

## The Sky Above by Michael Shalen

The sky was just ... so... blue. The clearest blue she had ever seen. Not a single cloud in sight. It brought her close to tears... or perhaps that was the other thing... but never mind that she thought. Why worry about that when life loomed above her. But more than life, it seemed as if the entirety of the sky was stretching out in front of her eyes, like a huge ocean, encompassing all of creation. It was all enveloping; it smothered her, wrapping her in its vastness, in its peace. Its brilliance stunned her; in fact it hit her like a wave on the beach.

And so she fell back into the water and was rolled in the ocean's great current. The wave had complete control over her, but she wasn't frightened. It carried her like a baby, back to the shore, and gently rolled her onto the sand. She didn't stand, no, it felt so much better to lay still she thought. She wriggled her toes in the sand as the wave receded. How good it felt, it was so gritty, and yet soft and comforting. She felt like she could lie there forever. But through her peace she heard a name... quiet, but familiar. It floated lazily on the breeze, more a whisper than a real spoken word. She looked up, and in the distance she saw small figures, etched out in the sand. They were moving... actually; they were waving at her... calling her back. She wanted to go to them, to know who they were, but before she could stand, the wave returned, crashing into the beach and pulling her back into the cold ocean. And as she drifted out to sea, she forgot about the people... they would wait for her, right now the ocean was beckoning. So she dived into the water, swimming deeper and deeper. The ocean was a deep azure blue, blue as far as the eye could see. But speckling her surroundings were other shapes, other colors. To her left she saw a school of fish, all of them red as a sunset, swirling inwards and outwards, inwards and outwards. At first they seemed to be moving in such a chaotic fashion, but as she watched she saw a beautiful flow and rhythm to their movements. They pulsed in and out, in and out, spreading bright red glistening fish all over the sea. And within them was... a yellow... what is it? It was hard to see through the moving fish, but eventually she picked it out. It was a few yellowish orange jellyfish, floating serenely in the center of the school. They glowed and pulsed in time to the movements of the fish around them. Such an amazing thing to see, she thought. It reminded her of something... something she pushed away... but what? Then the fish darted away, the jellyfish disappeared, and the sea grew dark. A shadow passed over her head... moving slowly and serenely across the blue ocean around her. She began to panic, looking around for the source of the shadow, but it always remained outside of her view. Always one step ahead, she only ever could see a shadow, foreboding the inevitable. She began to panic, to struggle. Why couldn't she see it!? And then there it was... the shark was motionless, the ocean itself was motionless. Time seemed to stop, as the dark eyes, black as night, and cold as ice, stared into her soul. It froze the girl in place. She couldn't move, couldn't turn around. She was paralyzed by fear. The shark slowly moved toward her, death looking her right in the eyes. She couldn't bear it. She closed her eyes.

And when she opened them, the shark was gone. Above her loomed the blue sky yet again. Just as blue and vast as the ocean. It was in many ways a much more comforting thought. The sky would never hurt her, or scare her. Despite the wind whistling past her, tickling

her ears and gently tugging at her feet and arms, she still felt at peace. Even the wind couldn't overpower the beauty of the blue, blue sky. It made her wish all things could have such peace, such beauty. She had once bought blue flowers for... someone... for someone she knew. They were the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen, and she knew that her someone would love them. How amazing would a field of those blue flowers be? A field as blue and vast as the sky itself.

She felt softness at her feet. All around her were her blue flowers. It was incredible. They went on forever, like the world was carpeted in flowers. She laughed to herself at how amazing it all was, at how lucky she was to be seeing such a sight. She walked through them, admiring each individual bloom as she went along. She didn't really know where she was walking, but she kept going. Wading through the flowers, moving towards the endless hills around her. And as she moved the ground around her grew thicker and thicker with flowers. She didn't mind though, they were soft, and she was okay moving a little slower for them. As she looked ahead she saw that the further she went, the thicker the flowers were. Blue as far as the eye can see... but wait? What was that on top of the hill? It was a group of people again. This time they were sitting on a mustard and ketchup colored blanket and were talking. It seemed like they were having a lovely time. She could see them a little clearer than before. And as she looked they turned and looked right back at her. Again they waved, and again she heard a sound in the wind. Louder this time, but still she couldn't hear what was being spoken. Then they changed... they stopped waving and started pointing, behind her in the distance... She turned around and saw a light slowly creeping over the horizon. She turned back around to look for the people, but they were gone, leaving behind their blanket. The wind picked it up and blew it in her direction. It floated above her, a bright red splotch hovering above her like a stain on the bright blue sky. She turned around again and saw the light on the horizon getting slowly closer. She could see it move clearly now. It was fire. Fire burning her beautiful blue flowers, spreading across the world, destroying everything she knew and treasured. She began to run away, but the flowers grew so thickly around her that she was hardly able to move. The fire came steadily closer. A raging inferno, consuming the blue flowers, scorching all it touched. It was only a few yards away now. She felt the heat on her face, reaching for her, trying to grab at her. She was so afraid. She turned away, feeling the fire getting ever closer. It became unbearable, and she closed her eyes to avoid the inevitable.

But the heat was gone. She felt the wind again, caressing her and cradling her as she fell. She opened her eyes and was immediately relieved to see the sky, yet again coming to her rescue. It caught her in its arms and lulled her into peace. Something was different though. She could see the clouds now. At first she was angered at their intrusion. How dare they disturb her amazing sky? It was as if some heavenly force reached down with a bottle of whiteout, and spilled it across her sky. Then again... the way they moved and stretched in all directions... it was almost funny. They were big and ungainly, yet playful in their shapes and designs. They were like great big balls of fuzz, rolling their way across a blue carpet. The thought made her laugh. It was so silly to think of them that way!

She picked up the little fluff balls and swirled them around, rearranging them on the floor, making up spectacular scenes and images. A puffy white knight facing down the wispy dragon of fluff in the cold blue cave. A furry cat, white as snow, chasing down a small fuzzy mouse. She laughed at how much fun she could have playing with balls of fluff! It was so silly, and yet, so wonderfully distracting. And surprisingly intuitive. She could create anything she wanted, with a ball of fluff and a big blue carpet. Everyone had always told her how creative she was, how she had an imagination that could take her anywhere she wanted. And while they never openly condemned her games and daydreams, she knew they didn't always approve. She spent so much time with her head in the clouds they were worried she wouldn't ever come back down to Earth. She knew that's how they felt, but she didn't care. She didn't need them. She could go anywhere she wanted, and meet anyone she could dream up. Life was glorious. Life was still stretching ahead of her like that blue carpet, full of promise and creativity.

She was snapped out of her reverie by her mother, calling her for dinner. She told her she could eat later. She had to finish her painting for the contest. Her high school was sponsoring an art contest, with the grand prize being a week in Italy, where she would visit Florence, the birthplace of the renaissance, a breeding ground for creative thought and innovation. She was determined to win, so she painted. She was painting a flower she had bought her mother that morning. It was a Blue Flower. She was surprised the store even had them still in stock. It was so beautiful. She thought people would have been buying them by the handfuls! She most certainly would have. The moment she saw it, she knew that's what her painting would be. She looked out the window at the beach and ocean on the horizon. The ocean waves lapped on the shore as her mother and father walked down to the beach. That ocean would be her setting, and that flower would be her subject. If she could capture even a hint of that beauty she would win the contest easily. The judges all agreed, her painting was by far the winner. She had captured the flower perfectly, and with such precision and elegance... and such an intersecting backdrop! The blue so perfectly merged and contrasted at the same time. Such stunning beauty! She smiled thinking about their praise. This was her passion, her life. She loved to paint, to create whatever she wished through simple colors and ideas. She thought about the future, the great scenes she would portray, of knights battling dragons, and cats chasing mice. Her family laughed at her and she looked towards them. Caught daydreaming again eh? They smiled and headed for the terminal entry. She got up, and sat down on the plane. She woke up and looked at her mother and father in the seat next to her. They were sleeping...so peacefully. So quietly. She wished she could have slept. She was just too excited. It would have been easier that way. So much easier. If only they had known ahead of time... if only that flower hadn't been so beautiful and that ocean hadn't been so perfect.

At the front of the plane the fish began to pulse, swirling around the yellow jellyfish within. They exploded outward becoming fire, slowly enveloping the rows in front of her. People screamed and were engulfed. She had chosen the window seat; the force of the explosion threw her through the window and into the ocean. She ran through the blue flowers, and finally fell through the sky.

The sky was just so blue. The clearest blue she had ever seen. Not a single cloud in sight. But there was a splotch of darkness above her. A dark fire, engulfing her whole life. Everything was gone in a flash of yellow and red and black. Down she fell, through the blue of the sky. Through the white clouds. The wind buffeting and spinning her, roaring past and deafening her to everything. She couldn't speak, couldn't scream. The wind took it away. She tried to close her eyes, to make it go away, but it wouldn't. She closed her eyes and the shark got closer. She closed her eyes and felt the fire approaching. When she closed her eyes she had to remember the plane, the explosion, and her parents... so proud of her, even at the end. When she closed her eyes she was in the dark. It was so dark. All around her, covering her, suffocating her. Fear clenched at her throat. She could see the reaper standing in the shadows waiting. She was so afraid and it was so dark... but that's because her eyes were closed. That's where the darkness lived. Her eyes were closed. All she had to do was open them and she would be able to see that incredible blue sky one last time. She nodded to the reaper in the dark, and he returned it in kind.

She opened her eyes and looked at the blue sky. She watched the clouds stretching across the endless sea of blue. There was some debris above and around her, but other than that it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her entire life. She took one last look, before she turned herself to face the ground. She looked down at the ground slowly coming up through the sky to embrace her. It was almost a loving approach. Like a mother moving to cradle her child when it has been crying and scared. She was at peace with her life and her death. She started to smile, thinking back, remembering the love in her life. She was still smiling as she hit the ground.