

(This is the opening of a young adult novel.)

Sheriff Bronson twists the dead bolt and tugs on the handle to make sure the front door is locked. He turns out the light and parts the curtains to take a last glance outside. A wooden swing hangs from an old Elm tree. Beyond the tree, the night appears more luminous than usual. The big round moon looks more like a hole in space than a floating object. It casts a lonely glow on the tree and swing and lawn. Far away, a jagged line of woods cuts across the hills. For several minutes, Sheriff Bronson searches the dark line of trees. At last, he closes the curtains. He walks upstairs and pauses at a closed bedroom door. He touches the door with his fingertips and starts to walk on. He reconsiders and opens the door. The room is cast in blackness. He walks next to the bed and turns on a small lamp shaped like the Eiffel Tower. Next to the lamp a picture is in a frame. It is a picture of him. On one side, his cheek is being kissed by his wife. On the other side, his cheek is being kissed by a young girl. Sheriff Bronson looks around the room. Other pictures of the girl are hung on the walls, with friends and family, at parks and vacations, at the beach, at a campsite, at the Rocky Mountains. He smooths his fingers down the bed and stares at the pillow. It no longer has her dent in it. The sheriff turns out the lamp and shuts the door. He goes to his room and lies next to his wife, and stares at the blade of the ceiling fan until he falls asleep.

Sheriff Bronson wakes up with a start, his heart pounding. He is sucking in small, quick breaths. He places his fingers on his neck and feels his pulse race. He looks over at his sleeping wife. The clock next to her head says that it is nearly 5 a.m. The sheriff climbs out of bed to splash water on his face when he stops outside his room. Down the hall a glow comes from under the door. Sheriff Bronson backtracks into his bedroom, taking each step with care. Beneath his bedstead, he cracks open a black case. He removes a pistol and holds it front of him as he walks toward the room. The light comes out warm and orange from under the door. He stands like that for several minutes, listening for anything, looking at the orange glow to see if a shadow crosses it. Nothing stirs. At last, Sheriff Bronson twists the handle open and lets the door swing open. He steps in the doorway, pointing the gun. He stands frozen for a moment. His eyebrows go crooked. His arms go slack and he drops the gun. Sheriff Bronson releases a yelp and charges into the room.

“Jerome,” his wife calls. “Jerome, is that you?” She races down the hall to their daughter’s room. She sees the back of her husband crouched at the bed. His hands are raised. His fingers contorted like deformed twigs.

“Don’t come in, Doris” he shouts. His voice is hoarse. Anguished. Confused.

Doris starts to walk in when Sheriff Bronson springs up. “I said don’t come in here.”

But she sees the figure in the bed. Doris Bronson screams.

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Doll:

I am thinking about how some people's brains are electric. I don't mean that they are literally electric. I mean that they are so filled with inventive ideas that they practically radiate energy. I like to imagine the perfect person as a beam of electricity, a white hot ray of fire perfectly contained in a bolt. A perpetual lightning strike.

I am thinking these things as I stare into something that has nothing to do with electricity. I am staring at the horizon. It is night. It is late. The waves crash against the beach close to my feet. The sky is charcoal. A streak of sienna combs across the horizon. The stars are spangled. The moon looms. The vastness of three earthly abysses converge in this one place: land, ocean, sky. I am sitting on the edge of a continent (North America). Literally at the end of a piece of land so large that scientists have decided there are only seven of them. The continent is being constantly slapped by the greatest mystery on Earth. So deep, vast and mysterious is the ocean that we have no idea what's inside except for a few creatures. That vastness ends at the edge of land. The great dome above us splashes down and stops at this point of convergence.

Which is to say nothing of what's behind the sky.

It is easy to be inspired when you sit at the world's triangulated point of limits to the limitless.

Next to me is my friend, Gerry. Gerry, I imagine, has no such thoughts coursing through his mind, but I could be wrong. I could underestimate him. Or I may overestimate myself. Either way, he's fiddling with a sand crab. I wish that he'd let the critter burrow back in the sand, but I want to sit and think and gaze and wonder and let thoughts come as they will. And if I say something to Gerry, he will engage me in a conversation which will take away from the whole point of being here.

We both snuck out to make the half hour trip through the woods. If our parents knew, especially with all that's been going on, we'd be grounded for months. To drink in the ocean and beach and sky at night is worth it. Especially for me. I just need to sit here and think and let the thoughts fall into my brain, or emerge from my unconscious like walking fish from the ocean on their own. I need the quiet roar of the ocean.

“Why are we out here again?”

In reality, I am surprised that Gerry made it this long without breaking the silence.

“We are here to enjoy the solitude.”

“It’s boring.”

“Just sit and think.”

“Thinking is boring.”

“Thinking is not boring.”

“We should be at a party. The risk/reward equation here is disproportionate.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

“If something happened ...”

“Nothing,” I said, cutting him off, “would or is going to happen.”

“If you say so.”

“The other incidents were anomalies.”

“You can say that. But three anomalies in three months make it not so anomalous.”

“You are breaking my concentration. And let that poor creature go.”

I took the sand crab from his hand and let it on the sand.

The thing about chasing creative inspiration is that it is not a chase at all. It involves patience. Absolute patient searching, testing and probing. And just as important, creating a mental equilibrium. Establishing a mindset as rhythmic and unbreakable as the waves of the ocean. It demands patience, openness, a yin and yang merger of energy and calm, and perhaps most important, a meditative mindset underpinned by the knowledge that it will not be broken until you break it yourself.

Thanks to Gerry, that last part of the process is vanquished. A spilled fishbowl.

I get up without seeing what the sand crab does and walk down the slope to the waves. How utterly dark and cold it is a mile out. Two miles out. A hundred miles out in the ocean, all the way down. What frigid, obscure things could live in that condition?

Ideas. Frigid and obscure. Ideas congregate at the ocean. They fall, sink and get swept into the abyss by the undertow, only to return in the most microscopic forms as the waves pound the beach with grains of sand.

There are certain places on Earth where ideas occur with more voltage and frequency than all the rest. Palpable. Like salt in the air.

Suddenly I notice how cold the sand is on my toes. It's as though the sky had dropped a sub zero charge through the waves and shot through the earth into the sand to enshroud my toes in icy particles. The sky. The empty, ongoing sky.

I start to think that we should get going home. I'm afraid to look at my phone to see what time it is. Or worse, to see a message from my dad. Gerry was right. It was insensible. It was stupid to come out there.

I turn to tell him that we should go, but he's walking urgently forward. Toward me.

"Gerry?"

He walks right past me.

When I turn, I see it too.

"What on Earth?"

It is on the water, maybe a mile offshore.

"That's no boat," Gerry says.

"It's certainly not moving like one."

"A boat doesn't glow like that. Or look like that."

What we are looking at is a small, vertical cylinder that glows blue-white, like a shred of moon frozen in sapphire ice. It is coming in. Gerry and I race down the beach to get a better look. Suddenly we stop and crouch in the sand. It is half a mile out now and still coming in.

“Doll ...” Gerry whispers.

I can barely get the word out. “Yeah.”

“You see that, right? I’m not seeing things?”

I see it.

“You see that that’s a ...”

I can’t believe it, but it is a child.

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Doll:

The poet William Blake experienced hallucinations early in his life. They informed his approach to art. What artist would not want to visit, or be visited by, angels and spirits? In such an inebriated state, you would gain access to sights and sounds and tastes and textures that would populate your artwork for the rest of your life, to say nothing of cultivating an entire artistic vision. Of course you would be deemed clinically insane and forced to suffer institutionalization, but if you are serious about your art, I guess it is a small price to pay.

At first I wonder if I am experiencing my first hallucination. The thought excites me. Was I being visited by an angel or a spirit? Could I have achieved such an altered state of mind having sat for so long on the beach that I gained access to a previously inaccessible realm in my mind? Was I experiencing a vision? Have I picked the lock of a cerebral chamber that offers the most sublime form of creative inspiration: witnessing a vision of myself, luminous, radiant, ethereal, diaphanous, walking across the ocean? Nothing would excite me more than if my mind were projecting a metaphorical, mystical version of myself walking on water.

“Yo.”

But no. Gerry sees the vision too.

At least I can derive comfort in the knowledge that I am not going insane.

Gerry and I race down the coast until we camp on a dune to gain a better vantage point. The child is just beyond the waves. We are confident it is a child. It is too short to be an adult, and it definitely has a human form even if it is draped in an aura. But aside from that, it is too far out to discern any additional details.

The waves continue to crash, curling pebbles in its crest and flinging them against the land. The waves flatten and hiss. Other than a cluster of clouds far in the horizon, the sky is cloudless. The moon sends a shimmering ray of light across the deep aquamarine ocean.

Gerry and I watch the figure pause just beyond the surf. Then it walks through the waves, its strange glow encompassed temporarily by a gulp of murk. Now it is walking out of the ocean onto the beach.

We are 20 feet away, lying prone on top of the dune. The only sound is the crash of waves. The child's features are now so clear that it's like we are watching her on television.

Her. It's a little girl. Oyster-white hair down her back. Cat-grey eyes. Pink pajamas zipped up to her neck. But her face. Her expression. Never have I seen a look so void. Confused, distraught, but mostly void, not quite dead but definitely not alive.

It would be incorrect to call her a ghost. The word "ghost" conjures things that she is not. I keep thinking as I lay frozen, sweating, trembling on the dune top: how can I describe her?

As she walks past us into the woods, Gerry whispers: "it's like she just walked out of a movie screen."

She is an image. A projection. A hologram. A simulacrum.

Several minutes pass as we lie on the dune watching her descend into the woods.

Gerry shakes his head in disbelief. "I don't know whether to ask 'who' or 'what' that was. How did she get there," he says, pointing to the ocean, "and why did she go there," he continues, pointing to the trees. He rises from the dune and brushes off the sand from his Albert Einstein shirt. "Is she an alien?"

He pulls out his phone and starts calling a number.

"What are you doing?" I say.

"I'm calling Charles."

"Charles?" I say in exasperation.

"He's our best friend. And besides, if we want to make a profit from this, Charles will know what to do."

"Profit? Hang up that phone right now. We need to follow her."

"He's not answering," Gerry says, looking at his phone. "It is 3:30 in the morning, after all. Fine." He stashes the phone in his pocket and we start toward the opening in the woods. "Wait, our shoes are back there."

As Gerry sprints back to retrieve our shoes, I dig through my pockets for something to mark the spot where the little girl entered the woods. I find a wooden coin that's used as currency at the farmer's market. My dad gave it to me earlier in the day to buy lettuce and carrots and cucumbers. A pang of guilt and terror race through my stomach. I stare at the wooden coin. Then I go to the opening. There is a hollow in one of the trees and I lodge the wooden coin inside.