

FINDING FAIRYLAND 3: SPRING BEAUTIES

1. Rock & Sand

Julia hurried along the sidewalk. Though it was the middle of March and the sun was bright, the wind still blew cold. She had left her hat in their van and the breeze tried to undo the French braid her mother had put into her brown hair. To protect her ears from the cold, Julia hunched her shoulders and pushed her chin down inside the collar. She walked as fast as she could, taking big steps and striding straight along the sidewalk.

Though she didn't pause to look inside, she noted each store or office she passed. The coffee shop her mother liked to go to, the barbershop that always gave off a funny smell in the summer, the "Tax Accountant", whatever that was. She'd seen the businesses nearly every day and she could almost name them off in her head. And each one that she named meant she was that much closer to where she wanted to be, where she was headed.

And that much further away from where she was supposed to be going.

Julia had seen it from the window as her mother drove them to her office. She squealed in excitement and her mother nearly stopped the van and asked what was wrong. Julia at first only begged her mother to pull over. But her mother wouldn't -- she said they were cutting it close for the first appointment. They had dropped Julia's sister Laura off at softball practice and then stayed to watch the girls warm up. Her mother smiled when Julia told her what she saw and said they would go look at it after she had seen all of her patients.

Now Julia turned the corner with the drugstore on it and nearly bumped into a man coming out. She was thinking about where she was headed and not paying attention to anything around her. She had asked her mother if she could leave the office and was supposed to simply go across the street and around the block to the bookstore. Julia knew her mother would be disappointed with her for disobeying and not heading right to the bookman's shop.

But she had to see it. That's what Julia kept thinking as she strode quickly past the tanning salon, the photography studio, and the wine shop. It was only a short bit out of the way and wouldn't take very long. She'd be back and in the book store and her mother wouldn't even know. And anyway, she had her cell phone in her pocket in case anything happened.

Julia stopped at the corner. The Do Not Walk flashed orange. Julia peered across the street. She could see it from where she was standing.

A fairy ring. In the middle of the lawn in front of City Hall. Right in the center of town where everyone could see, where hundreds of people drove by it all day, every day. She could hardly believe it. A perfect circle of white-topped mushrooms. The first one of the season.

The light changed and Julia looked left and right. She remembered her mother complaining that sometimes people ran this light and always warned her daughters to look before crossing. Even though she was in a hurry and excited, Julia looked both ways.

The distance suddenly seemed very far. She guessed it was only twenty feet across the street and then less than fifty yards to the ring, but it seemed like miles right then.

Julia stepped up onto the curb and then the sidewalk. Since it was Saturday, the City Hall was closed. Not many people came here on the weekend. A couple pushed a baby stroller along the walk by the street and a woman all bundled in a big coat and head scarf sat on one of the benches that

lined the walkway in front of the building. Julia could see the woman tossing something from a paper bag she had in her lap to the birds gathered at her feet.

The girl walked quickly, nearly ran along the walk. Julia couldn't see the ring right then, the woman blocked her view of the mushrooms. But she knew the circle was still there, in the grass, half-way to the statue of the Civil War soldier that stood watch over the downtown.

Julia decided to cut across the grass to the fairy ring. The ground was a little damp but the lawn hadn't yet turned green. As she neared the woman feeding the birds, the girl followed the cement walk a short distance, not looking anywhere else but at the ring of white-topped mushrooms seeming to glow bright in the still-brown grass.

She was so intent on making it to the fairy ring and testing it that she didn't notice the two boys on skateboards approaching her from the steps of the City Hall. They were moving fast, using the slope of the sidewalk to speed up. Julia was only a short distance from the woman's bench when she finally noticed the skateboarders. They were headed directly for her and, if she didn't move quickly, they would run into her. But as they passed the woman, she stopped tossing seed to the birds. She raised her hand as if pointing at the boys.

At that moment, Julia saw, they both pitched forward off of their boards and rolled on the sidewalk, crashing into each other, their skateboards flying away into the grass. Julia guessed that they must have both hit rocks or cracks in the cement at the same time. She paused to watch the two boys get up, shake their heads as they looked around, and then turn to retrieve their skateboards. The woman started tossing feed to the birds again.

Julia continued on, striding up the walk and past the woman. She glanced quickly to the side as she passed, trying to see who the lady was or what she looked like. But the big scarf hid the woman's face. Julia thought she heard the woman mumbling to herself as the girl stepped onto the grass. Then she ran to the fairy ring.

Circling the ring, Julia examined the mushrooms. The tops were larger than her hand and perfectly round and smooth. They reminded her of the ones Jennall, the wood sprite, had left as a trail for her and her friend McKenna to follow on their first trip to fairyland. She counted them. Twenty-one. But she noticed that seven mushrooms that were larger than the others were arranged the same space apart from each other around the ring. She liked to look for patterns in things and the seven leapt out at her right away.

Julia looked around. The boys were gone but the woman still sat on the bench. She had stopped tossing food to the birds. Julia thought the woman seemed to be waiting for something or somebody. The girl smiled, imagining a bus pulling up in front of the woman and letting her on.

Julia shook her head, reminding herself that she couldn't dawdle but had to get to the bookman's store soon. She cautiously stepped into the ring and put her feet side by side. Nothing happened. She turned in a half circle, looking at the mushrooms as she did and thinking about fairies and going to fairyland. Still nothing happened.

Julia was about to sit down when a boy's voice from behind her said "Watcha doing, dodo brain?"

She spun around quickly to see the skateboarding boys. She recognized them now. They were both a grade ahead of her in school but not, she knew, very good students. Both wore baggy pants and over-large hooded sweatshirts and carried their skateboards. They each had shaggy hair that kept blowing in front of their eyes.

"Nothing," Julia answered, startled. "None of your business," she added.

The boy closest to her brushed the hair from his eyes and said "Sheesh, what a goof" and grinned at her. Julia saw that he had braces and was near enough for her to notice he had food stuck in them.

Julia crinkled her nose. She decided that if she ignored them, maybe they would go away.

"What are you doing here?" the one asked again. The second boy walked up beside him. They were both outside of the fairy ring but Julia saw that they were nearly stepping on the mushrooms.

Fearing they might wreck the ring she blurted "I'm just going to sit down for a while and rest. Is that okay? Why don't you boys run along?"

"Sheesh," said the second boy, dropping his board so that one end rested on the top of his foot. Julia saw that his tennis shoe touched the edge of a mushroom. The white cap quivered a little and bent toward the shoe. Julia could imagine him breaking it. She believed that the fairy magic wouldn't work if the fairy ring was wrecked.

Fearing that the boys would ruin her chances to go to fairyland, scared and upset, Julia did what she knew she shouldn't. She leaned toward the second boy and pushed him. He fell backwards, flailing his arms and yelping. His friend turned to grab him and lost his balance too. The two of them ended up on the ground at Julia's feet.

"Just run along and mind your own business," Julia ordered. She half-feared that they would get up and push her and wanted them just to leave.

Both boys jumped up and brushed themselves off.

"Sheesh, what a kook," the first boy said.

The second shook his head but eyed Julia as he did. Her stomach flipped inside. He looked like he was going to start a fight.

"Come on," the first boy said and lightly hit the other boy on the shoulder. "Let's leave this crazy alone. She's goofy, all right."

The second boy stared at Julia for a moment longer and then bent over to look for his skateboard.

Julia hadn't paid attention to what happened to the board when she pushed the boy. She saw now that it had flown toward her and landed on the fairy ring. She gulped, trying not to cry, afraid of the worst.

Julia didn't watch as the other boy walked away. She stared at the turned-over skateboard lying there in the grass. It seemed to take all day for the boy's hand to grasp the edge of the board and pick it up.

Julia gasped.

She didn't look up when the boy said "Weirdo" as he walked away. She only stared at the three mushrooms, broken and crushed into the grass. They already looked bruised and brown. Julia tried not to cry. The ring was broken.

She sat down in the grass and bowed her head.

"It will still work," a cracking voice said.

Julia looked up. The bird-feeding woman stood outside the ring, leaning over her. Julia could barely see the face inside the hood, just the tip of her nose and a glint from her eyes.

Julia didn't say anything. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She wanted quiet in order to think about what to do next. She knew she shouldn't stay long, that she should get to the bookman's store before she got in any trouble.

"That's good. Little girls shouldn't talk to strangers," the woman continued and bent toward Julia.

The girl looked up. And into deep, dark green eyes. She didn't see anything else about the woman's face, just her green eyes that seemed to glow.

But she heard when the woman continued. Heard only the woman's voice, cracking and rusty sounding like it was made of old metal. She couldn't hear the noise from the traffic or people. Not even the wind blowing. She just heard the woman.

"Do you want in? I can help you. I know how you can get in," the woman said. The hair on the

back of Julia's neck tingled. "Into fairyland," the woman whispered.

Julia still stared into the green eyes, so dark, so strong. "How?" she whispered.

The woman stood up so fast, Julia snapped upright as if the woman had pulled her by an invisible chain.

The woman cackled, metal rusty and twisting. "Just say this rhyme three times," the woman instructed. "Rock and sky, wind and sand, let me into fairyland."

Before Julia could say anything else, the woman turned, her coat flapping outward in the breeze as she did. The woman grabbed it quickly and pulled it close again. Julia thought the woman's legs had looked like two little sticks poking out from the edge of a dress that appeared to be made from an old rug. The woman hobbled back to the bench and sat down without ever looking back at the girl sitting in the grass.

Julia didn't know what to do.

It had happened so fast and been so strange, she thought she should get up and run to the book store as fast as she could. Who was this strange green-eyed lady? she wondered. And how could she know I want to use this fairy ring to get to fairyland?

Not everybody knew about fairy rings, Julia thought. She knew right away what I wanted to do. And she laughed. People who had been to fairyland always laughed a lot. Even if it was a strange-sounding laugh.

And she had given me a rhyme to say. A key that might open the door into fairyland.

Julia repeated the rhyme in her head, making sure she had the words right. If she tried it, she didn't want to say it wrong. That might not get her there.

Julia pursed her lips. Should I try it? she asked herself. If it works, I'll only go for a few minutes and then come right back. What harm can there be in that?

The girl sat in the grass and looked around. Cars passed in the street, stopping at the light, revving their engines as they started again. People walked along the sidewalk, entered and left the stores, someone called to someone else. A horn honked in the distance.

No one seemed to see her or be paying attention to a girl sitting in the ring of mushrooms.

What harm could it do? she asked herself again.

"Rock and sky, wind and sand," Julia said out loud. "Let me into fairyland."

Nothing happened. The wind gusted into her face, blowing her hair and making her lips and nose cold.

She closed her eyes and repeated the rhyme. "Rock and sky, wind and sand, let me into fairyland."

She glanced around. The sun had dimmed, like clouds had blown in front of it. The buildings and street looked dirty and grungy. The colors of the people's clothes all seemed to get gray and drab. Even the grass looked less alive, more frozen and sleeping like it did in winter.

Julia smiled. She was going to fairyland.

She said the rhyme a third time.

"Rock and sky, wind and sand, let me into fairyland."

The ground shifted underneath her and Julia looked down. It was sand. The grass and dirt beneath her had turned to sand. She looked around, excited but a little anxious, and saw that all the ground inside the fairy ring had been changed to sand.

She giggled. The rhyme was magic, she thought. But all it did was make a sandbox for me. She giggled at this thought but the laugh caught in her throat.

Julia sank down through the sand.

As she did, she thought she heard from far away a familiar voice shout her name.

But then she was tumbling through sand-filled air. It felt like she was falling a long way very quickly. She barely had time to worry about getting hurt when she landed with a thump. The impact knocked the wind out of her and Julia went "Ooompfh" as she hit the ground.

Stunned, Julia lay there a moment before she sat up. She didn't feel like she was hurt but waited a little longer to see if a broken bone or bruised muscle would start to ache. Nothing did, so she slowly stood up and looked around.

Julia didn't know what she expected when she got to fairyland. The other times she had gone, she had been with Jennall who lived in the woods and fields and so they had spent their time running among the trees and dancing around meadows. And though she knew fairyland wasn't all like that -- she knew there would be lakes and rivers, mountains and rocks, fields, woods, and all kinds of places -- she hadn't expected what she saw around her now.

The sky looked like it always did in fairyland. That Julia expected and had gotten used to. The clear dusk sky appeared ready to darken, when people would start turning their lights on and kids would get called inside to baths and bedtime stories.

But everything else was strange and not at all what Julia thought of when she imagined fairyland.

As far as she could see, the land was flat and empty. The ground looked like sand and dry, dusty dirt with patches of rocks here and there. No trees, no flowers, no streams or grassy hills. Just empty, sad-looking sand and dirt and rocks.

She turned around in a slow circle. It was the same everywhere. Empty. No fairies, wood sprites, elves. Nothing. Maybe there were some rock trolls nearby, but she couldn't see them from where she stood.

And the wind was blowing. Gusting like it had when she walked along the street. Only not cold. It just blew and picked up bits of sand every now and then and hit Julia with them.

This was not at all what she would have thought fairyland would be like and realized she was lost.

Then Julia heard her mother's voice inside her head. 'When you're lost,' her mother advised, 'Stay in one place and I'll come and find you. Don't wander away and make it worse.'

But she had never been lost like this before. Julia was scared. She had never been lost and alone in fairyland. Where her mother couldn't find her.

Julia's eyes opened wide. Her mother wouldn't know where she was, that she was even lost in fairyland because she was supposed to be at the book store.

Julia started to breathe hard, like she was running. She turned around in quick circles and fearfully looked in every direction. Just rocks and sand. Everywhere.

Then she remembered from somewhere the words 'Don't panic.' She really didn't know what panic meant other than acting crazy and yelling and screaming when you were scared. She told herself, Don't panic. Calm down and stay right where you are.

Julia groped in her coat pocket and pulled out the little cell phone, flipping it open and pressing the one and the talk buttons to speed dial her mother, then put the phone to her ear.

Nothing. Not even a dial tone. Julia tried again, but still nothing. She checked her contact list and scanned the names. Her father, her school, her sister's cell phone. They wouldn't work, not if her mother's didn't. Then she saw the bookman's name. She pressed it and then pressed talk.

Ring. Once, twice, three times. During the fourth ring, Julia heard the bookman's familiar voice say "Julia."

But before the girl could say anything, a sudden and furious wind blew and grabbed the cell phone out of her hand.

Julia yelped in frustration and started to run after her phone. But the wind carried it away

faster than she could ever possibly run.

Julia stopped. She collapsed to the ground, feeling her knees scrape on the rocks through her jeans. Stay put, she told herself.

Then she smiled. She grinned a big grin and looked around her. She was in fairyland. Alone. Lost. Not sure what to do next. And she wasn't crying. She chuckled. Those boys would really think she was strange if they could see her now. But she felt proud and brave. She wasn't crying.

Julia stood up and looked around. She thought she had heard something. Far away. A horn.

Squinting toward the horizon, the girl held her hand over her eyes. The wind was back, blowing steady but not so hard as it did when it took her phone.

Then she saw it. Way off in the distance. A small cloud at the edge of what she could see. Something was coming toward her. Fast. The cloud seemed to get bigger and closer all at the same time.

Someone was coming.