Kiran Millwood Hargrave

JULIA AND THE SHARK

with

Tom de Freston

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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ONE

There are more secrets in the ocean than in the sky. Mum told me when the water is still and the stars prick its surface, some of the sky's secrets fall into the sea and add to its mysteries. When we lived in the lighthouse, I hauled my long-handled crab net over the balcony railing and tried to catch them, but I never did.

Other nights, when storms turned everything upside down and hurled water and sky at each other, the spray from the waves reached the beam. It came through the grates at the high windows to scatter across the floor of Dad's office. I listened to the puddles in the morning, but I never heard anything. No messages fallen from the clouds. Perhaps the secrets drowned in the night, like a fish in air.

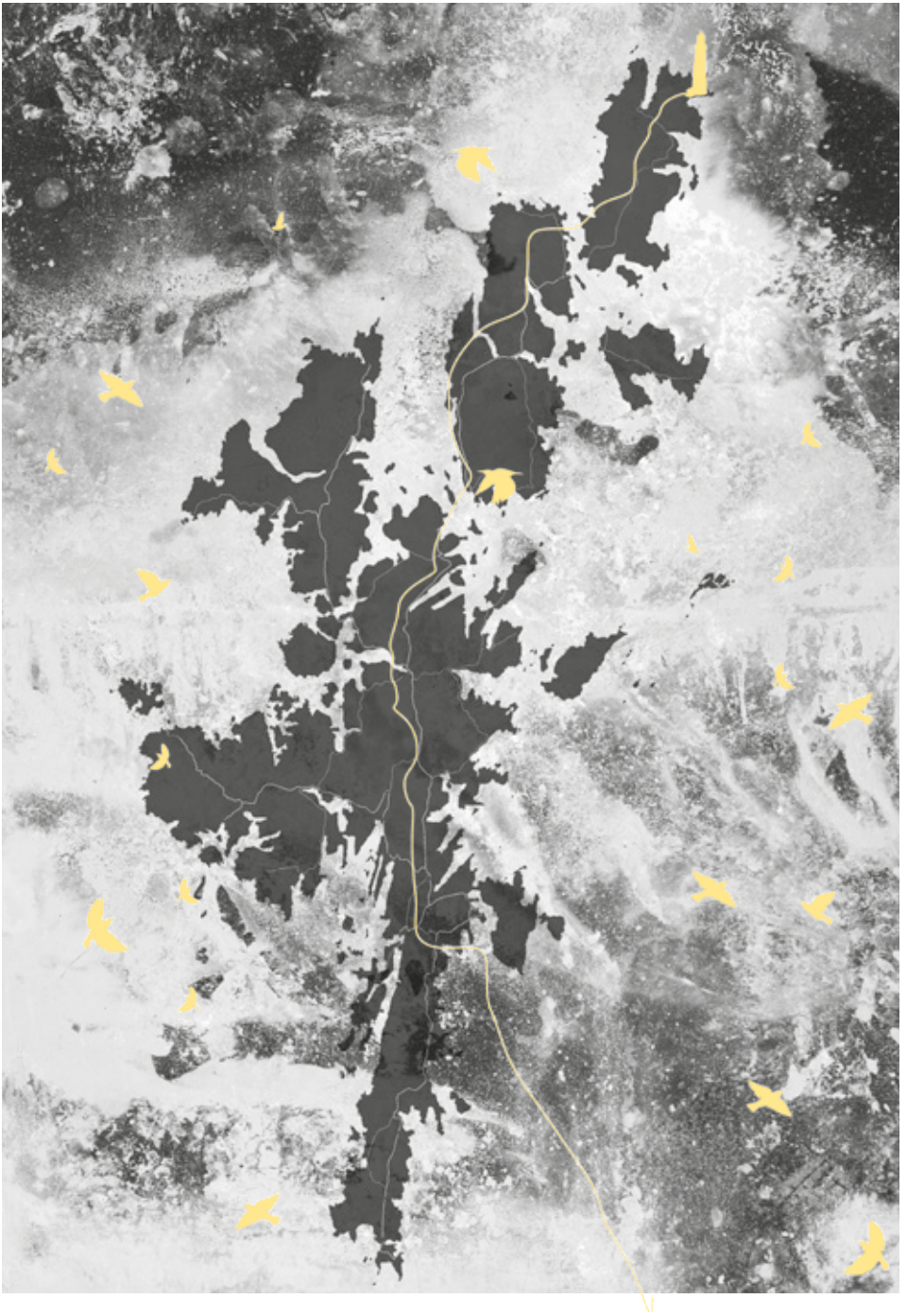
My name is Julia. This is the story of the summer I lost my mum, and found a shark older than trees. Don't worry though, that doesn't spoil the ending.

I'm named after my grandmother, who I never met, and also after a computer program that my dad likes. I am ten years and two hundred and three days old. I had to ask my dad to work that out for me, because numbers are not my favourite. Words are. You can make numbers into words, but you can't make words into numbers, and so words must be more powerful, mustn't they?

Dad disagrees. He works all in numbers. That's why we ended up at that old lighthouse in Shetland. He went to program it, to make it work automatically. A lighthouse keeper used to live there, and the flame was made of gas and sparks, not a one thousand watt tungsten light bulb. Gas and sparks, like stars.

It's closer to Norway than England, there. Closer to Norway than Edinburgh, even. To find Shetland on a map, you start at our home in Hayle in Cornwall and you move your finger diagonally up, up and to the right, until you find islands scattered out like ink splatter. That's Orkney. You go even further and there's another scatter. Shetland. It's an archipelago, which means a group of islands, and we went to one called Unst.

Unst, Shetland, Scotland.



I like how people there say it like it's got a whole other bunch of letters in it. Sco-awt-lund. That's another thing about words: there's space in them. They change according to whose mouth they're coming out of. Sometimes they change so much in mine they become something else entirely, but Dad says these are called lies.

There's no room for that with numbers. Even the 'language' of numbers, which my dad works with, is called 'binary code'. If you look up 'binary' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* it says:

(adj.) Relating to, composed of, or involving two things.

Two things. Right and wrong. True and false. Where's the space in that?

Mum works with numbers too, but words are her favourite. She's a scientist, which means you need to like both. Numbers help you keep track of things, but only words can help you explain them.

In Cornwall she studied algae, a special kind that cleans the water of any bad chemicals and perhaps one day even breaks up some kinds of plastic. You've probably seen the footage of turtles with plastic up their noses. I did once and it's still there in my head. I wish I could forget it, but perhaps it's fair I can't. Closing your eyes doesn't make things like that go away.

When Dad got offered this job in Shetland it was Mum who suggested us all moving there for the summer. Because while her algae work was important and good for the turtles, moving to Unst meant she would be closer to what she really wanted to study: the biggest things that lived in the coldest seas.

She studied whales at university, and wrote a very long essay about a whale that goes around the world alone because it sings at a different frequency to other whales. It can hear them, but they can't hear it. I understand a little how that whale feels. Ever since Mum got ill, I feel like I've been screaming inside. Yet her favourite animal in all the world wasn't a whale, but a shark. A Greenland shark. And because it was hers, that summer it became mine too.

I like how words are gentler than numbers. I could make everything go back to how it used to be, if I didn't care about this being a true story. If I had to tell you in numbers about my mum, I would have to tell you the most important numbers about her now are 93875400, which is what's on her hospital bracelet. But 93875400 doesn't tell you anything about Mum. Only words can do that. And even they fail me sometimes.

I'm getting tangled. That's the problem with words, and it's the same as the best thing about them. They can mean so many things,

and each word has so many branches, so many roots, if you're not sure of the route you can get lost like Little Red Riding Hood in the wood. So I have to go back a bit. I have to remember where I'm trying to get to. And where I'm trying to get to, is Mum.

Reaching Shetland took four days. That's longer than it takes to fly to Australia, which is the other side of the world, and back again. Twice. I didn't think it was possible for anything to take that long now that we have aeroplanes and bullet trains, but we had to travel there by car because we have books that are too heavy to take on planes, and a cat called Noodle who is too loud to take on trains.

She's called Noodle because she was so tiny when she was a kitten she fitted in the empty instant noodle pots Dad ate for lunch. My mum washed them and kept them to plant tomato seeds in because she hated throwing away plastic. You've probably heard of pirates having ship's cats and that is what Noodle is. Mum used to take her out to the algae farms and she'd sit at the front of the boat and hiss at the sea.

There was no question of leaving Noodle behind in Cornwall, so we bought her a special crate to travel in. It was made for dogs and took up nearly all the back seats, so I was squashed to one side with the tomato pots by my feet. Dad fitted out the crate so

that it had levels for her to climb in, and a litter tray in its own little compartment so she would have privacy when she needed it.

'I hope she doesn't poo,' said Mum. 'It stinks when she poos.'

'It stinks when anyone poos,' said Dad fairly.

I'm sorry that the first time you're hearing my parents' voices they're talking about poo.

Noodle was too busy meowing very loudly to use the litter tray much. This is a superpower cats have: they can hold their wee a really long time. They are unlike humans in this, and other ways. We stopped loads for toilet breaks and for Mum and Dad to swap driving. They put an audiobook on. It was called *The Crowstarver* by Dick King-Smith and it was very sad and soon we were all crying.

I traced our progress on the road map my parents didn't use any more because they have a TomTom. Maps are more interesting than screens, I think. They show you the whole picture and make roads look like veins or rivers.

We spent the first night in the West Midlands, at a B&B run by a fussy couple who allowed dogs but not cats. It was too late to find anywhere else, so Dad stayed with Noodle in the car while I slept with Mum in the big bed. It had a mattress made of water, which apparently was popular in the olden days.

'It's like sleeping in the belly of a whale,' said Mum, shifting around. 'All these gurgles and grunts.'

'You think?'

'I know. I've heard inside a whale. One swallowed a transmitter we were using to capture them singing. It was louder than the sea in there.' Her breathing went all calm like it always did when she talked about the sea.

'Are you excited for the whales in Shetland?'

'Yes.' I could hear the smile in her voice. 'There are so many kinds. *Balaenoptera musculus*. *Physeter macrocephalus, Monodon monoceros*, *Delphinapterus leucas*.'

'Blue whales, sperm whales, narwhals and belugas,' I reeled off, translating her Latin words into ones I could actually pronounce. 'It sounds made for you.'

'Yes. And for you. It's going to be the best summer ever.'

'Will we see otters?'

'Unlikely, but possible.' Mum never answered questions like that with 'yes' or 'no'. She was a scientist, and that meant leaving room for the impossible. 'Though I'll be travelling north, out to the Norwegian Sea. There's rumours of a Greenland shark around there.'

I hoped for a story, a story about the Greenland shark. She's been telling me about sea creatures since I was little, and I've collected them in this small yellow notebook with a daisy on the front, strung them on a thread like a necklace, each fact shining and precious. But she yawned again, and I could tell from her not

using fancy words any more that she was close to falling asleep.

I rolled over and all I could see were her teeth glinting in the dark. It was like the rest of her face wasn't there and I touched it just to make sure. I can remember her face that night, feel it under my fingers. Words can be time travel, too.

We didn't stay for breakfast at the stuffy B&B, and Dad was very grumpy because Noodle had pooed and it made his pyjamas smell. Mum hung them outside the door and closed the window to hold them in place but they escaped on the M5 just outside Birmingham and flew under the wheels of a lorry. They had a little fight, which took us to the M6 to Manchester, then the M62 past Manchester, then the M6 again.

By this time I was very bored of the M6 and also of the names roads have. Wouldn't it be better if they had names like in books? 'Elven-way', 'Diagon Alley', or 'Yellow Brick Road'? That would have made the last paragraph a lot more interesting for you and me both.