
CAITLIN HORROCKS

Zolaria

IT IS JULY and we are a miraculous age. We have been sprung from our backyards, from the neighborhood park, from the invisible borders that rationed all our other summers. We are old enough to have earned a larger country, and young enough to make it larger still. The woods between Miller and Arborview become haunted. Basilisks patrol the Dairy Queen. We are so beset by dangers we make ourselves rulers over them, and by July we are the princesses of an undiscovered kingdom. We make maps with colored pencils. “Here Be Dragons,” I write across the square of Wellington Park, at the end of our street. “Here Be Brothers,” Hanna writes across her own backyard, and we avoid them both. We are too old for these games, too big for this much imagination, but we are so unpopular that summer that there is no one to care. We have finished the fifth grade alive, and we consider that an accomplishment. We have earned this summer.

The neighborhood has been emptying of children. There are bigger houses being built past Wagner, past the edge of the western edge of town. The houses here—one story, one bathroom—have become a place to live after the children leave or a place to move away from when they come. This year Hanna Khoury, eight houses down, and I are best friends, a thing I haven’t had before and won’t have again until I meet my husband, both of us twenty-four, an age my family will say is too young, and I will be proud years later of proving them wrong.

The summer after fifth grade we pick blackberries in the Miller Woods and take them to Hanna’s house where her mother rinses them in a plastic colander. Hanna’s parents still live together, and their house feels friendlier than mine. When Mr. Khoury visited our fifth-grade class, our teacher introduced him as a man there to talk about his “troubled homeland.” He was a man from somewhere else, a troubled country people left and then called “home,” a country defined only by its perpetual unhappiness. Mr. Khoury told us that we were lucky, lucky boys and lucky girls, lucky American children, and Hanna rolled her eyes, embarrassed. Mr. Khoury has a Lebanese flag on the wall of his study, and I think it

must be a kinder sort of country that puts a tree on its flag. This is one of many things I do not understand that summer.

The gas station at the corner of Miller and Maple closes, and there is a sign in the windows announcing upcoming construction, Project Managers Ogan / Veen. We don't know that the construction will never happen, that nothing will ever be built there, because the gasoline has leached into the earth 100, 200, 300 feet down, some impossible depth, creating a biohazard that no one will own up to and that can't be cleaned. That summer we ride our bikes around and around the empty gas station and look in all the windows. Hanna says Ogan / Veen looks like the name of a monster, and from then on he haunts our summer in a friendly way, a goblin who lives in an empty Shell station and wanders the neighborhood at sundown. If we are lucky, he will encounter only the children who have spent the past year tormenting us, and he will grind their bones for bread. We sing

Ogan Veen, Ogan Veen,
His farts all smell like gasoline,
His stomach's full of children's spleens,
Ogan Veen, Ogan Veen

There are other verses, but this one's my favorite because I've come up with "spleens" all by myself. Hanna doesn't know what it means and I'm not so clear either, but it rhymes and my mother has said it's a part of someone that can be eaten.

"If you're a cannibal, I guess," she said, and I said, "Perfect."

On one of my dad's weekends, I ask him to take us to Dolph Park, too far to bike to. The hiking path circles two lakes, Little Sister Lake and Big Sister Lake, and since I am an only child and Hanna has two brothers, we decide to split the lakes between us. We fight over who gets which. We are the same age and nearly the same size, although Hanna's arms and legs are gangly so she seems destined for great height. In seventh grade, the year Hanna will slip a note between the vents of my locker that reads, "I Hate You," over and over, filling an entire notebook page, I will be 5'2" and as tall as I will ever grow. My father is 6'1" and will call me "midget." When I briefly register with an online dating site after college, I will call myself "petite." Hanna will never grow tall, either, and because we can't know these things, we ask my father to flip a coin over Big Sister Lake. I can see him peek and scuttle the coin when I call heads, a move too quick for Hanna to notice. She cedes the lake to me, accepts the smaller for her dominion, and I try to tell my

father that night over carryout Chinese what I am only beginning to understand myself, that the way in which he loves me is not quite the way I wish he would.

In fifth grade Hanna and I doomed ourselves. On the second day of school, organizing our desks, we took out our folders, our pencil cases. Hanna had space dolphins and I had pink unicorns. Two years earlier all the girls had school supplies like this, and I didn't understand why they abandoned the things they loved. Hanna and I were startled but not stupid, and if no one had noticed us that day we would both have begged our mothers to take us to K-Mart that night and exchange them. But it was too late. We were the girls with the wrong school supplies, and everything we did after that, even the things done just like everyone else, were the wrong things to do. I will never tell Hanna that space dolphins aren't really as bad as pink unicorns, and that she wasn't really doomed until I made her my friend.

The Little and Big Sister lakes form the eastern edge of what we named "Zolaria" that summer, simply for the sound of it, the exotic 'Z' and the trailing vowels as in a movie star's name. The northwestern border is the Barton Dam. It takes us most of the summer to get there, sneaking closer and closer, up Newport Road and through the grounds of what will be our junior high school. One day there is a door propped open by the tennis courts and we decide to explore. There is a sticker beside the door: NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SERVICE. I am barefoot, and we are so timid this sticker foils our plan until Hanna takes off her left shoe and gives it to me. Now we are within the law and follow a chlorine smell as far as the locker rooms, the labyrinth of showers, the locked door to the pool. We hear footsteps and run, directionless, past the library, the main office, the Cafetorium, past the music room where I'll play flute for three shrill years. Hanna will have quit band by then. "Hanna has only so much energy," her mother will tell mine on the phone, "and doesn't want to waste it on the trombone." We run past the glass trophy cases in the foyer and finally we find the open door, the patch of blue sky, and red and green tennis courts. In the homestretch Hanna's shoe flies off my foot and she yells, "Forget it! Don't stop!" but I go back and we make it out anyway.

The next day we bike through the junior high parking lot and across the freeway overpass just north, where we pump our arms up and down until three truckers have honked their horns. We take our bikes into the nature preserve and ride them until the hills get so steep and rugged they rattle our teeth. We ride bikes

like girls, throw like girls, we know it, and there is no one around that summer to make us ashamed. We walk our bikes through the forest, the sounds of the freeway to our right and the creek to our left, a symmetrical hum. Eventually there is a fence and a gate and a dirt road that leads to the Barton Dam. We ride to the huge gray wall of it, the rush of water at the base, the scum scudding across the surface of the river like soap suds. There is a dead animal floating at the base of the dam, bloated and colorless, its fur breaking off in hanks, drifting in patches of foam. It is a cloudy day and we are alone on the river path. A man comes out of the pump station at the top of the dam and walks out along the wall. He leans against the safety railing and shades his eyes with a hand and looks down at us. We know we are in the borderlands, where our kingdom meets a stranger's, where Ogan Veen wanders in daylight, and where we should not linger.

Thirteen years later Cal and I will announce our engagement on Christmas morning over crumpled wrapping paper and freshly squeezed orange juice. It will be the coldest morning of any year of my life so far—the paper's lead headline, the temperature: "26 Below!"—but as we unwrap presents we will see one of the Khoury boys outside walking their dog. My mother will call me into the kitchen to tell me, "You're young. You're still so young."

"Not that young," I will say.

"Yes, that young. You barely know each other."

"I know him."

"You don't know yourself," she'll say. "That's what I worry about. How can you get married when you don't know yourself yet?"

"I know myself plenty," I'll say. "I think I know all I want to."

One night in July, Hanna and I have a sleepover and dream almost the same dream, in which Ogan Veen is chasing us, gnashing his long, stinking teeth. Zolaria is not his to haunt, so we build traps in the woods, stretch fishing line between trees, scatter tacks in the dirt and make piles of throwing-rocks in places with good cover. In my backyard is a half-dug decorative fishpond, a project my father started and abandoned, and we lattice the top with long sticks, camouflage it with leaves and cut grass. Every day I wait for Hanna to come up the street so we can check it together. I do not want to face our quarry alone. We bow branches, harp them with yarn, notch twigs, and practice our archery. We strip the leaves from long tendrils of weeping willow and crack the whips in the air. We run shouting

through the woods brandishing foam swords from a Nerf fencing set. We are girded for battle, but the enemy will not show himself. We catch nothing, but we have made ourselves afraid. It seems unfair that a kingdom we invented should have inscrutable mysteries, unvanquishable foes. By September, we are almost eager for school to begin. We are tired of checking a dry fishpond for ogres every morning. But as princesses of Zolaria, we cannot say such a thing out loud. We have certain duties to our kingdom, to our adoring subjects. We must give the appearance of keeping them safe.

My father will take me once more to Dolph Park, when I am in high school, for old times' sake. The lakes are in the middle of an algae bloom, the weather hot and the water full of nitrogen and phosphorus. My high school will have implemented an experimental science curriculum the year I enter tenth grade, so I will know a great deal about eutrophication and very little about anything else. I will explain this process to my father when he grimaces at the damp mat of green over the pond, looking solid enough to walk on. We will pretend to skip rocks but will really just be throwing things, stones and sticks and clots of dirt, watching them break apart the algae and sink out of sight. We will throw until our arms are tired, and I will talk about the environmental benchmarks of healthy aquatic environments. We will get milk shakes at the Dairy Queen on Stadium Boulevard, and two weeks later my father will move to San Diego.

In sixth grade Hanna and I will still be in the same Girl Scout troop. We will sing Christmas carols for the old people at Hillside Terrace nursing home, and in the spring we will sell cookies. I will sell enough to earn a stuffed giraffe, while Hanna sells only enough for a patch to be sewn on her vest. She will already be sick and I will have no idea. She will miss the whole last month of sixth grade and four Girl Scout meetings, but it will be summer before my mother takes me to visit her. The hospital will remind me of a shopping mall, places to buy medicine and gifts and food, departments for having babies and looking after babies and looking after children and fixing all the different things that can go wrong with them. It will be a weighty place but exciting, the way my mother asks the front desk for Pediatric Oncology and I press the button in the elevator.

Hanna's mother and mine will go for coffee, leaving us alone. Hanna will be wearing a violet-colored bandanna. She will say she is a gangster, and I will say she would make the worst gangster in the world, which is true. She says a

highwayman, then, which feels a little closer, and when I suggest pirate, we're off. We go once more to Zolaria, the bed rails marking the deck of our ship, and Hanna tells me to climb on, that I won't hurt her, and our kingdom acquires an ocean, high seas. Aweigh anchor, we say, trim the sails, cast off, fore-and-aft, and we are all right for a time. We will be eleven, almost twelve; we will keep looking at the door, hoping no one comes in and sees us. After half an hour, Hanna will throw up twice in a plastic tub beside the bed. She will say she leaned over to take a sounding, that the sea is a thousand fathoms deep where we are, that if we don't make it back to port we'll drown for sure. I will ask her if she wants some water. She won't say anything, but I'll fill a plastic cup from the jug on the nightstand.

"I had a dream the other night that Ogan Veen was back," I will say. "It was in the woods and he was chasing us, and when we went out the fence we were saying, 'I don't hear him, I think we made it,' but then he was right there in front of us smiling, and then I woke up." Hanna will look at me and her eyes will be dark and flat and I will know it was a terrible idea to tell her this dream. She will sip her water and I will watch her sip it and we will wait for our mothers to come back, and when they do, we will be glad.

I will be unprepared for how long this sickness takes, for how long Hanna will be neither cured nor doomed. I will visit her once more at the hospital, twice more while she's at home. I will realize I am waiting for her to be either well or dead. She will seem very far away. I will start junior high alone, and when Hanna comes for her first day, in late November, I will be startled to see her. Our morning classes must all be different because I recognize her for the first time at lunch, sitting by herself. I will already be sitting in the middle of a long table by the time I see her, my lunch unpacked in front of me. I will be pressed tight on either side by people who, if asked, would probably say I am their friend. Hanna will be wearing an awful wig, stiff and styled like an old woman's perm. The hair will be dark brown, not black, and will no longer match her eyes. She will be pale, with her face swollen, and she will not seem like someone I can afford to know.

The summer we are ten we sketch maps of our kingdom and outline its Constitution, its Declaration of Independence, its City Charter. Despite a year each of U.S. history, Michigan history, and Ann Arbor history, we do not know the difference between these documents. In the end they all become zoological surveys. The Haisley woods harbor griffins, borometz, simurghs. There are dragons on Linwood Street, basilisks on Duncan who turn children to stone. We understand

that we have no sway over basilisks and dragons; we understand that they are the minions of Ogan Veen. He has servants now, he has armies, and despite all our efforts, Zolaria is not as safe as it was.

We make other lists, too, such as “People Who, in Zolaria, Would Be Imprisoned in the Dungeon FOREVER.” Hanna keeps adding her brothers’ names to the list and then erasing them until the paper is ready to tear, and I tell her to leave them off if she’s going to feel so guilty about it. We make a list titled “Animals That Can Be Ridden: Pegasus, Centaur, Griffins, and Space Dolphins.” We decide this is too charitable and amend it to read, “Animals That Can Be Ridden by Us.” We decide to hire young men to look after our stable of space dolphins, and we discuss how, when we deem ourselves a little older, and ready for love, we will notice the groomsmen and swoon. We prepare speeches of protest in which we declare our unwillingness to marry foreign princes, our determination to follow our hearts, until we remember with disappointment that in our kingdom we have no parents and may marry whomever we choose.

Fourteen years later, when I marry Cal at a Unitarian Church that four months later will be sold and remodeled into a bed and breakfast, Hanna Khoury’s parents will still be living down the street. My father will fly in from San Diego for the wedding, and he and my mother will agree to pose for photographs together: them, them and me, them and me and Cal, them and me and Cal and Cal’s parents, the symmetry of happy marriages. The Khourys won’t be at the wedding because I won’t have invited them. I won’t have invited them because I’m scared of what Hanna might have told them. Not about the way I never sat with her at lunch or talked to her in band, or the way I didn’t ever claim, precisely, not to know her, or the way I never said I did. Not even the way her life got worse and worse and I did nothing to make it better. Or the way, when I saw how bad things got for her in school, I was glad we weren’t still friends. The day I will worry she told them about is a Monday in February during sixth period, Phys Ed, one of our two classes together. Hanna has been excused from almost everything except changing. She doesn’t have to run or throw or dribble or swim, but she has to put on gym clothes. She tries to get her sweater off and T-shirt on without disturbing her wig, but it almost always catches, tips, slides to one side. Sometimes it falls limp onto the bench between the lockers. On that Monday, Barbara Zabrodzka steals it and sends it flying. Marti Orringer catches it and throws it to Naomi Sullivan, who throws it to Elizabeth Dugan, who throws it to Jamie Piakowski,

who throws it to Carla Deleon, who throws it to Mary-Alice, who throws it to Roberta, who throws it to me. And instead of giving it back to Hanna, I throw it to Andrea, who throws it to Aisha, who throws it to a girl whose name I don't remember, and another, and another, and another, because there are thirty girls in sixth period gym and I can't remember them all. Then Leah Campo throws it to Kendra Danielson, who throws it to Jasmine, who throws it, accidentally, to Mrs. Pendall the gym teacher, who has heard Hanna crying and come in the back way, through the showers. Mrs. Pendall gives Hanna back her wig and sends all twenty-nine of us to detention, where we fill the room and are sent out into the hall along the wall as in a tornado drill. The detention supervisor makes us crouch the rest of the period, drill style, on our knees with our foreheads almost touching the wall, our hands curled around the backs of our necks to protect our spines from flying shards of glass. My knees hurt and I think that if a tornado really did sever my spine and paralyze me for life, I wouldn't have to worry anymore about not doing the right things. I think that the feel of her wig in my hand was like a gutted animal, empty and dry and bristling.

Hanna will be in remission by the next fall, but her parents will already have taken her out of Forsythe Junior High and placed her in a private school. I will not know when the cancer comes back. I will have discovered how easy it is never to see someone, even an eight-houses-down someone, if you do not wish to see each other. When she passes away, my mother will find out from a newspaper obituary. She will come up to my bedroom, still deciding whether to tell me herself or just show me the paper. She will hand it to me and say, "There's bad news, honey."

It will be my first funeral, and my mother and I will go shopping for black clothing together. As we leave the mall, I will thank her for paying, as though she's bought me birthday gifts or new back-to-school clothes; and then to fill the silence I will say something about JV field hockey, and then my mother will drop the shopping bags in the middle of the parking lot and hold me tighter than she ever has or ever will again. At the funeral I will be so worried about avoiding Mr. and Mrs. Khoury and their sons that I won't have time to cry.

At the wedding Cal's mother will squint at me and ask whether I'm really Unitarian or just in need a cheap place for the wedding. I will tell her that I'm pagan, that I make burnt offerings to forest demons in the Bird Hills Nature Preserve. She won't laugh. Cal and I will go to Toronto for the honeymoon, and three and a half

years later the doctor will tell us to get ready for twin girls. I will be terrified. It seems like a sign. It seems like a coin has already been flipped, and we will spend years waiting for it to fall. I will stare at my daughters in matching pajamas and wonder which one Ogan Veen will ask for. Which one he'll try to take. If he will give them ten years, if he will come calling sooner.

One winter, the twins, bored, will unearth old photos in the basement: their baby pictures, our wedding, school portraits of Cal, and snapshots of my elementary school birthday parties. The year I turned ten there was no one I wanted to invite except Hanna, no one else I thought would come if I asked. In the picture there is a cake with ten candles and only two girls grinning above it: perhaps they should be lonely but somehow they look perfectly happy. Madison will ask me who the dark-haired girl is, and I will get a look on my face that will make Sophie elbow her sister into silence. She is the perceptive one, I will think, the one who reads people. And then I will think, please no, not her. And then I will think, please no, I didn't mean the other one.

On a July morning, the summer before the girls begin kindergarten, I will ask them to get dressed in their swimsuits, pull old shorts and T-shirts on over. I will pack a bag with beach towels and dry clothes, and they will ask which city pool we're going to. Wait and see, I will say, and we will all climb into the car. I will drive down the township road that skirts the edge of Bird Hills Nature Preserve; it will be lined with condos but still unpaved. I will park at the lot downriver from the Barton Dam, and we will climb the wooden steps up to the calm pond above the pump station. We will leave the trail to slide down the embankment towards the water. The shore is reedy, the ground spongy with black, rank mud. We will stand ankle deep in the water, and Sophie will yelp when her feet start to sink. I will suggest a short swim and the girls will look at me with horror. Tattered curtains of algae will stroke our toes in the warm water. Madison will hold her nose, and in the end I have to push them in. It will be only a moment, I promise, a slice of a second that I hold them under. And then I will be tugging at their hair and the backs of their T-shirts and wrestling us all into a heap on the grass above the reeds, and a woman on a bicycle will be standing on the embankment trail shouting at me that the pond is no place for swimming. "The water isn't clean," she will yell, and something else about phosphorus.

"I'm sorry," I will say. "I didn't know. The girls asked to go wading and slipped." My daughters will not contradict me, and the bicycle woman will leave, and I

will bundle them into towels, warm and dry. At home we will stand under the shower, all of us crowded together, and then eat ice cream in the backyard. I will ask Madison if she heard anything underwater, a gnashing of teeth, or if she saw a creature with eyes like an oil slick and incisors like bread knives, long and serrated. I will tell Sophie that Ogan Veen has a laugh like I-94 and a stink like algae. I will tell her that I have introduced them now, the three of them, Madison and Sophie and Mr. Veen, and if they ever meet him they must run away. They must tell him that they are princesses, that they are mine, that I will protect them in the only ways I know how.

Cal will get home from work, and while I cook dinner the girls will tell him what I did, and Cal will shout and I will try to explain myself, and Cal will misunderstand and talk to his parents about having the girls baptized at First Methodist. I won't know how to tell him that that won't help, that it isn't what I meant. I won't know how to tell him that I am still bracing for a day when Sophie complains of a headache that turns out to be something more, when Madison reels from dizziness in gym class and the concerned teacher sends her home with a note. When a doctor has something to tell me and asks me to sit down before hearing it.

I will be trying not to think about the possibility of a day when I will drive to the dam again, climb the stairs to Barton pond and wade in. I will walk until I can hear the pressing silence of the water, the rushing, vacuous weight of it. I will say, "Mr. Veen, do you remember me?" I will say, "Mr. Veen, I once ruled a kingdom and left traps for you in the woods. Don't you want your revenge?" I will say, "Mr. Veen, you are an ogre and a thief and the patron saint of Julys, of summer Sundays, of miracles." I will say, "Mr. Veen, do not take my children."

And if I think it is truly the only thing left to do, I will be swimming and we are in Zolaria, we are children, our bodies are honest children's bodies. We are narrow and quick, and we still fit in all our hiding places, the sun-wet hollows and the flowers in pink and purple and turquoise, all the damp colors of girlhood. We are riding our space dolphins and either we can breathe the water of Zolaria or we are no longer breathing and it is July and we are a miraculous age and we are ten.