



Christopher Bernard

## On the Moons of Saturn

CAST: Young Woman (late teens), Voice of Julia (at eighteen; as implied, this character is never seen), Julia's Mother, Julia's Father, Female Teacher, Julia's Schoolmate (a twelve-year-old boy), Julia as a Child (about ten years old)

*Light on Young Woman, sitting at a table, pressing a crumpled letter with both hands against her face. On the table is an unsealed envelope, a pen, a letter opener in the shape of a knife, a bud vase with a tea rose, and perhaps a few trinkets.*

*A pool of light over the Young Woman and table; the rest of the stage is in darkness. (The other characters stand or sit at various positions around the stage; they are in darkness except when speaking, but the light remains on the Young Woman throughout.)*

*The Young Woman lowers the letter to the table and flattens it out. She starts to read the letter, silently, to herself. She reads and rereads the letter throughout the play with rapt fascination until the final actions of the play. (GENERAL DIRECTION: When each character speaks, except for the VOICE OF JULIA, a light goes up on his or her face; after they stop speaking, the light goes out.)*

VOICE OF JULIA (heard over a speaker)

Dear Molly,

I'm sorry – my sweet Molly! (I always called you “my sweet Molly,” in my mind – now you know.)

Whatever you do, don't cry. I can't bear to think of you crying.

How often did we talk – three, four times, between gym and the cafeteria? I said “Hi” at least three times, but you didn't hear me, you just walked away. You had something on your mind, I'm sure, you didn't mean to be rude. I remember you saying Hi, when no one else was looking, just once. It was a very shy Hi – it was so sweet! Then you ran away. I walked home afterwards in a trance of happiness.

You are a smart, logical girl. It's one of the things I've always admired about you. *You* will understand, after you think about it. There is no other way out for me. I'm already gone. I have been gone for years. I am done with life because life is done with me. “How can you possibly know!” you'll say. “Stop feeling so sorry for yourself! Buck up! Whatever it is, you'll get over it! You're still young! It's cowardly!” And yet, there it is.

I realized something, not long ago. You know I didn't go to the prom, because nobody asked me. So I pretended to go and sat in a diner in my prom dress till two in the morning, daydreaming about how wonderful the prom must be, and then I went home, alone, and lied about the wonderful time I'd had. And I felt terribly sorry for myself. But then I realized it.

JULIA'S MOTHER

Dear Molly,

Julia often spoke of you, so I am taking the liberty of writing to say how fond of you I know she was. Julia was a good, brave girl but her demons finally overwhelmed her. I know about demons, I struggle with them every day! I thought, since she so valued your friendship, you might have an idea why she did this. It's too late, of course, to do any good, but I am hurt by not knowing, I feel lost in pain and confusion – could I have done something? Could any of us have done anything? I thought you might have an idea, since you were so close, given how Julia spoke of you. Why did she do this to me?

JULIA'S FATHER

Dear Daddy's Little Girl,

This is a hard letter to write, dearest Julia. I know it's hard to understand why Daddy had to leave, but I think you will one day, and you'll forgive your old Daddy. It's not because I don't love you, because I love you with all my heart, you know that, but I can't live there anymore, your mother and I have decided it's best for everyone for her and me to part and for me to live in another house. I know you know there's someone else, someone you haven't met yet, and you may think I love her more than I love you and your Mom, but that isn't true, I couldn't love you more than I do now, and I always will. I hope you know that, Julia.

FEMALE TEACHER

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Perkins,

I am your daughter Julia's homeroom teacher in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Hawthornden Middle School, and I am writing to you out of concern for your daughter. I am also concerned that you have not shown up at the PTA meetings, though you have been asked regularly, so we might have discussed this face to face. I realize both of you are very busy, but this is an important matter. Your daughter needs your attention especially at this difficult time. Julia is a bright girl, conscientious and hard-working, with a real gift for algebra, I have been told, and an interest in astronomy that showed itself in her science project on the moons of Saturn last year, which was displayed at school, although I do not recall either one of you attending. Of course, I am sure your schedules did not allow it, but I can still remember Julia standing proudly next to her project, saying "They'll be here any minute" till the janitor had to let her out of the locked building. I was told she was in tears.

#### JULIA'S CLASSMATE

Hi Julie,

I bet you didn't expect to get an email from me! I can't believe I'm writing this myself! Bobby Shanker bet me I wouldn't do it and I can't let him win a bet like that! So I took it on! I'm writing to you to tell you YOU HAVE A SECRET ADMIRER AT SCHOOL! I bet you didn't know that did you! I can't tell you who it is, but he's out there – really out there! (Almost as far as Saturn – ONLY KIDDING!) (It isn't Bobby Shanker, by the way, in case you were wondering.) I know because I sit next to him in history. He wrote your name all over his notebook and I saw it one day and asked him what he was doing and he BLUSHED TO HIS EARS.

#### JULIA AS A CHILD

Dear Mommy and Daddy,

I am having fun at camp. The camp counselor is really nice, her name is Alix, and she let me look through her telescope the other night. She has a telescope and she gives people turns looking at the moon and Mars and Venus and Jupiter when their orbits bring them close to the earth. It's really neat! The night sky is so beautiful out here, I never knew it was so full of stars, where we live the night sky is so dark, Alix says, because of all the light on earth (isn't that strange – it's too dark up above because it's too bright down below?). I love to lie down in the grass and look up at the night sky, the Milky Way really looks like a path of little stars running across the sky.

#### VOICE OF JULIA

Then I realized it. I looked around me, Molly, and I saw people pretending to be happy or pretending they would be happy if they just got something – got that guy (or that girl – don't laugh!), or got into that school, or got that job, house, position, fame, money, power, whatever. And it failed them, every time. I saw it in my own family – even when they got just what they had always dreamed about, they were miserable and lashed out at everyone around them. My father, my mother – they got exactly what they had always wanted. And they made everyone around them suffer for it. It terrified me.

#### JULIA'S MOTHER

I know Julia sometimes had a hard time with the other girls at school – her teacher wrote her father and me about it, though I never found the time to deal with it directly, it has been such a busy time, and it was a very delicate matter (of course I have no idea whether her father did). Anyway, this is partly why she, and I, felt so grateful for your friendship. You never visited, of

course, so I never got to know you personally, but I assumed that was because you too led such a busy life.

#### JULIA'S FATHER

I'm sorry I couldn't make it to your school play, I hear you were wonderful as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (that's usually a role actresses do after doing Juliet, but don't worry – someday you'll be Juliet too!) . . .

#### FEMALE TEACHER

I am very concerned about something she may never have discussed with you. Over the past year or so, she has become increasingly the target of bullying by other girls. You may not have heard of girl bullying, it isn't often talked about, but it's a serious issue in many of our schools today, when a girl is singled out as a scapegoat and bullied by more dominant girls, and eventually she can end by being harassed by all the girls in her class. It can damage her for life. I know how awful it can be. The bullying girls can be very subtle, and it can be easy to miss if you are not aware of it, but it can be very damaging to the girl in question.. The victim girl is often baffled and confused and doesn't know what to do, how to stop it, or who to turn to – to discuss it with an adult is often seen as “tattling,” which is just about the worst thing you can do among teens. I have seen signs of girl bullying in Julia: she is often ridiculed by other girls, usually behind teachers' backs, such as in the girls room; she is sometimes deliberately snubbed, her clothing and hairstyle (a bit old fashioned, you must admit) are often put down, and she is the target of sneering, arch comments, snide giggling, and the like. If she walks up to a group of girls in the cafeteria at lunchtime, the group will sometimes simply dissolve and walk away. Julia has responded in the usual way, by becoming increasingly withdrawn, unsociable, living in her own world, daydreaming alone in the lunchroom, pretending (I can almost hear her thoughts) that she doesn't care what anyone thinks of her, that she has more important things to do than make friends, that she is living a nobler life, learning about the universe and the stars. No doubt you have noticed she has stopped grooming herself properly – often her hair is uncombed and her clothes look slept in them. She has begun biting her nails. Once I had to excuse her to go to the girls' room since she was bleeding from her period and hadn't used a Tampon. And I am worried she may be having recourse to more serious compensations, too sensitive to discuss in a letter, which is why I wish you would get in touch with me personally to arrange an interview so we can discuss this in person.

#### JULIA'S CLASSMATE

I told him “You think Julia Perkins is a babe?” and he blushed so hard he LOOKED LIKE THE END OF HIS ERASER. Honest!! So I know what he thinks and I told Bobby Shanker and he told me I would never have the courage to tell you “because,” he said, “she'll think it's really you,” but it's not me, SORRY JULIA, it's somebody else, but is HE GONE ON YOU (maybe he's on a moon of Saturn?)(!)

#### JULIA AS A CHILD

Well, Alix gave me a special look through her telescope, she said she wanted to show me something special. And I looked and what did I see? Saturn, with its rings! I nearly stopped breathing, it was so beautiful! And Alix started talking about how they have found all these new moons around Saturn, and how one of them might be covered with water and might support life. Imagine, living on one of Saturn's moons! Deep in distant space, far away from earth!

## VOICE OF JULIA

And then they did something very strange: they pulled themselves up and tried to get *something else*. They called this being courageous and honest with themselves and mature in the face of life's disappointments. But it wasn't perseverance in the face of adversity. That was the awful discovery I made: no, it was the refusal to face the truth of their situation, of their life, of their lives, the refusal to face the obsessive, repetitive, stupid folly of what they were doing, what all of us are doing, what *I* am doing, which will never lead to happiness and peace and joy and love but only to frustration and disaster and despair and misery, then more deception, to ourselves and to others, and more disaster, forever and ever and ever. *You* understand this: everyone I knew, including *me*, failed at happiness and kept thinking, "If I make just *one more effort* and succeed, it will make all the effort and sacrifices I've made worth every disaster and disappointment I've been through, they'll be justified." Or if not for them, for their children, or their grandchildren: "If I missed happiness," they think, "*they* won't – heck, this is America; *somebody* here must be happy." But no. Nobody is happy here for a very simple reason that hit me with great force: *no one is happy*. At best we have a few good times, then fall into a ditch, wondering how we'll get that one thing missing that will finally make life worth all of its shoddy ineffectuality and pointless dead ends. But, always, always, always, the beautiful lose their looks, and the powerful lose their power, and the rich lose their money, celebrities lose their fame, everybody loses their family, their friends, their health, their minds, they lose control of their bladders, then of their bowels, they start to stink, they hate each other and everyone hates them, they remind everyone of where we're all headed.

## JULIA'S MOTHER

I felt I got to know you somewhat through Julia and could see why she admired you so. Recently she hadn't said much about you, though. I hope you didn't have a fight, she could be very self-willed and strong-headed, it comes with the genes. Poor Julia, she could be such a disappointment, but why did she have to do this!

## JULIA'S FATHER

. . . and I'm sorry before that I couldn't make it to the science fair with your project, something about Saturn, wasn't it? Probably the rings, people always do the rings, I'm sure it was excellent and you made all of your fellow students totally envious (is "fellow students" an acceptable way of putting it? I wouldn't want to be *politically incorrect*!) But I *promise* I'll make your next event, wherever it is - *even* if your mother's there (just kidding!).

## FEMALE TEACHER

There is one girl who has been especially cruel to your daughter, by never responding when Julia makes shy little attempts to be friendly: she stares right through Julia and walks past her as if she doesn't exist. I have seen Julia say hi to her at least three times, and the girl responded as if she had suddenly become hearing-impaired. Once I happened to see them alone: this girl managed to say "Hi," shyly and quietly, while looking at the floor, then walked away quickly and turned a corner where I saw her dissolve in laughter. I am not allowed legally to say who this girl is, but I felt you need to know about the incident. It was one of the cruelest things I have ever seen, given Julia's extreme sensitivity.

## VOICE OF JULIA

That is where I am headed too, it struck me then, as I sat in our living room still wearing my prom dress after the prom I didn't go to. It's like being in a trap whose bars are made of hours and days and years: it makes no difference if it takes five decades to happen if you know it *now* –

when those five decades are up, it will be as quick as five minutes, as five seconds, as if there had been no time at all between knowing it and having it. “Sure,” you’ll say - you’re always so strong, beautiful, tough, logical, sweet sweet Molly, “and with a few good parties and a lot of bad ones thrown in, and maybe a career and a family in the middle. There will be bad times and good ones. Enjoy what you can, and tough out the rest.”

But, Molly, if I am a zero now, and my life leads to zero, adding zeros to zeros merely adds up to zero. There is only thing that could save me: *not knowing what I already know*.

There is one thing I hate to lose. Can you guess what that was, sweet sweet *sweet* Molly? Once, I thought, if I just got . . .

#### JULIA’S MOTHER

If you feel able and willing to talk, please feel free to contact me at home, Molly. I look forward to hearing from you. I need to talk to someone who knew her well and cared for her – perhaps who even understood her. I certainly never did!

Best wishes . . .

YOUNG WOMAN (reading; speaking for the first time)

Mrs. Catherine Perkins.

#### JULIA’S FATHER

So be good and do well at school: I expect you to be at the very top of your community college (haha!).

Your overworked but everloving . . .

YOUNG WOMAN (cont.)

Daddy.

#### FEMALE TEACHER

I felt it was important to let you know all this, since the support of her parents for a young vulnerable girl at such a time is most important and can help defend her against social rebuffs that can be so hurtful at such an age. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Very sincerely . . .

YOUNG WOMAN (cont.)

Ms. Janice Fairway.

#### JULIA’S CLASSMATE

So there, Bobby Shanker (I’m cc’ing him with this email). Can you guess who it is, your SECRET ADMIRER?! PS: By the way, how is your Saturn project going? Why did you choose the moons and not the rings? I think the rings are cooler.

YOUNG WOMAN (cont.)

Timmy Jackson, Your Neighbor in Science.

#### JULIA AS A CHILD

Imagine, living on one of Saturn’s moons! Deep in distant space, far away from earth! I spent all night dreaming about it. Someday I want to go there and see it for myself. Maybe I could live there! Imagine what the night sky looks like from one of those moons – you look up to see Saturn filling the whole sky, and over the planet are the rings, like a huge rainbow!

Your loving daughter,

YOUNG WOMAN (cont.)

Julie.

VOICE OF JULIA

So there is no other way out for me. I was never pretty, even as a child. I have no figure. No one has ever even asked me out on a date. The boys only tease me, the girls at school despise me. *I* despise me. I am eighteen. I will never be prettier or sexier than I am now. I am at, or near, my apex. I am supposed to be blossoming! And what am I? Even Daddy left us partly because of me – I’m sure of it. Mommy pretends to love me but I embarrass her at her garden parties, I’m so ugly. Even you never looked at me. I always looked at you, but you never looked at me, not once. Even when you said “Hi,” it was the most beautiful moment of my life, you did not look at me. You looked at the floor.

Another thing, Molly: I heard you laughing around the corner when you left. I didn’t think about it till later. Then I realized what it meant. I didn’t collapse and scream and cry from humiliation. I made a decision, coolly and calmly. Never again, I thought. Never again.

I love you, Molly. I love you. I love you. But you do not love me. This is not my revenge. It’s my escape. You cannot love me. How could you love me, who so despise what I see in the mirror and what I see when I look inside me and look at the life ahead of me?

I will never have to do that again. Do you know how peaceful that makes me feel? How strong? How *free*? At last! If you ever know that, you will forgive me.

Love,

YOUNG WOMAN (whispers)

Julia.

*The YOUNG WOMAN stares, motionless, at the letter. All the characters except her begin to speak from their letters from the beginning, in a normal voice: continue for several beats. They stop, then read more, in a whisper, then stop. After another they pause, they pick up where they left off, in a softer whisper, then stop. Repeat, even more softly, then stop. Silence except for the amplified sound of the Young Woman breathing – a regular, loud sound of hard, tight inhalations and exhalations, with brief pauses between. She folds the letter, slips it into the envelope, seals it, and leans it against the bud vase. Then she takes up the letter opener and stares at it calmly for a very long time.*

*With a swift violent motion, she slashes her wrist with it. Blood pours down her arm and across the desk. She stares at the gash, then slowly bends over and slumps across the table. The sound of her breathing continues for several more moments till she exhales a long breath. Slow fade of lights.*

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Christopher Bernard is the founder and co-editor of Caveat Lector. He is also author of the novel *A Spy in the Ruins* and of the poetry blog *The Bog of St. Philinte*. (Photograph: NASA.)