

Can't

An idea for a story came to me in a dream. There was an octopus in it. And a shark. The scene was set for a battle royal. It seemed like a pretty good idea at the time.

'You can't just dream stories,' said my wife, who starts nearly all her sentences with those two words. 'Dreams don't make any sense most of the time.'

Six years before, I'd had another dream. The two of us were walking by a river when I said to hell with this, it seems kind of corny I know, but I'm nuts about you, so how about we get married and live happily ever after? And she put a hand to her mouth and threw her arms around me and said that every day would be like sunshine. That dream had stayed in my head for days, every detail of it, not like the good ones, the dirty ones, the ones that dissolve like sugar in water, until finally I did it for real and took her for a walk by a river and said to hell with this, it seems kind of corny I know, but I'm nuts about you, so how about we get married and live happily ever after? Which was when she nodded and said that if we really tried, we could probably get married in May, seven weeks before her sister, which would serve her right because everything was always about her and she was sick of it.

'I'm going to write the story down,' I told her. 'Before I forget it.'

'You can't be serious,' she said.

'I need a pencil and paper,' I said. 'I used to dream stories all the time when I was a kid.'

'You can't remember that far back,' she told me.

I went into the kitchen and opened the drawers one by one, looking for something to write with and when I found a pen that worked I couldn't find any paper so I sat at the kitchen table and started to write on my hand instead.

'You can't find someplace better to do that?' she asked me when she came in and found me scribbling away but I didn't listen as the words crawled along the fingers of my left hand in short phrases, settled on my palm in a block of prose, and crept towards my elbow in long, elegant sentences. My shape helped. It only took a few minutes but I had it, I had the story, the words were there and when I looked up, she was staring at me and shaking her head.

'You can't just sit there all morning,' she said. 'Aren't you going to have a shower at least?'

'I can't,' I said. 'I'm working.' I read the words over and over, following the path of the shark through the sea. I was skin and ink and letters, a human cuttlefish.