

The Flood

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“**A**nd then, during the fire, do you want to know what happened during the fire? During the fire . . . during the fire as I stood on the ledge, I shook out my dress, the one my uncle had sewn for me, and looked at the pit below, and had to decide, should I jump or burn in the flames. Should I find the boy I was looking for, or should I think only of myself . . . Never mind. You’re not listening.”

It was four in the morning, and I was trying to fight sleep. My head hurt. I had been lost in dreams of my own. Sweet, restful dreams, the kind that take you away from your life, the kind too beautiful and pointless to try to describe.

“You never listen to my dreams,” she said. “You never, ever listen. You think I don’t know, but I do.” She leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp. She shared my pillow and looked right at me. Her eyes were the pink eyes of pigeons.

“I can tell that you’re not even looking at me,” she said. “I can tell by the way you’re looking at me, you’re not even looking at me.”

“I’m listening,” I said. “I’m listening now.” I turned my head away from her and toward the window. The night bus

went by on the street below. It was raining hard now. She started again.

“And the eagle had such awful claws. I could feel them digging into my shoulders. But it wasn’t an eagle entirely. It was an eagle, but also an attic. But not quite an attic, an attic in the shape of a wilted penis, but not even so much a penis as a gray, low-hanging cloud. . . .”

I listened to the episodic plots of her dreams. To the transformations and amalgams and symbols and boundless geographies, to the strange cities and impossible architectures she created in the recesses of her head, in her memory’s intricate folds. I listened to her father become her brother become her ex-lover, to the store keeper who was a wolf who was her old gym teacher she had kissed, to the abandoned babies at her doorstep, to the earthquakes and pregnancies, lost teeth, blindness, diseases, found money, the dogs of the ballerina next door, how they gnawed on her prom dress on her way to the gym, stinking elephants rolling on the living room floor, screaming rats in her bathtub. Quietly I listened to the planes crashing over Egypt, to the story of her flight over San Francisco with a new sprout of maggot-munched wings, to the strangely hot sex with unlikely partners, once with one of her eighth graders, for instance, the smart one she’d always despised, how his braces cut her lips and made her come as she bled, another tryst with the barista at her favorite café; she was thick but firm, she’d described, and I listened, so quietly. I listened to her dreams.

Shut up and let me kiss you, I wanted to say. I have a painful erection despite the dullness of this conversation. Instead, I said how interesting, how traumatic, how bizarre. How immense the life is inside your tiny head. Sometimes I asked her to repeat herself. Did you say the man’s face was blue? Blue, did you say, and was he playing the cello or the violin, I asked. I smiled at the funny moments, scrunched my forehead in the difficult sections. Once I’d even squeezed a tear from my eye and let it fall.

"And then I woke up," she said now. "What do you think about that?"

Another bus went by.

"You weren't listening," she sighed.

"I was listening."

"It's over. Completo. The End. You don't care about my dreams. You were looking out the window. Probably wishing you were on that bus. I wish you were on it too. I wish you'd jump out the window in front of that bus. I wish its wheels would crush your bones."

I found a cigarette on the nightstand.

"I hate when you smoke in bed," she said. "Forget how disgusting it is. It's also dangerous. You wouldn't care if this mattress, this room, this whole house burned to the ground. You wouldn't care if my face burned. If all the skin of my entire body were crisped. That is how self-centered a man you are. It's really quite horrible to be with someone who only thinks of himself."

How it rained that night. I thought the city would flood. Then we'd have to make rafts. But how would we make rafts? We'd use the furniture of this house. She'd take the bed. I'd take the couch, or the dining room table; and we'd go rafting down the streets of this town, I thought. We'd use our coats as sails. Everyone else would drown, but we'd go rafting through the city under the sky. . . .

"You know what the worst part was? The worst part about the volcano," she said, "was that it wasn't a volcano but a giant cup of soup with enormous noodles in the shape of letters bobbing up and down in the lava, and I threw you the letter P so you could use it as a life preserver. I was trying to save you, I swear; in the dream, I was trying to save you. . . ."

. . . just drifting like that under the stars. We'd wave at all the people standing on the roofs of houses, clinging like fools to bridges. Imagine what the city would look like covered in water. It would look like Venice, I thought.

It would look like Venice scattered with floating corpses. But we would not be among the corpses. We would be among the sailing. We'd sing songs to each other about life on the water. With the rest of the city dead, we'd sing.

"And then," she said, "when the tarantula opened its mouth," she said, "it whistled Gershwin, or something like Gershwin, and we were back home again, except our house was really the Guggenheim, in the shape of a cone, with those staircases, endless, spiraling, dark; that's when the whole thing really turned into a nightmare. I knew none of it would end, and I knew I was dreaming, but I refused to wake up. . . ."

All night like that, weaving up and down the streets, I thought. She would not sleep and therefore she would not dream. And if she dared to shut her eyes and go to sleep, if she dared for one second to go off into those dreams and felt the need when she awoke to speak about them, if she even opened her mouth to say, "and then and then," I would push her off into the water. I'd watch her drown. I would not lift a finger to save her. Finally, I'd be alone. All by myself with the city and the water, smoking and sailing in the quiet of the night.

"What are you thinking about, for Christ's sake?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Your lips are moving. It's scary."

"It's just I love you," I said.

Another bus went by. It seemed like the buses were never on time on any street but ours. On any other street in that city, you'd wait an hour at the minimum for a bus to heave its way down the road, and you'd always decide it would have been better to walk. Or crawl. On our street, a bus came every two minutes at all hours of the night. Most of the time empty of passengers. A solitary driver doing his job.

Now the two of us smoked, propped up on pillows.

"I hate the rain," she said. "And I despise this city. It reminds me of a tomb. Everyone thinks it's beautiful, but that's because they're nuts. It's done. It's completely lost its kick. The people here are zombies. All they do is drink coffee and talk about their work. I don't know why they have heads. I'm always cold. See? Feel my hand."

I held her hand in mine. She was right. Her hand was cold. I kissed the back of it and placed it under my pajama pants. She pulled it away.

"And how are we supposed to make love with all those loud buses going by? Where's the romance in that? If you loved me, you would take me away. But you're not even listening," she said.

"I'm listening," I said.

She closed her little eyes. I looked out the window again, at the gray, wet street. And what would it be like to drown? To breathe water into the lungs, to feel the chest tighten, the stomach constrict, to gulp into the mouth the flood of the city, to feel the waste of the streets on the inside of the cheeks. Her face would turn blue and the current would spit her out into the ocean.

"You'll be food for sharks," I said. But now she slept. I rested my lips on hers. "Do you hear me?" I whispered.