

The Blind Oasis

The itch behind June's ear was like a persistent beetle burrowing into the pulpy sponge of her brain. The irritating sensation began the evening after she had dropped a wreath made of azaleas into the ocean off of the very same barnacled dock her brother had jumped from exactly a year ago to the day. Her mother, ever-fussy, had suggested she use lilies, chrysanthemums or, possibly, even a handful of cherry blossoms, since azaleas were more of a love flower and meant for women. June stuck with the azaleas, though, and after watching the pink wreath spin atop the frothy green seawater like a rotating discus, she stripped down to her bathing suit, dove into the waves and swam desperately for the shore, until her eyes bulged and her muscles burned from exhaustion.

When June awoke the next morning, the itch quietly gnawed beneath her right ear, her favorite of the two. Thinking it nothing more than a bit of sand and seawater, she tried to dislodge the hitchhiking interloper by probing the hidden whorl of her ear with a finger and jiggling it rapidly. This seemed to have the opposite effect, however, as the muffled buzz only increased in intensity, and thus, amplifying her irritation.

At breakfast, she complained to her mother about the itch, hoping she might offer a sagely remedy only a mother would have secret knowledge of. For not only was the itch a nuisance, it cast a gloomy pall over her mood and tinted all of her thoughts blue.

Try shaking your head repeatedly, her mother suggested. Like you used to whenever I forced you to eat Brussel sprouts? June shook her head until she became dizzy and fell unto the floor. But the itch continued unabated, clawing...clawing.

They then tried to sate the itch with a Q-tip. Her mother dug in her ear with the thoroughness of a miner stripping a pocket of iron ore. Sadly, this too had no effect, whatsoever. Well, I'm stumped, her mother declared. I guess, if it's still bothering you in the morning, we'll have the doctor sort you out.

June's doctor was a pipsqueak of a man with telescope glasses, a great pair of floppy ears he could bend at will and a silver mustache so bushy it looked as if a ferret had fallen asleep upon his lip. Indeed, the man was so short of stature he stood atop a stool in order to peer deep into June's ear with his otoscope.

Hmm...yes...I see...he mumbled, as he peered into her skull. Tweezers, he called to June's mother, who had been sitting patiently nearby. She handed a pair of long tweezers to the doctor who then nimbly poked the biting end into June's head. He fiddled around a bit before giving a triumphant, Ah-ha!, and removing what appeared to be a long thin string, like a bit of used floss, or maybe, synthetic thread used for a surgical suture. The doctor pinched the string between his fat fingers and began to pull it out. But the more he pulled the more string came forth from June's head. Moments later, a spooled pile of the string rose from the floor towering up to the doctor's knees.

I do hope that isn't her brain you're unravelling, Doctor, June's mother said cheekily.

Of course not, replied the doctor. Nothing at all to worry about. I just need to run a few tests is all. He clipped the string streaming from June's ear with his scissors, wound the whole mess about his hand with the nimbleness of a professional snake-handler and rushed out of the examination room. Less than a minute later, a nurse came bustling into the room with a hospital gown and the announcement that June was to stay the night, so they could more closely monitor her condition.

June spent the following month in the hospital and was systematically moved from room to room, office to office, wing to wing, so she could be examined by every doctor, every specialist, and practically everyone else in the hospital capable of a qualified opinion. She saw audiologists, neurologists, dermatologists, endocrinologists, cardiologists, epidemiologists, oncologists and once, even, a surly dentist who knew nothing of the mysterious string growing out of her ear, and could, frankly, give a hoot, but recommended, anyway, that she have her wisdom teeth out soon, or risk they become impacted.

And so it went. With each visit by a new doctor, the string was unravelled more and more. Some doctors would only unravel a few feet before cutting off a segment to hold before the overhead light in awe, while others pulled out entire reams, stretching yards and yards of it out in a seemingly inexhaustible supply. Even the janitor got in on the act when he requested a inch or two to fix the broken shoelace on his boot. June obliged, of course, since there really did seem to be no end to the strange crystalline substance.

One night, weeks into her stay, June turned the television off to ask her mother if she was going to die. Her mother put down the sweater she was crocheting for her pet owl, Churchill, out of the excess string from June's ear and plainly told her, Of course not. Now get some sleep. We have another 16 appointments tomorrow.

On and on, the doctors came from all over the country, each picking, poking, prodding her with questions, fingers needles until she began to feel more like a porcupine than a human being. She made the cover of *Doctor's Monthly*, flanked by her battalion of doctors, and a million dollar prize was even offered by the eccentric billionaire and space travel magnate, Milton Malone Morrison, a man known widely for his interest in outlandish maladies, ailments and medical conditions, the weirder they were, the better.

No one found a solution, though, and they continued to unspool June all throughout winter and deep into the following spring. She was close giving up hope of ever leaving the hospital and was resigned to the notoriety of a sideshow freak or, even worse, that of a shamed pop starlet.

But then, out of the thick fog of doctors crowding her, someone noticed a mysterious old woman standing alone in the corner. No one knew who she was, where she had come from or how exactly she had gotten past security in the first place, but once her presence in the room was found out, a tsunami of murmurs spread through the doctors until it reached June, pinned in her bed like a dusty moth to corkwood. June's mother parted the doctors to reveal a stooped elderly woman with a hairy face, a crooked nose and a glossy pair of black eyes, two opals, really, that darted about the room, seemingly, with a will of their own. Draped over her shoulders was a lustrous coat of giraffe and upon her feet were shoes that seemed to be nothing more than two clopping heads of baby crocodiles.

When she finally spoke the room fell into a quick silence. Might I propose a solution? she said with a voice so pointed and brittle it seemed made of ice. That is, she went on, if you're brave enough, my dear.

June's options had long ago been exhausted so, of course, she was ready to consent to whatever treatment the strange Witch-Doctor. The gang of doctors, whether feeling guilt from their inadequate remedies, or simply curious, agreed to help the Witch-doctor in whatever way they could and promptly set out fill her unorthodox, yet meticulous orders.

With the help of June's mother, they contacted each of June's relatives and had them assemble at the hospital. They dashed about town to rent every tow truck they could find still in working

order. And finally, they dropped by the local zoo and after much begging, cajoling and eventual bribery, they managed to borrow the zoo's resident elephant, Mr. Pozzo, for the day.

With all of June's relatives gathered outside her hospital room, the elephant properly fed and the fleet of tow trucks idling in the street below, the Witch-Doctor kissed June's forehead, smoothed her bangs behind her ear and whispered a bit of advice, Just be brave, dear. No more, no less. The Witch-Doctor's breath smelled overpoweringly like that of a dog, forcing June to hold her breath as she nodded that she understood.

The Witch-Doctor then climbed atop a chair to address June's relatives, a boisterous group numbering just under 70. The Witch-Doctor told each of them to link arms in a daisy chain and when they were ready to shout aloud. They methodically attached to one another, elbow to elbow, down the corridor beyond June's room. Once they were all connected, they let out a resounding roar.

Next, the Witch-Doctor called down to the crowd gathered in the street: the rowdy battalion of doctors along with much of the hospital staff, Mr. Pozzo and his caretakers from the zoo, the tow truck fleet and the dozens upon dozens of curious neighbors who lived nearby. Ready? asked the Witch-Doctor. And they too shouted a resounding, YES!

With everything set, the Witch-Doctor asked June's mother to hold onto June tightly. She then began to pull the string dangling from June's ear and feed it out the window. Once it reached street level, Milton Malone Morrison, himself, plucked it out of the air and strung each idling tow truck into a gigantic bracelet. He then circled the string eleven times around Mr. Pozzo neck as he scratched his great gray flank against a parked school bus. When Milton Malone Morrison had finished he gave the Witch-Doctor, waiting ever-so patiently seven stories above, the OK sign with his exquisitely manicured index finger and thumb.

Turning finally to June, the Witch-Doctor asked, Are you ready, dear? June gulped and nodded. The Witch-doctor signaled to the chain of June's relatives to attach themselves to June's mother, who was holding June tightly. The Witch-doctor then signaled to the crowd in the street to begin pulling on the great swath of string moored to June's head. The tow trucks lurched forward and Milton Malone Morrison, riding atop Mr. Pozzo, spurred the 6-ton elephant onward down the street. Behind them, the gang of doctors and the enormous crowd pulled on the string as if they were playing the most intense game of tug-o-war in the history of humankind.

As they progressed down the street, the string unraveled more and more. One mile, then two, then four, until they had gone the full six miles to the roaring green mouth of the ocean. How could so much string come from such a small head? the sweaty volunteers wondered as they struggled against the crystal string.

Keep going! the Witch-doctor called out through a bullhorn a policeman had provided her. We're nearly there! Sure enough, a few feet later, as Mr. Pozzo's heavy feet dug into the yellow beachhead, the string tightened and jerked to a sudden stop. If it weren't for the dozens of straining, red-faced relatives anchoring June, she might very well have been yanked from her bed and flung right out the window.

Don't stop! bellowed the Witch-doctor out the window. The train of people strained to pull the string backwards a few more feet. June grimaced from the pressure and her relatives, their feet scuffing the floor as they slipped, did their best to hold desperately unto her. The string vibrated tautly in the open air and for a tense moment the very air seemed to hum with stillness. Then, suddenly, a great pop exploded. The string fell slack, sending Mr. Pozzo, the entire fleet of tow trucks, the gang of doctors and everyone else straight into the gurgling, foamy green waves of the ocean. Likewise, back at the hospital, June's relatives were flung in the opposite direction and

sent sprawling across the linoleum floors. The pop had reverberated throughout the hospital corridors as loudly as a cannon shot and left everyone inside of a dozen feet with ringing ears.

June's relatives could care less about their own ears, as they crowded back into the hospital room to see what had become of June and the string. What they found was June sitting upright in her bed with streams of tears spilling off of her face. On the floor lay the string, and on its was the pink face of a simple cork stopper. The room burst into cheers. June's uncles hugged her mother. Her aunts heartily shook hands and slapped each other on the back. They had won the day.

But once again a tsunami of murmurs spread across the room, dampening the merriment, as the Witch-doctor did her best to shush the crowd. Everyone's attention turned to June, whose tears had become two uninterrupted gushes pouring out of her eyes. Water soon began to spray out her ears, the corners of her mouth and even from her nose. It dripped from the bed unto the floor and gathered into deep pools. One of June's cousins, a known nose-picker and connoisseur of human gum, paste and goo, dipped her finger in one of the pools and touched the sparkling liquid to her tongue. Seawater, she said with a scowl.

Seawater? the Witch-doctor repeated quietly. Seawater! She held her head and rushed to flee the room. Run while you can! she called back over her shoulder, her crocodile shoes clopping as she vanished around the corner.

Unfortunately, none of June's relatives heeded the old woman's advice and remained watching as more and more seawater continued to pour, in greater and greater sheets, from every open pore of June's body. Soon she leaking so much of the heavy, glittering water a mighty river burst forth from her mouth and spurt out of the hospital room in a great winding flow, sweeping June's family right along with it.

By the time the gang of doctors, zookeepers, tow truck drivers and the neighbors finally made their way back to the hospital, each one of them hoping to be greeted as heroes, they found great torrents of seawater shooting out of every window of the hospital into the street below. My god! said Milton Malone Morrison. She must have had a hurricane inside of her!

The cascade continued for eleven straight days, flooding much of the town, and poured forth until the strange waters met with the warm waves of the ocean in the distance. The streets transformed into salty channels. Fish, crab and curious dolphins swam casually into people's homes. Sharks attacked house pets. And the screeches of gulls could be heard at all hours of the night. The townspeople were so overwhelmed by the damage done to their town, as they fended off jellyfish and snarky eels, that they completely forgot where the offending waters had come from in the first place.

Luckily, on the twelfth day, the fates relented and the tide swept the waters out to sea and the town was soon found itself dry again. If it weren't for all ruin around them, the townspeople would have marveled at how lovely the shimmering sheen of salt made everything.

But their anger was stubborn and they quickly formed a mob and marched back to June's hospital room. Milton Malone Morrison, of course, was at the head of their numbers and was immediately flanked by the original gang of doctors, each armed with the diver spears they had used to fight off intruding sharks, octopi and all too brave gulls. Once they reached the hospital room, though, they did not find exactly what they had expected. Instead of June, they came upon the poor girl's mother, and in her arms wasn't her daughter, but an unconscious young boy, naked to the bottoms of his feet. June's mother looked up at the mob of people and in her eyes they saw they were full of tears, but thankfully, normal tears this time.

It's my son, June's mother said. I thought he was gone forever, but he's come back to me. My precious, beautiful son. They stood in silence as the mother cradled her previously lost child as if he were still a baby, until one by one, they mob broke apart and returned to their homes to sweep up the piles of clams, jellyfish and soon-to-be rotting mounds of dead fish.

In the years that followed, no one ever did see the likes of young June again. Granted, rumors were murmured that her ghost had been spotted looking over the edge of the pier or swimming far out in the bay. But the majority of these rumors were exactly that, rumors and they never failed to be swallowed up in the day's routine gossip and bickering.

Occasionally, though, a hurricane would sweep over the town or a noteworthy rainstorm would fill the streets again, and if one listened close enough they could hear young June's voice singing between the howls of wind or echoing skyward from the rippling puddles of water ringing in the never-ending rain.