

THE GIRL WITH THE SUN IN HER HEAD

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

Emelia's home is in a city where only children are allowed to draw graffiti on the crumbling walls. The old bricks and stones are covered in crude pictographs and stick figures, smoking chimney houses and bicycles with four wheels and two seats. Chalk is a penny a piece, any color to be had. A little old lady with gnarled fingers and crooked eyes sells the sticks out of cigar boxes on street corners, even in the rain.

Emelia lives with her father and twin brothers, Blanco and Negro. Negro is very nice to Emelia and buys her sweets. Blanco steals and hides them underneath his mattress. In the spring, the flies are drawn to the sugar, and Blanco spends the night swatting at them without much success. The flies never bother Emelia or Negro, or their father who sleeps in the rocking chair in the living room beside the fireplace. Ever since robbers came down the chimney to steal and carried away Emelia's mother instead, her father has stood watch over the sooty tunnel. He lost his job years ago.

Negro and Blanco work on the waterfront unloading exotic goods from far away lands. When no one is looking, Blanco stashes a bolt of spun silk or a bag of spices under his shirt. He sells these things on the underground market and uses the money to buy dirty comic books and tickets to the movies for his girlfriend, a prostitute twice his age named Consuela. Sometimes, Blanco brings Consuela home with him and takes her into the bedroom.

To Emelia, Consuela is a sour-smelling monster with long, red-painted talons and ragged dresses in garish colors. Her skin seems permanently colored by the red glare of the lantern that hangs from her window above the cobblestone streets.

When Consuela comes to visit, Emelia takes a penny from her hiding place in

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

the flour jar below the kitchen sink and runs down the stone steps from her family's apartment, down the streets between buildings built from blocks of pink and grey corals, through the green-grassed Tommy-Gaul Park and past the dolphins dancing fountain, until she reaches the little lady with the gnarled knuckles and the box full of chinks.

"I will take one stick of yellow," she says to the lady, and the lady nods and grins, staring over Emelia's shoulder down the street and out over the endless waves of water. The old woman is blind, but she can feel the colors of the chinks through her weathered fingers.

Many children have tried to steal from the chalk seller, but she can always hear them sneaking up, no matter how softly their footsteps. Emelia always buys her chalk, and always buys yellow. When the woman has no more yellow, Emelia comes back another day, and another, until finally the yellow is there again. Nobody, especially not Emelia, knows where the woman gets her chalk. The art store that caters to the rich and lonely artists who rent small rooms in the hotels along the waterfront sells its chalk for three times the price, sometimes more.

Once, Consuela brought Emelia a piece a blue chalk. "When I was a little girl, I would draw on the walls," Consuela said. "I drew the waves of the ocean, and tall masts disappearing over the horizon." Emelia said nothing. She gave the chalk to Mariana, the little girl who lived next door. Consuela never gave Emelia anything again.

"Here's your yellow, dear," says the chalk seller with a toothless smile. The stick of chalk is perfectly round and as long as Emelia's finger, but brittle and frail. Emelia cups the palm of her hand, and the chalk seller lets the stick roll gently off her fingertips and into Emelia's hand.

Emelia closes her hand carefully and then runs, pretending that monsters from the sewers have slunk out of the foul stink and wish to make her their princess. She runs around the bend, past the bakery and the smells of fresh croissants and the window full of ginger cookies, around the men playing obscure games of dice and checkered board games on the street corner outside the tannery, over the wall of the cemetery, past the collapsing church with more holes in the roof than statues of saints within, and down the alleyway, always uphill, always higher into the city and away from the smell of brine and drying fish, until she stops, huffing and holding her stretched sides.

When she looks up, she is surrounded by stuccoed walls and dark windows.

THE GIRL WITH THE SUN IN HER HEAD

These nicer neighborhoods pay their children to wash the walls each day, unlike her part of the city where the graffiti piles up and piles up, and only the rain ever washes the walls clean.

Here she sets to work, chalk piece held gently in her hand, pressing ever so softly against the stucco. She draws in quick and furtive motions, only half looking at the chalk. Mostly she looks above and below and all around, like a mouse in the open, afraid of getting caught. Her work is not against the law but the people in this neighborhood would like it to be. The children are paid to clean the walls, but they're paid even better to keep away the children from the streets below. Emelia knows that they play games in the forest after their lunches, but sometimes they come home early, especially when someone scrapes a knee or twists an ankle.

She sketches quick circles that are nearly perfect. Her circles can and have made the artists on the waterfront weep when they stumble across them, knowing because of the law that they must be the work of a child. She throws circles from her quick wrists, and then fast, perfectly straight lines radiating out from the circle.

In the middle of drawing, she switches hands, and without thinking, wipes away the wet, sweat-soaked yellow chalk across the front of her white dress. She leans in so close that she can see the fine gritty pattern of the stucco, even in the shadow of the buildings with the sky-sun obscured. She draws his face, each time differently, but the features are almost always the same. It is only the expressions that change.

This time, Emelia draws him smiling, an expression like that of St. Lucius on the statue she found locked away in the cellar of the church among spare pews and boxes of books filled with hymns that she had never heard sung in all her life. It was a knowing smile, a smile that that said the wearer held a secret mystery within.

She draws the sun's face as if it were a middle-aged man, his eyes lined with wrinkles, his lips full and plump, with the nose of hawk, sharp and beaked, but bent a little to the left. When she finishes, the chalk stick is little more than a nub, barely able to be held between her tiny fingers and touch the wall at the same time. She tosses the nub to the ground, grinds it under her bare feet, and then runs as if the harpies from the mountain have come to take her for their stew.

On this afternoon in the late spring when the winds are changing direction and windows are left open more often in the evenings to catch the sea breeze, she glances back at a sound from an alley as she passes and catches a glimpse of a long-necked aristocratic animal, a cat of indeterminable grace and wisdom, as it leaps from a windowsill and down into the street. When she turns back to the direction

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

she is running, it is too late; she runs headlong into the black-coated figure of a man whose eyes are shocked, his mouth an O of surprise. Then the collision, and all the bones in Emelia's small body are jarred and she falls, as does the man in the black coat. They land in a jumbled heap on the warm, smooth stones below.

Emelia lies for a moment, shocked by the impact, and surprised at the coolness of the black cloth beneath her. The coat should be hot and uncomfortable, but instead the touch is soothing, like a damp rag across her forehead. She remembers suffering from a fever, a cool cloth held by an almost forgotten mother who had almond eyes and straight black hair. Black like the man's coat. She lies motionless and holds her breath.

The man groans and stirs, then freezes when he realizes that Emelia does not move. Gently, he slips out from underneath her, and Emelia could swear that he becomes as thin as a shadow and half as there when he does so. She doesn't move from the stones and keeps her eyes looking downward. She pretends to be dead.

"Little miss, please get up," the man whispers. His voice reminds her of the taste of grapes, wet and tart, the consonants like small pops in her ears. She cannot help but roll over to look up at him, even though she is ashamed for her inattention. He offers her a hand twice the size of hers. It is covered in thin black lines that swirl and coil back on themselves. A labyrinth of lines crisscrosses his hand, and her gaze is trapped on the path, chasing an exit that isn't there.

He coughs politely, and she looks up, the spell broken. He wears a broad hat made of green felt with a peacock feather in the band. Emelia has never seen a peacock feather so close before. Staring at the feather and the delicate whorls of color, she takes his hand, and he lifts her effortlessly to her feet.

"I—I'm sorry, master, I should have been looking where I was going," she says, her voice cracking like dropped china. She doesn't want to cry, but the man is being too nice. If she ran into a man on the waterfront, he would whip her silly for her stupidity.

"What thing scares you so that you run like a frightened rabbit?" He asks in his grape voice. His eyes are as green as his hat, and his hair is white, though his face looks young and unwrinkled.

"Nothing, sir. I always run this fast," she answers.

He shakes his head. "You run as if something chases you. I know about such things, you see."

"I pretend that things chase me, so that I run faster. Each time, I run a little

THE GIRL WITH THE SUN IN HER HEAD

faster. One day, I will run faster than the setting sun, and then I will see him in his slumber.”

“Oh ho,” the man says. “You wish to see the sun resting his head upon his bed? That is an odd thing for a child to wish.”

She holds her head low. “I’m sorry, master.”

“It is nothing to be sorry for,” he says, smiling and reaching out to tilt her head. His eyes are the color of seaweed, she thinks. “Maybe you will, one day.”

“Thank you, master,” she says, and then dodges past him, her heart fluttering, and this time she runs, afraid that the strange man in the black coat and the green hat will follow her. When she looks back, he is not, and part of her is sad, but she does not know why.

The next day, a fierce storm blows in from the sea, and Blanco and Negro stay home. They sit in the chairs from the kitchen table beside their father and listen to the wailing wind, getting up only occasionally to refasten a shutter. Emelia lies on her bed and stares at the ceiling. She wonders if the sun takes naps on days where the rain clouds blanket the earth. What else would he do, besides nap or stare at the clouds below? When he wakes up, he glares and frowns, and the clouds boil away, she thinks.

When Emelia was too little to walk, she remembers being left in the park on a blanket under a clear blue sky with the sun in his noon perch. She remembers staring deeply at the yellow orb until it became all that she could see. All she could see for weeks afterwards was the sun’s face, his curious half-smile and his sad eyes. It does not seem strange to her that she could remember things from when she was so young. She remembers more.

Doctors feared she had gone blind, and her mother sobbed every night above her cradle; her mother blamed herself. They took Emelia to see the old healer who lives in the abandoned lighthouse where the rocks used to be until heavy man-o-wars came and blasted them away with cannons and made the waters safe. She was blessed in the church with cool water sprinkled on her brow. A few weeks later, her sight slowly drifted back, but the image of the sun stayed. He was always there, except at night or on a cloudy day.

She wonders often what the sun is thinking, to accompany his odd facial expressions, but everyone knows that the sun can not speak to people. So this she sets aside, and does not allow it to trouble her. When the sun sets, he is no longer in her mind, no longer her ever-present and silent companion. Where does he go, and

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

most importantly, what look rests upon his face while he sleeps in the dark night's sky?

And so she runs every day, from home to the little school when the bells ring and the teacher is sober, to church on Sundays, to take her brothers lunch in the afternoons, and on her chalking excursions up the hill and down the rich streets.

It rains for three days after she met the man in the green hat. In the rain, the sun is away from her mind as it is at night, and she grows lonely for the sight of his kind face. The sun is never fierce to her, not even in the hottest days of summer; in fact, he seems most joyous on those days.

Finally, she wakes with the sunrise on the fourth day, and the sun beams across the sea on her city into the open window of her bedroom. Roosters call from below in the streets. The sun is happy, but weary and exhausted. Emelia smiles; she also feels that way when she has slept too long.

She creeps out of the house, past her snoring father, and down to the street. She runs to the waterfront, swinging her arms like she is hammering nails. This time, Black Legionnaires are onto her and will sell her as a concubine overseas if she doesn't escape. Emelia doesn't know what a concubine is, except that it is a very bad thing for a young girl to become, and it happens often in the stories that are told by old sailors from the bows of their ships to the laborers.

Today, she will earn a penny running errands, she decides, and then she will draw the face better than she ever has. Sometimes, she wishes that her drawings could remain longer than the chalk; she dreams of buying canvas and paint and putting the sun down in all his magnificence. Maybe then she will get it right, and truly capture him in a way that she can share with her family. Blanco once saw her drawing the sun and only laughed and shook his head. That was when she decided to move up onto the hill for her sketches. Negro seems to know about them, but he never speaks of them. Sometimes she wishes that he would. She almost wants someone to explain it to her as much as she wants to explain it to herself.

For most of the morning, Emelia delivers bread across town for the baker, whose son stepped on a shard of glass and would not be walking for the next several days. To and from the bakery, she is chased by goblins, wicked sea gulls, and sea spirits with sharp tridents that will jab her fiercely if she slows. Finally, there is no more bread to deliver, and the baker's wife pays her three pennies for the morning's work, promising that Emelia can make more if she comes back the

THE GIRL WITH THE SUN IN HER HEAD

next day. Everyone knows how fast Emelia can run, and often they vie for her to run their deliveries when their regular help is unavailable.

Emelia stops home and places two of the pennies in her father's lap. He nods always when she brings him money, but never looks her in the eye. She backs away, watching him for some other reaction, and then she is off, down the streets, only just avoiding the roof-bandits and their lassos tossed from above.

She comes to the chalk seller and gives the old woman her penny. "Yellow, please."

"Of course, dear." The old woman's hands fumbles within her box until she withdraws a green stick. "Here you are."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry. That stick is green," Emelia says, suddenly feeling a cold chill run down her neck. It is green like the man's hat.

The old woman frowns, but reaches back into her box and feels again. This time, her hands returns with Emelia's yellow.

"Stay away from him, little one," the old woman says, and does let go of the chalk. "He's been around; I can smell him." Then she drops the chalk into Emelia's hand.

"Thank you!" Emelia says when she is already halfway around the bend and to the bakery. She runs as if the man in the green hat is there behind her, following without taking a step, just floating in the air alongside, and she runs faster than she ever has before. When she glances back, she sees him and he waves to her with a grin. She runs faster.

When she reaches her spot for drawing, she nearly collapses from the strain of running. She pants and wipes sweat from her brow. She ties her long brown hair back behind her head in a loose knot, only to look into her hand and see that she has broken her chalk stick in two while running. Emelia has never broken her chalk before.

Tears well up in her eyes, but before she can let them loose a hand grips her shoulder from behind and shakes, then spins her around. A fat man in brightly colored, expensive clothing glares at her and begins to shout. His voice blasts her like a hurricane.

"So you're the useless thing that draws on walls nearly every day! It costs me a penny to have your pointless doodlings scrubbed away! What's this?" His sausage fingers pry open her hand and pluck the chalk from her. He throws the pieces to the ground and grinds them into dust.

"No more! It may not be against the law for you to draw here, but *I* won't have

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

it! If I catch you drawing your sun here again, I'll have you sold to gypsies!"

Emelia is too frightened to say anything. The man is a rich banker, one her father owes money. She did not know that the walls she draws on nearly every day are the walls of his home.

"You look familiar," he says. He squints and turns her face upwards. "You're Marco's daughter, aren't you?"

Emelia is too terrified to admit that she is. What would he do if he knew? That look in his eyes, a greedy look she has seen in Blanco's eyes so many times. He looks at her and sees something valuable.

"If I catch you here again, I *will* have you sold to gypsies, girl. Go away."

Satisfied, the banker turns and enters his home, slamming the wooden door shut with a bang like a cannon shot. Emelia then begins to cry in great sobs that nearly shake her to pieces like the broken chalk.

If she doesn't have her drawings, what does she have? Brothers who barely know she's there and a father who has not spoken to her since her mother was taken away? Only the sun in her mind, and he is not always there. If he can leave her at sunset, he might leave her forever one day. He is the only one that cares for her anymore.

She wanders through the streets and alleyways, sniffing and sighing. The sun begins to set, the shadows grow longer, and the noises of the homes around her grow louder. She flops down on a coral stoop to rest her tired legs.

The man in the green hat is beside her, sitting with his feet crossed and his hands across his lap. The maze lines draw in her eyes again, hypnotizing them.

"There's very little for you here, Emelia. If you could run to him," he cocks his head to the west, "would you? Would you run as hard as you could?"

"I could only run that hard if something *really* chases me," she says with a sniff.

"Wherever you run, little miss, something will pursue you, even if it's ghosts of memory. But if you want to go to him, I'll help. I have seen how he looks in your drawings. He is lonely, don't you think?"

And that's it exactly, the reason that she has felt sad for so long. The sun looks at her, each day, whether smiling or frowning, grinning or grimacing, and he is sad, because he is all alone in the sky. The moon and the stars must fear him.

"I would run to him, if only I could," she whispers.

"Then look," the man in the green hat says, and he opens coat, dark as the

THE GIRL WITH THE SUN IN HER HEAD

approaching night. Inside, red eyes watch her. “The beasts will fall upon you and devour you if you do not run. Run to him. Only his light will save you.” And then they flow out; the gargoyles, the demons, the spirits, the ghouls and ghosts. The creatures of the night, the terrible things that cannot be seen directly, they come and they chase.

Emelia runs. She turns to the west and stretches her legs as much as they can, and then some more. Each step goes a little further. The creatures behind her howl with anger and hunger. She bounds over the walls of the city and across the treetops of the forest on the mountain slopes. The creatures bounce along beneath her, leaping up. Their claws graze the soles of her feet, but they cannot grasp her now. She is too fast.

She runs until she is a speck in the distance. She runs until she disappears over the horizon. The creatures give up, and shuffle back to the home in the man with the green hat’s coat.

When the sun rises in the morning, a tiny little star follows it closely, one that was not there the day before. And when the sun sets that night, the tiny little speck of light hurries to keep up with it.

Negro weeps when she does not come home. He goes into Emelia’s room to collect her things to give away to the needy children. In the children’s drawings, Negro occasionally sees the sun drawn as an old man, and he holds hands with fast-footed little girl who is always smiling.

Her father vanishes one night from his chair, and Blanco finds the floor around the chimney covered in soot and ash. The people of the city catch glimpses in the night of a pair running across the rooftops holding hands.

Consuela finds religion, but Blanco does not. She tricks him into marrying her after a late night of drunken revelry. They fight often over petty things, but especially Blanco’s cheating. Soon they have three horrid little children that Blanco spoils, mostly to irritate his wife.

The man in the green hat hikes into the forest, continuing on his journey to the east. Anyone he meets gets what she wants, but not always what she deserves.