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After The Storm

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The rain pounds on the metal roofing sheets above, a vicious battle between the forceful downpour and the stationary roof. These sounds had been the background noise to my warm summers of splashing in the muddy puddles that dotted our potholed streets. Draped in our single swimming costumes that had never touched the blue waters of swimming pools, these paddles provided by the rain were our swimming pools. And where the rain's silent music did not whisper, the voices of our angry parents warned of the looming danger of malaria if we continued to play in the rain. Our laughter rang with carefree adolescence, blooming underneath the warmth of the afternoon sun peering from behind a weeping cloud.

Whenever the air cooled and filled with an earthy fragrance, the earth promised rain. The gray clouds floated above this coarse hair, teasing waiting skin with a cold embrace. My wide nostrils drank from this cup of nature's essence as my lips waited for the kiss of the water that would soon fall. And when mischievous play turned to silent pour, my mouth opened to receive the drizzle. As if in agreement and perfect synchronization, when the rain would conclude, little termites would leak from depressions in the ground as if born of the rain that sank below.

Somewhere between ticking clocks and the pulse of seconds, the lilting sound of falling rain transformed into a harsh siren that took center stage whenever the sky threatened to fall. I imagine that the rain is a warrior, fists clenched in merciless battle, waging a war against more than just the flimsy sheets that kept the elements on the outside and me trapped on the inside.

The first time the water forced itself into focus before me, I had been sitting in front of my grandmother. The malformed form of naked reality loomed in the shadows cast by the setting sun as I watched the air crawl into her nostrils and then, as though it had given up on its

descent into the lungs slip out to collapse on her wrinkled upper lip. The soil from which these walls were made must have allowed moisture from the outside to seep into the spaces between her particles, because the earthy fragrance of damp soil reached my nose. I had heard the rain then; its fists fighting the dirt in the yard, the eroded dirt washing away like fallen soldiers. Her life dangled from the tendrils of her weakened body like a plastic bag clinging to a feeble branch while the wind tears mercilessly at it.

Angry voices argued in the room nearby. These voices played like a record on the soundtrack of this pitiful attempt at breathing.

“She is our mother,” One voice pleaded, her voice a trembling plea for sympathy. The helplessness that clung to these words belonged to my mother.

“It is against God’s will,” a man declared. This man, his voice carrying the power of life and death in its few words, waited as if daring disobedience and then in a terrible finality that I could feel soak through the mud wall to settle over my grandmother’s head like a death sentence. There would be no blood transfusion.

A memory that had folded itself in the shadow of my conscious memory and smashed into my cognizant mind to transport me to a forgotten time. I was wrapped on my grandmother’s back, her body a comfort that lulled me into a cozy sleep. Her guttural voice whispered a quiet song whose message was bleak but its tone warm and tranquil. She told stories in this way; her lyrics the canoe that carried you over the border between consciousness and slumber. She lowered me onto the bed, gently untying the cloth to lay me down. I stirred when the warmth of her back vanished and my hands wrapped around her neck in an attempt to stop her from leaving.

“I’m here.” She lay next to me, her arms around me until sleep returned to carry me to my dreams.

Anger began to coil like a snake in the spaces formed from jointed bones. I failed to fathom this adamant rejection of another’s blood

coursing through a foreign body. But the knees of belief would not bow in the presence of death to permit life. Somewhere between the battle of faith and that of nature, a battle of will as weapon and opponent as death, my grandmother's breathing faded. Silence only found where the dead go to sleep might have followed, but the sky, armed with thunder and lightning, and this house, a frail form of dry clay, continued to rage on outside. My grandmother died that afternoon.

The moment I had stepped onto the wet soil in our yard to let the weapons of the sky assault my skin, this silence shattered into wild cries that bounced off the walls like they were coming from the throats of a thousand women. These cries resounded in that way I had seen women begin to mourn when watchful eyes sought the most wretched griever. I blinked away the sleep that was beginning to set weight over my eyes while the water fell over my dry lips; my surrender to the victor.

Nighttime when I would close my eyes to the world around and my ears would mute, a sick silence accompanied sleep. Darkness would settle over my bed like lead while loneliness washed over my skin like a blanket. In times when dreams would escape exile to show themselves before my tempestuous slumber, I longed for the emptiness of darkness to return, for the pain of elusive fantasy was too much to bear.

The next time the rain had managed to slip through the cracks of my subconscious, I had been standing at the open door of my parent's bedroom. Screaming had woken me that night; beckoning me towards this open door while dread pleaded I flee. Words were the weapon that my mother flung towards my intoxicated father. He had been standing before her, his body swaying to the nectar of inebriation and then as if realizing this, he had lowered himself too carefully onto the small bed that they shared. He said nothing. My mother, her voice low and menacing, desperate to wound her opponent, said the one thing she knew would make him bleed;

“This is why I found another man to father my children.” And as if like David before a mighty Goliath, her stone caused her opponent to stumble. But he did not fall. As if returning to life only then, my father’s eyes shot up to glare at my mother, a lion woken from slumber. In the instant between blinking eyes and an inhaled breath, a wide palm landed on my mother’s face. The madness in her eyes began to transform into an unthinkable rage as she lurched her entire body towards his, scratching and kicking. Fist found stomach while teeth sunk in to flesh. Screams followed the sickening sound of blows delivered onto skin. And then, with a thud too loud to be real, my mother was flung to the concrete floor upon which she had been standing. The rain had made its presence heard at that dreadful moment; that moment that the eyes of the one who had been left standing and the eyes of the one who was lying on the floor met mine. Victor and conquered shared shameful glory over accidental destruction. Shock clung onto these faces like mud, but no one dared to speak. I could not hear the sharpness of the air that left my father’s body, or the trapped air that managed to stumble out of my mother. I could not smell the foul odor of cheap liquor that clung to my father’s lips or the saline sweat that had dried on my mother’s skin with a hard day’s work. I could not hear the wretched sobs that spilled from between my parted lips or the cries of the baby that lay in the other room. All I could hear, as though it were trapped between my eardrums, was the water that fell like bullets above my head.

My ears receive the enticing welcome back before my eyes can clear away the blur. I am standing in a room I do not know, in between arms that feel as though they are an extension of myself. My body inches closer to him, our chests leaving no room between us. I raise myself to my toes, bringing my lips to meet his. A deep moaning escapes from somewhere in my throat as he wraps his hands even tighter around me. Reason whispers restraint but my body sways in passion’s intoxication. I try to gather the runaway pieces of memory of this day from my desert brain. Bare feet were rooted to the hard floor on that Saturday afternoon. His eyes ran into mine and everything fell into oblivion. No

words were spoken but a language I had never known I could understand had taken course. The dark eyes spoke surprise followed by a seeking curiosity. They hardened into resistance and then melted into surrender to the sweet unknown. We were entwined in each other.

He smiled as he lowered his eyes to wonder at our feet. I felt a warmth that rose from my chest and spread to consume me. In the brief moment that his eyes detached themselves from mine, I longed to drink from them once again. As though he had felt the panic within me, he raised his eyes to meet mine again. I wanted to speak, but there were no words that formed in my mouth. He moved closer and the air escaped the prison of my lungs. I could feel his breathing close to my face and the heat forming in my stomach. The smell of his breath awakened a passion that I didn't know I could contain. I swallowed to banish the lump that had made my throat its home. His eyes had an excitement within them that I hoped had been caused by me. He leaned even closer to my left ear and said something. My knees weakened at the sound of this voice. It was smooth and kind; a playfulness about it that made me wish it would whisper in my ear forever.

"It is raining so heavily. I can't even hear myself speak." He had said these few words.

I held my breath and pulled my eyes from him and looked up at the metal roof above. It was raining. I had only now realized this. But I didn't care. All I wanted was the warm contact of his eyes caressing mine.

He had held my hand in his. He had brushed his fingers along my chin. He had made jokes that were not funny and waited for my laughter to follow. He had spoken of dreams and then searched for the ones on my face. It was the happiness of years folded into one day.

Warm lips brush against mine. He cradles my lower lip between his lips, kissing me softly while his hands tighten around me. My fingers wrap themselves around his neck as I pull him closer to my body. His tongue finds its way into my mouth and lingers there,

making me quiver in delight. We are breathing heavily now, discovering each other's mouths with an urgency that burns. My hands find his clothes to pry them away and he does the same. Our bodies lay tangled on the white sheets, fused in a passion ripe with need. My arms wrap themselves around his shoulders as if release would be a fall to my death. My body is no longer my own as it unfolds to let him in. He is warm above me as well as within. I open my eyes to find his glazed eyes staring at my face. As desire shatters into incredible bliss, he kisses my slightly parted lips as if to share in the ecstasy dripping with the moans that escape from our lips.

The rain is pounding on the metal roofing sheets above, a vicious battle between the forceful and the stationary. It whispers in the background as we lie in each other's arms, taking in the sweet smell of this aftermath. These gentle waters carry me within their cool embrace from the past where memories had refused to remain and lay me gently in these tender arms of reality. I imagine that the rain is a warrior, fists clenched in merciless battle, waging a war against more than just the flimsy sheets that keep the elements on the outside and me lying here on the inside. I do not wait to hear the victor.

