

FAIRIE

“Trolls are only macho elves,” I explain to my niece, who is sitting in the upturned palm of my hand. Stellie suffers from an acute form of ultra-dwarfism. Although she is seven and soon to be eight, she weighs only twenty-three pounds. She is almost two feet tall, but squatting the way she is now – hunkered down on my palm – she seems much smaller.

I am reading *THE THREE BILLY-GOATS GRUFF* out loud to her for the third time since my arrival. Stellie goes wide-eyed when I speak the voice of the Troll. She interrupts me frequently with urgent questions about the nature of trolls. Her voice sounds like a chipmunk’s, and every time she says something, I’m equally amazed. We are sitting in amber lamplight, on a sandy, big-cushioned sofa. The salt-smell of the sea and the muffled sound of breaking waves

roll in through the open windows. My sister Susan and her husband, Zed, have gone out for a walk, alone for a change, along the dark beach. ✧

“Why does the troll want to eat the most-little billy-goat?” Stellie’s voice is high and nasal.

“Oh, he doesn’t really want to eat him – he’s just trying to scare him for fun.” J O

“What do trolls eat for breakfast?” H

“On Saturdays, your average troll will eat a bowl of dirty, balled-up socks.” N

Stellie looks at me with her lips parted, like a parakeet expecting a bit of cracker. Then she smiles, realizing that I am making this up. A L S

“Uncle John?” she asks. Her voice seems squeezed, as if out of a balloon. “What does the troll eat on Sunday?” P A

“Oh, he doesn’t eat anything on Sundays. That’s why he’s only fooling the three Billy-Goats Gruff – just for fun.” U G

Stellie looks up at me from my palm and says, “Cause today’s *Sunday*?” H

“Of course. The troll isn’t about to eat anything today. He’s fasting.”

“‘Fasting’? Not even a bite of air?”

“No. Not even a bite of air. It’s against his religion.”

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Earlier that afternoon – under the shade of a big blue umbrella – we had watched someone’s Labrador Retriever chomping in the surf. Squatting atop a yellow Dixie Cup packed with sand, Stellie asked, “Why does he bite the air?”

I told her he was fasting.

In her tiny brain, even small beasts loom to devour her. A rampaging sand crab could easily knock her over. A starfish might even smother her. From her perspective, the world is truly immense.

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The following morning, playing with Stellie in a tidal pool, I sprawl out on my stomach in about half a foot of sun-warmed water. Stellie and I study a few trapped minnows that are swimming around us. When an incoming wave rushes across us in a thick white blanket of foam, I lunge and snag Stellie by her leg before she’s sucked seaward in the backwash. She rolls up sputtering, crying from the sting of seawater. Susan and Zed come running.

Back at the umbrella, where it is safe and the sand is dry, Stellie spends the next few minutes angrily spanking the beach with a doll-house spatula. I lie face-up to the searing sun on a dry towel. I can see the orange-red glare through my shut eyelids, where squiggles drift across like flagellate specimen under a microscope.

To the rhythm of the waves, I hear Stellie’s wee voice chant:



*Jesus loves me, yes I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little worms to him belong
They are weak, but he is strong...*

For the last seven years, since Stellie was born, my sister and her husband have waded deeper and deeper into Christianity. As far as I can tell, they are in way over their heads, and it truly seems that I have more in common with Stellie than I do with either Susan or Zed.

After my nap in the sun, I wake up hungry. Earlier, Susan made cream cheese-and-olive sandwiches that she individually wrapped in Baggies. They are packed in a red and white cooler, stacked on top of an assortment of soft drinks which, in turn, are nestled firmly in crushed ice. I wolf down half a sandwich before I realize that Zed, Susan, and Stellie have their heads bowed in a silent prayer. I immediately stop chewing and stare down at a miniscule insect with delicate electric blue wings. It has landed on my sandwich. With one eye slightly opened, I examine the tiny creature as it quivers in the wind. It is firmly anchored to the spongy surface of my bread. After our sandwiches have been properly blessed, I flick it into oblivion.

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I am amazed that little Stellie eats as much as we do. She has the metabolism of a hummingbird. After lunch – on my hands and knees – I start digging a hole for her to play in. Within fifteen minutes, having worked like a dog, I have created a virtual pit. Stellie smiles up from the hole, dwarfed, as I would be, if I were to stand in a newly dug swimming pool.

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The hole is big enough to accommodate both of us – but, sitting, I’m capable of seeing out – my head just above the ruffled horizon of sand. I pack a Dixie Cup with deeper darker sand, turn it upside-down beside Stellie and lift off the cup. She smacks her little spatula on the mold of sand. It seems quite firm. Then she says, “Uncle John, I’m going to sit on my bucket.” When she plops down on it, it collapses and she falls down laughing. We go through this procedure maybe a dozen times before she decides that I should build her a full-fledged castle. She wants to be a princess. She has plans for me to save her.

By now, I have dug down to the water line. I dribble sandcastles around the top rim of sand, making our hole seem deeper still. Whenever Stellie wants me to construct a new addition to her castle, I say, “Yes, Your Heinie,” and Stellie’s staccato laughter machine-guns me to the quick. We cannot help our outbursts. Now and again, I will glance at Susan who looks up affectionately from her paperback. Zed also faces our hole, his back to the lure of the

ocean and the strolling bikini-clad women. He is wearing dark glasses, a baseball cap, and a long-sleeved white shirt with the cuffs buttoned. A yellow towel is laid out over his legs. Underneath all of this, he is lathered with suntan lotion that my over-protective sister periodically applies.

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It has only been during the last year that Susan and I have renewed – mostly through letters and phone calls – the bond we once had as children. I am four years older than Susan. It’s funny, now that I think about it, but I have always been four years older than Susan. Yet, when we were small, that gap seemed greater.

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One day, when I was eleven and Susan was seven, our parents left me to look after her. But they were nearby, at the neighborhood cookout staged strictly for the adults on the block. It was summertime – a humid August evening. The drone of insects and the flicker of bats against the twilighted sky had inspired me and Mark – the kid from next door – to make a human sacrifice of Susie’s favorite doll.

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Susie had named her doll “Star” because of the twinkly effect given off by her realistic glass eyes – the irises were a crystal blue. Susie didn’t seem to mind at first, when we tied Star to the back fence with the broken-off pull-cord from a lawnmower’s crankcase.

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But when she realized that Mark and I were setting ourselves up as the firing squad and that we had plans to execute her precious baby-doll – using over-ripe cherry tomatoes as ammo – Susie started to cry. Her crying was soft and resigned, knowing at this point she could not possibly save Star. Things had gone too far, especially after Mark blindfolded Susie’s doll with a strip of rag that supported one of the tomato shoots. When he wedged one of Father’s crushed out cigarette butts between Star’s pouty lips, Susie knew that her pleas were futile. She stumbled, bleary with tears, to the swing set, where she sat crying, twisting herself around and around, then spinning and crying louder as she unwound. She kept her head averted as we laughed and pummeled her baby.

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This was not typical behaviour on my part. All it took was one well-directed tomato from me, and the orange smear that leaked down over Star’s white dress made me want to quit. But Mark – as I remember – thrived on destruction. He was the better marksman, knocking the cigarette out of Star’s lips on his third throw. Still, that wasn’t enough for Mark. I’m not sure now whose BB gun it was – maybe we both had our own at that point – but our firing squad had suddenly become too real. I had Susie’s doll in my sights, taking aim down the barrel of the rifle.

When Mom and Dad came home an hour or so later to discover Susie still crying in the backyard swing, I ran to the bathroom and

locked the door. I cowered there, waiting for my father's footsteps. ✧
When they finally materialized and he knocked on the door, I
blurted, "I'm sorry!" Then I started crying – not to save myself, but
because I was afraid to look at the inhuman thing I had done to
Susie's baby.

"Open up," my father had said softly. J

So I did. O

He stood there in the threshold, cradling the doll in one arm as H
if it were a real baby. In his other hand, he held a shovel. His grief N
was real. Star's eyes were missing, shot out, wholly vacant – and
what had been a white dress was now caked with ugly stains and A
coagulated gobs of tiny seeds. Father tried to hand her to me, but I L
wouldn't touch her. So he handed me the shovel, and dragged me S
out the back door. P

Burying Susie's doll in the far corner of the dark backyard A
– digging a grave for her as if she had once been alive – still recurs U
in my dreams. I know that Susan must have similar nightmares. I G
only pray that Stellie is not somehow superimposed. Knowing H
Susan, I am sure that she still thinks about that. I just hope that she
has forgiven me.





Dinner is on Zed tonight. We have gone out for fresh seafood to Neptune's Corner. Although Stellie doesn't seem to mind the car ride over in her baby's seat, she has voiced her displeasure about having to sit in a highchair when dining out. She doesn't like eating in public. She is at that age where her uniqueness has begun to make her self-conscious.

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The waitress – a well-endowed bleached blonde – smiles at me when I enter carrying Stellie. Clutching menus to her breast, she leads us to a dockside booth. As we sit down, Susan requests a highchair for Stellie, still in my arms – by her own wishes – but looking more infant than school-aged. And to many, I'm sure this must be the impression – that I am carrying a small baby. But when I set Stellie down in the booth, she stands up on the blue vinyl cushion and informs the waitress, "I really don't want one."

The waitress goes wide-eyed and takes a wobbly step backward. Not many people have encountered such an articulate baby. The waitress composes herself and smiles weakly, still trying to comprehend Stellie's command of the language. Her hand trembles when she hands out three menus to Susan, to Zed, then to me. She has a fourth menu which she reluctantly hands over to Stellie. Stellie says, "Thank you very much, but I don't like to read menus. Only little kids' books."

At that, the waitress laughs nervously, pivots on a squeaking white shoe, then begins to jostle water into our empty water glasses. “Would anyone care for a cocktail?”

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“Sure,” I say, skimming over the menu, thinking that an ice cold beer would be great. Then I remember that Zed and Susan are non-drinkers. “Do you mind if I order a beer?”

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“What’s wrong with iced tea?” Zed says coolly, studying his menu, with his glasses riding low on the bridge of his nose.

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Susan has always been big on fried foods. I prefer broiled. So that’s what I go for – broiled swordfish. When the food arrives, we all hold hands and say grace. I’m getting accustomed to this.

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Susan, Zed, and Stellie are also fond of bread. The third hush puppy that Stellie digs into is left unfinished, resting like a Dutch wooden shoe on the scuffed aluminum tray of her highchair beside her special little fork, knife, and spoon that Susan always brings along when they eat out.

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Immediately after dessert – Key Lime pie, all the way around – Stellie places me in charge of rinsing off her silverware. This is usually done by Susan, but Stellie enjoys having me attend her like a footservant.

I have to go to the bathroom anyway, I tell Susan when she scolds Stellie for asking too much of me.

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The bathrooms are labelled “Buoys” and “Gulls.” It makes me think twice before deciding which one is for me. I have Stellie’s doll-house utensils in the palm of my hand. She is very demanding, meticulous when it comes to the care of her little fork, knife, and spoon.

A father and his son, I assume, linger to watch me rinse off the tiny instruments. This man and boy had been sitting two tables away with a woman and a little girl, casting sidelong glances at Stellie throughout dinner.

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I go about my business.

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“Excuse me,” the man says. “I don’t mean to be nosey, but your daughter.... She’s – *uh* – so *small*.”

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I wrap the silverware in a wad of Kleenex and tuck it into the side pocket of my blazer.

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“She’s my niece. She’s a fairie,” I say, directing my statement toward the boy. They both smile, somehow satisfied with what I have told them, and they walk out hand-in-hand – the little boy craning his neck up at his father, perhaps curious to know if his father believes in fairies.

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I am carrying Stellie on our way out because she wants me to. I am almost embarrassed by Stellie’s focus on me. But I am not em-

barrassed by Stellie. Our shoes clomp on the weathered planks as we walk around the outside of the restaurant to get a better view of the inlet here. Seagulls are now swooping in to roost on the upright pylons which look like big bundles of Cuban cigars. I really want a cigar, but I continuously have to check my hedonistic desires, being in the presence of the pious Susan and Zed.

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The dock is roped off on either side with sagging cables of hemp, as thick as electrical lines. When we walk out on the dock, Stellie takes my sunburned cheeks between her tiny hands and whispers, "Watch out for the troll!"

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I immediately stop in my tracks and cast a worried look down onto the oily water. When I growl, Stellie squeals and clings tight. I lightly drum my fingers on her tiny back and she burps, then giggles.

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Susan and I are sitting on the deck of the beach house. A large yellow candle gutters on the glass-topped table between us. Zed went to bed early, shortly after I reappeared – having read Stellie to sleep. Staring out at the ocean's dark horizon, I focus off to the left at the distant rotating beam of faint light emitted from a far-off lighthouse. I let Susan do most of the talking.

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I am amazed when Susan tells me that Stellie – considering her condition – is actually big for her age. Susan says that there are others – mostly little girls, odd as it seems – born with this syndrome who are much smaller than Stellie. It boggles my mind.

“How much smaller?” I want to know.

“Well, Stellie has a special friend who we met through Little People of America – out in California. Remember us going out there about a year or so back?”

I nod.

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“Anyway, we went out specifically to meet the Doswells and their little girl, Martha. We were put in touch with them through the Church maybe two or three years ago, and we corresponded, you know, sending pictures and that sort of thing. Little Martha is ten. But she’s about the same size as Stellie. Actually she doesn’t weigh quite as much.”

I wonder if that’s a bad sign – an indication that Stellie has done all the growing she possibly can.

“Every day I thank God that Stellie is as healthy and as happy as she is.”

Again, I nod.

Susan asks me about my new teaching position and about my love life and about my ex-wife, Kay, and if we still communicate. That sort of thing. She asks me how I think – “I mean honestly” –

about how Dad's "really" doing since Mother passed away – as if Mother were newly gone. ✧

"Susie, Mom's been dead for four years now. Dad seems to be doing fine. He misses her – sure, but he's managing. I only hope I live so long. So gracefully."

"But that *home* smells so. Like urine." There are tears flickering in Susan's eyes. "I just hate what we've done to him, Johnny. Putting him there." Her voice wavers. "What would Mother think?" The candle dies out. J
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Mother still lives in Susan's mind. When Stellie was born, our mother had suggested that Susan place her in an institution. Of course, Susan's doctor was wrong about Stellie being retarded. Stellie is as bright – if not brighter – than any seven year old I've ever taught. Although it's been years since I have taught on that level. Nearly a decade since I received my doctorate. A
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While Mother seemed proud enough of me and my choices in life, she had always wanted me to make more money. She would often joke when we'd get together with relatives and friends: "Ph.D.? What do you suppose that means – 'Phony Doctor'?" U
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I never let her know how much that hurt me, but I am *not* one of those who dwells on such – whereas Susan tends to remember little things, done or said, and her capacity to hold a grudge is deep. When Susan refused to institutionalize Stellie, Mother called Susan

✧ a fool – not only to close ties, but to Susan’s face. Susan would never consider the possibility of putting Stellie up for adoption or into a home, so she contrived a protective distance from all of us, and it was Susan’s love for her daughter that had – until recently – kept us apart.



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Tonight, Susan seems older than I’ll ever be. Deep down – moving unseen in the depths of Susan’s mind – our mother lives, mysteriously feeding on Susan’s insecurities. Death has made Mother that much larger. After pouring off the warm liquid wax over the rail of the deck, I re-light the candle. Susan looks tired, although her new tan makes her look healthier than I’ve seen her in years.

“I think I’ll go for a walk. Want to come with me?” I say.

“No, you go on ahead. I’m bushed.”

I lean down and give her a kiss on the forehead. “Thanks for inviting me. I really am enjoying myself. It’s so good to get to know Stellie. She’s such a doll.” I think twice about what I’ve said. I wonder if the same monstrous memory lingers in Susan’s mind, just below the surface.

But she smiles up at me and takes my hand. “Remember when we’d go to the beach with Mother and Dad when we were little?”

“Yeah. Sure do,” I smile back at her. “I used to pretend like I was a shark and I’d swim up under your raft and make you squeal.”

“Mother used to, too. You and Mother would always gang up on me.”

“Did we?” I really can’t remember.



After I bid goodnight to Susan, I check my back pocket for my wallet before heading out to the beach. I am thinking about walking all the way to the nearest convenience store to buy a beer or two and maybe a cigar – depending on what is available.

I haven’t let Susan know, but my plans are to head back home sometime tomorrow. It’s a five-hour drive. I know that Stellie will be disappointed, but there’s so much for me to put in order before school starts up again. In fact, I still have a few late papers from last semester to grade, and here it is the middle of August.

I have walked only a mile or so when I notice the distant flicker of lightning – now miles out at sea – but I know how fast an offshore storm can blow up, so I decide to turn around and head back to the cottage. I am mesmerized by the breaking waves. What with the electrical storm coming on, I notice, in each rising swell, the green luminescence of plankton, lit up randomly inside the waves.

Jagged spurts of lightning web the sky now, and the rumble of distant thunder comes quicker, more intense. Presently, I am sitting on the beach directly in front of the dark cottage when two

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❖ teenagers – who I assume are brother and sister by what they have to say to each other – walk around me, one on either side. They ignore me entirely, as if I were a deposit of driftwood. I watch their dark shapes fade away with distance. There go Susan and I, I think, realizing our past lives rarely surface.

I am suddenly pelted with the fresh splatter of rain.



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The following morning, I slowly open my eyes. What I see is a billowy white plume, coming up from the side of the bed as though it were a sign of surrender. Someone is trying to wake me by tickling me with an enormous feather. The way the quill bobs and wavers back and forth reminds me of some kind of puppet show. Stellie laughs when I say in a gruff manner, “WHO’S THAT HIDING UNDER MY BRIDGE?” I quickly reach down and grab her.

“It’s time to get up and play,” she announces, curling up on my stomach like a kitten, waving her huge feather in the air.

I glance over at the clock. It’s only 8:45, but I’m glad to be up. It will be easier to leave if I get an early start. I decide to tell her. “You know what, Princess Stellie?”

She crawls up close to my face and says, “What?” Her tiny voice buzzes in my ear like a trapped fly.

“I have to go home to where I live sometime soon.”

“Why?” She asks, touching the new beard growth on my cheek. She draws back her hand as if she’d been stung. She momentarily forgets what we were talking about, and she tells me, “You’re dirty shaven.”

I growl and make like I’m going to swallow her whole arm.

We drop our conversation about me having to leave.



For breakfast, Stellie and I split a fresh cantaloupe. Susan heaps frozen vanilla yogurt into its spooned-out center. Because Susan and Zed have already eaten, I take the initiative and bless the food with my own little prayer. After we eat, Stellie follows me into the bathroom and I stand her on top of the toilet lid so she can watch me shave.

We are out on the beach by nine-thirty. Although the sky is overcast this morning, it seems to be clearing up after last night’s storm. The beautiful sandcastle we built yesterday has been obliterated. What remains after last night’s high tide is a smoothed-over, spireless crater that Stellie just stares at with a frown. “We’ll build another one, okay?” I say.

Several hundred yards down the beach, a dozen or so people are gathered around a large object that has washed up during the night. Stellie, curious to know what everyone is looking at, wants

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✧ me to take her down there. Susan and Zed tell us to go ahead. Zed is just now pitching the umbrella, and Susan is trying to spread out the quilt, unwittingly stinging Stellie and me with windblown sand in the process. Stellie looks like she's about to cry, so I pick her up and turn around, hunched over her to protect her. We head off down the beach.

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Halfway there, Stellie wants me to put her down. When I do, she stares squarely at my kneecap. For every step I take, Stellie must take eight or nine. So I figure for every mile I walk, to Stellie, it is more like eight or nine. To my tiny niece, the small sandpipers that look like wind-up toys, running back and forth on the slick sand, chased by small waves, are as big as storks.

A young woman in a black one-piece suit with white polka dots is walking toward us. Now, only several paces away, she smiles and says, "Good morning. Not a pretty sight up there."

"What is it?" I ask. Stellie and I both stop in our tracks.

"A dolphin. It looks like a shark attacked it."

The woman glances down at Stellie. She smiles again, then keeps walking.

Stellie looks up at me and says, "I want a bathing suit with freckles." Meaning polka dots.

As we near the crowd, the angry sound of flies fills the air. The blued skin of the dolphin is dull looking – not glistening the way

one would think. I pick Stellie up so she can get a better look. And as I step closer, I am sorry that I have.

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The dolphin's stomach has been torn away. Leaking out from the gash in its rubbery skin are coils of intestine and other raw organs. Although it is too fresh to have acquired a stench, I am almost on the verge of vomiting. I turn away and carry my tiny niece back to where Susan and Zed are waiting. I let Stellie tell them what we saw.

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"It was very disgusting," she explains. "It was exploded and unhappy."

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I nod in agreement, but Susan and Zed have to go see for themselves.

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After they walk off, Stellie wants me to bury her in the sand. While I dig out a shallow grave, she asks me questions about sharks. Her questions about sharks are almost identical to her questions about trolls. I answer her as best I can, but my answers – this time – do not seem to amuse her. When Susan and Zed return, Stellie's tiny head is all that shows. I am not really thinking about covering Stellie with warm white sand. I just do it. It's not morbid in the least. But Susan over-reacts. She screams when she sees what I have done. Immediately, I pull Stellie up and brush her off. Stellie, looking like an oversized sugar cookie, walks stiffly over and plops down in her mother's lap.

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“Do dolphins go to heaven?”

I look out at the ocean, realizing that I have been here for three days yet I have not been in for a swim. Susan says, “Yes, of course they do, honey.”

“What about sharks? Do they go to heaven, too?”

This really seems to worry Stellie. I can see what she’s getting at. Susan says, “Yes. Sharks, too. All of God’s creatures go to heaven.”

“But what do they eat there?”

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I just can’t stand here and wait for Susan to come up with a Christian answer. I tear off towards the water, as fast as I can, and when it starts to suck at my legs, beginning to drag me down, I fling myself headlong, diving into the face of a rising wave. I swim long and hard under the pound of water. With my eyes clenched, I pull with all my strength to get beyond the breakline, straight out, until my ears start ringing. When I finally burst up for air, I am out over my head. I blink wetly towards the shore, where Susan and Zed are standing. The saltwater stings my eyes, but I notice that Susan is waving as I drift further and further out. I am so far out now, Stellie is an indistinguishable speck, sitting on the beach, in the shadow of the blue umbrella.

Alone out here, I am vulnerable, filled with the terror of the unknown – my arms and legs moving freely in the deep, murky water.

In Susan's stead, I see a younger version of our mother. It makes me waver for a moment, questioning the existence of whatever lurks beneath the surface, wondering: Is Susan's eyeless doll still buried in our old backyard? And: How long will our father manage to hang on?

The smallest creature that touches me – such as now – assumes enormous proportions. *“What about sharks? Do they go to heaven, too?”* Stellie's tiny voice replays itself in my head, when something underwater grazes the side of my foot.

I work my arms and legs frantically in the thick, dark currents, trying to keep my head above the surface, buoyed by the gentle swells, pulled diagonally out and away from Susan and Zed and Stellie, while my doubt circles me, preys on me.

“Is one's faith ever justified?” I silently ask myself, recalling the face of the little boy in the restaurant when I told him that Stellie was a fairie. I can picture his upturned expression, forever looking to his father for confirmation.

I arch my back and float, closing my eyes to the clear morning sun. And the longer I dare to stay here, the stronger my faith becomes.