

Excerpt from *HUNGRY GHOST THEATER: A NOVEL* by Sarah Stone

AT THE EDGE

San Francisco, March 1993

The dark warehouse chills Arielle through her coat and gloves—she and her sisters stare at their aunt as she descends an iron staircase, undressing. Torches cast a smoky, wavering light, half-illuminating the audience, who sit in a circle around the stage. A thin, harsh, persistent music turns the warehouse into a haunted cave. Aunt Julia—Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth, according to the photocopied program—has stripped down to her underwear and jeweled armbands. A blue-white spotlight strikes the mirrored floor of the stage, lighting both Inanna and her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Dead and the Underworld, who sits on a throne at the bottom of the staircase. White makeup with sharp black lines and areas of red covers the faces of both queens: they look like warriors, like demons, like the angry dead.

Arielle, Jenny, and Katya have heard about their Aunt Julia and Uncle Robert’s performances but have never, until now, been allowed to see one. “They’re for adults,” their mother said when they first asked. “Putatively.”

“Too much sex for us?” asked Katya, and her mother said, “If it were only that.” Later, she said, “When you’re older you can go, if you still want to, but you’ll be sorry.”

They badgered her this time, though, until she gave in—sooner or later, she always does if they keep at her.

Arielle feels as if she's inside one of her own nightmares, but she can't look away from the stage. Maybe she doesn't even want to. She'll never forget this play—if she can get through it. She's become more and more uneasy as, at each of the seven landings, Uncle Robert's amplified voice gave Aunt Julia—Inanna—another command: “You must surrender your scepter and crown to pass through this gate,” or, “You must surrender your golden robe to pass through this gate.” Whenever Inanna asked why, he repeated, “This is our way in the netherworld,” sounding cold and formal, like a stranger. So at each gate, Inanna dropped something on the stairs and left it behind: her lapis lazuli scepter, her neckpiece, her robe, her dress, her slip.

Now at the bottom of the steps, Inanna takes off the last of her clothing and jewelry and walks onto the stage completely naked. Crouching figures emerge from the sides and move toward her. Movie images flicker on each of the walls behind the audience—one with soldiers in uniforms in the desert and tanks firing, another with planes in the air at night, a third with President—now ex-President—Bush talking, a fourth with a bald man the children only slightly recognize. Someone in charge of the war and too many other things, someone their father hates and goes on about. The bald man talks silently, smiling.

Arielle can see her own breath in the cold air. Aunt Julia might be crying, or is it a trick of the light? The Queen of Heaven and Earth descending into the underworld for her brother-in-law's funeral, and her sister won't let her in. Well, why wouldn't you cry? Arielle's thinking about all this deliberately, trying to stop her fear, to stay separate from it. But the play has made her part of its world, like one of the dreams where she's trapped in a culvert with someone coming after her, on the verge of learning something she doesn't

want to know. The old feeling's coming over her, her breathing starting to close up, tears rising in her throat. She takes off a glove and feels around under her folding seat, pressing her forefinger against the metal edge where a rough bolt fastens the legs to the chair.

“Don't wriggle, Arielle,” whispers her mother, and she holds still again, but the tears are coming back.

She waits until she can't stand it, then presses her finger against the bolt, hard. In the half-dark, when her mother is watching the stage, she looks down at her finger, the blood very slow, just a drop or two. The pressure eases, but not enough. Moving very slowly, not to draw attention to herself, she presses until there's enough pain to help. She slides her glove over her bleeding finger and lets out her breath, slowly, the tears receding again.

Ereshkigal, the queen on the throne, wears shimmering deep blue robes, reflected in the mirrored floor, along with the torches and the faces of the audience at the edges. She calls out, “My sister thinks she can come down here without stripping away all she has, even her skin. She thinks, as a Queen of the Light, that she can rule our realm as well, but she will never see in the dark.”

After the performance, Julia sits “backstage” in her robe, her heartbeat still quick from the performance. Waiting for Eva and the children, she talks with visitors in the warehouse's old break room, now converted to a place for costume changes but still decorated with relics of the previous era: a defunct time clock, beige lockers, a leftover sign on the wall: “Coffee and tea are free. Please pay into the coffee fund if you wish to use creamer and sweeteners. And clean up your own dishes! Your mother doesn't work here.”

Her brother has wandered off somewhere. While she chats with people, her adrenaline rush slowly starts to fade; now she's starving. Eva has explained the biochemistry of performance and post-performance to her. The advantage of having a neuroscientist for an older sister: she can describe all the mechanisms you can't do anything about. But maybe it feels somewhat better to know that the anxiety beforehand fires up the amygdala, which brings in the hypothalamus and triggers the adrenal glands. Somehow epinephrine gets involved, releasing a lot of sugar, and some brain changes take place that hook into the internal opioid receptors. "Which explains," her sister said, "why you and Robert are such miseries to be around when you're not working."

Julia, now sweating through the thick makeup she hasn't had time to remove, smiles and responds to real compliments as well as to ostensibly innocent but barbed remarks. Martina, also a director of an experimental dance-theater company, says, "You so captured the sense of uneven power dynamics. How interesting to bring in Desert Storm."

"Thank you."

"You and Robert always do such intriguing things with appropriation and collaging bits of all kinds of cultures. This one is really quite... sometime you must tell me all about what the Kabuki makeup has to do with the Sumerian myth." Bringing in the Kabuki elements was Robert's idea. Julia argued against it, but she isn't going to say so. Martina switches gears. "These idea-driven pieces are so challenging. It's hard to keep them from being either bewildering or obvious. Or both." She laughs. "I focus on the images and the movement. It's so brave, though, the way you two take these big risks. I admire you for even trying."

"Thank you," says Julia, again. Where is Robert? Leaving her alone with the wolves. "I'm so sorry, I have to go find my sister and her kids." She shakes Martina's hand,

smiling and thinking, *bitch*, and moves through the crowd. Maybe Eva hated the show so much that she's taken the girls and gone home: she'll call later with an excuse.

Eva said beforehand, "Baby, you know I won't understand anything of what you're doing."

"You can tell me what it felt like to you, though," Julia said. She's hoping to hear that the play is about what you have to give up to make it through, about how it's not too late even when it looks like it's all over. But if she were to tell her sister what she thinks it's about, Eva might agree just to keep the peace, and Julia would never know what she really saw in the performance. Waiting, she feels a little sick, as well as excited, even though Eva's never liked anything they've done. Robert would say, "She doesn't go to the theater, Jules." Julia will be thirty in three years, she shouldn't care what anyone thinks. Still, she wants to hear her sister's verdict.

And the children. Katya, at twelve, might be old enough to make something of it. Eleven-year-old Jenny, though, would just as soon be outside somewhere, playing with animals. And eight-year-old Arielle? Before the performance, Julia wondered if she might giggle uncontrollably once Julia was naked or melt down into one of her helpless tantrums when Ereshkigal had Inanna flayed. What *did* the kids make of the flaying?

Finally, here are Eva and the children, wandering into the old break room, dazed and out of place. They stand for a moment, looking around at all the half-dressed performers with their friends, and make their way through the crowd to Julia.

Eva says, after the initial hugs and kisses, "Ray had to work. He sends his regrets." And, "That was darker than I expected."

"I told you she gets flayed, right?"