

CHAPTER ONE

Eleven-year-old Marcia Gold was excited about her homework assignment. Sitting at the speckled Formica table beneath the fluorescent lights in the Brooklyn apartment kitchen, she spread out her notebook and pen.

“Good girl, doing homework,” said her mother, coming into the kitchen and patting Marcia’s head. Marcia waved her away, trying to concentrate.

The assignment: write a scene that occurs on a beach. Most of the class had either been to the beach over the weekend, when beaches had opened for the season, or were looking forward to going soon.

“Be creative!” the teacher, Mrs. Collings, had urged. They could start with something real, she explained, and then embellish it. Marcia liked that word “embellish.” She thought it sounded musical. “And use lots of description!” were the teacher’s final words on the assignment.

Marcia knew exactly what she was going to write. The warm glow she’d felt at the beach with her family had lasted through the rest of the day after her big brother Eliot, dripping wet as his trunks clung to his body, had emerged from the water. But that did not mean she’d forgotten the “vision” that had visited her there. It had stayed with her, vivid and sharp. That animal’s slick gray sheen, the hugeness of its open mouth, the shock of the soldiers emerging. She could return to that any time. It was a personal possession, this vision, always waiting for her. And she was excited to write about it.

Marcia saw something no one else there had seen. Beneath one of the largest waves, the hump of a huge, gigantic animal momentarily appeared. She gasped. Was Eliot in danger? To her relief, she saw him coming out of the water then, taking her little sister Rochelle’s hand to lead her back to their blanket. But that animal – she saw now that it was larger than she’d originally thought – was edging closer and closer to the shore. It emerged from the wave that had been its cover, and a humongous head lifted itself out of the water. Why aren’t all the people scattering and screaming? Don’t they see this? Aren’t they scared?

The head, followed by a gargantuan, sleek gray body, opened its huge mouth, as if to vomit something onto the shore. And it did! Out of this immense mouth poured an army of soldiers. Marcia grabbed onto her father’s leg. The soldiers were Gestapo – she could tell by the uniforms. Hundreds of them were marching, in goose-step just like she had seen in countless movies, just like her parents had described what they’d seen in their Polish towns, onto the beach. More and more were coming – how many were stored in that animal’s mouth?! Marching in lock-step, they emerged from that open mouth, remaining in perfect formation as they approached.

“What’s the matter?” her father asked, covering her hand with his own. Her nails were digging into the skin of his leg. “Are you okay?” She tried to tell him that the Nazi soldiers were heading straight for their blanket. They are probably looking at her parents and thinking: You got away from us once before – we are back for you now! Marcia had tried to tell her father this but the words stuck in her throat.

Marcia turned to her notebook and began her assignment with description. She described the smooth, dark blue water, the rolling waves, the foam, the laughing people. Then she went into the imagination part, and wrote what she saw as if it were really happening. It had seemed real to her at the time. She was very proud of her story when it was finished.

She came home crying from school the following day. "I hate Mrs. Collings!" she wailed and ran into her room.

Instead of appreciating the story's description and imagination, the teacher had been horrified by the story and had yelled at poor Marcia. "A beach is a place for beauty and peacefulness!" she had shouted in front of the class. "Why would you write this scary, crazy story! If you want a passing grade on it, you will write another one!"

The teacher had thrown the pages down on Marcia's desk and then went on to read aloud and praise MaryAnn's story, which involved throwing a ball back and forth on the sand with her sister. Marcia fought back tears and spent the rest of the day staring down at the papers on her desk. When the day was over, she gathered them up and ran out.

"What made you think of that?" her mother asked when Marcia tearfully reported the events of the day.

"I don't know," Marcia shrugged. "It just...came to me. I think I actually dreamed it one night, and then it came back that day at the beach. Kind of like a vision."

"She has bad dreams all the time," little four-year-old Rochelle piped up in her squeaky voice. Turning to Marcia, she added, "You scream in your sleep, and you wake me up!"

"I do not!" Marcia shouted.

"You do so!" Rochelle retorted. "I'm in the room with you! You scream your head off!"

"Enough, you girls," their father said. "First of all, dinner is getting cold, so stop arguing and eat. Secondly, Marcia, just write something else and be done with it." He spooned vegetables onto his plate.

"Why should I?" Marcia yelled. "You should go talk to her. Tell her she's an idiot! I was being creative, like she said! It just wasn't exactly the kind of creative she wanted. I'm not writing another one." She crossed her arms.

Her parents exchanged looks over her head. "Okay, don't," said her mother, sighing. "But take another piece of chicken."

"I just had a piece."

"It was a tiny drumstick. Not enough."

Marcia excused herself and stomped off to her room. Eliot wasn't there to stick up for her. He had basketball practice. Lucky Eliot.

The incident passed. Marcia never wrote another story, the teacher ignored it and did not penalize her, and Marcia spent the remaining few weeks of school shooting dirty looks at Mrs. Collings. Maybe the teacher forgot all about me and my “failing” composition, Marcia thought, because the assassination of President Kennedy months earlier dwarfed all the teacher’s other concerns. Crying in class when the news was announced, Mrs. Collings seemed dazed the remainder of the year. The teacher’s break from her mourning to yell at Marcia must have been her way of trying to act like a teacher after all. Of course, Marcia reasoned, if the death of the President had saved her from failing, that would be awful, a terrible burden of guilt to bear. She would have been willing to fail the grade if it would have kept President Kennedy alive.

She did have nightmares. Rochelle was right, and Marcia was mortified. She usually found excuses to avoid sleepovers because anyone else would make fun of her for screaming during the night. Everyone except her best friend Natalie, whose parents also came from some town in Poland, or maybe Ukraine. They weren’t sure themselves. Marcia never knew if she screamed during the night when Natalie was there, but since Natalie sometimes talked and yelled in her sleep, Marcia knew it was all right. Neither her parents nor Natalie’s ever seemed to hear the screams. In both apartments, the master bedroom was at the end of a long hallway, as far from the children’s bedrooms as possible. Did whoever designed these Brooklyn apartments know that the children who would live here would scream at night and should be far from their parents? Maybe the screaming never lasted very long – perhaps it only seemed long to the person doing the screaming.

What happened in those nightmares? She couldn’t always remember; she just knew they left her terrified and soaked in sweat. Scary things, mean people, sharp weapons aimed at her and her family, crowds chanting hateful slogans and goading people to do horrible things. Once, a laughing group of young men hanged a shop owner in front of his shop, and no one could do anything. They just stood around, wringing their hands and looking upset. She knew she had heard that story somewhere. It was all very vague, but horrifying nevertheless.

The following year in school, they studied Greek mythology. As soon as Marcia read about the Trojan Horse, she had half a mind to march back into Mrs. Collings’s classroom and direct that misinformed excuse of a teacher to compare her story of soldiers pouring out of a sea creature’s mouth with the myth of the Greek soldiers pouring out of the wooden horse. Maybe, Marcia wondered, something inside her mind was in tune with this ancient story.

She came to believe, later that year, at age 12, that something inside her was indeed primitive, barbaric. Her recurring vision of the giant sea creature planted that idea in her head, and the night the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show reinforced that thought. She was alone in the apartment – thank goodness, she thought – and sat in a chair pulled up close to the television set. As they performed and screeched and shook their hair around their heads, Marcia screamed too. She couldn’t help it. She wished she were there with the other screaming girls in the audience, the ones who were crying and covering their faces and itching to throw bras and slips onstage. Poor Ed Sullivan – she was certain he was not prepared for this. But something elemental inside her was no better than those girls at the performance. They were all animals inside.