

Instead, the giant cushion rose up to receive her, holding her fast. Her injuries were not serious, but the SATs took place without her. She spent two days in a private hospital room filled with flowers. By day she entertained a constant stream of visitors. At night her father kept vigil beside her bed.

MIKE MEGINNIS

## *Navigators*

FROM *Hobart*

AFTER THEY FOUND the metal boots but before the dirt clod, Joshua's father bought graph paper at Wal-Mart. Unfurled and pinned on the wall where his mother's family pictures had once hung, it stood six feet high by seven feet wide. The paper was hung in three rows, each printed with thousands of small gray squares. If Joshua crossed his eyes, the squares seemed to rise from the page. He crossed his eyes and then uncrossed them, watching the squares rise and fall. "It's time we started a map," his father had said. "Or we'll never finish this game."

This was the logical culmination of his father's theory of The Navigator. In games, where it was so often so easy to lose perspective, but also in life. When Joshua played their game, it was his father's job to keep watch, to tell him when he was doubling back, to remind him where he meant to go, and how. When Joshua's father had the controller, these were Joshua's jobs.

Their game was *Legend of Silence*, or *LoS*. *LoS* was different from their other games; whereas in *Metroid* or *Zelda* the player character became more powerful as he explored, the heroine of *LoS* was diminished by every artifact she found. The manual still called them Power Ups, but this was, father and son agreed, misleading: they should be called Power Downs, or Nerfs, or Torments, because this was what they did. The goal of the game was to lose everything so that one could enter Nirvana, where the final boss lay in wait, enjoying all the ill-gotten fruits of not being and not knowing. It was their favorite game, so much so that they often discussed what

they would do when it was over. What they meant was what *could* they do. It was impossible to imagine After.

Joshua's father had not played any of their other games since *LoS*. Not even *Contra*, which had previously been their favorite, because it had a two-player mode and because they could not beat it: when one died, the other soon followed. He had tried to talk to other fathers about it at Boy Scout barbecues and overnight camps, but they did not listen.

After Joshua's father smoothed the graph paper to the wall, it exhaled softly and came unstuck, sagging. He took their respective pencil boxes from the top of a pile of R-rated VHS cassettes on the TV stand. Inside were markers, highlighters, and colored pencils, watercolor pencils and pink erasers, and ballpoint pens, and number-two mechanicals.

"We'll use sixty-four squares for every screen," said his father. "That's eight by eight. Starting here, in the middle. Here." Using a red marker and a number-two mechanical, he sketched the first room of the labyrinth: its gold and velvet throne, its many crystal chandeliers, its candelabras. At the right edge of the chamber he drew a purple pillow on a white pedestal, where the heroine would lay her crown to rest if you pressed the B button. This opened the exit, which led to the next room. Joshua's father drew this from memory because they could never see it again without restarting their game. Once you left the throne room, the guards wouldn't let you come back. They did not recognize their queen without her crown.

"If we map the whole world," said his father, "we can stop getting lost. Then we'll really get cooking. We'll be through in a month." There were, his father had said, maps you could buy. But this would defeat the point, which was the journey.

You always started outside the throne room no matter how much farther you explored. The hall outside was like a decayed palace, hung with rotting standards, walls collapsing, suits of armor disassembled and scattered over the floor, brown with rust. The stern guards at the door to the throne room were responsible for preventing the rot from coming inside, in addition to keeping you out. Of course, much of this was open to interpretation, rendered in simple arrangements of squares. Sometimes Joshua thought this hallway was more like a palace waiting to be born than one dy-

ing. It was full of small monsters—green rodents, yellow bats. The first time Joshua walked this hallway, when his heroine was at the height of her powers, these enemies were trivial to kill. A single shot from the blaster, a blow with the sword. Now each journey through the hallway became more difficult as the heroine withered; it served as an index of her progress toward not being, not knowing. Sometimes, recently, father and son couldn't even make it through.

Joshua made the heroine struggle through the hallway. His father stole bites of peanut butter jelly and drank from his Big Gulp with one hand as he drew what they saw with the other. Sixty-four squares for every screen. Joshua struggled not to tell him there was cheese-puff dust in his beard.

Tuesday nights were grilled cheese, but when Joshua came home, the gas was off again. You could make grilled cheese in the microwave, but the bread would come out wrong—first soft and hot, and then too hard. He took the American cheese from the refrigerator and sat down at the television, which still worked. Sometimes he played their game without his father. Today he was upset enough about grilled-cheese night that he didn't want to play alone. He watched the cartoon channel. The map had grown again. It loomed in his periphery, slowly consuming the wall with its red, purple, forest green tendrils. Doors sprung up all over like a dalmatian's spots, doorknobs like lidless eyes. His father played without him too. Joshua unwrapped a slice of cheese and ate it in strips. He deleted all their messages, even the new ones, without listening. He unwrapped another slice.

His father came home with an envelope, unopened, in his fist. "They shut off the gas," he said through gritted teeth.

"Sorry," said Joshua.

"We can make grilled cheese in the microwave."

"No," said Joshua. "That doesn't work."

The electric bill was paid through Friday. They could still play their game. Joshua's father changed into his home pants.

Her name was Alicia. That was, in Joshua's opinion, the second most beautiful name in the world. The first most beautiful name was Trudy. Then third was his own name. Then his father's, Dustin. Alicia was not only a queen in the beginning but also a bird girl.

She had large brown wings speckled with flecks of silver and white. After her crown and throne room, these were the next things she gave up. She flew to the top of a very tall room (eight squares by fifty-four on the map) and found a door leading to a smaller room, a single screen, housing the metal boots and otherwise empty. These boots sat on a white pedestal like the one they had given their crown. At this point in the game father and son did not properly understand its principles—they thought the throne room was an interesting fluke. Joshua's father had made Alicia step into the boots. They couldn't tell what the metal boots were supposed to do. Joshua's father led Alicia out of the room, and he made her jump out into the emptiness of the very tall room. She fell to the floor, flapping her wings without effect. The weight of her boots was too much. Her wings bent and warped from the effort as she fell through seven screens. Then she crumpled on the floor, half-dead, and enemies nosed her body, gnawed, and further drained her life points. Her wings would slowly atrophy from disuse, shrinking, curling inward, dropping feathers in clots for the rest of the game, until there was nothing left. These feathers being pixels, of course—two each, twisting and angling this way and so on, such that the viewer could see what they were meant to be. Then father and son understood the game. Joshua's father said, "This is a REAL game."

It was some time before they found the Elixir of Ice. This was a blue potion that poured from the mouth of a gargoyle who looked like Alicia, but with horns and healthy wings. The Elixir of Ice made crystals in her blood and other body fluids so she couldn't run as fast as she used to, or swing her sword as well, or draw her gun as quickly. Joshua could move the same way if he tensed all his muscles painfully.

Once they were up until two in the morning, exploring the dark caves in the bottom-right corner of the map, which were riddled with hungry purple mole-men and waxy stalactites dripping fat drops of poisonous water. The boss of this area was a worm with sticky skin, which collected various enemies and hazards—spikes, mole-men. Joshua could not kill the worm because without Alicia's wings it was difficult to leap over the many differently shaped obstacles that clung to it. Joshua's father pulled him into his lap, took the controller from his hands, and finished the fight with her sword. In the next room there was only darkness and a large blue

stone. They thought they would have to leave their sword there, a gift for King Arthur. When Joshua's father pressed B, Alicia struck the stone instead, which shattered the sword, leaving only a small length of blade and the hilt. The exploded fragments hung twisting in the air like stars or a junkyard mobile.

"How will we kill the enemies?" said Joshua.

"We still have the gun," said his father, chest rumbling against Joshua's back, voice low and wooden in his ear.

"We'll lose that too," said Joshua.

"Then we'll run away," said his father. Joshua saw he was losing his hair. His skin was waxy like the stalactites.

They tried to cook together. They made meatloaf with 73/27 beef and Great Value saltines. They stirred the raw beef and the rest with their bare hands, then wiped them with paper towels and washed away the pink sticky residue, Joshua feeling all this time like the worm. The ketchup and brown-sugar glaze scorched and made a black, brittle shell on the meatloaf.

They made stir-fry with bits of egg and too much soy sauce, too much salt. They made macaroni casserole and forced themselves to eat the cheddar scabs. They made pizza bagels: marinara, mozzarella, pepperoni slices. Three days in a row it was peanut butter jellies. Joshua took to sleeping on the couch while his father mapped the game. They were searching for the dirt clod.

"What do you think she'll do with it?" said Joshua.

"I don't know," said his father. "She could eat it."

"Why would it matter if she ate it?"

"You ever eaten dirt, Joshie?"

Joshua shook his head no.

"It could make her sick, for one," said his father. "That's just for a start."

"I think she'll cover her eyes with it," said Joshua. "Or maybe she'll put it in her mouth, but she'll hold it there, and plug her nose with it, so she can't scream, and she tastes it all the time." He imagined his mouth packed full.

"Like being buried alive," said his father. He patted Joshua's head. "You feeling okay, buddy?"

"Sure," said Joshua. "You want me to draw this room into the map?"

His father said yes.

His father said, "We've got seventy percent of the game mapped, but we still don't have half the items."

His father fell asleep on the couch. The TV screen was reflected in his glasses, and the game's movement made him seem awake. Joshua sat down in his lap, took over. He found the dirt clod beneath a false floor in the Chamber of Commerce, where dollars and coins flew at Alicia from all sides and clung to her body, briefly rebuilding her wings in their own green image. The dirt clod was on the floor, among several other dirt clods that looked identical, but smaller. "Wake up," said Joshua to his father. His father opened his eyes.

"You found it."

Here is what she did with the dirt clod:

She dirtied herself, browning and smearing her clothes, removing their luster. Clouds of filth hovered around her.

"Huh," said his father. He fell back asleep.

Joshua examined their clothes—his father's, his own. Both were crusted with cheese-puff dust and stained with cranberry juice cocktail. It had been nearly a month since they'd done the laundry. Joshua did not like folding the clothes, but he didn't like it when people looked at him either, at school or anywhere. His jeans were wearing thin in the knees and the groin, and the cuffs were already ragged. He paused the game and went to the kitchen for something to eat.

The sink was full of dishes slick with grime. The table was piled with pop cans, some empty, some half-full. There were coupons on the table for Gold's Gym and LA Fitness, fanned out like playing cards. The cupboard was empty except for macaroni and pumpkin pie filling.

The phone rang twice before Joshua could get to it. He thought he had known it would ring before it did ring, which was why—he thought—he looked at the phone when he did.

"Hello?" said Joshua.

"I'm sorry," said a woman's voice. "I have the wrong number."

"Who was that?" said his father, awake again.

"Some lady," said Joshua. "Wrong number."

"Crazy bitch," said his father. He closed his eyes.

Joshua would stay up for the next hour, trying to find the old answering machine tape, or something else with his mother's voice, to see if it sounded the same.

The next morning they ate off-brand Cap'n Crunch for breakfast. Joshua's father spilled droplets of milk on the gym coupons. They wrinkled and turned gray. They would stick to the table like glue. Holes would open in the paper. His father said, "We're going to move into a smaller apartment."

Joshua nodded.

His father said, "Lower rent."

Joshua nodded.

His father said, "More money to play with."

In the concert hall at the top left of the map they found the oozing earplugs inside the conductor's podium, which they broke open after killing the orchestra. When Alicia put in the earplugs, the game went quiet. Her footsteps and the footsteps of her enemies made no sound. The music was no music. Joshua fired her gun. The shots did not burble as they used to.

"Do you think it's going to stay this way?" said Joshua.

"Yes," said his father.

They moved into the new apartment. None of his father's friends could make it to help. They shared a jug of blue Gatorade as they unloaded the borrowed pickup truck. First thing, Joshua's father taped their map over the sliding glass door that was their western wall, or most of it. The map was growing. It cast a dark, faintly colored shadow on the blank carpet, like a bruise. Then it draped the couch, which they pushed against the southern wall. They set the TV up opposite, and loaded the refrigerator with everything left from the old one. A jar of mayonnaise. Several pickles. Lipton tea, still soaking the bags. A bag of potatoes. White bread. His father said, "Do you want the couch or the bedroom?"

Joshua searched his father's face for the answer. It wasn't there. It was possible there was no answer. It was possible he could say what he wanted. He said, "I'll take the couch."

His father said, "Okay."

They moved his father's weights into the bedroom, his still-boxed ab roller, his clothes, and several shoeboxes, all duct-taped shut.

They plugged in their game as the sun set. It shone brightly through the map, casting a grid over the kitchen and their faces, and in that grid a brighter bruise, or a fog, like melted crayons. Joshua's father was blue and yellow in the face, from water and

poisonous acid. Joshua's hands were green and brown from the plant zone. The throne room was cast on the refrigerator's side.

They guided Alicia from the throne room's exit, down through one of the gateways opened by the dirt on her clothes, and then others unlocked by other infirmities. Joshua wanted to open some chips, but his father said they should save them for later. Soon they found the chamber of the orange cork. Joshua's father pressed the B button and Alicia took the cork. She drew her gun, solemn as pixels can. She fitted the cork inside the gun, pushing hard until it stuck out only a little—a flare at the end.

"Now it won't fire?" said Joshua.

His father shook his head.

"She's defenseless."

His father nodded.

Their game became one of evasion. Alicia could still duck, could still jump. They spent the rest of the night running from enemies, seeking alternate routes—climbing previously neglected ladders, ducking behind rocks. When they could not duck the monsters, they ran into them head-on, took the hit, and then used the brief invulnerability this granted to escape into the next room, where they would do it again. Joshua's father paused often. He offered the controller to his son, who refused it every time. They were both sweating.

Some hours later Joshua woke up. He wiped his drool from the knee of his father's home pants.

"You're up," said his father. "Look what I found."

"She's on the floor," said Joshua.

"I found the lead belt. You see?" It was a narrow band of pixels on Alicia's waist. She was propped up on her elbows, and her legs were bent at the knees. The belt's buckle (unseen, but Joshua knew it from the manual and the attract mode) was pressed firmly to the floor. This was the weight that held her down. "This is all that happens when I try to attack," said his father, and she pushed her arm up feebly, the blunted remains of her sword outstretched. It seemed less an assault than an offering. "And she can crawl." He made her crawl.

"We are so screwed," said Joshua. "Dad, we're never going to get anywhere like this, and we still need the sunglasses."

"Maybe we can't win," said his father. "That's life too, I guess."

It was not clear how they could leave the chamber.

After some crawling around on the floor, they discovered there were bricks in the wall, low bricks that could be destroyed with her blunted sword. The world of their game was riddled and undermined all over with tunnels just large enough for crawling. These tunnels were sometimes visible to the players, but often not. Often they were obscured by rock or tree roots, or a lava flow, or water. The only way to know she still moved was the slow scrolling of the screen. Joshua said, "Where do you think the tunnels came from?"

"I bet the sticky worm made them," said his father.

Trees rolled by, and their stumps. Ever-burning candles. Caverns and rock formations. They saw what they had seen before from new angles. Joshua drew the tunnels onto the map, which now filled most of the graph paper. They were black lines, spiraling toward the center of the map as his father made his way. But there were many dead ends in the tunnels. Father and son knew they had hit a dead end when the scrolling stopped. Then they turned back.

When Joshua woke again, he was alone on the couch. His legs were tangled in his lone wolf blanket, his shoes and socks removed. He wiped the drool from his chin and nose. The arm of the couch was crusted with his snot. He went to the bathroom. The previous tenant had left a framed picture of Greta Garbo, smoking, on the wall. There was a small peacock feather in her hat. She looked happy.

Joshua's father talked about places they could go for vacation. Santa Claus, Indiana, was a top contender. They had Holiday World, which was also a water park now. "World's biggest wooden roller coaster," said his father.

"No kidding," said Joshua.

It turned out having "money to play with" meant paying the utilities on time.

Father and son experimented with a mostly vegetarian diet. Peanut butter jellies were the same, and so were chips, but no hamburgers and no fish sticks, except on Friday, which was Hardee's night. They could afford to rent two videos a week at Blockbuster. One was always a Dad movie, rated R. One was a Joshua movie, rated PG-13 or lower. The Dad movie was usually new, from the shelves that lined the walls and circled the rest. The Joshua movie came from the inside shelves.

Sometimes Joshua's father called relatives and talked about Joshua's mother, though he tried not to let on. He thought he was speaking in code. "The Queen," he would call her. "The Duchess." Joshua listened carefully for clues as to where she was, what she was doing. "(Something something) pay phones," said his father. "(Something something) Atlanta."

Atlanta was the capital of Georgia. It was a big city. This was not nearly enough. Joshua couldn't even find his own way through *Legend of Silence*.

Their map was almost complete. The sun cast it on their coffee table, on their shoes, and on the clothing they scattered on the floor. Soon they would be done with their game. His father connected the NES through the VCR and bought a blank tape so they could record the game's ending.

His father offered wisdom at strange times. Joshua was on the toilet when his father knocked on the door. "It's busy," he said.

His father said, "Never settle for less than you deserve. But whatever you can get, understand that you'll have to give it all up someday. Prepare yourself for that, as much as you can."

"Okay," said Joshua.

"Okay," said his father. "Do you think you should have an allowance?"

"I don't think you can afford to give me one."

"Okay."

They were near the center of the map, just above the throne room, when they found the sunglasses. This was the last thing they needed. Joshua's father pulled him onto his lap. He put the controller in Joshua's hands. Joshua pressed B. Alicia put on the glasses. The screen dimmed. She crawled farther toward the center of the map. As she crawled, the colors faded to black. She passed through a gate, which she unlocked with how nothing she was, how faded, how silent, how crawling. She fell through a hatch into what had been the throne room. It was no longer the throne room.

"It's changed," said his father. "I'll have to change the map."

He would use the black Sharpie. The screen was black now.

A white, blinking cursor at the screen's center, as in a word processor. After a moment's hesitation, it made blocky white text on the screen.

*You are in Nirvana, it said. You are not in Nirvana.*

*You have come here to destroy your enemy. Your enemy has been waiting for you in Nirvana. Is your enemy in Nirvana? Yes or No.*

"No," said Joshua's father. Joshua chose no.

*No, said the game. Your enemy is not in Nirvana, and neither are you. There is no you.*

"What's happening," said Joshua.

His father held him close. He rubbed Joshua's tummy through his Ninja Turtles shirt.

*You might pursue your enemy, said the game. Do you want to pursue your enemy? Yes or No.*

"What do you think?" said Joshua's father.

"No," said Joshua. "We should not pursue our enemy."

"Good," said Joshua's father. Joshua chose no.

*No, said the game. You have no enemy. You have no you. The labyrinth is gone. The weight falls from your body. Your body falls from your soul. Your soul falls from your absence. The absence is not yours. Do you fear? Yes or No.*

"Are we afraid?" said his father.

"Yes," said Joshua.

*You will forget fear. Do you love?*

"Yes," said his father.

"Yes," said Joshua.

*You will forget love.*

*Congratulations. You win.*

"Game over?" said Joshua.

"I guess so."

His father squeezed him tight. Joshua wondered what they would do now. The need he felt was like when he stepped on the sliver of glass, and his mother pulled at the skin with her tweezers, and pushed them inside, until she found the glass. It was like when she told him to get ready, to squeeze his father's hand. Clenching his teeth, closing his eyes, waiting.