

The Man Who Defied Gravity

by Kathryn Kulpa

There are people who run away from the past. I keep it wrapped in plastic bags, locked away in cedar trunks. I could never throw away the P.O.P. GAME BOARD, because then who knows what part of me I'd lose? Something that thought wicked thoughts, something that ran down the hallway, something that loved with the frightening carelessness of innocence. I listen to that bird and I can see it, how a bird looks, and all of a sudden it's morning and I'm outside. Five years old. I've been throwing up all night from eating grass and weeds, like dinosaurs do. I'm reading Highlights for Children and a comic book about little girl ducks, Daisy Duck's nieces, April, May, and June, and they are trying to grow a garden. Leslie is coming over later—Rumplestiltskin is my name!, we say, and we tell that story and all the stories we invent and tell each other over and over: the girl who gets washed in the washing machine, the girl who gets flushed down the toilet and becomes queen of the sewers. Tubby the Tuba, King Cornelius, the Jungle Book and Alice in Wonderland: I used to fall asleep at night listening to those records.

I always have a secret and compelling wish that the first heat wave of summer will come. And then when it does, I'm terribly uncomfortable. But there's a pull to it, just as there's a pull to lightning-storms and blizzards. Once when I was a little girl there were hurricane warnings, and how I wanted it to come! We could bring blankets to the cellar and sleep there, and use candles and oil-lamps. Then there might be a flood, and I imagined us spending the night in a tree. But we spent the night in bed, as usual, and not even the power went off.

There is a pull to such things, and that is why I always wrote about

them. A secret thought at takeoff: what if the plane should crash? Followed by yes, let it crash, let us be stranded in the Andes and have to eat human flesh or at least toothpaste to survive! Let there be an earthquake! Let there be a flood! Let there be a tornado, a new ice age, an invasion from Mars. Only: let me survive. "They huddled in the cellar, eating corn muffins and listening to the sounds of destruction above them."

To live in a world, then, where concrete, clearly definable evil does exist, but where it can always be conquered by good. Where every 200-year-old house really does have a 200-year-old lady in it, and the preserved dead body of the husband she shot dead for sleeping with another woman. She keeps herself young by killing the kids who dare to trespass on her property, and drinking their blood. Then she buries them in the back yard, where the corn grows tall. But I've no doubt old Mrs. Browne could be vanquished by the right sort of expedition. Three brave and daring girls, let's say, whose strength is as the strength of ten because their hearts are pure. "It was Widow Browne, herself! They caught her by flinging an object at her."

Have you ever noticed, when you're lying outside, flat on the ground, your body stretched against the earth--have you ever noticed, then, how it pulls you? You weigh twice as much, you feel heavy if you try to get up, your head aches. It is like this when you've been swimming too long, and you can barely pull yourself out of the water. It pulls at you. I don't know what it is but it's something. It pulls you down to the earth.

Once there was a man who defied gravity, and gravity let him. He drifted away with nothing under his feet, and there was no one like him in the world. He would never nurse at the earth's bosom again. If you look very hard, at night sometimes, you can see him going by.

