

The Ages of Juliette

Juliette at Thirteen

Even before her family moved home to Baltimore from New York, Juliette had developed a romanticized notion about her aunt Eugenia. The way her mother's older sister flaunted her Greek background gave the girl insight into her own heritage — around her father's WASPY New York writer friends her mother hardly ever mentioned being Greek.

Plus, no matter how much Eugenia's house bulged with neighbors and relatives, she always seemed to have time to twist Juliette's hair into a French braid, or share a piece of baklava, or listen to the girl's longing for a dog. And how her father claimed "another roach" couldn't fit into their Brooklyn apartment, let alone a dog.

She was thirteen when her family finally returned home to Baltimore for good, and by then her belief that she shared a special bond with her mother's older sister had become an *idée fixe*. In daydreams she could feel Eugenia's hugging arms and hear her murmur, "Oh, Sweetpea . . . you're my favorite. But don't tell your brother and sister . . . it's our little secret" And then she'd imagine sitting in Eugenia's breakfast nook and dumping onto her aunt all those worries her mother never had time for. Like which would look better on college applications, French or Latin? Or should she join Briarwood Hall's drama troupe or go out for lacrosse? And did Eugenia think she'd stand a chance of making the staff of *The Thicket*, the school's literary magazine.

"Oh, Sweetpea," she imagined Eugenia saying, "such big stuff to worry your little noggin about. I watched your cousin Melany go through all that, and it's not easy, that's for sure. And your mom, she has a lot on her mind . . . big things. But you're smart. You'll figure it out."

The girl's fantasy actually came true, at least in part. Early in the ninth grade, she established a routine of doing her homework at her aunt's because it was midway between school and her own home, and because her aunt's provided a sanctuary from her younger sister and brother. After school, she'd tote her backpack around to Eugenia's back yard and find her rooting around in the flowerbed circling the birdbath, or inside playing online bridge, or on her

phone—her mother claimed Eugenia “yakked her life away”— so the most the girl ever got was a quick hug and maybe an apple. Then she’d go upstairs to her cousin Melany’s old room where the walls were the shade of “rosy fingered dawn” she’d read about in the *Odyssey*. And her only distraction was Eugenia’s barking laugh occasionally piercing from the kitchen below.

Late in April, the girl was sprawled on her cousin’s white duvet, trying to memorize Portia’s “Quality of Mercy” speech, when, her aunt’s voice blasted through the floorboards — apparently Eugenia wasn’t quite through phoning all her friends about the astonishing news that Melany had given birth to twins. “Two boys! No, not identical . . . fraternal.”

Juliette wished her aunt would be quiet . . . that she’d just shut up. Her phony chirpiness sounded just like her own mother’s whenever she claimed that escaping the “unbelievable pressures of York New was the best thing they’d ever done,” when it was obvious to the girl that her father was drinking as much in Baltimore as he ever had in New York.

Now, her aunt sounded just as deluded—everyone knew Melany was a flake who barely made it through some third-rate South Carolina college. How was someone like that ever going to cope with twins? Her aunt’s voice kept rising. “No . . . Melany’s aren’t the first. Not exactly. Actually, twins sort of run in the family. My sister’s oldest girl, Juliette, was supposed to be one. The other died in utero . . . it’s called a phantom . . . some people call it a vanished twin. So there’s a little family history of twins. I guess you could say our family has history of vanished babies.”

The girl sat up. Her aunt’s words floated around like winged worms, landed on the pink walls, and faded into the plaster before she could grasp them to wrest any meaning from them. Twin . . . twin . . . twin . . . the single sound ricocheted around her mind, defying her to subdue it and examine its import. Or calculate its impact. Finally she managed to massage it into some semblance of meaning. Twin. . . twin . . . twin . . . why had no one told her? Why had no one realized how knowing about her vanished twin could have explained everything? Like why she always felt like an outsider. Or never good enough. Or was so lonely.

“Juliette! Juliette! You all right? It’s getting late, Honey. You all right up there?” From the bottom of the stairs Eugenia was calling. “It’s just that I gotta get to Target, Sweetpea. Your cousin Melany needs a boatload of stuff, and I gotta get to Target.”

Juliette looked around her cousin’s room. Its pink walls, its spindle bed, its white duvet, they never had been meant for her. On her back she could almost feel the hands of her cousin’s

baby boys, pushing her out. No, this place had never been meant for her. The girl wrapped her fantasy of a special connection with her aunt around her phantom twin and tucked the whole messy wad deep within herself. “I’m coming. I’ll be right down, Aunt Eugenia.”

“Actually, I need you to stay here, Sweetpea. I just put a casserole in the oven for your Uncle Hayes, but the stove’s timer has gone kablooey, so can you stay thirty-five minutes, then turn it off?”

“Yeah. That’ll be fine.”

“It’s just that I have to get to Target.”

“I’ll stay . . . no problem.”

“I knew I could count on you, Sweetpea. Remember, thirty-five minutes. If your uncle Hayes comes home before then, just tell him to take it out when it’s done. And maybe you should call your mom, tell her you’ll be a little late . . . she’ll be worried.”

When her aunt left, the girl tried memorizing Portia’s Quality of Mercy Speech again, but “Twin. Twin. Twin” had wormed into her brain. She opened her Tablet and Googled “Vanishing Twin Syndrome.”

“When one of the twins or multiple embryos dies in utero, disappears or gets resorbed partially or entirely, with an outcome of a spontaneous reduction of a multi-fetus pregnancy to a singleton pregnancy . . .”

But resorbed where? Into her mother? Into herself? Did it make any difference? . . . since her mother’s blood circulated through herself. So, then weren’t particles of her twin still inside herself? And didn’t that mean that for her whole life, her heart had pumped the blood of a whole other person who was both herself. And not herself. A whole other person who hadn’t loved her enough to stay.

Nothing felt familiar, not the aroma of her aunt’s casserole, or the sight of her grandparents’ portrait on the mantle, or even the touch of her upper lip to her lower. She’d been transported to an alien landscape where she was a stranger to herself and to everything around. A place so alien, she scarcely dare breathe its foreign atmosphere, let alone venture a single step.

Her phone rang. “Juliette?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Juliette, where are you? . . . it’s getting late.”

At last something recognizable, not comforting, but recognizable, that familiar tightness in her mother's voice signaling her father hadn't come home, yet. Which meant he was somewhere drinking. Which meant she shouldn't mention her vanished twin. Not now.

"I have to stay and watch a casserole for Eugenia . . . her oven timer doesn't work. And Mom? Guess what?"

"What?"

"I got an A on my French paper."

"Good for you! That's great, Juliette. Listen, I've got to go . . . your sister's bugging me about one of her Little Ponies."

The girl hung up and started to cry. She was so tired of being the good one, the kid not goofing off in school like her brother or an air head like her little sister. Why did she have to be the one who backed up their mother's phony claims that their father "had an emergency" at work, or that their smashed car was "the other guy's fault," or that cutting back on Christmas was "good for the planet"? Why did everything depend on her?

She heard her uncle's car pull in and with her sleeve gave her eyes a savage swipe. She was wrestling herself into her backpack when he opened the backdoor.

"Hi, Uncle Hayes."

"Juliette, you're still here?"

She explained how her aunt had to go to Target and about the casserole.

"What kind is it?"

"I don't know . . . I forgot to ask."

"Well let's hope it's not more damn moussaka . . . not that there's anything wrong with your aunt Eugenia's moussaka." He took the casserole out of the oven and gave it a stir. Then looked at her and trimmed his smile. "You okay, Juliette?"

She wiggled her thumbs between her thin shoulders and her backpack's cutting straps. "I'm fine, Uncle Hayes . . . fine."

"You sure? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just school and all . . . you know."

He put the lid back on the casserole. "Oh, Briarwood Hall, they sure pile it on."

"Yeah, that's for sure."

He took out his keys. "What do you say, I give you a lift home, Juliette?"

“Oh, no. I’m fine, Uncle Hayes. I’m okay.”

“Come on . . . everyone can use a lift now and then.”

She sat silently beside her uncle as he drove past the solid houses with rioting azaleas camouflaging their stone foundations. He stopped in the space where her father’s car would have been if he were home. “Well, here we are.”

Thanks, Uncle Hayes.”

“No problem. Like I said, everyone can use a lift now and then.”

“Thanks again .”

Later that night, when downstairs, her parents argue, the girl’s left hand will reach under her pillow and she will imagine the once and present touch of her vanished twin. And she will name her Portia.

Juliette at Fifteen

She has an AP bio test on Monday that she has to ace so she can get into AP chemistry. But it’s Saturday morning, and her muzzy, hung-over brain refuses to retain what kills anaerobic bacteria — nitrogen, hydrogen, water or oxygen?

Plus, she’s fighting the vague, distracting menace she senses seeping from her parents’ room across the hall. She’s grown deaf to their fighting, but this morning they’re confronting each other in different, more ominous tones . . . murmurous, insistent, resolute . . . something significant is transpiring.

Her mental echo locator fixes her mother on the bed, stationary, probably sitting. But her father is moving about, at first randomly, then more deliberately, to the bathroom, his closet, his side of the bed. When he finally opens the door, the girl hears her mother’s voice rise an octave above desperate — “Where, Teddy? Just tell me where you’re going. At least that much . . . I need to know how to reach you.”

But she hears her father say nothing — her left hand opens and closes on her absent twin’s. His footsteps go down the stairs. Then, she hears the vacuum-like suck inward when he pulls the front door open. And its thud when he closes it — that sound, she will remember forever. And the silence afterwards signifying a shift in the universe.

She has a rule: whenever her door is shut no one is allowed into her bedroom. But this morning her little sister ignores it. “Juliette?”

She shifts her biology book—that test on Monday; she needs to study—but Amy’s pink pajamas have a tear in the knee, and she looks so pathetic.

“What?”

“Daddy’s left.”

“You don’t know that.”

“He had his suitcase.”

Juliette’s left hand opens and closes. “Well, maybe he’s going on a business trip or something.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would he go on a business trip? He works for a magazine. He never goes on business trips.”

“What does Lukas say?”

“He won’t open his door. I think he’s crying.”

She feels an unexpected impulse to distract her little sister. “Want to see something, Amy?”

“What?”

She lifts her onto her lap and brushes her haywire red curls from her face. Then turns a page and points. “Know what that is?”

“No.”

“It’s a zygote.”

“What’s a zygote?”

“Well, zygotes are beginning babies. Remember when Cousin Melany’s twins were just born, and how everyone talked about their tiny fingers and toes?”

Her little sister nods and she tells her that babies don’t always have fingers and toes. They begin as zygotes, very tiny creatures in their mommies’ tummies. “So itsy bitsy, they don’t even have arms and legs, let alone finger and toes. But then they start to grow and grow, and soon they have everything they’ll ever need. Arms and legs, and hands and feet. Necks and heads, tummies and bottoms. Everything.”

“Juliette?”

“What?”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Open and shut your hand like that.”

She’s never told anyone about Portia . . . how could she tell someone about that sweet, imaginary telepathy that never fails to assure her everything will be all right. That no matter how badly she herself screws up, she has a secret sharer who will accept her without question, support her without fail, and forgive her without limit.

She gives her sister a distracting tickle, and Amy asks if she was ever a zygote.

“ Everyone begins as a zygote.”

“Even Melany’s twins? Even Taylor and Justin?”

Her book open before her, her little sister on her lap, and their altered universe at bay for a few minutes more, Juliette sing-songs. “Everyone . . . everyone . . . everyone . . . begins as a zygote.”

Amy’s singing along with her when their mother calls from below. “Hey, you guys, come downstairs. I have something to tell you. Come downstairs, guys. There’s something important you need to know.” And the girl hears her mother nearly choking on her own forced, bitter brightness, so she closes her book, sets her little sister off her lap, and opens her door. With every step down the stairs she feels the weighty role she’s always played—the good daughter, the reliable child — growing heavier. Her left hand opens and closes. She wants a drink.

Juliette at Seventeen

At her aunt’s birthday party for Melany’s twins, Juliette wants another cup of her uncle Hayes’s Hurricane Rum Fun, an antidote for her hangover from the night before. Going to the dining room she spots her mother in the kitchen. She’s leaning against the marble counter, one foot flat on the floor and her other leg cocked so just the toe of her red, tasseled shoe touches the throw rug. She’s deep in conversation with a bald man wearing a blue blazer, and the girl realizes that at that moment she, her sister, and her brother are utterly absent from their mother’s

awareness. They've been replaced by a blazer-wearing man. By a stranger, who has made their mother into a stranger as well.

The coquettish woman at the counter is a flirty version of the woman who comes home every night. The woman who first must divest herself of her newfound paralegal professionalism by dropping her keys into the foyer's blue bowl, stashing her briefcase in the closet, and stripping off her shoes, before she can assume the role her waiting children demand of her: Mom.

In her pocket, Juliette's left hand flexes, and she turns away and continues to the dining room. Her uncle Hayes is refilling the cut-glass bowl, and he gives her a wink—"Having ourselves a big-girl little drinky drinky, Juliette? Don't worry, your secret's safe with me." Her uncle's playful words belie the worry she sees backlighting his eyes—good-hearted Hayes has noticed that this is her second trip to the bowl.

She locks her gaze onto his, then directs their joined eyes to the springtime backyard out the French doors. A throng of four year olds is chasing her younger sister around the birdbath. Her hands held high, Amy runs and trails a rivulet of blue and white paper streamers over her head.

"If dandelions were red," Juliette says, "Amy's hair could be their fluff."

"It's a good thing your sister's got that carrottop. It makes her stand out . . . you're a tough act to follow, Juliette," her uncle answers, meaning she's top bird on the family tree's "brainy" branch.

Besides Macalester and Swarthmore, Davidson has accepted her. She's proud of that, yet somehow the "Dear Juliette Holbrook" in their acceptance letters seems meant for someone else. Someone other than that Juliette Holbrook who cribbed her way through calculus and gave a boy a blowjob to write her essay for Haverford. A more worthy Juliette Holbrook.

The rum has nested itself nicely in the back of her head, where its tendrils massage the knot in her neck and loosen her smiles. She raises her cup and salutes her uncle. "Excellent . . . truly excellent, Uncle Hayes. You'll have to give me your secret recipe, so I can serve it at my wedding. Whenever that may be."

"For your wedding, Juliette, I'll unlock the vault."

She decides to join Amy outside, but her sweater is upstairs. Her cousin Melany's old spindle bed is heaped with coats, jackets, and sweaters, but rather than search for hers, she goes to the window and watches. Down in the yard, the twins have wrapped her little sister in her

paper streamers, and she's zombie walking toward them. Nearly hysterical with glee and terror the children race round and round the birdbath.

"I can't believe I'm at a birthday party for five year olds." A boy wearing a Duke t-shirt is rooting through the pile on the bed. "I need my damn jacket."

"They're four."

"What?"

"They're four . . . the twins are four-years-old."

"Whatever. I need my damn jacket." The boy looks up and stares. "So, you're hiding out, too? Christ, I can't believe I'm at a kids' party."

"So, why are you?"

"We just stopped on the way to the airport. I was on spring break."

She thinks he must be from Hayes's side of the family. "So, you're Melany's cousin from her dad's side?"

"Something like that."

He's holding a bottle of beer, takes a swallow and begins tossing the clothes again, but without any real earnestness. He keeps glancing at her. She can tell he thinks she's attractive, and senses him computing Baltimore's social calculus: Where does she go to school? Where does her family live? What does her father do for a living? And she knows that if she dropped her Swarthmore, Davidson, and Macalester she'd rise in his estimation because she computes the same social calculus. She wishes she had more rum.

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about being the father of twins," she says.

"What? No . . . thank God! Why?"

"Well, I'm Melany's cousin from the other side. My mom and Eugenia are sisters. And my mom was supposed to have had twins."

"What do you mean 'supposed to'?"

"Me . . . I was supposed to have been a twin."

"Again, what do you mean 'supposed to'? Either you're a twin or you're not. Unless, oh my God. I'm sorry . . . are you telling me your twin died?"

"Not really. It died before it was born. I'm the one who survived."

"Still, that has to be sad."

She shrugs. “Not really. My body just absorbed her into itself. I guess you could say” She takes a sip.

“Say what?”

She gives him a stupid-little-me smile. “Nothing.”

“Come on . . . you can tell me.”

“I guess you can say I ate her.”

Juliette at Twenty-Three

Her train from Boston had been delayed outside of Trenton, so she had a few beers in the club car and doesn't get to Baltimore until ten-thirty. She'll have to Uber, she thinks, because her brother probably hasn't waited for her.

But as soon as she steps onto the platform she sees him huddled in a hoodie, looking like what he is: a two-time college dropout with a parttime job in a plant nursery.

“Hey” is all he can muster for a greeting.

And she gives him a simple “Hey” back. Their absence of words expresses what neither of them can say aloud: good-hearted Hayes has died. And the uncle's death has ripped a hole in buffer of time they'd always assumed was permanent. And now they're terrified to look up and see eternity staring through the tear. So they keep their heads down and walk out of the station and into the night.

At his car, her brother takes her bulging backpack. “Christ, Jules, whaddahya got in here? Granite?”

Even his pronunciation has degenerated, she notices. Almost as if he's rehearsing to enter a universe where forming distinct syllables isn't a requirement.

“Books,” she says “You know how it goes . . . grind . . . grind . . . grind.”

“Right . . . grind . . . grind . . . grind. You can say that again.”

Over the roof of his rust-cankered Civic, she grins and repeats. “Grind . . . grind . . . grind.”

He grins back. “So that's what they're teaching you in law school? How to be a smartass?”

“Smartass was two semesters ago. I aced it.”

His grin fades. “Of course you did. When have you ever not aced anything, Jules?”

The two beers from the Club Car have faded, and she wants a drink. Lukas probably does, too.

As if he's read her mind, her brother abruptly turns off the highway and into a neighborhood of narrow rowhouses interrupted by auto-parts stores and brave new eateries with outdoor heaters and white lights strung over sidewalk tables. "I want to take you to Blue Heaven," he says.

Not a restaurant, Blue Heaven is an upscale bar specializing in elaborate custom cocktails. Past the crowd of business-casual professionals at the bar, they find a table with two high stools in the rear. A solemn waiter presents them with leather-bound menus of drinks ranging from standard Manhattans to something concocted with turmeric tea and sweet potato shochu. Almost nothing costs less than twelve dollars.

"The Beowulf looks good. But so does the Crab Apple Toddy," she says. Across the table, Lukas looks lost. She calculates—she's not as bad as he is; she can drink and still function. But Lukas can barely breath.

He gives a vague wave in the direction of the bar crowd. "Isn't this great, Jules? I mean it's so frickin' cynical, it's genius."

She thrusts her left hand deep into her pocket. "Cynical how?"

"Christ, Jules, you're the smart one. Look at this place. Wanna know how they get away with charging twelve bucks for a frickin' highball? By camouflaging what they're really doing, that's how . . . so all these pathetic deluded boozehounds can tell themselves they're just having a little something after work . . . no big deal. They're not drunks . . . no sir. Drunks go to dive bars, not Blue Heaven. Drunks don't pay twelve bucks for a frickin' highball. . . . frickin' genius. They should have a course in it in business school, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know . . . I'm in law school."

"Right. I know that."

She orders a Great Brandy Alexander. In her pocket, her fingernails rake her palm. Now, her vanished twin surfaces only when she drinks. No matter how far she slips — sleeping with her Con Law professor, her roommate's fiancé, the best man at their wedding—Portia remains her secret safety valve, a chromosomal red light she trusts to stop her before she becomes as lost as someone like her brother.

Their drinks come and he raises his glass to hers. "Here's to Hayes."

“Yeah, to Hayes.” She remembers the night of Melany’s engagement party when their father stumbled into Eugenie’s precious birdbath and knocked it over. And how everyone just stared at him as he struggled to get up. And how Hayes came across the lawn, and took his elbow — “Here, Teddy. Here, let me give you a hand.” —and then brushed the dirt from her father’s knees. Good-hearted Hayes.

“How’s the drink?” her brother asks.

“Good.”

“You know, Dad came to the viewing last night.”

“How did that go over?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there . . . Amy told me.”

“I wonder why he did that.”

“Who knows . . . who knows why he does half the things he does. According to Amy, he’s sober again.”

“Well, let’s hope it sticks this time.”

Her brother lifts his glass. “I gotta get away, Jules. I gotta get outta here.”

She doesn’t know if he means the Blue Heaven, or Baltimore, or life. Whichever it is, she knows his destination: that sweet spot where reality fades into a chimera viewed through a dusky mirror, a muzzy-thoughted reality played out with a soundtrack of noise sounding almost like laughter.

“Where will you go, Lukas?”

“I dunno, Jules. I just dunno . . . somewhere peaceful. Peaceful like in that poem Dad used to recite . . . remember?”

“Yeah, Dad and his poetry.”

“How did it go? Something . . . something, then ‘And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow.’ Do you know where that’s from?”

“No. Somewhere Irish, maybe?”

“Don’t do that, Jules.”

“Do what?”

“Dumb yourself down for my sake. It’s embarrassing.”

“Okay . . . it’s from the ‘Lake Isle of Innisfree’ by William Butler Yeats . . . satisfied?”

“Satisfaction isn’t something I know much about. But what I do want to know is how the fuck does peace drop? I mean, wouldn’t peace drip? If it drops, what’s that? A humongous wad of peace falling on top of us? Freakin’ everyone out? What’s frickin’ peaceful about that?”

“I don’t know, Lukas. I don’t know.” Her nails are cells away from blood. She looks up. From the bar’s ceiling a stylized blue moon smiles down. Benign and knowing, its crinkled eyes seem to hold an awareness of fathomless possibility, and just before the booze clots her brain for the night, she imagines Portia her twin and her uncle Hayes meeting and recognizing their common bond—the one who never lived, and the one who lived not long enough, together forever. On the dark side of the moon. In the shadow of Gemini.