

BOOK THE SECOND*:

JULIA

*I can't believe I actually put "Book The First" in here.
What is this, *The Hobbit*?

CHAPTER 11: MY BLANK PAGES

October 1, 1993

Julia was into ska music because it was jazzy. Jazzy music was certainly like jazz — like that Mingus shit Jaspar was always playing in the store — but it didn't depress Julia the way Billie Holiday did. It had the same mysterious sexuality when it was played soft and sinuously, and the good ska bands always included slow songs.

Ska wasn't too serious. Julia hated bands that took themselves too seriously. U2, for example, just struck her as the sort of music you chose if you didn't have anything to say, and needed someone to care, at the professional level, about girls and quests for you. Julia wasn't too serious either. She'd shoot you as quick as look at you. It was all the same to her.

She was at Johnny Goodall's school because, goddamn, the man was interesting. The new school was the best game in town. That was obvious. You couldn't see something so

gleaming and so, well, *octagonal* arise from the dust of the cliffs, and then miss your chance for a ticket, could you?

Julia was a local celebrity because she was a young actress. She specialized in Shakespeare, which was a piece of luck, since that hit exactly the right note in Oberstville. The town took itself very seriously indeed, and liked that high-falutin' feeling you can only get from Shakespeare or, maybe, from an occasional production of something really sad by Eugene O'Neill. Julia's first role had been as a short Desdemona in a feminist version of *Othello* entitled *Desdemona*. The reviews, which were glowing if local, all described *Desdemona* as her "debut," which was helpful if you were, as Julia put it, trying to keep track of Oberstville's theater scene. In which case you were probably an insane person.

"Did you know it was her debut?" people would say, and their dates would answer, "I had no idea!"

The point of *Desdemona* was that it is difficult for Desdemona to get a word in edgewise throughout the entirety of *Othello*, especially after Othello chokes her out. For the final scene Julia had to deliver all of her soliloquies with a broken windpipe, an effect she created by imitating a dog she'd once heard bark with all its vocal chords cut. The dog sounded like two pieces of sandpaper trying to be music.

People absolutely loved *Desdemona*. It spoke to something they all felt to be true about *Othello*. After all, there were virtually no black people in Oberstville, so everyone was relieved it wasn't about merely about racism. (The people of Oberstville hated racism, though. Good for Shakespeare for standing up and saying something about it. Ahead of his time, was Shakespeare. All geniuses are.)

Building on the success of her first show, Julia Marguiles soon landed the part of Ophelia in a very solemn, reverent production of *Hamlet*, in which she wore historically accurate dresses and said historically accurate

things. During the scene where she was drowning, she refused to make gurgling noises, on the grounds that one performance as a tragic, suburban, barkless dog was enough funny noise-making for a lifetime. People who had never wept at a performance of *Hamlet* actually cried when she drowned. She made Ophelia seem like a good person, a very genuinely good person in a Danish court that had lost all its moral character. The way Julia envisioned it, Ophelia kills herself because she can't bear to see the people she loves kill each other. It's Ophelia's way of finally beating them all to the punch. There's a note of triumph mixed into that goodbye.

Perhaps her experiences with Shakespeare inspired Julia to pick the very unusual senior project that Johnny oversaw, entitled "10 Women Who Die." Marginally a work of non-fiction, it was a series of stories Julia had created as accompaniment to ten real deaths on the Oberstville coast. These deaths had fascinated Julia ever since adults had

begun gossiping about them. One of them was the death of a high school student named Hallie Long. Hallie had been one of those freckled, cheerful young women who always seem to be getting a "B+" on the report card of life. She led her church youth group whenever they weren't up to something forbidden.

Her boyfriend was a sandy-haired, good-looking kid with a religious bent himself. His name has been lost in the many years (twelve) since Hallie's death. (I mean that Julia never bothered looking up his name.) She assumed he was named Samuel, or something else equally Biblical and hot-blooded, evangelical. Samuel was dying to want to have sex. In fact, sex frightened him and he'd never gotten anywhere past first base, but he assumed he was normal enough.

In order to have sex, Samuel had to marry Hallie. He did not believe in sex without love, marriage, and ritual. On the day he was to propose, he began by taking Hallie for a surprise drive by the ocean. She was wearing a fancy,

complicated, uncomfortable dress. She already looked lacy enough to be his bride. Samuel had a really good camera -- you know what I mean, the kind you can have a whole conversation about -- and he got Hallie posing in her slightly Victorian clothes right there, on the windbitten knuckles of the cliffs.

There is a strange, cartoonish aspect to people who aren't thinking about the future, if that's what you're doing. They seem small and shrill, clucking over nothing, and that's how Hallie seemed to Samuel, who kept taking pictures and thinking about the ring in his pocket. She was talking about her upcoming birthday, which she wanted to have in San Francisco. Behind them, the sun was falling into the water, and the air was thick with its light. In some of the photographs Hallie seems precariously balanced, as if she could turn her ankle and fall into the sea. But that's not what happened.

With a weird, sibilant noise, like the sucking in of phlegm, the ocean began to run away from the land. It bared the bottoms of the rocks, and then the ocean floor itself, as it slowly gathered and left. Fish were still there, lopsided, suffocating. There were the long, plaited strands of kelp, gleaming like copper. The rocks were as wet and gray as steel gets in the rain. Amassed, the water darkened. Its movements were too subtle for Hallie or Samuel to see, but they could be felt nonetheless. Hallie, agog, was picking her way over the pitted surfaces that edged the cliffs. The honeycombs of gray sandstone were straight out of pictures of the moon. Samuel backed up a dozen paces. "Something's wrong," he said to Hallie. "I know," she said, "I'm coming." The water rose up behind her. It took back everything it had, for a bright moment, surrendered, moving and covering the land, hoisting up the horizon on its back in great silence. A distinct wave emerged, at last, fringed with foam. Hallie stumbled and it was upon her. "What's

going to happen?" she asked Samuel, her face a picture of fright. Then the water reached her body and it was all Sam could do to get away.

Between stories, out of respect for the dead, Julia inserted one completely blank page. I'm not sure if your almost-certainly digital editions of this book will be able to portray it accurately. It looked something like this, except much longer:

...in any case, there it was, the blank page, followed rapidly by a story about Little John Rainier. Little John was born Samantha John Rainier to Randy Rainier and his wife Bermuda. The reason Samantha's middle name was that of a boy had to do with family traditions, which Bermuda zealously maintained, to the point of ridiculousness, while Randy let

them slide. (Because Randy let them slide, probably.)

Samantha was a handful from the very beginning, when she kept her parents up for about a year straight by having seizures that nearly killed her. She didn't have these seizures every night, but they were always threatening, like rain. The rest of the time she behaved like a normal infant, which meant of course having a sleep cycle that was an elaborate joke on, well...sleeping, adulthood, health, etc. Baby Samantha was often awake, and if she was awake but acting strangely, for example by going mute, that meant rushing to the hospital and forcing barbituates down her throat until the seizures relented. It was a race between the barbituates and whatever was trying to reach terminal velocity in Samantha's undeveloped brain.

The doctors had numerous other machines, all of which got involved eventually. There were CAT scans. There were X-rays. There were consultations with brain surgeons who didn't live nearby. The consensus was that Samantha had a

normal brain that didn't act normally, and instead, acted like it was invisibly on fire. (Later, MRI scans of patients like Samantha would confirm that, compared to CAT scans, MRIs look incredibly impressive.)

Randy Rainier was an employed songwriter, which meant that he had once written something very sad and true-to-life, and had been living with Bermuda on the royalties from that and the unfairly neglected other songs ever since. To call him a one-hit wonder would be unfair, because his one hit was a very sober and searching poem about Las Vegas. It was obvious, from hearing his big song, that it must be sitting on a big fat pile of other good songs that nobody has ever heard. This was basically true, but none of the other songs were about Las Vegas, and there was the rub. Only one true thing had happened to Randy in Las Vegas, and in the ruthless ledgers of popular art, that meant he only had the materials for one song. Despite that, he occasionally returned to Vegas, hoping for lightning to

strike twice. It was always very cheap to stay there during weekdays.

Into those long, useless, romantic days of Randy's slightly drunk waiting around for more songs -- while Bermuda worked her ass off proving to herself that sales work, paid on commission, could be meaningful -- was, suddenly, poured the eventful chaos of a new baby. And what a genius the baby turned out to be! At two years old, Samantha was already able to read simple words. This is rare. It is so rare that Samantha was handed off to child development experts, as if she was still getting seizures, which, thank goodness, she wasn't.

Child development experts give tests. These tests went smoothly, produced exciting results, and evoked (for all concerned) the ethereal forecasts of Samantha cruising past normal grades like First Grade without even stopping in to say hello. If these tests had been any good at their jobs, they would have predicted that Samantha would have a fully

developed aesthetic by the age of six, an aesthetic that would include serious glasses with black frames, and reading the pages of books out of order, and buttoning all of her shirts up all the way. Samantha also insisted on being called John and described herself as a boy.

John -- AKA "Little John," AKA Samantha -- was always permitted to be a boy, from the moment s/he started being really bossy on the subject, at the age of four. The raw, cold, penetrating intelligence that radiated out of their child scared both parents, and they quickly came to believe that Samantha would spend her entire life in a world that didn't work the same way as it did for most other people. When Samantha started calling herself by her middle name, she did so for complicated reasons that she tried, unsuccessfully, to explain to her parents. "I prefer *John*," she would say, very slowly, double-checking every word for correctness. "I am a boy. Nobody else in my school is. A lot of what people think about boys is wrong."

Randy had heard Samantha say there were no "real" boys in her school before, so he let that pass. Asking her about it just led to incredibly specific stories that went on, and on, interminably. (One such story was about the way a classmate spat his lunch into Samantha's lap. "Would a boy do that?" Samantha asked. "I don't know, maybe," Bermuda said. "No," her daughter replied.)

"What about the things people think about girls?" asked Randy, who was feeling sensitive.

"I wouldn't know," Samantha (John) said, trying out a phrase her mother liked to use.

"Little" John -- the nickname, obviously, taken from Walt Disney's *Robin Hood* -- absolutely loved the song his father had written about Las Vegas. It was about a couple who broke up because they got started together too young. It's called "Something Old, Something New." The chorus goes, "We tried everything except staying together," and Little John had his own little karaoke version of it. He could

really belt those words out. "But what I learned to wear from you / Is a certain shade of blue / One I thought I could borrow / Without following through." The song is about the man showing up at his ex's wedding, wearing the blue suit that she bought for him when they were trying to get serious about each other. It's set at this huge Las Vegas wedding. Anyway. It's a tearjerker. You can find the song pretty easily, as a matter of fact. I can't do it justice merely by quoting the lyrics.

It was February, and Randy was writing his first song of the new year. It was a real rock song, with a guitar solo, like his agent had suggested. Little John went outside, which was normal under these circumstances. Their house was on the headlands, with the water spreading out perfectly to the horizon when they glanced out a window.

Later on that evening, a by-now-terrified Randy and Bermuda found Little John's clothing in a pile by the cliffside. It had been carefully and lovingly folded. On top

of the clothes were Little John's glasses, which he took off "to up-close the world," as he put it -- a real misnomer, since they had thick lenses, and without them he was pretty much blind, even when looking at things up close. His shoes were at a ninety degree angle to his clothes, side by side. He never returned, nor was his body ever found. "Perhaps he's alive" -- now *there's* a joke nobody dared to make. Little John disappeared into the world, naked, apparently because that's what he wanted to do. All his parents had, by way of answers, were the ones they could wring from those experts on childhood development, the same experts who'd run tests on the child just two years before. Randy and Bermuda split up fast. Afterwards, separately, they talked themselves out of going crazy.

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THE END