

Rising to the Call

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Julie heard them calling: the high, shrill pinging of a thousand points of – not light, but tinnitus. Most people never heard the cries, because they were not attuned to that particular pitch of anguish. They were, to most people, silent screams. Yet, for Julie they were as pervasive and persistent as the sound of traffic along the interstate, or the disembodied voice in the airport forever admonishing you to keep a closer eye on your luggage. They grieved her like the relentless stabbing of a broken rib with each breath. People wondered about that look on her face, her default expression. Unless there was someone around to lure a smile or spark a conversation, she always appeared to be contemplating something unpleasant.

Usually, she could sleep through it. She could occupy herself with a book until her body surrendered, but tonight the moon was poking its beam through the slats of the bedroom blinds and into the receptive, white orbs beneath Julie's eyelids. It woke her with its blinding luminescence, and the cries flooded her awareness with such intensity that she bolted from her bed and burst out of her family's vacation bungalow in her nightgown, onto the white beach where the starfish lay stranded in the sand. There were thousands of them, washed in with that evening's storm. They were fresh and wet and black, and covered the beach as far as she could see in either direction, as though they had been pulled from the water and sprinkled over the white sand in reverse-contrast to the light and darkness of the white stars in the night sky. Someone's idea of creation?

Creation. She definitely didn't believe what she had heard about those first seven days. She was pretty sure that suffering was older than that. She was *certain*, however, that mercy existed only in the hands of the beholder, and so she began to throw the starfish back into the sea, one after the next. They felt hard and rough on top, yet the underside was a vital wiggling of soft tentacles. They sucked desperately onto her flesh after their long journeys free-falling with the waves that had carried them to this dry, alien terrain. Given the chance, they quickly glued themselves to her palms, so that it felt mean when she had to remove them forcibly and send them tumbling once again through the airy void to land as far out as she could propel them. She hoped that they would not feel it as rejection. She had cast them homeward out of love, though she yearned to be eternally embraced by all of them.

The tide was low, so she had to run back and forth to the water's edge in order to get the starfish deposited farthest inshore. She hoped that they would move to deeper water before the tide rose again. It was an infinite task that would have buried others in a sense of futility, but Julie was okay with it. She was only at peace when she was throwing starfish back into the water or skimming drowning insects out of the birdbath, or practicing any of the many pursuits that had earned her the nickname *Saint Francissy*.

Throwing stars, she forgot about Ebola and the Taliban and the fact that they'd never found a match for her brother's bone marrow. They had all been tested, of course, and she had been certain that hers would be the match that saved him. They'd been twins, after all. He would have been the first to jump out of bed and follow her to the beach.

Together, they would have thrown the starfish back. On her own, it was lonely work. To live was to be separate from so much of her self.

She was glad that no one was there to watch. Sometimes at school, when she was picking up worms stranded on the sidewalk after a spring rain, the other children made fun of her and found ways to be malicious to the worms just to spite her. It was hard to say whether the worms were better or worse off for her interventions. Was it better to bake slowly on the concrete under the heat of an apathetic sun, or to be torn maliciously into segments or flattened under rocks or drowned in the gutters or sawed in half with blunt sticks in lieu of knives or buried under piles of salt or smuggled into science class to be sizzled over the Bunsen burners? It seemed as though her efforts fostered more suffering than they eased.

Still, she threw them back. It was the only thing in the world that made absolute sense in dangerous times: an act of love driven not by personal desire, but compassion. It was an act small enough to be pure, and yet large enough to mean the whole world. It was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the right thing to do at that moment. Each starfish splashing into the sea was like a star falling from the sky.

She had seen a meteor shower once. It had been incredible. She and her brother had been lying in the back of the camper during their last trip to the Cape together. Thought to be sleeping, they'd really been counting falling stars. There had been so many! It was almost as though someone was pitching the stars right to them. They had reached to catch them in their hands before they disappeared. She wondered now if that was how the starfish appeared down below, each star plunging into the atmosphere of the underwater world. Was there

someone down there welcoming them home? Maybe her brother was there, catching them before they hit the bottom and laying them gently onto rocks so that they could anchor themselves in a better world. □