

Haunting Olivia

By [Karen Russell](#)

June 5, 2005

The New Yorker

My brother Wallow has been kicking around Gannon's Boat Graveyard for more than an hour, too embarrassed to admit that he doesn't see any ghosts. Instead, he slaps at the ocean with jilted fury. Curse words come piping out of his snorkel. He keeps pausing to readjust the diabolical goggles.

The diabolical goggles were designed for little girls. They are pink, with a floral snorkel attached to the side. They have scratchproof lenses and an adjustable band. Wallow says that we are going to use them to find our dead sister, Olivia.

My brother and I have been making midnight scavenging trips to Gannon's all summer. It's a watery junk yard, a place where people pay to abandon their old boats. Gannon, the grizzled, tattooed undertaker, tows wrecked ships into his marina. Battered sailboats and listing skiffs, yachts with stupid names—Knot at Work and Sail-la-Vie—the paint peeling from their puns. They sink beneath the water in slow increments, covered with rot and barnacles. Their masts jut out at weird angles. The marina is an open, easy grave to rob. We ride our bikes along the rock wall, coasting quietly past Gannon's tin shack, and hop off at the derelict pier. Then we creep down to the ladder, jump onto the nearest boat, and loot.

It's dubious booty. We mostly find stuff with no resale value: soggy flares and UHF radios, a one-eyed cat yowling on a dinghy. But the goggles are a first. We found them floating in a live-bait tank, deep in the cabin of La Calavera, a swamped Largo schooner. We'd pushed our way through a small hole in the prow. Inside, the cabin was rank and flooded. There was no bait living in that tank, just the goggles and a foamy liquid the color of root beer. I dared Wallow to put the goggles on and stick his head in it. I didn't actually expect him to find anything; I just wanted to laugh at Wallow in the pink goggles, bobbing for diseases. But when he surfaced, tearing at the goggles, he told me that he'd seen the orange, unholy light of a fish ghost. Several, in fact—a school of ghoulish mullet.

"They looked just like regular baitfish, bro," Wallow said. "Only deader." I told my brother that I was familiar with the definition of a ghost. Not that I believed a word of it, you understand.

Now Wallow is trying the goggles out in the marina, to see if his vision extends beyond the tank. I'm dangling my legs over the edge of the pier, half-expecting something to grab me and pull me under. "Wallow! You see anything phantasmic yet?"

"Nothing," he bubbles morosely through the snorkel. "I can't see a thing."

I'm not surprised. The water in the boat basin is a cloudy mess. But I'm impressed by Wallow's one-armed doggy paddle.

Wallow shouldn't be swimming at all. Last Thursday, he slipped on one of the banana peels that Granana leaves around the house. I know. I didn't think it could happen outside of cartoons, either. Now his right arm is in a plaster cast, and in order to enter the water he has to hold it above his head. It looks like he's riding an aquatic unicycle. That buoyancy—it's unexpected. On land, Wallow's a loutish kid. He bulldozes whatever gets in his path: baby strollers, widowers, me.

For brothers, Wallow and I look nothing alike. I've got Dad's blond hair and blue eyes, his embraceably lanky physique. Olivia was equally Heartland, apple cheeks and unnervingly white teeth. Not Wallow. He's got this dental affliction which gives him a tusky, warthog grin. He wears his hair in a greased pompadour and has a thick pelt of back hair. There's no accounting for it. Dad jokes that our mom must have had dalliances with a Minotaur.

Wallow is not Wallow's real name, of course. His real name is Waldo Swallow. Just like I'm Timothy Sparrow and Olivia was—is—Olivia Lark. Our parents used to be bird enthusiasts. That's how they met: Dad spotted my mother on a bird-watching tour of the swamp, her beauty magnified by his 10x binoculars. Dad says that by the time he lowered them the spoonbills he'd been trying to see had scattered, and he was in love. When Wallow and I were very young, they used to take us on their creepy bird excursions, kayaking down island canals, spying on blue herons and coots. These days, they're not enthusiastic about much, feathered or otherwise. They leave us with Granana for months at a time.

Shortly after Olivia's death, my parents started travelling regularly in the Third World. No children allowed. Granana lives on the other side of the island. She's eighty-four, I'm twelve, and Wallow's fourteen, so it's a little ambiguous as to who's babysitting whom. This particular summer, our parents are in São Paulo. They send us postcards of bullet-pocked favelas and flaming hillocks of trash. "*glad you're not here! xoxo, the 'rents.'*" I guess the idea is that all the misery makes their marital problems seem petty and inconsequential.

"Hey!" Wallow is directly below me, clutching the rails of the ladder. "Move over."

He climbs up and heaves his big body onto the pier. Defeat puddles all around him. Behind the diabolical goggles, his eyes narrow into slits.

"Did you see them?"

Wallow just grunts. "Here." He wrestles the lady-goggles off his face and thrusts them at me. "I can't swim with this cast, and these bitches are too small for my skull. You try them."

I sigh and strip off my pajamas, bobbling before him. The elastic band of the goggles bites into the back of my head. Somehow, wearing them makes me feel even more naked. My penis is curling up in the salt air like a small pink snail. Wallow points and laughs.

"Sure you don't want to try again?" I ask him. From the edge of the pier, the ocean looks dark and unfamiliar, like the liquid shadow of something truly awful. "Try again, Wallow. Maybe it's just taking a while for your eyes to adjust—"

Wallow holds a finger to his lips. He points behind me. Boats are creaking in the wind, waves slap against the pilings, and then I hear it, too, the distinct thunk of boots on wood. Someone is walking down the pier. We can see the tip of a lit cigarette, suspended in the dark. We hear a man's gargly cough.

"Looking for buried treasure, boys?" Gannon laughs. He keeps walking toward us. "You know, the court still considers it trespassing, be it land or sea." Then he recognizes Wallow. He lets out the low, mournful whistle that all the grownups on the island use to identify us now.

"Oh, son. Don't tell me you're out here looking for—"

"My dead sister?" Wallow asks with terrifying cheer. "Good guess!"

"You're not going to find her in my marina, boys."

In the dark, Gannon is a huge stencil of a man, wisps of smoke curling from his nostrils. There is a long, pulsing silence, during which Wallow stares at him, squaring his jaw. Then Gannon shrugs. He stubs out his cigarette and shuffles back toward the shore.

"All right, bro," Wallow says. "It's go time." He takes my elbow and gentles me down the planks with such tenderness that I am suddenly very afraid. But there's no sense making the plunge slow and unbearable. I take a running leap down the pier—

"Ayyyyyiii!"

—and launch over the water. It's my favorite moment: I'm one toe away from flight and my body takes over. The choice is made, but the consequence is still just an inky shimmer beneath me. I'm rushing to meet my own reflection—gah!

Then comes the less beautiful moment when I'm up to my eyeballs in tar water, and the goggles fill with stinging brine. And, for what seems like a very long time, I can't see anything at all, dead or alive.

When my vision starts to clear, I see a milky, melting light moving swiftly above the ocean floor. Drowned moonbeams, I think at first. Only there is no moon tonight.

Olivia disappeared on a new-moon night. It was exactly two years, or twenty-four new moons, ago. Wallow says that means that tonight is Olivia's unbirthday, the anniversary of her death. It's weird: our grief is cyclical, synched with the lunar cycles. It accords out as the moon slivers away. On new-moon nights, it rises with the tide.

Even before we lost my sis, I used to get uneasy when the moon was gone. That corner of the sky, as black as an empty safe. Whatever happened to Olivia, I hope she at least had the orange residue of sunset to see by. I can't stand to think of her out here alone after nightfall.

The last time we saw Olivia was at twilight. We'd spent all day crab sledding down the beach. It's the closest thing we island kids have to a winter sport. You climb into the upended exoskeleton of a giant crab, then you go yeehaw slaloming down the powdery dunes. The faster you go, the more sand whizzes around you, a fine spray on either side of your crab sled. By the time you hit the water, you're covered in it, grit in your teeth and your eyelids, along the line of your scalp.

Herb makes the crab sleds—he guts the crabs and blowtorches off the eyestalks and paints little racer stripes along the side. Then he rents them down at Pier 2, for two dollars an hour, twelve dollars for a full day. The three of us had been racing down the beach all afternoon. We were sunburned, and hungry, and loused up with sea bugs. Wallow had stepped on a sea urchin and broken his fall on more urchins. I wanted Jiffy Pop and aloe vera. Wallow wanted prescription painkillers and porno. We voted to head over to Granana's beach cottage, because she has Demerol and an illegal cable box.

Olivia threw a fit. "But we still have half an hour on the sled rental!" A gleam came into her eyes, that transparent little-kid craftiness. "You guys don't have to come with me, you know."

Legally, we did. According to official Herb's Crab Sledding policy, under-twelves must be accompanied by a guardian—a rule that Herb has really cracked down on since Olivia's death. But neither Wallow nor I felt like chaperoning. And Olivia was eight and a half, which rounds up to twelve. "Stick to the perimeter of the island," Wallow told her. "And get that crab sled back before sundown. Any late fees are coming out of your allowance."

"Yeah, yeah," she assured us, clambering into the sled. The sun was already low in the sky. "I'm just going out one last time."

We helped Olivia drag the sled up the white dunes. She sat Indian style in the center of the shell, humming tunelessly. Then we gave her a final push that sent her racing down the slopes. We watched as she flew out over the rock crags and into the foamy water. By the time we'd gathered our towels and turned to go, Olivia was just a speck on the horizon. Neither of us noticed how quickly the tide was going out.

Most people think that tides are caused by the moon alone, but that is not the case. Once a month, the sun and the moon are both on the same side of the globe. Then the Atlantic kowtows to their conglomerate gravity. It's the earth playing tug-of-war with the sky.

On new-moon nights, the sky is winning. The spring tide swells exceptionally high. The spring tide has teeth. It can pull a boat much farther than your average quarter-moon neap tide. When they finally found Olivia's crab sled, it was halfway to Cuba, and empty.

"What do you see, bro?" "Oh, not much." I cough. I peer back under the surface of the water. There's an aurora borealis exploding inches from my submerged face. "Probably just plankton."

When I come up to clear the goggles, I can barely see Wallow. He is silhouetted against the lone orange lamp, watching me from the pier. Water seeps out of my nose, my ears. It weeps down

the corners of the lenses. I push the goggles up and rub my eyes with my fists, which just makes things worse. I kick to stay afloat, the snorkel digging into my cheek, and wave at my brother. Wallow doesn't wave back.

I don't want to tell Wallow, but I have no idea what I just saw, although I'm sure there must be some ugly explanation for it. I tell myself that it was just cyanobacteria, or lustrous pollutants from the Bimini glue factory. Either way, I don't want to double-check. I shiver in the water, letting the salt dry on my shoulders, listening to the echo of my breath in the snorkel. I fantasize about towels. But Wallow is still watching me, his face a blank oval. I tug at the goggles and stick my head under for a second look.

Immediately, I bite down on the mouthpiece of the snorkel to stop myself from screaming. The goggles: they work. And every inch of the ocean is haunted. There are ghost fish swimming all around me. My hands pass right through their flat bodies. Phantom crabs shake their phantom claws at me from behind a sunken anchor. Octopuses cartwheel by, leaving an effulgent red trail. A school of minnows swims right through my belly button. Dead, I think. They are all dead.

"Um, Wallow?" I gasp, spitting out the snorkel. "I don't think I can do this."

"Sure you can."

Squat, boulder-shouldered, Wallow is standing over the ladder, guarding it like a gargoyle. There's nowhere for me to go but back under the water.

Getting used to aquatic ghosts is like adjusting to the temperature of the ocean. After the initial shock gives way, your body numbs. It takes a few more close encounters with the lambent fish before my pulse quiets down. Once I realize that the ghost fish can't hurt me, I relax into something I'd call delight if I weren't supposed to be feeling bereaved.

I spend the next two hours pretending to look for Olivia. I shadow the spirit manatees, their backs scored with keloid stars from motorboat propellers. I somersault through stingrays. Bonefish flicker around me like mute banshees. I figure out how to braid the furry blue light of dead coral reef through my fingertips. I've started to enjoy myself, and I've nearly succeeded in exorcising Olivia from my thoughts, when a bunch of ghost shrimp materialize in front of my goggles, like a photo rinsed in a developing tray. The shrimp twist into a glowing alphabet, some curling, some flattening, touching tails to antennae in smoky contortions. Then they loop together to form words, as if drawn by some invisible hand: "*g-l-o-w-w-o-r-m g-r-o-t-t-o.*"

We thought the Glowworm Grotto was just more of Olivia's make-believe. Olivia was a cartographer of imaginary places. She'd crayon elaborate maps of invisible castles and sunken cities. When the Glowworm Grotto is part of a portfolio that includes Mt. Waffle Cone, it's hard to take it seriously.

I loved Olivia. But that doesn't mean I didn't recognize that she was one weird little kid. She used to suffer these intense bouts of homesickness in her own bedroom. When she was very

small, she would wake up tearing at her bedspread and shrieking, “I wanna go home! I wanna go home!”—which was distressing to all of us, of course, because she *was* home.

That said, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that Olivia was an adoptee from some other planet. She used to change into Wallow’s rubbery yellow flippers on the bus, then waddle around the school halls like some disoriented mallard. She played “house” by getting the broom and sweeping the neon corpses of dead jellyfish off the beach. Her eyes were a stripey cerulean, inhumanly bright. Dad used to tell Olivia that a merman artisan had made them, out of bits of sea glass from Atlantis.

Wallow saved all of her drawings. The one labelled “*glowerm grotto*” is a sketch of a dusky red cave, with a little stick-Olivia swimming into the entrance. Another drawing shows the roof of the cave. It looks like a swirly firmament of stars, dalmatianed with yellow dots.

“That’s what you see when you’re floating on your back,” Olivia told us, rubbing the gray crayon down to its nub. “The Glowworm Grotto looks just like the night sky.”

“That’s nice,” we said, exchanging glances. Neither Wallow nor I knew of any caves along the island shore. I figured it must be another Olivia utopia, a no-place. Wallow thought it was Olivia’s oddball interpretation of Gannon’s Boat Graveyard.

“Maybe that rusty boat hangar looked like the entrance to a cave to her,” he’d said. Maybe. If you were eight, and nearsighted, and nostalgic for places that you’d never been.

But, if the Glowworm Grotto actually exists, that changes everything. Olivia’s ghost could be there now, twitching her nose with rabbity indignation—“But I left you a map!” Wondering what took us so long to find her.

When I surface, the stars have vanished. The clouds are turning red around their edges. I can hear Wallow snoring on the pier. I pull my naked body up and flop onto the warm planks, feeling salt-shucked and newborn. When I spit the snorkel out of my mouth, the unfiltered air tastes acrid and foreign. The Glowworm Grotto. I wish I didn’t have to tell Wallow. I wish we’d never found the stupid goggles. There are certain things that I don’t want to see.

When we get back to Granana’s, her cottage is shuttered and dark. Fat raindrops, the icicles of the Tropics, hang from the eaves. We can hear her watching “Evangelical Bingo” in the next room.

“Revelation 20:13!” she hoots. “Bingo!”

Our breakfast is on the table: banana pancakes, with a side of banana pudding. The kitchen is sticky with brown peels and syrup. Granana no longer has any teeth. For the past two decades, she has subsisted almost entirely on bananas, banana-based dishes, and other foods that you can gum. This means that her farts smell funny, and her calf muscles frequently give out. It means that Wallow and I eat out a lot during the summer.

Wallow finds Olivia's old drawings of the Glowworm Grotto. We spread them out on the table, next to a Crab Shack menu with a cartoon map of the island. Wallow is busy highlighting the jagged shoreline, circling places that might harbor a cave, when Granana shuffles into the kitchen. "What's all this?" She peers over my shoulder. "Christ," she says. "Still mooning over that old business?"

Granana doesn't understand what the big deal is. She didn't cry at Olivia's funeral, and I doubt she even remembers Olivia's name. Granana lost, like, ninety-two million kids in childbirth. All of her brothers died in the war. She survived the Depression by stealing radish bulbs from her neighbors' garden, and fishing the elms for pigeons. Dad likes to say this in a grave voice, as if it explained her jaundiced pitilessness: "Boys. Your grandmother ate pigeons."

"Wasn't much for drawing, was she?" Granana says. She taps at stick-Olivia. "Wasn't much for swimming, either."

Wallow visibly stiffens. For a second, I'm worried that he's going to slug Granana in her wattled neck. Then she raises her drawn-on eyebrows. "Would you look at that—the nudey cave. Your grandfather used to take me skinny-dipping there."

Wallow and I do an autonomic, full-body shudder. I get a sudden mental image of two shelled walnuts floating in a glass.

"You mean you recognize this place, Granana?"

"No thanks to this chicken scratch!" She points to an orange dot in the corner of the picture, so small that I hadn't even noticed it. "But look where she drew the sunset. Use your noggins. Must be one of them coves on the western side of the island. I don't remember exactly where."

"What about the stars on the roof?"

Granana snorts. "Worm shit!"

"Huh?"

"Worm shit," she repeats. "You never heard of glowworms, Mr. Straight-A Science Guy? Their shit glows in the dark. All them coves are covered with it."

We never recovered Olivia's body. Two days after she went missing, Tropical Storm Vita brought wind and chaos and interrupted broadcasts, and the search was called off. Too dangerous, the Coast Guard lieutenant said. He was a fat, earnest man, with tiny black eyes set like watermelon seeds in his pink face.

"When wind opposes sea," he said in a portentous singsong, "the waves build fast."

"Thank you, Billy Shakespeare," my father growled under his breath. For some reason, this hit Dad the hardest—harder than Olivia's death itself, I think. The fact that we had nothing to bury.

It's possible that Olivia washed up on a bone-white Cojímar beach, or got tangled in some Caribbean fisherman's net. It's probable that her lungs filled up with buckets of tarry black water and she sank. But I don't like to think about that. It's easier to imagine her turning into an angelfish and swimming away, or being bodily assumed into the clouds.

Most likely, Dad says, a freak wave knocked her overboard. Then the current yanked the sled away faster than she could swim. In my night terrors, I watch the sea turn into a great, gloved hand that rises out of the ocean to snatch her. I told Wallow this once, hoping to stir up some fraternal empathy. Instead, Wallow sneered at me.

"Are you serious? That's what you have nightmares about, bro? Some lame-ass Mickey Mouse glove that comes out of the sea?" His lip curled up, but there was envy in his voice, too. "I just see my own hands, you know? Pushing her down that hill."

The following evening, Wallow and I head over to Herb's Crab Sledding Rentals. Herb smokes on his porch in his yellowed boxers and a threadbare Santa hat, rain or shine. Back when we were regular sledders, Wallow always used to razz Herb about his getup.

"Ho ho ho," Herb says reflexively. "Merry Christmas. Sleigh bells ring, are ya listening." He gives a halfhearted shake to a sock full of quarters. "Hang on, nauticats. Can't sled without informed consent."

Thanks to the Olivia Bill, new island legislation requires all island children to take a fourteen-hour Sea Safety! course before they can sled. They have to wear helmets and life preservers, and sign multiple waivers. Herb is dangling the permission form in front of our faces. Wallow accepts it with a genial "Thanks, Herb!" Then he crushes it in his good fist.

"Now wait a sec . . ." Herb scratches his ear. "I, ah, I didn't recognize you boys. I'm sorry, but you know I can't rent to you. Anyhow, it'll be dark soon, and neither one of you is certified."

Wallow walks over to one of the sleds and, unhelmeted, unjacketed, shoves it into the water. The half shell bobs there, one of the sturdier two-seaters, a boiled-red color. He picks up a pair of oars, so that we can row against the riptides. He glares at Herb.

"We are going to take the sled out tonight, and tomorrow night, and every night until our parents get back. We are going to keep taking it out until we find Olivia." He pauses. "And we are going to pay you three hundred and seventy-six dollars in cash." Coincidentally, this is the exact dollar amount of Granana's Social Security check.

Herb doesn't say a word. He takes the wad of cash, runs a moistened finger through it, and stuffs it under his Santa hat. He waits until we are both in the sled before he opens his mouth.

"Boys," he says. "You have that crab sled back here before dawn. Otherwise, I'm calling the Coast Guard."

Every night, we go a little farther. Out here, you can see dozens of shooting stars, whole galactic herds of them, winking out into cheery oblivion. They make me think of lemmings, flinging themselves over an astral cliff.

We are working our way around the island, with Gannon's Boat Graveyard as our ground zero. I swim parallel to the beach, and Wallow follows along in the crab sled, marking up the shoreline that we've covered on our map. "X" marks all the places where Olivia is not. It's slow going. I'm not a strong swimmer, and I have to paddle back to Wallow every fifteen minutes.

"And just what are we going to do when we find her?" I want to know. It's the third night of our search. We are halfway around the island, on the sandbar near the twinkling lights of the Bowl-a-Bed Hotel. Wallow's face is momentarily illuminated by the cycloptic gaze of the lighthouse. It arcs out over the water, a thin scythe of light that serves only to make the rest of the ocean look scarier. "What exactly are we going to do with her, Wallow?"

This question has been weighing on my mind more and more heavily of late. Because let's just say, for argument's sake, that there is a Glowworm Grotto, and that Olivia's ghost haunts it. Then what? Do we genie-in-a-bottle her? Keep her company on weekends? I envision eternal Saturday nights spent treading cold water in a cave, crooning lullabies to the husk of Olivia, and shudder.

"What do you mean?" Wallow says, frowning. "We'll rescue her. We'll preserve her, uh, you know, her memory."

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?"

"I don't know, bro!" Wallow furrows his brow, flustered. You can tell he hasn't thought much beyond finding Olivia. "We'll—we'll put her in an aquarium."

"An aquarium?" Now it's my turn to be derisive. "And then what? Are you going to get her a kiddie pool?"

It seems to me that nobody's asking the hard questions here. For example, what if ghost-Olivia doesn't have eyes anymore? Or a nose? What if an eel has taken up residence inside her skull, and every time it lights up it sends this unholy electricity radiating through her sockets?

Wallow fixes me with a baleful stare. "Are you pussying out, bro? She's your sister, for Christ's sake. You telling me you're afraid of your own kid sister? Don't worry about what we're going to do with her, bro. We have to find her first."

I say nothing. But I keep thinking: It's been two years. What if all the Olivia-ness has already seeped out of her and evaporated into the violet welter of clouds? Evaporated, and rained down, and evaporated, and rained down. Olivia slicking over all the rivers and trees and dirty cities in the world. So that now there is only silt, and our stupid, salt-diluted longing. And nothing left of our sister to find.

On the fourth night of our search, I see a churning clump of ghost children. They are drifting straight for me, all kelped together, an eyeless panic of legs and feet and hair. I kick for the surface, heart hammering.

“Wallow!” I scream, hurling myself at the crab sled. “I just saw—I just—I’m not doing this anymore, bro, I am *not*. You can go stick your face in dead kids for a change. Let Olivia come find us.”

“Calm it down.” Wallow pokes at the ocean with his oar. “It’s only trash.” He fishes out a nasty mass of diapers and chicken gristle and whiskery red seaweed, all threaded around the plastic rings of a six-pack. “See?”

I sit huddled in the corner of the sled, staring dully at the blank surface of the water. I know what I saw.

The goggles are starting to feel less like a superpower and more like a divine punishment, one of those particularly inventive cruelties that you read about in Greek mythology. Every now and then, I think about how much simpler and more pleasant things would be if the goggles conferred a different kind of vision. Like if I could read messages written in squid ink, or laser through the Brazilian girls’ tankinis. But then Wallow interrupts these thoughts by dunking me under the water. Repeatedly.

“Keep looking,” he snarls, water dripping off his face.

On the fifth night of our search, I see a plesiosaur. It is a megawatt behemoth, bronze and blue-white, streaking across the sea floor like a torpid comet. Watching it, I get this primordial déjà vu, like I’m watching a dream return to my body. It wings toward me with a slow, avian grace. Its long neck is arced in an S-shaped curve; its lizard body is the size of Granana’s carport. Each of its ghost flippers pinwheels colored light. I try to swim out of its path, but the thing’s too big to avoid. That Leviathan fin, it shivers right through me. It’s a light in my belly, cold and familiar. And I flash back to a snippet from school, a line from a poem or a science book, I can’t remember which:

There are certain prehistoric things that swim beyond extinction.

I wake up from one of those naps which leach the strength from your bones to a lightning storm. I must have fallen asleep in the crab sled. Otherworldly light goes roiling through an eerie blue froth of clouds.

Wallow is standing at the prow of the sled. Each flash of lightning limns his bared teeth, the hollows of his eyes. It’s as if somebody up there were taking an X-ray of grief, again and again.

“I just want to tell her that I’m sorry,” Wallow says softly. He doesn’t know that I’m awake. He’s talking to himself, or maybe to the ocean. There’s not a trace of fear in his voice. And it’s clear then that Wallow is a better brother than I could ever hope to be.

We have rowed almost all the way around the island. In a quarter of an hour, we'll be back at Gannon's Boat Graveyard. Thank merciful Christ. Our parents are coming back tomorrow, and I can go back to playing video games and feeling dry and blameless.

Then the lighthouse beacon sweeps out again. It bounces off an outcropping of rocks that we didn't notice on our first expedition. White sequins of light pop along the water.

"Did you see that? That's it!" Wallow says excitedly. "That's gotta be it!"

"Oh. Excellent."

We paddle the rest of the way out in silence. I row the crab sled like a condemned man. The current keeps pushing us back, but we make a quiet kind of progress. I keep praying that the crags will turn out to be low, heaped clouds, or else a seamless mass of stone. Instead, you can tell that they are pocked with dozens of holes. For a second, I'm relieved—nobody, not even string-beany Olivia, could swim into such narrow openings. Wallow's eyes dart around wildly.

"There has to be an entrance," he mutters. "Look!"

Sure enough, there is a muted glow coming from the far end of a salt-eaten overhang, like light from under a door.

"No way can I fit through there," I gasp, knowing immediately that I can. And that the crab sled can't, of course. Which means I'll be going in to meet her alone.

What if the light, I am thinking, is Olivia?

"It's just worms, bro," Wallow says, as if reading my mind. But there's this inscrutable sadness on his face. His muddy eyes swallow up the light and give nothing back.

I look over my shoulder. We're less than half a mile out from shore, could skip a stone to the mangrove islets; and yet the land draws back like a fat swimmer's chimera, impossibly far away.

"Ready?" He grabs at the scruff of my neck and pushes me toward the water. "Set?"

"No!" Staring at the unlit spaces in the crags, I am choked with horror. I fumble the goggles off my face. "Do your own detective work!" I dangle the goggles over the edge of the sled. "I quit."

Wallow lunges forward and pins me against the side of the boat. He tries to spatula me overboard with his one good arm, but I limbo under his cast.

"Don't do it, Timothy," he cautions, but it is too late.

"This is what I think of your diabolical goggles!" I howl. I hoist the goggles over my head and, with all the force in my puny arms, hurl them to the floor of the crab sled.

This proves to be pretty anticlimactic. Naturally, the goggles remain intact. There's not even a hairline fracture. Stupid scratchproof lenses.

The worst part is that Wallow just watches me impassively, his cast held aloft in the air, as if he were patiently waiting to ask the universe a question. He nudges the goggles toward me with his foot.

"You finished?"

"Wally!" I blubber, a last-ditch plea. "This is crazy. What if something happens to me in there and you can't come in after me? Let's go back."

"What?" Wallow barks, disgusted. "And leave Olivia here for dead? Is that what you want?"

"Bingo!" That is exactly what I want. Maybe Granana is slightly off target when it comes to the Food Pyramid, but she has the right idea about death. I want my parents to stop sailing around taking pictures of Sudanese leper colonies. I want Wallow to row back to shore and sleep through the night. I want everybody in the goddam family to leave Olivia here for dead.

But there's my brother. Struggling with his own repugnance, like an entomologist who has just discovered a loathsome new species of beetle. "What did you say?"

"I said I'll go," I mumble, not meeting his eyes. I position myself on the edge of the boat. "I'll go." So that's what it comes down to, then. I'd rather drown in Olivia's ghost than have him look at me that way.

To enter the grotto, you have to slide in on your back, like a letter through a mail slot. Something scrapes my coccyx bone on the way in. There's a polar chill in the water tonight. No outside light can wiggle its way inside.

But, sure enough, phosphorescent dots spangle the domed roof of the grotto. It's like a radiant checkerboard of shit. You can't impose any mental pictures on it—it's too uniform. It defies the mind's desire to constellate randomness. The Glowworm Grotto is nothing like the night sky. The stars here are all equally bright and evenly spaced, like a better-ordered cosmos.

"Olivia?"

The grotto smells like salt and blood and bat shit. Shadows web the walls. I try and fail to touch the bottom.

"Oliviaaa?"

Her name echoes around the cave. After a while, there is only rippled water again, and the gonged absence of sound. Ten more minutes, I think. I could splash around here for ten more minutes and be done with this. I could take off the goggles, even. I could leave without ever looking below the surface of the water, and Wallow would never know.

“Oli—”

I take a deep breath, and dive.

Below me, tiny fish are rising out of golden cylinders of coral. It looks like an undersea calliope, piping a song that you can see instead of hear. One of the fish swims right up and taps against my scratchproof lenses. It’s just a regular blue fish, solid and alive. It taps and taps, oblivious of the thick glass. My eyes cross, trying to keep it in focus.

The fish swims off to the beat of some subaqueous music. Everything down here is dancing—the worms’ green light and the undulant walls and the leopard-spotted polyps. Everything. And following this fish is like trying to work backward from the dance to the song. I can’t hear it, though; I can’t remember a single note of it. It fills me with a hitching sort of sadness.

I trail the fish at an embarrassed distance, feeling warm-blooded and ridiculous in my rubbery flippers, marooned in this clumsy body. Like I’m an impostor, an imperfect monster.

I look for my sister, but it’s hopeless. The goggles are all fogged up. Every fish burns lantern-bright, and I can’t tell the living from the dead. It’s all just blurry light, light smeared like some celestial fingerprint all over the rocks and the reef and the sunken garbage. Olivia could be everywhere. ♦

[Karen Russell](#) has written five books, including the short-story collection “[Orange World](#)” and the novel “[Swamplandia!](#)”