

SOLSTICE STORY

[Tarot card: The Sun]

Z. Sharon Glantz

Darkness consumes the days. Xmas lights and sparkling snow beseech the famished darkness its hold to no avail. A blazing fire in fireplace attempts to warm the bone-chilling cold inside Julia's old house. No surprise that Julia has trouble sleeping.

My life sucks, she whines to herself. Megrimms feed on the darkest parts of her psyche, surfacing her worst fears. She knows the feeding frenzy will culminate at the great feast of the Winter's Solstice. Darkness makes a banquet of this night because on the days to follow, it goes on a diet.

Fluffy pillows cushion Julia's head, but not her thoughts. "The longest night of the year and I can't sleep," she mumbles, giving her pillow a punch. Both her head and her thoughts are too heavy to hold, yet she is restless. "I've had better times," she muses, a tear running down her cheek and staining her satin pillowcase. One minute sleep seems very far away, the next the Sandman knocks her out.

"Where you be?"

Julia jolts awake into a dream. "Am I late?" She sits on a log, its texture smooth and strong. She is surrounded by majestic trees that look down upon her, patronizing enough to make her feel very small. The full moon casts shadows that darken the dark.

"Say what?" the voice pursues. Julia looks in the dim dark for the source of the voice. "I'm right behind you." Julia turns around. He looks like a snowman except he isn't made of snow. Like a snowman, he has a round base and spherical chest and head. He has a carrot nose, button eyes that don't blink and a mouth made of

something familiar. Julia can't think of what that something is. But he doesn't shimmer the same way as a snowman in the moon light.

"Nothing," he says proudly. Julia hates it when others assume they know what she is going to ask. When they're wrong, she feels disconnected. When they're right, she feels invaded.

"I was going to ask what your mouth is made of."

"Nothing. Can I kiss you?"

"Why?"

"You can't get something out of nothing, but nothing can make more nothing out of something. Can I? Please, can I?"

"No." Julia scowls. "What the hell are you--"

"Sand."

Julia hates being interrupted while she's asking a question. Her reasons resort back to the assumption issue. "You must be the Sandman who put me to sleep. So, where am--"

"A log. You're on a log. You're a bump on a long. Did you wish to be elsewhere?"

"Beats me." The Sandman uses one twigged hand to break off a piece of his other twigged hand and swats Julia not just once, but many times. Red welts erupt from her skin.

"Cut that out." The Sandman's twig turns into a large carving knife. He moves towards one of the welts on her arm as if to gouge it out. "Stop," she commands. It occurs to Julia that she'd best be careful. The Sandman is so literal, an idiom could kill her. However, this is easier said than done. Under stress, Julia tends to resort to

cliches. It's easier than feeling what she feels.

Julia is distracted by a tree that suddenly uproots itself, rises a few inches in the air and falls silently to the ground.

"Did you hear that?" asks the Sandman.

"No. I saw the tree leave the ground but didn't hear anything when it returned. Should I have?"

"Only if you're not really here."

"I'm only here in a dream. So, no, I guess I'm not really here."

"Of course that's what you think." Sand flies off the Sandman as he laughs. The sound of his laughter sends chills down Julia's spine.

"This dream sucks," she mumbles. The Sandman's mouth of nothing opens very wide. Like an oversized vacuum cleaner, it pulls her closer to the opening as if to consume her. "Stop." Julia pulls away, thankful she has a safe word in this dream. As is her habit, she reaches up to smooth her hair, but her head is completely bald. "Shoot," she says rubbing her head. Before she can stop him, the Sandman pulls out a pair of guns from a holster. "Stop," she commands before he pulls the triggers. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything you haven't explicitly asked for." The Sandman looks hurt.

"I guess I'd better be careful what I ask for," she says, patting his twigged arm. "I'm sorry."

"Where you be?" The Sandman asks again.

"I don't know," Julia answers cautiously. "You tell me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because. Where do you think you are?"

Julia thinks. "I don't feel like I'm anywhere. I used to think my life was taking shape. I used to have goals, ideals, expectations. But I seem to have hit a brick wall." Julia bangs her head before falling backward, tripping on the log. Looking at the brick wall before her she rubs the lump on her forehead. "Ouch," she exclaims.

"Go on," the Sandman encourages, stepping in front of the brick wall as though protecting her from hurting herself.

"Thanks," she says.

"For what?"

"For being there."

"Why?"

"I don't want to beat my head against the wall." She smiles. She's outwitted her dream.

"Go on."

"I'm down," she says, making no effort to rise.

"Why?"

Julia can't think of how to answer. "Because."

"Because?"

"Molly says I've hit the glass ceiling." Julia is not surprised as the air above her solidifies. Moonlight diffuses through the glass. Julia has just enough room to stand. She runs her hands along the cool surface, thinking about how angry she is. "Why can't I get what I want," she whines, "Am I asking for so much?" She pushes against the

glass with all her strength. "A little recognition -- all right, fame. A little prosperity -- all right, wealth. A little familiarity -- all right, intimacy. I deserve a break." Her pushing cracks the glass. "Now we're getting somewhere. What happens when push comes to shove?" she asks, pushing against the ceiling with all her strength. The glass refuses to disappear, disintegrate or even retreat. Julia sits back down crossing her arms.

"Push came to shove and nothing changed," she challenges the Sandman. He laughs. "Don't laugh at me," she commands. He continues laughing, "You aren't doing what I want you to do." The Sandman's laughter grows larger and louder. "What's the point?" Invisible pins and needles prick her sensitive skin. "You're hurting me," she cries out as the pins and needles probe deeper. "Quit hurting me." The pricking and probing sensations disappear. "I don't believe this."

"It doesn't matter what you believe or don't believe," the Sandman says not unkindly.

"I don't like this dream," Julia whines. "I feel like everything's caving in on me." She wants to take back her words, but it's too late. The brick wall and glass ceiling crumble and fall upon her, hurting her more than the pins and needles. "I'm buried," she calls out, "I'm buried under a mountain of shit." Again, she regrets her words. What's wrong with me? she asks herself. The stench is stupefying, the goo uncomfortable. "I thought I was too young to be over the hill, but I guess I was wrong." Just as she'd hoped, she disappears from beneath the mountain of shit and reappears at its base. The stench of her body makes her eyes water, but at least she can see and breathe. The Sandman stands over her, shaking his head, smiling sadly.

"Guess I'd better clean up my act." In the blink of an eye, the goo vanishes along

with the stench. Julia sits naked and shivering.

"Where you be?"

"I'm afraid if I answer that, I'll create another disaster."

"Where you be?"

"In a dream. A nightmare, I guess."

"Where you be?"

"I give up, where?"

"Where you be?"

"I said I don't know. I'm stumped." Julia doesn't mind being transformed into a stump. At least it's safe.

She sits there for what feels to be a very long time. The forest darkens as the full moon sets. "I've lost my vision," she mutters. Nothing changes. It doesn't have to. At least the Sandman is nowhere to be seen. As she sits immobilized by the condition of her tree-like body, Julia suffers about her life. If she had a hand, it would be stapled to her forehead. Timeless moping. Interminable despair. Forever miserable. "What-if's" turn memories into failure. My sleeping body must be close to death, she ponders. What am I not seeing?

A second moon rises, casting eerie shadows. And still Julia suffers. Looking down, she sees the shadow of the stump that is her, shift and take shape. She watches as its outlines becomes more defined. Julia didn't think stumps could be scared. She realizes she knows very little about stumps. Looking up at the twinkling stars, Julia plagiarizes the nursery rhyme that pops into her head:

"Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, gain

courage to make it through the night." Nice, she thinks, trying to set aside her growing anxiety.

Looking down, she sees the shadow of the stump that is her redefine its perimeter and stand up. Julia recognizes her own body shape. It's identical to the one sleeping in a warm bed somewhere both very close and very far away.

"You look terrible," Shadow-Julia tells her. Julia says nothing. How can she? Stumps don't talk. "Get over it, Julia. I'd rather talk *with* you than *at* you." Julia continues to hide inside the stump. Shadow-Julia intrigues her, but she fears her mouth will get her into trouble if she engages in conversation. "It won't, don't worry. Let me introduce myself. I'm your shadow. Nu? Still no response? I know you've read Jung. I know you know what I am. Take me in, Julia. You want to wake up, don't you? All that pissing and moaning you've been doing as a block of dead wood could completely take over your waking life. Is that what you want? A life as a block of dead wood? I don't think so. Deal with me here, and you won't project me onto everyone you meet. I hate it when you do that. Like when Molly made that glass ceiling comment, you blamed her and she's your best friend. Just deal with me head-on, face-to-face, and maybe you'll learn something for a change. Julia, you know I hate being ignored. Actually, you don't care and that's a problem for me. Who the hell do you think put you into this nightmare, eh?"

Julia hides deeper inside the stump. "The wood that contains you is not safe, Julia. Far from it. I could set you on fire. Better yet, I could send in an army of worms, little maggots to squirm their way inside you. I know how you love worms. Nu? You wuss, wimp, chicken-hearted shutdown piece of flammable nothing. You don't even have roots. That's right. Those roots you think exist, those roots you claim have a safe hold in

the earth, those roots are dead. You're nothing but a stump, a corpse in the wood."

Fighting against surfacing to confront her shadow once and for all, Julia reaches for a deeper despair on which to focus, to separate her from the aberration before her who speaks with her voice.

"You haven't had an original thought in ages. No wonder you complain about your alleged writer's block. Are you so stumped you can't acknowledge that no, there is no such thing as writer's block – not for a writer. Are you a writer? I thought we were."

Julia can't help herself. A great deal of her identity is attached to her ability to create, to synthesize input and produce something entirely new.

"There's nothing new under the sun, Julia" Shadow-Julia taunts.

"Bullshit," Julia responds.

"So that's what it takes to pull you out of your shell," teases Shadow-Julia.

"Now who's spouting cliches," Julia counters.

"I do what you do, much as I'd rather not sometimes. At least I admit I talk in cliches when stressed out. You call it writer's block or emotional overload."

"What if I do?" Julia loosely confesses. A breeze makes the leaves shimmer in the moonlight. Julia takes a deep breath. "There. I confessed. Can I go home now?"

"You make a little confession, and you think you've actually accomplished something? Get real." Shadow-Julia laughs.

"Where's the Sandman?" Julia asks, fearful her words could get her in trouble again.

"Asleep. Don't worry. He can't hear you. Your words won't harm you," reassures Shadow-Julia. "Come with me. I have something you want."

The tone in Shadow-Julia's voice promises something ugly and uncomfortable. What could she possibly have that Julia would want? Julia's anxiety makes her palms sweat. Julia never could draw a distinction between cooperation and compliance. She stops walking abruptly.

"Something wrong?" Shadow-Julia asks, obviously irritated with the delay.

"I demand to go back to my sleeping body," Julia says with more authority than she feels. "I don't want to do this. I don't have to." Julia uses her most haughty tone.

"Who cares what you think." This is a surprise. Julia almost always gets her way when she uses this tone. "If you don't come with me, you'll wake up from this dream feeling the same way you did when the Sandman nailed you."

"So what. I'll manage. I don't need you." Julia hopes her rejection will make Shadow-Julia go away.

"Nice try, but I couldn't leave you even if I wanted to, which I too often do," says Shadow-Julia. "You think you're really tough, don't you, Julia."

"I can be if I need to be," says Julia, oozing self-satisfaction.

"You're so tough you'll hold onto the most ridiculous ways of thinking, feeling or behaving, just because you can't bring yourself to let it go. You'd rather wake up suffering the horror that is your life than making the changes necessary to move on. That's true determination, Julia. I hope you're proud." Julia pounds the ground with her fists in a tantrum. "Go ahead, regress to childhood. Except that you're not a child, Julia. You're an adult. Sure, the child lives inside you, but do you really want that primitive level of consciousness running your adult life?"

Julia tries to shut out Shadow-Julia's words. They make her feel inadequate, even

more inadequate than she felt before falling into this nightmare of a dream. "I want to take a shower. I feel dirty."

Rain falls. Not a bone-chilling rain, but a warming and cleansing rain. "Uh oh. We stayed here too long," advises Shadow-Julia. "All we can do is weather it through."

"Weather what?"

"You'll see."

Rain turns to showers. Julia feels a rumbling under her feet. The rumble shakes water from the trees and trips her off her feet. As the shaking gets wilder, trees bend unnaturally, whiplashed by the rolling ground.

"Stop that," Julia commands.

"You're going to have to do better than that," Shadow-Julia responds, unmoved by the earthquake.

"What should I do?" asks Julia, bouncing uncomfortably.

"Take it inside."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I told you we shouldn't have stopped here. This is the natural disaster zone."

"Huh?" Julia tries to understand but cannot. "Help me, please. Get me out of here. I can't take any more."

"More suffering, oi. We have to ride it out, Julia."

Trees crash down silently on the two of them. Unlike Julia, Shadow-Julia dodges them easily. When the rumbling subsides, Julia finds herself trapped beneath tree branches. Her vision is covered except for a small peep hole. Looking out, she sees that all the trees have fallen. In the distance, the moonlight illuminates a volcano. Julia can't

determine how far away it is because she can only look out with one eye at a time so that she has no depth perception. Despite the pouring rain, the volcano steams in the distance. Suddenly it's top pops up into the sky. The spewing steam is replaced with fire. Molten lava oozes over the top and down the sides, heading straight towards her.

"Help me," she calls out.

"Help us both," she hears Shadow-Julia whisper. "Help yourself."

"How?"

"I already told you. Take it inside."

"Oh. I thought you meant indoors and I don't know of any such place in this dream. You mean the experience, don't you?"

"Brilliant deduction."

The molten lava races towards them. Julia doesn't ever remember being so afraid. In her worst fears and greatest fantasies, she is trapped and unable to save herself from some horrible catastrophe. She recalls reactions to events she'd seen on the news: the earthquakes of Los Angeles and Columbia; the hurricanes in Kuai and Florida; the volcanic eruptions of Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Pinatubo. She'd imagine performing courageous acts of bravery, saving herself and others from certain death.

"I can't believe you're letting this happen," Shadow-Julia whispers.

"It's out of my control," Julia whines.

"This is a dream -- your dream -- you idiot. Take back the control."

Julia sees the lava creeping closer. Survival instincts take over. Julia breathes in as deeply as she can and lets out a loud wail, an infant's wail. As sound erupts from her chest, Julia remembers an infanthood of wild discomfort. Colic, my ass, she thinks. I

was pissed. I was born into a world of humanity, for chrissakes. What could be more infuriating. Look at them. They hurt one another and they selfishly believe their individual identity has more value and meaning than anything else. How could they forget from whence they came?

"Remember, Julia." Julia can barely hear Shadow-Julia through her shrieking and wailing. "Remember." Shadow-Julia words penetrate and invoke a sadness that rumbles deep from within her gut, exploding in tears that race out of her eyes and nose. She cries like she hasn't cried for a very long time as though a dam within her has burst. Through dripping eyes, Julia sees the volcano has disappeared, trees resume their upward reach to the stars and the rain has stopped falling.

Shadow-Julia holds Julia against her breast, rocking her gently. Julia weeps and cries until she is empty. Shadow-Julia exudes warmth and reassurance. This surprises Julia into giggles. Her giggles make Shadow-Julia's breasts bounce. This makes Julia laugh. "What's so funny?" Shadow-Julia asks, stroking Julia's bald head.

"You." Shadow-Julia abruptly extricates herself from Julia's grasp. Julia looks up at Shadow-Julia and falls to the ground in a fit of laughter.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Yes. No. I didn't think you had substance and there you were, holding me, and your boobies started jiggling."

"You thought I was insubstantial. I had to laugh." Julia wipes her eyes and nose as her laughter dies down.

"Ready to move on?" Shadow-Julia interrupts her reverie.

"There's more? Can't you just give me whatever you think it is I want?"

"You make a little confession; you experience a little emotion in the natural disaster zone; and now you think you're ready to accept what I have to give you? Dream on. Let's go. If we stay here much longer, the meteorological or geological disasters of your screwed up emotional life will slow us down again. They'll keep returning as long as we stay in one place."

"Then please, let's get going," Julia pipes in. She follows a pace behind Shadow-Julia. Maybe she isn't so tired after all.

They walk for what feels to Julia like many hours. The landscape remains the same -- tall, treed forest in moonlight. The lack of variation gets on Julia's nerves. She knows if she was relaxed -- truly relaxed like after a long vacation -- she'd enjoy the quiet time. But Julia is not relaxed, nor does she have a vacation coming up any time soon. Julia is bored.

"I have to stop," she says, slumping down on a rock.

"You really don't want to stop here," Shadow-Julia warns.

"Why not?"

"You just don't."

"But I'm bored of walking in this forest. It's dull, it's tedious, I can't keep doing it."

"I was afraid this might happen."

The rock underneath Julia turns into some kind of conveyor belt, transporting both she and Shadow-Julia rapidly through the forest. "Hey, this is great," Julia exclaims. Shadow-Julia withholds comment. They are transported through a series of gates that close behind them. "Where are we?" asks Julia.

"The Petting Zoo."

"How fun." Julia loves animals. The Petting Zoo was always her favorite part of the zoo. The conveyor belt moves them towards a crowd of people. "Where are all the animals?" Julia asks. A knot grows in the pit of her stomach as they approach the crowd.

"Right in front of you." Shadow-Julia's tone does not sound promising.

The crowd sees Julia and rushes around her.

"Me, make nice to me."

"Pet my ego, pet my ego."

"Schmooze me, schmooze me."

"Get away," Julia exclaims. She notices no one gets near Shadow-Julia. "How do I get rid of them?"

"It's a Petting Zoo. Figure it out."

Julia approaches each person, rubbing an arm, patting a back, ruffling hair. "It's okay." "You're fine." "Don't take it so hard." The crowd dwindles. Only a few remain.

"What do you want?" she asks the remaining few. Each pulls her aside and talks at her about everything that ails them. From physical pain to heart break, the stories go on and on and on and on.

"I know what you mean. Once I--" Every time she tries to involve herself by sharing an experience of her own, they interrupt her and continue with their sagas.

By the time the last person finishes their tiresome personal history, Julia is empty. Her ears ring.

"They took it all," she tells Shadow-Julia.

"What do you expect? You gave it all away," replies Shadow-Julia. "Same old shit,

eh, Julia? Let's go."

"I'm too tired to move."

"They'll come back for more. Is that what you want?"

"No more, please. I'm sucked dry. Let's get out of here."

"You're the one who was so bored you had to stop at the Petting Zoo."

"Fine, I'm an idiot. Lead on, McDuff."

As they walk, Julia starts to feel better. The scenery is as tedious as ever, but she'd rather keep going than get stuck in another strange place.

"We've arrived. See ya." Shadow-Julia waves and turns her back on Julia.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be seeing you."

"What were you going to give me?" Julia asks, trying to deal with whatever awfulness is to come.

"You'll see." Before Julia can ask another question, Shadow-Julia vanishes.

"Terrific," she says out loud to no one. She's about to sit on a pile of leaves when the ground drops out from under her, sending her flying. The trees, the moon, they disappear. She is surrounded by darkness. Although she was never afraid of the dark when she was little, Julia feels fear creep behind her ears. Looking down she sees a dim blue glow. She maneuvers her body so that she falls headfirst. Forget landing on my feet, I'm going to dive, she thinks to herself. The sooner this is over, the better. Her stomach seems to move faster than the rest of her body, pushing against her throat.

Blocking the blue light, she sees the Sandman. He shimmers blue. Looking up at her, he smiles and puckers his lips in preparation for a kiss. What a jerk, she seethes.

She swings her body around to kick the Sandman in the head. A few feet from his mouth she stops abruptly, hanging in the air. She kicks at nothing. The Sandman laughs his spine-tingling laugh. The more he laughs the more Julia struggles to kick him.

"Get away from me you over-bloated bag of sand." This makes him laugh harder. As his laughter increases in volume, his mouth expands in size. She tries to run away but the ground won't let her make progress. The more she struggles the louder his laughter and the larger his mouth grows.

She stops her struggling. The Sandman stops laughing. His mouth, the size of a door, stops expanding.

At first, Julia reaches out for despair. Despair is not in, call back later. She reaches out for suffering. Suffering is out right now, please leave a message. "Fuck you," she says at the tone. She reaches out for any emotion available. We're on vacation, we'll get back to you. This strikes Julia as very amusing. Her giggle echoes around her. This strikes her as funny. Her laugh laughs back at her. This strikes her as absolutely hysterical. She laughs and laughs until her sides ache.

When she is finished, silence dulls her senses. She looks down at the mouth of the Sandman, except the Sandman is no longer the Sandman. He is Shadow-Julia.

"What the hell. I've got nothing to lose." Julia shifts her body and dives down into the mouth of Shadow-Julia.

The dark no longer frightens her. In fact, it's rather comforting. She falls gracefully, drifting in and out of thought. At some point the same sense of boredom she felt on the path infiltrates her easy descent. She tries amusing herself by dancing. She does cartwheels, somersaults, flips and twirls. And still she descends. Anxiety makes her

muscles tighten. Without distractions, Julia is lost.

She hears an engine of some kind. It's buzzing gets closer. Looking up, she sees an airplane shimmering in the dark. It looks like it's made of sand.

"The Sandman has a sandplane," she mutters. Something falls out of the sandplane. As it gets closer, Julia can see it's a silk something. She grabs it before it passes her. She loves the feel of the silk on her skin. The robe is a perfect fit.

She looks up at the sandplane just as it lets out a plume of light that spells out two words: SURRENDER JULIA. This is the second time I've committed plagiarism in my own dream, she thinks to herself. Shadow-Julia was right. I haven't had an original thought in ages.

The sandplane swoops close to her, jolting her out of her reverie. She re-reads the words. "Fine," she says loudly, "I surrender."

The speed of her descent increases. Her heart leaps ahead of her breath. She struggles for air. Her heart jumps out from her breast and falls along with her. She grabs it and plants it firmly on the sleeve of her silk robe. Looking down at her hands, she finds she is shuffling a deck of cards. A table appears in front of her. She lays out the cards on the table. It disappears. Her hands leap to her chest. Her breasts are encompassed by something slimy but firm. She rips it off her chest and flings it away.

Julia lands softly in a pile of leaves. In the moonlight, she sees the Sandman chopping at a tree. He looks up at her and smiles. Finally, the tree gives way, creaking its resistance before crashing loudly through the branches of the other trees. It hits the ground with a thud so loud, it makes the earth quiver.

"Where you be?" asks the Sandman.

"Right here, right now," Julia happily exclaims.

"Come here, you." Julia plants a big kiss on the mouth of the Sandman. The Sandman points to the stump. Julia rises and sits on its smooth surface.

"Maybe something can be made of nothing," he murmurs in her ear. His soft warm lips kiss her neck before returning to her mouth. She reaches out, expecting a sandy embrace. His firm body leans into her. His flesh pulses with life as he removes her silk robe. Julia loses track of time and space, lost in passion, consumed by lust.

". . . 3 inches of snow. Take extra time this commute. Don't go out if you don't have to."

"But I want to," Julia says, surfacing from her dream. Sleep falls away easily. She stretches the kinks out of her muscles and lies back in the warmth of her bed. The seed of an idea sprouts in her brain. She nurtures it along, letting it take its own shape.

The turmoil of waking up to another day doesn't writhe under her skin and make her irritable, the way it usually does. Instead of thrashing about to liven her drowsy spirit, Julia's spirit bursts from deep within her like an overflowing fountain. After weeks, maybe months of pulling herself out of bed, she is propelled into vertical joy. New ideas burst through her writer's block. Not that they were new. They'd always been there. Except they'd resided in the heart and mind of Shadow-Julia, not her. Now she and Shadow-Julia are one. Well, maybe and much of the time. Certainly, more than when she fell into last night's dream.

Julia greets the beginning of the light, inspired and ready. She smiles at the mirror, pleased with whom she sees. Time to step up.