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by
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The first time he read the letter, Will was on the toilet with a week's worth of mail on his lap. He sat rereading it until his thighs went numb pressed against the cold porcelain, then stood shakily and found his shoes. There would be a visitor. He would have to hurry.

It had rained for six straight days. Now the French Quarter was sodden and steaming, its brightly colored houses like rows of soggy party hats. Will crossed Bourbon Street and continued up Orleans, weaving a path of purpose through the clumps of dull-eyed, sweating tourists. The neon signs above peep shows and daiquiri bars were no match for the morning sun, already burning the damp foreheads and camera-strapped shoulders blocking the narrow streets.

Later, shopping bags in hand, Will headed for home, towards the river. He allowed himself the longer route through the open market down on Decatur. Here, where the street widened, the Mississippi sent up a breeze to dilute the thick air and set palm fronds waving. This was where he'd first seen Shyla, leaning against a lamp post eating oysters off a paper plate, paying no mind to anybody. Later this is where they'd come in the afternoons to have a chicory coffee and walk by the water. Will sat on a stoop for a moment to paint it all once more in his head.

At work, they would be wondering where he was by now. On Monday mornings he usually met with the new intake of job seekers. He would pass out Welcome packets and pens with the New Orleans Department of Labor phone number on them to the dispirited people sitting on plastic fold-out chairs around the conference room. When he could, Will brought doughnuts for everyone.

"Please help yourselves to an apple cider doughnut. Then we're going to go over how to prepare for a successful interview. I hope everyone brought their resume", he would say, and begin to write out on the board a list of companies that had sent in hiring notices. Then they would review resume layout and cover letter etiquette and take a ten-minute break for the smokers and anyone who wanted to make instant coffee in the small kitchen next door. There would be the sounds of paper shuffling and sighs of resignation behind him as he wrote. He didn't blame them; for him too the energy for life petered out as soon as he put himself to the task of living it.

Now as he sat watching legs and shoes pass by, Will saw a fish with blue-tipped scales flop from a fishmonger's stall onto the pavement. It lay there with its wide-hinged mouth working open and shut, its gills stretching to become deep red gashes. Suddenly it writhed so violently its little body became wedged in the crack between the base of the stall and the hot concrete. It stared at Will with its one upturned eye, and he imagined shards of plywood working their way between its scales as its twitching pinned it still further. He motioned to the fishmonger, who looked to where Will pointed but saw nothing, so far underneath the stall had the fishes' jerking movements carried it. Will stood abruptly and stepped in with the footfalls going past. He wondered as he walked towards home, eyes to the ground, is it dead now? Now is it dead? It seemed impossible that such suffering could take place without disturbing the life around it.

Will paused at the last shotgun house before the river, fishing his keys from his back pocket, and took the three stairs to the porch in one stride. He let himself into the dark kitchen. As he entered it seemed that the room let out a breath it had been holding since he'd hurried out that morning, leaving his bowl of oatmeal with raisins on the counter. The raisins had absorbed moisture and lay like bloated corpses on the beach of congealed oatmeal.

He dropped the shopping bags to the floor and retrieved the letter from the trash, scanning it once more. "Dear Mr Lanier, It has come to our attention..." Someone had reported him. "...an inspection of your residence has been scheduled for Tuesday, July 9th." Tomorrow. Why did they not give more notice? "...despite repeated attempts to gain entry to assess safety code violations..." That explained the knocking on the door. "...unsafe living conditions which need to be evaluated and may lead to your property being condemned unless proper action is taken. Social Services Commission."

It was the electrician, no one else had seen inside. He had arrived, toolbag in hand, maybe three weeks ago now, to find the source of the power outage. But there was no way to reach the fuse box, blocked behind a wall of newspapers piled almost to the ceiling.

"A hazard," he'd said. "Hoarding. How long you been living like this? I'm not gonna be able to get these lights back on. You can't be living in the dark." Will thought of him going back out to his van, phoning someone, the Sanitation Department. He made a few observations on the importance of self-reliance and let the impact sink through him like a lead line. He'd made a sloppy mistake, not fixing the problem himself; now he'd leave nothing to chance.

From the doorway he surveyed the living room. It was layered, wafered in newspapers. There were tall stacks of them lined up in front of the windows, only slivers of light blading through here and there. There were crooked piles of newspapers balanced on table and chairs. April to September 2002, all 183 papers, were braced against a wardrobe, the thicker Sunday editions stacked in the wardrobe itself. Most of 2007 and 2009 were heaped on the couch, its springs poking angry fingers through the fabric.

In the bedroom it was the same, tall stacks surrounding the double bed, piled on the dresser, leaning in lopsided towers away from the ceiling fan, the pages of some drifting down to lie like open carcasses on the floor. Only a small pathway was left clear, running from the door to the bed. Every copy of *The Times Picayune* since the 24th of February, 1998. They seemed to rise up and stick to him whenever he moved, comforting him, a second skin. Now even these were to be taken away. The papers were a soft gray glow when he woke in the night to a misery that left him rocking knees to chest in the lettuce-fold of sheets. Then he would prefer his heart were made of glass pipes and pistons rather than pulpy flesh. After an hour or so the frenzy of feeling would exhaust itself and Will would slip back below the surface of sleep.

He turned now to his task. The shopping bags by the door contained twenty-five boxes of four-inch galvanised framing nails. In the crawl space beneath the house were the two-by-fours he'd nailed over the windows when he rode out the hurricane. He had seven, maybe eight hours of daylight. If the neighbors asked, he was securing the house before leaving town for the hottest months. They had a tendency to keep a watchful eye, to meddle even. He'd learned to be careful. Anything looked amiss and they'd call someone right away. Just like the electrician.

He went down the back steps he'd finally rebuilt last year, if only to convince himself that these things got done eventually. On hands and knees Will dragged the boards from the cool darkness under the house. A pair of yellow cat eyes gleamed and winked from the deeper shadows. He had found a raccoon family living under there once, and Shyla insisted on leaving food for them. Then, "What grows in the dark?" she asked, and they got books from the library. She had started to build mushroom beds in the space. She wanted to grow other things too, in the small backyard, sunflowers, watermelons, coffee plants, orange trees.

"Is there room for all that back there?" asked Will.

"There's room," Shyla said. "Even if we have to grow them on the roof." She wanted to do things, and Will wanted to help her.

She'd been referred to his department for employment assistance along with all the others from Reynolds Packaging when the factory moved to Mexico.

"I've seen you before," said Will. "In the French Market."

"I've seen you too."

He looked down, at her file. "Machine Operator. That's always in demand. I can find you someplace else, maybe better pay this time."

"No," she said, "I worked ten-hour shifts there for nine years. They gave us two days notice the plant was closing. I want something different."

"What would you like to do, if you could do anything?"

Shyla looked out the window, watching a pair of squirrels dart between cars in the parking lot below. "I'd like to make soaps, handcrafted soaps with essential oils, so I can make individual batches, see? Whether you like the smell of pine, or lemongrass, vanilla, or one I really like, sandalwood. Or I can mix them, make you your own custom-smelling soap and I'll note what yours was in a file, like you have there, so you can reorder."

Will told her the Small Business Administration offered loans to people starting up their own business. "I'll help you, I'm sure we can put something together. So why don't you do this, get the soaps going. I think it's a great idea. Do you have a name for it?"

"Serendipity Soaps," she said, a shy smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "I'll put you down for a batch."

She'd moved in a few months later, and the house smelled of vanilla, and sandalwood. The kitchen was full of vats and whisks and racks of drying soaps. She made Will try them all.

"I can't wash my hands anymore, they'll fall off."

"Wash your feet then," she'd say, laughing.

Soon there was a baby to wash. To rock to sleep in a baby swing hanging from the magnolia tree. Will and Shyla would sit nearby on a blanket and he'd read her the day's newspaper.

"Let's figure out how the world works," she'd say, clapping her hands.

"What do you want to know about?"

"I want to know everything. I didn't have much schooling. Now I want to make up for lost time."

So he'd pick out the articles he thought would interest her. "Let's see here. Oh, listen to this. 'New research shows that blue whales have shifted their calls up an entire octave over the past half century, to be heard over the noise from commercial shipping

and military exercises. Whales are the loudest animals on Earth. Under the right conditions, a blue whale can recognize the song of its partner from one side of the Atlantic to the other, 3000 miles away.”

“That’s amazing! So an American whale could be long-distance lovers with a French whale... How do they survive only eating tiny little shrimp when they’re as big as school buses.”

“I don’t know. They must have to eat in their sleep.”

“Read another one!”

“Okay, here’s something — ‘China is building huge cities at a rate of twenty-four a year. Many have yet to see a single occupant.’ Now why are they doing that?”

“Let’s go to China! We’ll take the baby. I want her to grow up smart. Read another!”

“Okay. Shyla, what is it makes you want to know so much about the world?”

“I don’t know. I want to understand why things are... and how it all ties together. I think everything that happens must affect everything else in some way... maybe only small, but... it all matters, somehow.”

“Everything?”

“Everything. Every little thing has to be for something. Now let’s put it all together like a giant puzzle.”

She would make him feel as if there were more to a subject than he had taken account of. He liked the way life looked through her eyes.

And then one day trying to get to the post office before it closed there’d been a car accident. Will was driving. He survived and Shyla and the baby did not. Life was a haphazard affair. Events didn’t really follow one another in the rational arc of a story. There was no logic to it. Meaning had to be scavenged into existence, patchworked together.

By late afternoon he’d worked his way around two sides of the house, moving a ladder along from window to window, fast but thorough. The old nail holes were visible in the window frames but Will made new ones, deep ones, right through the damp clapboard to the timber frame beneath. The house shifted slightly on its mossy haunches. His hands were made raw but he continued, methodical as always, under a low sky that gathered and bunched like gray netting. Dusk would come early. He paused to put a hand on the old magnolia tree, which seemed to ache with its own loneliness. Then back to it. Plank by plank, one by one, the windows were covered in orderly lines.

Finally at the front door, he stopped to assess. He would have to nail this shut from the inside. Carefully, Will carried in the remaining two-by-fours. The house was utterly dark now but for the half-circle of light angling through the doorway. He lit the candles he bought in large boxes now the lights didn’t work. Closing the door, he felt the fear subside. Almost finished. Twenty minutes later only the doorknob was visible, the planks neatly tucked around it. No social worker or cleaning crew would be coming in here to rearrange, nor to cart one single newspaper off to the dump. Shyla wouldn’t like that.

Cocooned, Will snaked between the stacks to the bedroom. He lit more candles and the house was filled with creamy honeyed light, becoming a glowing paper

meringue, a whipped cream éclair of fading ink. His breathing slowed. There was time now to read and sort.

He started with a pile of papers from October and November 2004, turning each page, looking for new things to tell Shyla.

“Listen to this, I missed this one. ‘Oak Trees Invade City Hall. The sprawling City Hall complex in downtown New Orleans was found to have crumbling walls throughout the basement due to a massive root system taking over the lower level after years of neglect. ‘I practically needed a machete to get down the stairs’, a City official said. ‘It looks like Sleeping Beauty’s castle, roots lifting the furniture right off the ground.’ Now why are they allowed to do that Shyla, and I can’t be left alone to read to you.”

The candles burned down; nine, then ten o’clock passed. The pile of papers shortened as he read, fanned out, toppling a nearby stack. Will winced. Those would be from 1999, when the grief was still etching acid in his blood.

Fingers smeared with ink, he was almost through November when he finally felt the sting of smoke in his eyes. Will turned. In the living room 2008 was alight, flames already licking the ceiling. Next went 2001, then 2005. Burning paper swirled as he moved quickly among the stacks. 2010 set fire to 2003, 2012. One by one the years were returned to her, blazing through the roof, sparks aloft on the wind. Now all was illuminated, a radiant funeral pyre, delivered safely in one great flame. The weight of days was lifted.