desert. And you are very polite." Julia looked up.

"Why?"

"Because that is cooked sand. I'm testing your powers."

Julia spit out the sand. "Powers!?" What powers?"

“You have the power to change the world at will. I’m testing that power.”

Julia wiped the sand from her mouth. She set the rock down. She didn’t tell Pellea that it had tasted like falafel for a second. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Pellea looked at her sternly. Or rather her blindfold was pointed where Julia was sitting.

“Do you believe that my resolve is so easily shaken?” Julia sat silently, looking down at the pile of sand. “You do not possess a word in your vocabulary to describe my patience. I will wait a thousand years if necessary. You *will* become that of which I speak.” She smiled confidently at Julia. “You will save our world from the Sad King. I am not worried.” Julia was not in any way reassured by this smile, and she wondered if Pellea had belonged to skimped on social graces during her blind swordsman training.

Julia was good at some things—she was tall (is that a skill?), she read a lot, and her ponytail looked pretty good from the side—but a magical powerhouse? Even in fantasyland she didn’t buy it. Of course, in books people developed latent superpowers over the course of the novel, but this did not seem likely. The only superheroic thing she had ever done was win a watermelon eating contest with her dad—though she suspected that was more due to *his* formidable eating prowess than hers. Her run across the desert the day before had conveniently skipped her mind. The human brain is particularly proficient at reminding and reassuring us that we are at the very best mediocre.

She dumped the burger off her plate. It disintegrated upon

striking the ground. “So, where are we going?” Pellea stood and shielded her eyes with her hand. She was looking at the horizon.

It was rather odd.

She pointed.

“We are going that way. To the sea.”

This time, they walked. Pellea was in the lead. Though she walked more cautiously, the scenery did not change. However, after a while, the hairs on the back of Julia’s neck began to stand up. She felt like they were being watched. Once she heard a small scuttling noise. She turned around quickly, but saw nothing.

“Pellea—” Pellea held a hand to her lips.

“Quiet. We are in the Kingdom of the Krabs.”

Julia almost laughed at the way she said it (Kuh-rhabs) but the complete seriousness of her tone made Julia reconsider that course of action.

“We must be extremely careful. They are territorial, and very difficult to deal with.”

Julia shivered a little bit, and then noticed something rather odd about the sand. It looked exactly the same as the sand she had been walking through for the past few days, but it made different sounds, squishing sounds beneath her sneakers. And, she noticed upon looking, that the bottoms of her red canvas sneakers were wet. Something was very odd. She was more than a little uneasy.

You see, Julia didn't like spiders. Crabs were like ocean spiders. Her brother once put a giant spider in her orange juice one morning and she had nearly died of shock when the hairy thing hit her in the face.

At precisely this moment, Pellea stopped. She said very quietly, "Turn around. Slowly."

Julia didn't really want to turn around. But she did, agonizingly slowly.

She gasped. Hundreds of thousands of crabs—tiny, big, humongous, blue, red, green, yellow—scuttled behind them. Their legs made eerie shifting sounds in the sand. Most of them had swords and spears which varied in size from crab to crab. Some had little beards and goatees, made from everything from cotton balls to troll doll hair. Between moments of abject terror Julia wondered where they had come up with that idea.

Then they spoke, each of them barking or squeaking one word. "What. Are. You. Doing. On. Our. Land. Biped. ?." Apparently, they had a limited capacity for speech, but the fact that they could think collectively was interesting. Also, it was a little funny that one of the crabs, a tiny sunflower yellow one, had to do the intonation for the question, a tiny little "hmmmm?" But back to the monstrous terror.

Pellea did not appear affected at all. She stared at them all, hand on the hilt of her sword, betraying no emotion.

"We seek passage through your lands."

"We. Demand. Tribute. For. Passage."

“Our mission is too important to be troubled by the likes of you—crustaceans.”

The crabs scuttled, irritated, banging their weapons against their carapaces. They moved closer to the pair, and encircled them, their eyes cold and alien. Pellea drew her sword and began to make hand gestures, drawing in her mysterious reserves of magical power.

“WAIT!” Julia shouted. The crabs stopped, Pellea looked over at her. She reached up into her mousy brown hair and removed a silver bobby pin. She remembered reading somewhere that crabs liked shiny things. Or was that ravens? Crows? Pellea looked incredulously at her, and Julia tossed the bobby pin to the crabs. They quickly moved away from where it landed, and then circled around it reverently. Or at least, what Julia thought was reverence. They were crabs after all. The mass parted slightly, and an aged crab with a shell yellow and cracking, wearing a long tuft of white troll-doll hair scuttled forward slowly and picked up the pin in its claws. It turned it over, evaluating it. There was a long moment of hushed, catholic silence.

The mass addressed them once again.

“Your. Tribute. Is. Valuable. Too. Valuable.”

Julia looked from Pellea to the crabs, completely blown away that her desperate move had worked. She let out a breath.

“You’ll just have to owe me one.” Julia said to the crabs. The old crab dipped its head and said “Yes.”

Julia blinked, and they were gone. Pellea looked down at her (it was really uncanny how easy it was to forget her decided

lack of eyeballs) and raised her eyebrows. “You seem to possess powers all of your own, Julia Sparks.” Julia blushed slightly, looking down at her feet. “Just because I don’t take a sword to everything in the world doesn’t mean I’ve got powers.” Pellea grunted, and they kept moving.

The sand became soggy and soggy as they walked, though it showed no visible signs of change. Julia’s shoes were soaked, and she could feel something cold and wet around her ankles, but she couldn’t quite place it. It felt like water, but it was somehow far away, tickling her ankles yet not quite there. There was no sound, aside from the wind whipping through the crests of desert sand which had become so familiar she had almost forgotten it was there.

Pellea abruptly stopped and turned to Julia.

“Do you feel it?” she asked. Julia nodded, though she didn’t know quite what she was feeling. It felt a little like water.

“What is it?”

“It is the ocean of this world. The only one. But you must bring yourself to it. It will not come to you.” She gestured around.

“This desert will trap you as long as you allow it to.” With that, Pellea reached out into the air with a scarred hand, and grabbed something. Her clutching fingertips distorted the air, grabbing some kind of invisible fabric. She tugged at it, like she was trying to rip it down, and she abruptly vanished. Julia blinked. There was no longer any distortion, nor was there any Pellea. She heard a distant, almost ghostly voice.

“You have to let it go.”

Julia had no idea what that meant.

She also had absolutely no clue what to do, and she was very very alone. She reached a hand out feebly to grasp at the air as Pellea had done, but to no avail. She sighed, and walked further forward, until the wispy wet and cold of the invisible water brushed her knees. An idea formed in her head. She moved back, until she no longer felt the water.

“You know,” she said, louder than necessary, “this stupid desert is hot.” She pulled her swimsuit (a pink polka-dotted number) out of her backpack and put it on. She felt rather stupid, her too-long legs covered in freckles, the chipped green nail polish on her toes making stark contrast with the hard yellow sand, gems revealed within mundane rock.

But she sprinted forward anyway. The cold hit her feet, taking her breath away, but she shouted with joy, enjoying the experience that was like no other, of feeling something but not seeing it, of understanding that her senses could be fooled, that her tools were inadequate. The water surged around her knees and she jumped, pulling her knees into her chest, a cannonball. The splash was enormous, and with it came a real ocean, a deep blue-green that surrounded her and filled her mouth (which she had forgotten to close). She stood, gasping, choking and shivering, and looked around, the waves gently lapping at her bare legs. The ocean stretched as far as the eye could see on one side, and a long strip of beach encompassed the other side. The sky was a pale Nordic grey, huge sharp clouds chasing one another about the sky (quite literally chasing each other. What? You’ve never seen clouds play tag?). She spluttered the last bit of water from her lungs, and made her way over to the shore, where Pellea stood impassively. Julia stomped her way over to the knight and said, failing to conceal the pride in her voice:

“Well, I made it through.”

Julia thought she saw the tiniest hint of a smile play across the face of the knight, but then it was gone.

“You may want to get changed.”

...

Julia dressed, shivering with goosebumps. She noticed that she could make out ugly little buildings in the distance and another large, less distinct object next to them. “What are those?” she asked.

“That is Ahab’s camp. He’s been here for a very long time.”

“Are we going over there?”

“Yes. We need to get across the ocean, and this is the only way.”

As they made their way down to the town, Julia looked down the shore, trying to see if there was any other option. She didn’t want to go to the town. It scared her for some reason, forcing thoughts that weren’t hers into her mind. Bloated, wasted time lay across the beach, made from driftwood and tar. It reminded her of something, but she couldn’t place it.

“What are we supposed to do when we get there?” Julia asked, failing to hide the small note of fear in her voice.

“You are going to convince Ahab to sail again.”

Convince Captain Ahab to sail again? From what Julia knew of *Moby Dick* (she hadn’t actually gotten to the part where Ahab makes his first appearance) Ahab never had any real trouble sailing across the ocean in pursuit of the white whale. It was

more surprising to her that he *wasn't* sailing. Was it the same Captain Ahab, or a different one?

“Keep your wits about you,” Pellea said, noticing Julia’s concern, “the camp is a dangerous place, even if it doesn’t appear that way.”

Julia gulped. They slipped forward into the camp, which, up close, looked pretty terrible. Calling them shacks did a disservice to shacks everywhere. These were scattered about, and sullen looking men and women ambled about them slothfully. Many of them looked familiar, but Julia wasn’t paying close attention. The place made her want to slip into a restless, uneasy slumber. The camp was cast into shadow by a giant ship, beached just outside of the town far from the shoreline. The ship was dried out and dead looking, pieces of tattered sailcloth blowing in the wind from the mast. Julia could almost hear the ghost of the ship pining to sail again, but it was quickly stifled by the muggy, tired atmosphere of the place.

Pellea led the way to the ship. Julia recognized many different people, but it was the sort of recognition that comes in passing, seeing someone that you swear you’ve seen before, but you can’t quite place them and there was no time to double check. There was a gangplank making its way onto the deck of the ship, and Pellea marched right up it.

She never stops to think, does she? Julia thought exasperatedly. She took a deep breath and followed the knight up onto the deck of the ship.

...

It was a ghost town. The decks were covered in muck and

grime, and everything appeared to be in a serious state of disuse. Not a living thing could be seen, but a door leading into the bowels of the ship stood ajar. They made their way down into the darkness, the boards beneath their feet creaking with a suppressed loneliness. As they made their way down the stairs, their eyes adjusted to the muggy gloom, shadows of life flitting in front of their eyes.

Then they entered the bowels of the ship. Tiny pinpoints of light shot through the hull, where cracks in the sealed wood had begun to form. The gloom penetrated even her abundant reserves of cheer, slowly worming its way into her limbs, slowing her down, making her mind and body sluggish. She forced herself to examine the room.

Men and women lounged about, lying wherever there was a comfortable spot to lie, in fact, lying even when the spot wasn't that comfortable. Sacks of flour, ugly wooden chairs, hammocks suspended from the ceiling, piles of dirty laundry—anything that could be lounged on was. It reminded Julia of her older brother's room, nothing placed deliberately, things just strewn about, dropped where they had exhausted their current utility and left—forgotten. Julia looked closer at the people, sure she recognized some of them. Her eyes honed in on a man splayed on his back on a sack of flour.

His doublet (yes, he was wearing a doublet) was food-stained on the front, and his green leggings and odd-looking boots made him look like an escaped elf from the North Pole. His small, paunchy stomach rose and fell with each labored breath. He smelled very strongly of alcohol, and maybe a little bit of urine. Julia stared at him, recognition washing over her the instant she saw his poorly manicured goatee and greasy, slicked back hair spread over a bald pate.

This man was William Shakespeare. Julia was about ninety-percent sure. She covered her mouth in surprise, stifling a gasp. After the moment of shock, she slowly lowered her hand. Something about him was—*off*. It was like he had been painted in broad strokes with a clumsy hand—the clothes, first of all. Definitely a North Pole vibe. Clearly done by someone who had only a remote conception of the fashions of the Elizabethan period (Julia knew if it had been her, the job would have been much better). As Julia looked at him, she became aware of his odd physical features. He was not distorted, his nose was in the correct position, as well as his eyes. He just didn't quite look the way Shakespeare was supposed to. He had a defeated look in his eyes, and the spark of genius that Julia had always associated with the bard was also missing. He just didn't *feel right*. He snorted and mumbled something, then rolled onto his side.

They moved past the Shakespeare-who-was-not-Shakespeare, and made their way to the rear of the ship. As they approached, the masses of people (and characters, it turned out—Julia was pretty sure she saw a giant yellow bear with a pot of honey balanced precariously on his sleeping head) thinned, and they came to a clear area with a chair in the center.

In the chair sat Captain Ahab, scourge of the sea.

His grey eyes were flat and level, always staring just past any particular point of focus. His black hair, tinged with grey, was a rumpled mess, and his face was covered with an even dusting of stubble. He had a strong jaw, and straight white teeth. He might have been handsome, but the hard, cold way he looked at the world made him another thing entirely. One is not romantically attracted to impassive, rocky cliff faces. He wore a long coat, unbuttoned, with a clean white shirt underneath. His feet were bare underneath pressed blue trousers. It was as if he

was preparing to go somewhere, but had never quite got out of the door.

Julia tried to say something, but her breath had caught in her throat. Here was her reason for rereading that stupid book over and over made real in front of her, and she couldn't say anything at all to him!

Luckily, Pellea broke the silence.

"Greetings, Ahab."

Ahab looked up, and acknowledged Pellea with a nod, not really looking at her. He didn't really *look* at anything.

"We seek passage across the ocean. You and your crew must help us."

There was a long moment of deep silence.

"No."

Ahab didn't dismiss them from the bowels of his ship, he simply leaned back in his chair, and let out a deep sigh. Pellea stood for a moment, her mouth forming a hard line. She made a move to speak, but Julia interrupted her.

"Why not? Your world is in danger, or so I hear from this lady."

Ahab looked at her with that same sense of farawayness in his eyes. Julia looked back, and forced herself to stare into his eyes. There she saw an anger that she hadn't noticed before. It was deep inside Ahab, and Julia realized that the anger must have been there a long time because it was very difficult to see, hidden behind layers and layers of sadness. But there was

something else there too. He didn't say anything, and after a moment, Julia had an idea. She stamped her foot and shouted:

"The Ahab I've heard about went to the ends of the Earth for revenge! He didn't sit inside his ship moping!"

Ahab chuckled. Then he burst into laughter. It was cold, high laughter, devoid of warmth and feeling. It made Julia shiver, and some of the characters around the room looked up, only very slightly alarmed out of their stupors. Ahab spoke.

"The Ahab you've heard about!? The Ahab from the book, you mean!" His voice was rough, as if it hadn't been used in many years. "But I am the Ahab you read! And the Ahab that so many others have read! In fact, maybe I should thank you," his voice took on a tone of scorn, "if it hadn't been for you *readers*, myself and the hundreds on this ship wouldn't exist."

Julia looked at Pellea, who looked just as clueless. Ahab stood up, and began pacing toward them, malice in his voice.

"But you see, I am not Ahab! Ahab is a character in a book. He isn't real! I exist because enough people believe in me, talk about me, write about me—"

"That doesn't make any sense," Julia interrupted, "just because a bunch of people believe in something, doesn't make it true!"

"And yet, here I stand before you. And I curse the day I came into existence, a purpose defined for me without my consent. There is no white whale here for me to hunt. Shakespeare doesn't have timeless plays lurking in his alcohol addled mind. We are children, enslaved by the meaninglessness of our existences, our collective and distinct lack of narrative!"

He was inches from Julia's face when he finished, and he spat those last words in her face. He turned on his heel, and slumped back into his chair. Julia looked around the room, realization flooding over her. Characters without a story. It was really kind of sad. Julia really didn't know what that felt like. Not yet, at least. Maybe when she got older.

She considered a moment, and then told Pellea to "go wait outside." Pellea looked at her a long moment, and then left. Julia waited until she was gone, and then walked forward, slowly, carefully. She was inches from the man. She slowly slipped her hand into his. It was very soft.

"Come with me."

He didn't resist, though the dead look remained in his eyes. Julia led him out of the ship, walking towards the beach. She took off her sneakers, and rolled up her pant legs. She gestured for Ahab to do the same. She took his hand again, and led him out into the surprisingly warm water. *The temperature of the water must fluctuate around here*, she thought to herself. *Or else it's dependent on how profound I'm trying to be.* They walked until the water just touched Julia's knees. Ahab was tall, so it was more around his shins.

Julia took a deep breath. Ahab looked the same as ever. She waited for the water to clear around her feet. She looked over at him.

"Wiggle your toes." She said, trying to sound as authoritative as possible. Ahab looked at her.

"What?"

"I said, wiggle your toes. I'm watching you. Do it."

Ahab looked at her for a moment. He looked down at his feet, and then wiggled his toes slightly. He looked a little confused.

“Alright. What did that feel like?”

Ahab took a moment, wiggled his toes a bit more.

“I don’t really know. It feels like standing in scrambled eggs.”

“Alright. How does it feel?”

“I don’t understand.”

“How does it make your toes feel?”

Ahab took another moment, his grey eyes brightening slightly.

“It feels...good.”

Julia smiled. Then she spoke to Ahab in a stern, not quite condescending voice.

“You are the biggest baby I’ve ever met! Waaaaahhhhh. ‘Distinct lack of story.’ Boo hoo. You think that I woke up one day with the universe speaking to me and telling me what to do?” Julia made a mental note not to mention the journey she was on, which was tailored exactly to her specifications. “Tell me, what do scrambled eggs taste like?”

Ahab looked caught off guard. “Uhhh, they taste like...erm... they taste like...,” he paused and lowered his head. “I don’t remember. I had them for breakfast yesterday.”

“Exactly. You were so busy crying about how meaningless your

life was, you forgot that you're *alive!*" She pointed back at the ship. "I'm guessing those boneheads over there are all having the same problem." Then, she walked over to Ahab, and gave him a gentle slap on the face.

"Ow."

A light came into his eyes that hadn't been there before, and he seemed to grow a few inches taller. He started to say something, but Julia kicked a huge splash of water into his face. He spluttered for a moment, water dripping from his face, and then he grinned, and kicked water right back.

...

They all had a day in the water, and it was good. The next day, with the help of some monosyllabic krabs, they pushed off the beach and set sail. Adventure.

....

When Julia was ten years old, a hurricane blasted the Floridian coast where her family lived. She and her then 13-year-old brother Michael hid under a table while their parents ran around outside, shutting storm shutters and battening down hatches. Michael was frightened, his long red hair plastered around his ghostly pale face, the posturing toughness of his adolescence gone. He was crying, sweating and shaking, and Julia knew what she had to do. She held him close, even though he was older, and told him a story about jellyfish.

So, there's this jellyfish, right? And this little thing can live forever. I mean FOREVER. Whenever it's in danger, feels threatened or whatever, it turns itself into a baby jellyfish, I think it's called a cyst or something. And then it grows up again. Wild, huh? Lonely too, don't you think? Like there's a

jellyfish somewhere that's seen EVERYTHING. What would that jellyfish say to us?

She didn't remember any other part of it, but she remembered the story wrapping her brother up in a soft cloak, a cloak of protection and safety, the color and flavor keeping the little boy distant from the howling wind and smashing rain, keeping him far from harm. When she told stories from that day forward, they were a bricolage of places and things, and they left her memory as quickly as they entered it. For her, the story wasn't as important as the tellings of it, the nuggets, the bits and snippets, that was the important thing.

But her brother remembered. He remembered every story.

...

The ship, as it turned out, was called the *Enterprise*. Julia really didn't know that much about ships, but the ship she sailed on now was magnificent. It had beautiful snow white sails, and the ship had been polished and shined to a deep smoky brown.

The ship didn't hold her interest for long though, pretty as it was. Julia was more of a people person. And a sea person. She really liked the sea, watching it ebb and flow, splashing up against the edges of the boat.

She cooked every morning for the crew (with William Shakespeare, who, as it turned out, made a mean Cajun gumbo). She learned all of their names, and loved watching them as they took plates of food from her hands. Her opinion of all of them had changed. They weren't painted in broad strokes, as she had thought before. It was as if many different artists had painted the same picture, and then someone had

forced all of those pictures on top of one another, and smeared them together. It was kind of beautiful in a way, like a collective project that would never be finished.

But it was exciting to watch each individual develop their own identity, to grow—Tom Sawyer found a deep fascination with embroidery, Long John Silver read an old book on ballroom dance and began to teach the other members of the crew, sweeping around on his peg leg quite gracefully, and the tin man began developing his operatic register.

Julia watched all of this, and she very closely watched Pellea, who never seemed to change. The blind sword master did nothing but stand at the rear of the ship and watch the ocean as it flowed behind. One day, Julia climbed down from the rigging (she'd been climbing a lot, and her hands had become hard and calloused, and, while we're on the subject, her skin was rather browned by the sun) and stood next to Pellea, watching the ocean. There was silence, interrupted only by the lapping of the waves against the edge of the boat.

“So, Pellea.”

Pellea didn't move. Julia decided to be blunt.

“What's your story? Why do you do all of this?”

In moments like these the world changes. Quiet moments—not the grand moments that resound in stories. The moment when the soldier sees the eyes of his enemy as they both walk through the woods, smoking and eating apples. The moment when a child cuts herself for the first time. The moment when the world is not the way it was, and will never return. One is never prepared.

Pellea watched the ocean, her expression unchanging. They waited for a very long time. Julia didn't mind. She was getting used to the fact that Pellea often spent a lot of time on dramatic silence as a theatrical device. It was kind of cool. And sometimes, really important things were a lot of work to say.

Pellea spoke:

“When I was a girl, I was an orphan living alone in a merciless city. It was take or be taken, hurt or be hurt. I have done horrible things,” she said without a hint of theatrics. “I stabbed an old woman to death for a loaf of bread. I remember how her blood felt as it flowed over my hand.”

Julia had not been prepared for this. The world grew darker, colder.

“On another occasion, I killed and ate a little dog that trusted me for scraps of food. The look in its eyes was...” She didn't say. Julia didn't ask, trying to hide her revulsion.

“Then an old man found me. I never learned his name because he could not speak. When I first saw him, I tried to rob him. He stopped me. I didn't see him again until I was ambushed by other children, beaten, and left for dead. They were cruel, they took my eyes. I don't know why. Madness, perhaps, like the madness I had felt. But the man helped me, he taught me... how to be good. Mercy—understanding—the only things that differentiate us from a dark sucking vacuum. When he died, he left me this blade. No message, but I understood what he wanted me to do.”

“What?” Julia asked.

There was a very long moment where, and Pellea's head turned

to face Julia's. Julia suddenly felt bored into, like someone was getting inside her head and setting up a room all for themselves.

“To help you, Julia Sparks. This world is not the only thing that is in desperate need of repair. You are broken too, though you hide it very well.”

There was silence, and Julia looked out onto the ocean, a sharp feeling inside her chest reminding her of the world she had driven away from on a bright yellow school bus.

“What am I supposed to do to fix myself?”

Pellea didn't answer. She faced the ocean with a quiet dignity. Julia's world was a little different now, clouded with the pain of sharing and the hope for some ephemeral explanation that would never come.

“I suppose I better just be good for now.” Julia said.

Pellea nodded.

...

After a while, the novelty of traveling aboard a ship began to fade away, and Julia began to grow bored. Actually, that was a bit of an understatement. Sailing, to Julia, was *extremely boring*. The sky was grey, a constant, no sun to be seen. The ocean was beautiful, a sharp green, but even that got a little boring after a while. Beautiful things tend to become that way without moderation. Inclement weather did not seem to exist in this place. There was never any wind—yet, the sails were always full. When she asked the captain about it, he growled at her about “tradesman's secrets.” Shakespeare, almost on cue,

was there with semi-profound (and slightly disgusting) iambic pentameter to describe the functioning of the ship.

The days slowly slipped by, and Julia fell into deep slothful melancholy. She read *Moby Dick*. Actually completed the book. Not bad, but a little overhyped. Many times she resisted the urge to ask Ahab his thoughts about the book, but she didn't, because the answer probably wouldn't have been as profound as she would have liked.

...

Michael had left.

Julia remembered her mother crying, and her father angrily moving around the house, slamming doors. Glass shattered in the kitchen. She hadn't seen her brother since the car wreck. Julia was sitting on the couch, reading a book but not reading it. If she didn't face the problem, it couldn't affect her.

As the words jumbled, her father strode into the room. He sat down on the couch next to her.

"Julia."

Julia gripped her book so hard her hands turned white. She saw out of the corner of her eye that her father's hand was bleeding. It trickled down his right knuckle, seemingly unnoticed. Her father spoke, almost in monotone, as if he wasn't speaking to her.

"It's my fault. I didn't raise him right. This is my fault, it's my responsibility. He wouldn't have gotten into that car, wouldn't have been—been—" Her father broke down, sobbing into his chest, and Julia couldn't look at him, couldn't say anything.

How could she? Her brother wasn't dead, not even a scratch on him, but that woman and her boy, they would never, they could never—

Julia woke from her dream, suspended in her hammock, the ship was rocked by what felt like a massive right hook. The timbers shook. Many voices screamed in disharmony. She scrambled out of her bunk, pulling on her clothes as she ran to the main deck. This was unusual. The last time she had been awoken in the middle of the night, Susan B. Anthony and the Seven Dwarfs had been in a tussle over the amount of time certain crew members should be allowed to work.

She froze in shock when she saw what awaited her in the open air. First, Ahab at the wheel of the ship, holding it with all the strength in his sinewy arms, his eyes wild with challenge. But that only held Julia's attention for a second. The giant whirlpool quickly captured her interest. It was a massive maelstrom, black and smooth as ivory. It made no sound, the screams of the crew and the creaks and groans of the ship the only sounds audible, cutting the night air.

"IT CAME FROM NOWHERE!" shouted Ahab, but Julia was focused on Pellea, who stood gracefully at the side of the ship, staring down into the abyss. Taking care not to fall, Julia made her way over to the knight.

"Do you know what it is?"

Pellea stared at her impassively. "I suppose it is our next challenge."

What happened next was almost too fast. The ship yawed, and tipped sideways into the abyss. Julia felt weightless, floaty.

...

Darkness.

...

She opened her eyes, recognizing the semi-familiar inside of the yellow school bus. Her grandfather was driving, a toothpick held stiffly between his teeth. A snowstorm raged outside, but it didn't matter as they weren't really driving down any sort of road. Her grandfather rolled down the window, and spit the toothpick out into the storm. He rolled the window back up, and turned the Willie Nelson blaring on the radio down to a more tolerable level.

His eyes stayed focused straight ahead. It was obvious that he was trying hard not to look at Julia. There was silence. "Grandpa." There was a long pause, and then he looked at her cautiously out of the corner of his eye.

"What's going on? Everything is going so fast! I thought I could figure it out as I went, but everything's so confusing! Who am I supposed to be in this place? What am I supposed to do? What does it mean!?"

The last statement exploded out of her, and Herb jumped. He looked directly at her now, his hands no longer steering the bus, the steering wheel spinning uselessly. He took a deep breath, and there seemed to be (Julia couldn't quite tell behind his glasses) tears in his eyes.

"You're going to find out, one way or another."

She swallowed. This was not the same mountain of confidence she remembered from their last meeting. There was something

hidden in his voice and demeanor. “Things are moving very fast, yes. You’ll make it though. You’ll get it, before it’s all over.” Julia reached over, and squeezed the old man’s hand, clutching the finger with the massive ruby class ring.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“I trust you. It’ll make sense.” Julia didn’t believe it, but it looked saying it comforted him somewhat. He smiled, a sad little smile that didn’t look right on his face. He gestured around. “This will help you, I promise. It helped me, so many years ago.”

Julia had no idea what that meant. Herb placed his hands back on the wheel. “Get ready.” Entirely before Julia was ready, she was somewhere else.

...

A cold stone room, with a huge iron door situated exactly in the middle of the wall in front of her. There was nothing else. The stone was sickly green, cold and emotionless, as if it had been bricked and mortared out of the primordial tissues of the earth, before life was even an inkling swimming in soup. The door radiated cold, much colder than a door had any business being. Julia slowly stretched out her fingertips and almost touched the handle, but the gelid surface screamed at her fingers not to touch it. The cold reminded her of the liquid nitrogen her father froze apples in, much to the delight of she and her brother.

She remembered the way the apples shattered when they hit the floor, and she wondered if she would shatter too. She hadn’t really understood her grandfather’s words, but she

assumed that this was some kind of test. Protagonists always had to do tests. Find her way out of the room. Maybe another way? Running her hands over the cold stone walls, feeling for hidden panels, a secret brick. She found nothing. Definitely through the door.

Shaking, she sat down on the floor in the middle of the room, preparing herself. “Here goes nothing, I guess.” She said it, and the room almost seemed to swallow her words with cold, mocking silence. She charged forward and grabbed the huge pewter handle of the door.

It was an explosion of pain, cold like fire, beyond any sort of cold Julia had felt before. She willed herself to see through the pain, to push through, but conscious thought left her screaming brain. She fell, and as she did, the handle turned, her shoulder slamming the door, and it swung open—sending her gangly form sprawling into a tuft of snow.

The door disappeared and the cold with it, replaced by clouds. Big white puffy ones. Framed by a beautiful blue sky, no sun anywhere to be seen. She sat up, the pain quickly receding, a tiny throb in her hand. Tucking her knees under herself, she slowly stood up, and nearly fell down again in shock.

A column.

She was on top of a column of snow. There was nothing else, just the blue of the sky and the clouds, stretching down slowly into a black abyss that gaped at her like the maw of a hungry beast. It swayed, a light breeze playing slowly about it, the source of the swaying.

Of course, she thought, remembering her lengthy, windless sea journey, *NOW there's a breeze*. She caught her breath, in

and out, in and out. She looked up at the sky until her breath returned to a rate that was closer to panic than abject terror. Looking down slowly, she saw nothing but black on all sides of the column.

Yup, still terrifying.

What kind of trial was this? No clues. Column, sky, black. Then there was an odd whistling noise, and part of the column slid slowly down into the abyss inches from Julia's toes. No trace, just gone. Now Julia began freaking out.

"Ohgodohgodohgodohgod." She didn't know what to do. The sharp spikes of fear had wormed their way into her mind, preventing her from moving, from thinking. Fear is this way. Only with practice and experience and stupidity (which gets called courage if one survives) can it be kept from turning its subject into a frightened animal. Julia forced herself to think, because she was braver than most.

A memory.

Her father was unsuccessfully trying to teach her to roll a kayak in the small river that ran by their house. Every time she flipped over, the water slapping past her face made her thrash for air in the water. The fear held her tight, and she always grabbed at the skirt holding her in, ripped it off, and swam out into current. After this happened twelve times or so, and Julia didn't really want to try anymore, her father held both of her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Girl, it's gonna be freaky," he said in his slow, Georgian drawl. "You might not get used to it. Our body doesn't like being put in situations it has no right being in. For most people, when that happens, panic takes over, makes them mindless. Not you

and not me though. *We* have a secret. *We* remind ourselves that we have brains. Brains that can think, if we let them.”

She thought.

“I hate kayaking.”

She mumbled this to herself as she stood, another piece of the column falling away. Now, all she had to stand on was a tiny little square of snowy column. Quickly, she inventoried the facts.

1. There was no way she could continue to stand on this column.
2. There was no number 2.

That wasn't very helpful.

Then she remembered something Pellea had told her. Something about constructs of the mind, she had great power, some dumb thing like that. Stupid stupid stupid.

“Stupid” she said out loud.

Then she spread out her arms, flapped and waggled and jumped.

She jumped and she flew.

Flying was exactly ten times better than she had imagined it to be. She sailed out into the pale blue sky, her arms outstretched, wind rushing by her face. The column disappeared and there was now only a hemispheric division between blue and black.

This was exciting. This was *living*. Maybe she was figuring out what it was that her grandfather wanted her to know. She could will things into existence! She floated about, trying as hard as she could to imagine her favorite food—stove top macaroni and cheese, bread crumbs crumbled on top.

Nothing.

She willed REALLY hard.

Nothing happened.

Her mind worked, trying to piece together why she could fly, but she couldn't make food. She tried imagining other things, but that didn't work either. It didn't make sense. She floated in mid air, crossing her legs like a televangayogi on TV, contemplating. The fact that she couldn't do anything she wanted dampened the novelty of flight a little. What if something else was making her fly? What if she wasn't special? What if everyone who came to the land of poorly-built-disappearing-snow-columns-suspended-over-an-abyss could fly? And what was she supposed to do now?

She pulled up, flying as high and as fast as she could, but the horizon line never changed, always an equilateral division between blue and black. She imagined other things, her family, New York City, baguettes—nothing seemed to make a difference.

She didn't like her next thought.

Maybe there was something down below?

But it was so scary. This wasn't your typical lights-off darkness. This was for-real darkness, the darkness of sleep—of death. Or

so she thought. She hadn't really thought about it before. She hadn't died recently, nor had she become a brooding modernist poet.

But when it came to doing something, Julia was not one for deep moments of contemplation. Her imagination ran rampant, and she ran with it, too impatient to let things happen at their own pace. Her fear of the blackness was overwhelmed by her desire to know what was going on in this stupid place.

So, she let herself drop into the abyss.

Unlike the sky, the black rushed up to greet her almost immediately. It became a material substance, catching her, enveloping her. She struggled, but it won. It filled her ears, her eyes, her nose, her mouth. She breathed it in, and something about it felt intimate, almost familiar as she lost consciousness.

...

A voice in the darkness. A hand clutching hers. A distant sound, comforting.

...

A small light. Dim. But it grew brighter and brighter, and soon her eyes were forced to open. It was green. A green light. A sword. A blade close to her face, glowing. Julia rolled to her back, and saw Pellea looking down at her.

"Are you all right?" she asked. Her voice had an odd echo, as if it were being broadcast to Julia's location from very far away. Pellea stretched out her hand and helped Julia to her feet, and she examined her surroundings. Surroundings was probably the wrong word—impenetrable blackness surrounded

them (as was becoming a theme on this particular journey), so fathomless that the light from Pellea's sword was swallowed up by it almost inches from where it glowed. The only visible marker was a nearly invisible grey road stretching into the dark.

"Where are we?"

Pellea responded, grimmer than Julia had ever heard her speak. "We are in Death's kingdom. I escaped this place once before." Julia found this statement to be rather odd. She was unused to the idea of Death as a being who had a kingdom. A cloak and a scythe maybe, but not a kingdom. That was a Grecian notion, Hades and that all that funny business. Also, Pellea had been here before? Did that mean she had died? Was Julia dead?

Julia asked Pellea if she was dead.

"Yes." She said simply.

"Huh?" Julia asked.

Pellea did not answer. Explanations didn't seem to be the order of the day. Any more attempts at academizing this place were probably fruitless. She looked around, getting very tired of standing in the dark, in both senses of the word. Why was she constantly forced down a path that she didn't wish to follow? Wasn't she in charge of her own fate, couldn't she choose the circumstances in which she lived and died? But, as usual, such questions were kind of boring, so she squared her shoulders and started down the grim grey road. As they walked, Julia looked at Pellea.

"You're not allowed to tell me anything about this place, are

you?”

“I can’t tell you about this place because I do not see it the same way you do.”

“How do you see it?” A pause. “Oh, right, I guess you don’t. ‘Cause you’re blind.”

Once again, no response, not even to Julia’s poor attempt at a joke. They walked in silence, until inklings of something began to appear on the horizon. Which was odd, because who could say the place they were traveling was round or flat? Why was there a horizon? Approximation will have to serve. It was a black light, which was odd—it wasn’t like a black light in a night club, those were usually kind of purple—it was a blackness that glowed with impossibility. As they got closer, she saw that it was a river, and the blackness felt substantive, full of, Latin springs to mind, *nihil*. But that wasn’t right either. It made a sound, a slow sliding, shuffling sound that sounded like a synthesized recording of what a river was supposed to sound like.

As they approached the banks of the river, Julia felt a growing sense of dread. The road ended sharply and they found themselves in a field that had been almost impossible to notice from farther away. Little tiny scraggles of grass forced their way out of the black earth, desperately searching for purchase in the darkness of the ground. It was odd to see life (if that’s what the grass was) no matter how small and pathetic. Even in this place that oozed absence, there was substance, there were *things*.

Then she saw the river. It moved slowly, like a gelatin glacier. The substance was sticky and gelatinous, like milk left in the sun. It was many colors, but they were all muted, like the refractions of light in a puddle of oil. But the horror was slower

to process. There were shapes.

The shapes of people.

They were featureless and almost amorphous, but the eyes made them recognizable as people. The eyes rolled and roved madly in sockets, desperately searching for something that would never be found. What Julia had mistaken for the sound of the the river flowing was in fact the sound of the shapes dragging along the bank of the river.

She was shocked and revolted, but her body seemed to be ignoring these feelings. Change was coming, whether she wanted it or not. Her hand slowly reached out, and touched the surface of the water. It was cold, and felt—

I AM LONELY so it made.
And it was happy, but it couldn't make like itself.
The makings withered and died
spilled on the ground
and though the makings
flourished, it was still
lonely.
so
lonely.

And slowly, the loneliness turned,
Turned to anger, turned to resentment.
A sun burning so bright it consumed
firefleshmind until it was everything
The makings were burned melted down
reforged by furious light sopotent. When it
was done the makings were still there,
and changed. But it was so lonely.

It turned once again to the
makings with a jealous rage and it took,
took the innards and ran
ran
ran
ran
until it reached the end of all
and stood waiting. They stood and
watched on the end as it stood
Shaking.

WHY it screamed
and screamed and the makings
had no answer for it, because they
couldn't understand the lack, the
lonely.

And so it threw the innards
the
in
si
de
o'er the edge. Where it could not
go.

And then it fled.

She lives in the city
stands in a
window
in a string.

Money comes
the men too
she takes a piece of them

and they of her (Wholeness is...?)

her breasts fleshy and meaningless
her sex a roller coaster

This she knows.

She had a name—Lucy? Lucinda?
But she forgets it and hates it.
She likes the moment of wanting, where
she is chosen

chosen. Its nice.
But then its time
which doesn't mean anything.

She walks down the canal.
a sonorous voice
she doesn't turn, staring
out at the opaque stillness
transfixed
the the voice is sharp
she turns
recognition
a regular
he slaps her her nose breaks
and she

falls

he is on top punching
sledgehammer blows
crack
blood in her eyes
mouth.

He stops. Steps
back there is the snap of a knife

the bridge is high high high high
she doesn't care
some dignity some small amount please
she stands, quicker than he can think
and is over.

Splash.

He stands before the plastic
mountain
it rises imposing before him
Impossible "a."
a. a. a. aa. aaa. aaaa. AAAAA.
he can't
not one
more not
one more toggle
press toggle toggle
press press press press press.
his chair squeaks
hands immobile
limply at the sides
the words jumble
numbers/equations
he listens to the sounds
the dull hum of the xerox
pages falling whoosh whoosh stack
an electric hum order/civility/.....
he listens hard for the signs of his life
no connection static noise.
digits raise
pressure on "d" and "f"

more pressure
pressss
urrrre.....SNAP.
the machine within his chest gives up
his head lowers to the desk.

trash
trash
trash
of the white variety
that's what they say
well, show 'em
sawed off shotgun
roadside grocery
the sun is rising ever so slightly in the east, blasting the
landscaping golden hues of magnificent and deadly yellow,
hearkening back to a time long forgotten and remembered
poorly, willfully forgotten rightly so because then makings
burned so brightly that it hurts hurts to remember.
he thumbs back the hammer
doesn't see the gun that
the cashier

I HAVE BEEN BLINDED. SO BLINDED BY THE LIGHT OF
THE SUN IT BURNS SO DEEPLY INTO THE CORE OF ME
SO DEEPLY THAT I AM NOT THE SAME AS I ONCE WAS,
LYING ON THE EDGE AWAY FROM FEELING WHAT

i am forgotten i am so so forgotten once i was there and
perhaps i still am i am perhaps locked away like a malfeasant
waiting for parole that will never come

once i burned o so brightly. so brightly

Drift.

Blown from place to place
a bag of meat and bone
dressed in refuse
this is what he has
chosen. He he he
to be derelict outside away
an observer who does not
observe
he is hungry. or at least his body tells him so
he hasn't been hungry in a very
long _____
he sees_takes
lies down for the night
wakes
burning in belly
handle/blood
another took because he had the hunger
eyes wide
a vision of revelation

The edge of night
car holds the child in the backseat
sleeping calmly
another driver drunk
red
stop
crash.
now there is screaming, metal and
organic. fire
blood
where is my baby.
There
under the
under the
the enormity trembles

the foundations of infinity
not for a moment
for all
she rips a hole
and steps in

d n
a i
r d
k n
a i
n w
d

there is only darkness
and she fights it yes
does not stop
he will come back.
it will give him back.

he does not come back.

...

To understand part of life, you must be hot. You must go to a place where heat and light have intermingled, where the knotted trees sink their massive knobby roots into sodden ground. Where you feel the peeling sensation that comes when a cotton T-shirt separates from your sweaty back like a reluctant lover peels from a partner.

You must understand this, for without it, yellow school buses

and one-legged old men mean nothing.

...

Julia gasped and pulled back from the water. The feeling had been beyond intense, yet it didn't feel interrupted. Like she had pulled back at exactly the right time. She fell back onto the grass, and her breath escaped raggedly from her lungs, like she hadn't taken a breath in many lifetimes. Pellea had not moved, betrayed no emotion.

"May I help you?" a metallic voice asked.

Julia looked up, not really ready for any new stimuli, far too tired, far too exhausted.

A large automaton, at least seven feet tall, loomed over both she and Pellea. It had a sleek silver body, shaped like a human, but there was something distinctly *wrong* about it. Perhaps its fingers were too long, the joints of its arms and legs too sinewy and smooth—no—it was the eyes. Violet and flickering, an intelligence cold and alien. The cordiality it extended to the two travelers was programmed. The automaton felt no reason to state such a thing, but then, that choice wasn't within its control. It had parameters to abide by.

Julia was shaking. "Wh-who are you?" Her voice sounded timid, more timid than it ever had before. The machine tilted its head, and spoke. The voice was grating and hard.

"I have no name. Though I suppose you could identify me with the word Violet." It pointed at its eyes. Pellea stepped forward.

"Gatekeeper, we have met before. We seek the Lord."

Violet appraised both of them with absent eyes. “Pellea Kingsley, you have failed, you are null. Why should I grant you entry? Why should I grant this *child* entry?” Violet said *child* with a particularly grating tone that almost passed for real disdain.

Pellea stepped closer to Violet. The automaton towered over the knight. “The Sad King brought us here. His power has grown so great that even death cannot stop him. She can.”

The automaton laughed, a cold metallic noise, devoid of the elements that make laughter a human device. Pellea did not move. Violet stopped. Julia wanted to protest. She had been powerless so far, powerless against everything. Events had unfolded around her, and she had simply waved at them as they floated by. Violet made computations behind her burning eyes.

“Very well. I will inform the Lord of your intentions. Follow me.” Violet stepped to the edge of the river. Julia kept a very healthy distance from the edge—once had been enough for her. The machine waved a hand and the grey road snaked through the meadow and bridged the gap in the river. It continued coiling along the other bank until it abruptly stopped and shot straight up, forming a grey door with a polished golden handle. Violet gestured at the bridge, as if to say, *after you*.

Pellea led the way across, Julia following, trying to block out the grotesque sloughing sound from below. They were across quickly. Violet waved a hand, and the bridge disappeared. The road to the door remained. Julia was unfazed by the oddness of a door frame standing by itself with a door inside it. Par for the course. Violet opened the door, and gestured for them to go inside. Julia nodded, and slowly walked in first.

The surroundings didn't change. A man appeared, seated at a hardwood table with one vacant chair at the other end.

The man, if that was what he was, was not frightening. He was certain. Yes, certain would be the correct adjective. Julia knew the chair was for her without being told. So she sat in it. The being raised an eyebrow at her and said "Welcome." The voice that came from the mouth was cold and warm, masculine and feminine.

Something deep in the back of her mind clicked, a small piece of recognition that she had tried to forget.

"Did you enjoy my river? It reminds and amuses me from time to time," the words slipped and slided from its mouth. Julia choked back bile.

"Reminds you of what?" She asked. She had grown used to people not introducing themselves.

"I am, as many have called me in one tongue or another, Death. It is rather amusing, as if I need a title, a kingdom to rule over. Facts and truths do not rule. They do not have shifting borders or boundaries. They do not change. I do not change. Though," it gestured to Violet, "I do find amusement from time to time. Novelties serve as my instruments from time to time."

Violet's eyes flickered.

"Well, let us speak about your reason for being here. I am not omniscient. I really have no need to be." It chuckled.

Julia thought for a moment. Though, as was becoming more and more apparent to her, thinking really didn't serve much purpose. She could think herself blue in the face, but things

would continue to happen to her regardless of her choices or desires. There was still that small thing in the back of her mind. It was only a tiny needle, but there nonetheless.

“I’m here to stop the Sad King,” she said quietly.

“Why do you want to stop him?” The being leaned forward in its chair.

“Hatred and malice, as you call them, interest me more than anything. This man seeks to enter my kingdom, to control it, to understand how it works. He believes he knows the truth, but he cannot force his way in here without my permission. To do so would...create difficulties.”

“What truth does he think he knows?” Julia asked.

“It is irrelevant. I rule all possible dimensions, all possible truths. I am the gatekeeper.” He pointed to Pellea. “Why does this woman’s agreement with me interest you?”

“I want to stop him.”

“So did she. Why don’t I just keep you for myself? You would be a wonderful toy.” Julia did not like this creature, and the certainty she had initially felt in its presence was beginning to feel rather false. Suddenly, she understood.

“You have no power over me.” She said it quietly, with the conviction of those who are comfortable with certainty.

“What?” the illusion said dangerously. Julia held up her hand. The table disappeared. The man did too. The world shifted, shimmered, blurred. Julia palmed it aside and brought herself, Pellea, and Violet to the gates of a massive, sand colored castle.

Pellea glanced around, confused.

“How?”

Julia looked at her with steel in her eyes.

“It wasn’t the truth.”

Pellea smiled. They moved to the massive iron gate, which Julia swept open with a flick of her fingers. They marched up staircase after staircase until they came to another large door, which led to a massive throne room.

Julia blew this door apart with a motion of her eyes. In the middle of the room stood a young man, sixteen or seventeen. He loomed in the space, almost filling the room. Julia looked to Pellea and held her hand out. He was tall, and had reddish-brown hair. His features were completely unremarkable.

Pellea drew the gleaming emerald blade from its sheath and placed it in Julia’s palm. Julia smiled and then Pellea disappeared. Julia looked back at the Sad King. At least that’s what he called himself now. Julia knew who he was.

“I see you have made your way through my toys.”

Julia smiled at him. “I saw through them because they weren’t true.”

He laughed in her face. “Truth.” His laugh was devoid of anything that might resemble laughter, it was a bark, the bark of someone desperately trying to remember what a laugh was, what it meant. “Truth does not exist. Human weakness, desire for sense.”

Violet now spoke, after silently moving into the room.

“Master.”

The Sad King glanced at the robot, not at all troubled by it.

“You see, Violet is blessed. It doesn’t have the capacity to comprehend what it means to craft illusions. It doesn’t need such things. It acts. I find such clarity of purpose to be quite enviable. Or maybe it isn’t purpose. Did you enjoy her presence?”

Julia saw the problem, but she didn’t see the solution yet. She waved her hand, and the castle disappeared, and the three of them stood in a desert, a very familiar desert. The Sad King threw back his head and laughed again.

“Shake it off as much as you like, but this is your truth!” He gestured around. “Perhaps the truth is even less than this.” He snapped his fingers, and they were engulfed in darkness, darkness so black that Julia could not will it away, it suffocated her, prevented her from accessing the memory of something that had existed before. She screamed, and swung the sword, slashing slashing madly at the Sad King and he had a sword and they fought and screamed and Julia slowly lost the sword was knocked from her hand and she fell into the black and the king was holding her throat screaming YOU DONT EVEN KNOW YOU DONT KNOW and she was screaming because she knew who he was and there was nothing she could do but call. call. out his name. hisrealname.

Michael!

she remembered. she remembered everything. the times they had had. she remembered her grandfather as he really

was, shrunken and old and powerless, his mind slowly slipping through his hands like so much dust. It heaved with exhaustion. She remembered the love she held for him and the way she saw that crumpled old man as tall and strong and wearing snake leather boots, like a character from a book. And she saw her brother, tall and handsome and intelligent, caring for no reason at all—and she showed this to him, the Sad King—who was her brother and who had also forgotten. This was her power, her truth. And he gasped and dropped the sword and fell to his knees and wept wept because he saw what she saw when she looked at him the world. And she wasn't done.

*You must see them, you must see them, you must face this.
Look into my eyes.*

He looked and he saw the mother and child, he saw the mother with her child and he screamed he was sorry and she didnt say anything anything at all. She looked at him serenely until he stopped and she smiled at him. NO its my fault my fault how can I ever fix it!?! you cant

The mother walked forward, and she was tall, machinelike and there was compassion there and she changed into a woman a tall dark woman who took off her blindfold and she touched him on the shoulder and said “You must live with the broken things because that is how it is.”

Then they lay there, Violet's eyes flickering with slow computation. Michael smiled, a smile of pain and truth.

He said, “I will miss your stories.”

And then it was gone.

...

It was done. And Julia sat among the stars, at a party she had accepted an invitation to. A dark cliff that glowed with mystery stretched out before her. She felt no fear for what was to come. Herb sat at the edge of the cliff, his legs dangling over the precipice. His gnarled, strong hands rested lightly on the cliff-edge. As she moved to him, she saw the globe of the Earth before her. It was beautiful, a sphere that was one, and many, all made of the same life that was inside of her. There was substance, but there was also a vast emptiness. Her mind was blanking slowly out, pieces and places slipping away from her into that void.

“So, you did it.”

“I did? Did what?”

Herb said it as if it hadn't been much of an accomplishment. Julia was slowly slipping but she knew what he would ask next.

“Do you feel any different?”

Julia took in a deep breath. She smiled, and tried to remember everything that had happened, but she couldn't. It was all slipping, slipping so quickly. She remembered the light, the pale light, the glow that had burned within her and the others around her, she remembered faces, full of joy and love, pain and sadness, and rolls of dice. She remembered the dance of the stars, vibrant and full and joyous. The stars did not dance for her now, they twinkled somberly.

“Not much of a party,” she mumbled.

She looked at the old man again, and saw him as she had last

seen him before he had died, withered and small and watery-eyed. The veil was peeling back, soon, too soon. This place felt powerful and also insignificant. It was something that she couldn't quite understand.

"I don't remember much."

Herb smiled. "I was there when you beat him, when you brought him back."

She simply couldn't remember. Who did she bring back? Did she bring anyone back at all?

Julia tried to clear her head. "It didn't really matter that much, did it? It all amounts to the same, doesn't it?"

Herb smiled, and there was hope in his eyes. "The window dressing changes. And there are nice things, folded and wrapped in empty peanut shells."

Julia knew he was wrong. There was stuff, and it moved. Shifted, reformed. And that was something. This place was reserved for her by her dying mind, but that wasn't all. There was something, something else. What was it? Remember Julia, Remember.

Blinding. That's one way to describe it. Blindness so white and so dark that it left an indelible imprint so deep that her skin sloughed off her and she stood naked. Herb was gone, a distortion, an blemish left on the fabric of the blindness before her. The globe of the Earth became a shifting mass, impossibly and infinitely large and then infinitesimally small. Everything, everything at once, rushing rushing inside her.

And then she was back with Herb, who was no longer small,

the lies her mind had thrown to obscure the truth were gone. He was the maniacal bus driver again, that gleam burning in his eyes. Ahab sat with him, an endless ocean reflected in his eyes. They smiled. Ahab threw his head back and laughed and laughed. Julia saw within that laugh that she someday she would have loved this man. He looked straight at her.

“I found the trick. It isn’t a trick though. It’s a fact. There is no balance to the universe, no balance to our stories. We tipped the scales the minute we stepped onto them.”

Julia remembered everything, she refused to let it all go. It was not simply dust or pieces of torn paper. She screamed, as loud as she could, and it burned through all.

It left an indelible imprint.

...

The family sat in the room around the girl. There was no bus shaped hole in the wall. She had died moments before, a last mischievous twinkle in her eye, and they did not know what to do. The brother had returned, lost for so long, but he was in the doorway, the threshold. The girl’s wasted body had never been so beautiful. No one moved, no one breathed. The brother moved forward, and took his mother’s hand.

THE END