My First Date

I was walking home from school when I came across Joan of Arc sleeping in a field near my house. My suburb was decorated with easy walking paths that kept its travelers cool under a blanket of big-leafed trees, and Joan was nestled in an open sunny meadow along one's edge. Stepping off the gravel and into the heat, I knew I had to be hallucinating. There was no way someone in a full suit of armor could drape themselves across the grass like that, loose and comfortable as a silk scarf. Her short dark hair parted gently in the wind revealing a freckled face. Her metal chest rose and fell rhythmically. I was shocked she wasn't visibly sweating. I checked my own perspiring forehead while squinting up at the sun. Heatstroke? I still had the chill from the air-conditioned science lab on my forearms and calves. Crossing my arms, I waited for some dog-walker or jogger to confirm that I was insane, but nobody came.

It was the last day of June. High school was over for the summer, and for me and my class it was finished forever. Everyone had received their final grades, said their last goodbyes, and then raced to christen the beginning of the holidays in their parents’ pools. I was looking forward to nothing more than hiding in the deep end, and seeing how long I could stand the pressure before my head exploded. This morning had been a disaster. But, all plans of feeling sorry for myself were put on hold, what with this historical discovery. I cautiously approached the sleeping figure, dropping my backpack and Becky’s bouquet along the way. God, she just looked so relaxed. She had one arm sprawled out and open in the grass, the other atop her stomach, while her legs were crossed haphazardly below. Her chainmail glistened like fish scales. I knew a little about her; I'd done a project for French class a few years back. She looked nothing
like the sad portraits I’d seen of her as a tragic, sensationalized heroine, known for her divine visions and righteous spirit. Here, she looked like a teenage girl in a costume. My stomach sank when I remembered how she died.

But I was crazy. There was no way this was happening! I crouched beside her, surprised by the sharp smell of iron and musk, and then doubly surprised that I had something to be surprised about at all. Leaning in, I watched her odd fringe continue to shift in the breeze, revealing a pimply forehead above two closed eyes and a pair of open lips. I was bashful, like you would be when meeting a celebrity, or running into an old friend. It was actually her. Jesus! She couldn’t be real! I reached out a hand and let it float above her cheek, and then hesitantly over her mouth. She breathed hot air into my hand.

Suddenly, her eyes fluttered open, coming to life. She turned her face so that her cheek fell into my palm, like a fish landing on a dry deck. Her abrupt movement and tangible mass shocked the air out of my lungs.

“Hello, again.” Her voice was scratchy from sleep, and deeper than I had expected. That silly fringe was now tickling my fingertips.

“You speak English?” I asked, stupidly.

“No?” She smiled. Her eyes were a shocking blue.

“Then how can you understand me?” I whispered fiercely.

“You’re speaking in French,” she whispered back.

“Right now?”

“You are speaking with me.”

“So, you do see me.” I exhaled. Was I sick, or dying?

“You are magnificent,” she replied, making my cheeks burn. The heavy sound of her metal plates re-aligning startled me out of my concentration, making me snatch my hand back and tumble away from her. Was she ever frightened by her visions? She was moving onto her side to face me, but in this process, her head lost its cushion and thunked comically down onto the grass. Still flung on my butt, I only heard her delighted giggles.

“How’d you end up here?” I wondered out loud, wiping at my face. My eyes were swimming in the sweat pooling down from my forehead.
Joan propped her arm up to support her head and looked up at me shyly. Her alienness, created in the contradiction of her teenage casualness and the medieval suit of armour, overwhelmed me. She opened her mouth to one side and blew up into her fringe, a gesture so unexpectedly universal it struck me as charming. God, this had to be my brain's Freudian response to my humiliation from this morning.

“My parents were born here. I've always been here.”

“Where—where are you now?” I asked louder, heart beating faster, as I scanned my surroundings again to confirm the brick houses peeking out from the treetops, the familiar gravel path, my old backpack, even those ridiculous marigolds I had kept.

“In my father's garden.” She looked beyond me and nodded toward invisible elements. “There are the roses, sage, and behind is the fence. The dirt path to the house. Our farm. But now,” she said, smiling back at me, “I am here, in the grass, with you.”

This description hit like a double-edged sword to the chest: I was experiencing an otherworldly encounter, and this encounter was meant to make a mockery of me. It was the kindness she exuded that burned like salt. She acted like she had been looking forward to this meeting, and was even enamoured by my presence. Shame bubbled up in my stomach for even allowing myself to imagine something like that. Shouldn’t I have known better after Becky? But that bile turned into fear—

“And who am I?” I asked, shaking. Oh, Joan. It would be so cruel of God to make you a messenger after being burned at the stake for it.

“I haven’t met you before,” Joan said. “But I’ve seen the other spirits and they’ve spoken to me. Each time, I am overcome with wonder.” At this, Joan’s blue eyes filled with tears, her smile never ceasing.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” Jesus Christ, it was true, I was dead! Eighteen is too young to die!

Panic finally took control as I slumped my body inward, burying my face in my hands which caught the hot tears that were flowing down my cheeks. Nothing else could account for the realness of her being, nor the ridiculousness of her words—the Angel of Death had come to pick me up and had graciously created a fantasy so unattainable for my cowardly, childish nature, that with it, I’d be tortured forever. Fuck! I was
dizzy with grief. How unfair was it that the one day I try to do anything with my life, I was taken away before I could learn how to deal with the lash of rejection? I looked towards my discarded bouquet, seeing visions of thorns rising from the stems, weaving around my ankles like shackles binding me to this limbo.

“Why didn’t you just say something?” I finally choked out.

“Why’d you keep me waiting?”

“Waiting for what?” She sat up on her knees and faced me, arms raised and voice nervous.

“That I was dead!” I wailed as I pounded my fist into the dirt between us. “That you’ve come to take me to heaven! That I am dead, done, gone! God!” Her expression transformed from one of shock to one of contempt.

“You’re visiting me from heaven! You, like all the others before, have come to me in a vision from God to deliver news and words of joy. Spirit, you frighten me! Do you not know who you are?”

“Well, who are you? My brain’s final sputtering of consciousness? God’s sick response to my disgusting display earlier?” I yelled as I tackled her down, hands slapping down on her iron shoulders like cymbals. Was she here because I was gutless, or because I was sinful? We screamed at each other and wrestled in the grass, legs crumpling the marigolds and hair getting caught in our mouths. In between our hits, this morning’s scene played loudly in my mind: the eagerness with which I had gone to her, how quickly I had lost confidence and felt like a fool, the burden of myself. The weight of Joan’s suit forced me underneath her, but didn’t stop my hands from trying to choke her exposed neck.

“You’re cruel!”

Was I not supposed to want it? Or did you just take me away from having my chance?

“—I tried! I tried so goddamn hard—”

So hard I bought her flowers! Isn’t courtesy a virtue?

“—Or was it those English jerks who killed you that decided that?”

Joan cut off my babbling by slamming my arms down beside my head.
“I am not dead!” she snapped. “You came to me!”

I was shocked into silence. Looming over me with the sun behind her, the glare of yellow light circled her face like a halo, which would have been beautiful had her fringe not gotten stuck to her sweaty forehead. But her eyes were serious. Fear and anger washed away as her sweat dripped onto my cheeks. I came to her?

She rolled off in a huff and laid down beside me. As we let our breathing calm down, we watched white clouds migrate across the blue June sky. I no longer knew if I was seeing her sky, or if she was seeing mine. I caressed the potentially ancient grass under my hands.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Seventeen,” she quietly responded.

She had been burned at the stake at the age of nineteen. Nineteen is too young to die. We were both alive and having visions of each other, as if there’d been a mixed signal in the fabric of psychic time. What else could explain her physical solidity, or her aversion to the rules of any normal hallucination? Or my heart’s incessant beating? Or even her own, which I had heard against her iron chest. I considered what she had said to me earlier: that she was simply here, in the grass, with me. And I was with her. I could believe that. Oh, Joan. I wiped my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I began slowly. “I didn’t mean to hurt you like that, or yell at you. I was … I’ve had a hard day. I was upset and couldn’t control myself. I’m sorry I took it out on you.”

I heard her armour shift and wondered how old that sound was.

“That’s alright. Why were you upset?”

I thought I was dead. I felt like a fool. “I am not very brave.”

“Spirit, is this a test?” She asked with such genuine uncertainty, that my heart jumped into my throat in realization—Joan had only ever experienced visions of Saints who bestowed pearls of wisdom and courage. She probably still thought I was one of them, even after our scrap. Despite whatever reason we were fated to have this introduction across time, I didn’t want to let her down. Or was I just telling myself that?
“Sort of,” I decided, as I turned to face her. “What have you been told before? What have you learned from … from the spirits? Not about battles, or any political stuff, just … do you have any advice?”

“Advice about what?” Our noses were about three inches apart. I felt the tug between her medieval gallantry and teenage naïveté pulling at me again. We had been fated to have this introduction across time, and while I couldn’t teach her a thing about courage, I could give her the gift of attention. And maybe receive the same. A vision, regardless of its origins, has the purpose of telling you something about yourself and who you’re going to become. Her fish scales blurred in my eyes.

“I don’t know, dude,” I muttered. The warm summer wind washed over us both, dragging my long hair over the valley between us to tickle her cheek.

“You seemed very upset,” she began. “You seemed frightened of me. But you said you aren’t very brave. And yet, you overcame your dread and confronted me, attacked me even. I’ve learned from you and the others that that is real bravery—finding the will to overcome that which makes you tremble.”

She let my hair dance across her skin. The flower petals from the bouquet we had trampled were scattered between us.

“Why do you tremble?” she whispered.

In that moment, I realized I’d never been this close to another girl before.
Illustration by Shawna Browarsky-Quigley