

WAVES

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**My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh,
and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.
Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye
my friends; for the hand of God hath touched
me.**

Job 19:21

She was falling apart. If it rained another day she would surely lose it. Outside the rain fell steadily, as it had for three days, drops pattering against the broad leaves of the camellias outside the bathroom window. Lauren sat on the closed toilet lid, wrapping her finger in a bandaid. She had been at the kitchen table writing a letter to her sister, biting her nails, when she had torn off much of the nail in her teeth.

Lauren was writing to her sister, to her sister's husband, more precisely, to say that she could not find them another placement, that they would have to stay where they were. She looked at her hands. The nails were all bitten down, and cat scratches marked the backs and wrists. She had tried to drown the cat the day before and now the scratches were welting up and showing signs of infection. Lauren had been fighting the urge to do it for months, because she held the cat responsible for the drowning death of her son the previous summer, so yesterday she'd tried and found out that it was much harder to drown a cat than to drown a two-year old. All it took for a child was a moment of inattention. A cat required a burlap sack. So she hated all the puddles and the constant drip of water, and the cat.

She went back into the kitchen, poured another cup of coffee and returned to the letter, writing awkwardly now because

of the bandaid. She explained to her sister that she could do nothing for them, that they lived in the only sheltered housing for the deaf-blind in Southern California and that furthermore--she thought, but did not write--she could not bear to see them, to be battered by their unceasing unhappiness, by the inability to understand or be understood, by her sister's plaintive, moon-white face. She did write that she would speak to the administrator to see if something could be done about the annoying neighbor, the one who kept mistaking their apartment for his own. She closed, promising to see them soon, that she would get their television fixed.

Lauren realized that she could not even imagine going to their apartment, or speaking to the administrator. Before her illness, Lauren's mother Evelyn had always managed Susan. Soon enough, she would be Lauren's problem.

Lauren bit off another nail. She sat still, listening, aware of a momentary stir of expectation; then came the brief rustle of another aftershock.

The fact was, thinking of her sister made her want to run like hell, made her feel as if she couldn't bear her own skin, not because she was a bad person, a wicked person (even though she had tried to drown the cat), but because she was an incapable person, incapable of caring for creatures like cats, or children, or forty year old deaf-blind adults with the minds of pre-adolescents, or, for that matter, herself.

She checked her watch. Four o'clock. "I'll deal with you later," she told the black and white cat watching her from the corner. She would have to find that burlap sack.

Her mother was asleep when she got to the hospital, so she sat awhile reading the newspaper. Her mother's breathing was slow and thick sounding. An intervenous drip of antibiotics, meant to stop the pneumonia developing in her lungs, didn't seem to be working. Behind the curtain the woman in the next bed talked to herself, babbling about waves, and then quieting down. Lauren made a mental note to speak to the doctor about getting her mother moved. Then a young man came in and went to sit with the woman. "Ma," he said. "Ma, it's Jimmy."

"Watch out! Here it comes!" she cried out.

"No, Ma - wake up."

The nurse came in. "Everything okay, here?"

"Oh, god, all the people - where's Jimmy?" Her quavering voice suddenly filled with panic. "Jimmy!"

"Ma I'm right here. Here, I've got your hand." He lowered his voice, turned to the nurse. "How long has she been like this?"

"Not long. She's just having a bad dream."

She was lying, Lauren knew. On duty just since 4:30, the nurse had no idea how long she had been delirious. Rain beat against the windows. The room darkened. The woman babbled softly.

"I think she's hurting again, I think she needs something," the son said.

"Oh, I think she just had some Demerol an hour or so ago."

"Would you check on that? I think you should get her something."

The young man's tone changed. He was starting to get the hang of this. Lauren had demanded pain medication a dozen times now, pushed the nurses for fresh sheets, for jello and apple juice at ten o'clock when her mother roused herself and suddenly wanted to eat. Rather early, she had realized that this was the ward of no return and that these nurses had more promising patients elsewhere.

Suddenly there are waves, drawing back, gaining height, waves of the most miraculous green, luminescent, shimmering back a midday sun. Drawing back, and then the roar of the water cuts out into silence, as the hum of the engine cuts out when you fall asleep in the car. Not a sound, but still, hot air out the window of the coffee shop. She opens the door and the wave is there -- shining green and flecked with bits of seaweed, drawing back and up, high above her. She stands, unable to move, watching the wave build and crest, and then crush down against the shore, racing toward her in a swirling, bubbling foam, sweeping people from the beach. But before it hits, she is suddenly conscious of her son standing silent beside her, a ghost-child watching the wave come, but she hasn't time to pick

him up and run, only to clutch at the ground, and struggle for breath.

Lauren woke to her own whimpering, the familiar sensation of unbearable grief. After a few moments her heart settled down, and she heard the rain still falling outside, the splash of drops in the pool.

Wide awake now, she stared into the darkness. She thought she could hear the roar of the wash, beneath the rain sounds. She got up, pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, her yellow rain slicker, boots. It was raining hard as she walked toward the bridge and the wash, four blocks away. Without a moon the neighborhood was dark. Water ran curb-high in the streets, and sloshed into her boots as she crossed. She came to the fence and stared down into the concrete riverbed. Shining in the dark, the black water rushed by, no more than five feet from the top of the wall, splashing against the underside of the bridge thirty yards away. Was it rising higher? She couldn't tell. Her hair was soaked and drops fell into her eyes; the rain was not letting up. All over the city, the flood control system, the arteries of concrete that fed into the Los Angeles River and then into the ocean, were full of turbulent water and twisted debris from earthquake wrecked houses, broken, blackened tree limbs, wrecked cars, the bodies of ten year old aqueduct surfers, derelicts. She felt a drop of icy water slide down her back, saw the image of her child's body, floating like a leaf on the surface of the swimming pool, and she shivered, chilled to the bone. She turned and walked quickly, nearly running, splashing across the flooded road back to the house.

Another aftershock at dawn stirred her awake. After the initial jolt, the bed rocked gently a few moments, and then subsided. She became conscious of the rain falling, still falling, while the neighborhood dogs woofed and howled. She lay in bed tracing the cracks across the ceiling. She wondered if they were structural or cosmetic.

She was feeding the cat when the phone rang. It was the hospital. "You'd better come," said the nurse - it was Ellen, the night nurse. "Do you have a priest, or shall I call the chaplain?"

"No. No priest," Lauren told her.

She splashed her car through the flooded streets. The traffic lights were out at several intersections, whether from the aftershock or the rain she couldn't tell. She was grateful, at least for the early hour, the light traffic. When she got to the hospital she felt a little dazzled by the bright lights, the white corridors after the shrouded morning. She punched the elevator button and headed up to the fourth floor, turned left to her mother's room, to the chart hanging by the bed with the big words across it, "Do Not Resuscitate." She expected to be too late, but her mother's eyes were open, glittering, lucid. She actually smiled.

"I'm going away now," she said, matter-of-factly.

"You are? Where you off to?"

"I think someplace where it doesn't rain."

"Mom - how do you know?"

"I don't really. I just wanted to see you today. I told the nurse to call you. Did you feel that one this morning?"

She grasped Lauren's hand with her chilled, bone-brittle fingers. All her life she had battled her weight, and now here she was, practically a waif. These moments of lucidity came farther apart now as she grew preoccupied with the awkward and painful process of unburdening herself of her body, of finding the exit.

"Yeah, it woke me up," Lauren said.

"Where's Steve?"

"In Chicago, Mom."

"Still?"

"Yeah, still. He likes it there."

"Whatever." She waved her hand to indicate she would not pry further.

"What happened to your room-mate?" Susan asked her.

"Disappeared. Angels took her, I suspect." She looked sly for a moment, the unnerving dark glint in her eyes. "Susan and Rafael were here yesterday," she went on. "You've gotten them all excited - you don't want them to move in with you, do you? You're not up to it, Lauren."

"No, of course not." Lauren fidgeted. She wanted to leave.

"Well I've told Rafael he can go wherever he wants, but Susan has to stay. She's safe there. She'll drive you crazy, I should know."

Evelyn knew better than anyone. She had dealt endlessly with the government, taken her daughter to promising special programs, arranged for the Braille tutor whose infinite patience soon wore out, the New York boarding school that sent Susan home because the teachers said she "encouraged" the boys. Then Rafael came along. Deaf and mentally about twelve, he proved the perfect seeing-eye person. He liked to shop for them at the Target store, and had been picked up recently for shoplifting refrigerator magnets and Matchbox cars.

"I just said I'd ask Mrs. Clark about a different placement - that's all," Lauren said. "They hate it there."

"They don't understand. You'd better write back and tell them you can't do it. You'll be stuck," she warned. "I'm dying, you know." Her glee at being nearly through with Susan glimmered. "Did you bring the travel section? Anything about cruises to the Mediteranean? Someplace where it never rains."

Her mother lay back, ready to listen as Lauren found an article about yacht tours in the Greek Islands, a place where it rarely rained and where the sea lay calm as green glass.

Lauren worked at the airport, a bookkeeper for a little helicopter charter service. All day long she watched the newscasters from the outfit next door lifting off in the constant downpour to cover the flooding. Her place was grounded - no one wanted to do any sightseeing. But from where she sat in her tiny office on the second floor, she had a great view of the field, the river which had begun to form at the north end and which was now running down the middle, widening, rushing now toward the flood control basin at the south end of the runway. By eleven the tower had closed the field. At noon, her computer blinked once, started to reboot, and then went dark along with the lights. She lost the fourth quarter report she'd been working up all morning. Her boss came in, looked out the window a while, and told her to go home.

Every street, every intersection ran hub-cap high with the brown water. The power was out to the whole west side of the Valley, knocking out the traffic lights. Lauren could hardly see the lines in the road through the driving rain against the windshield. Lightning flashed. Stalled, abandoned cars clogged

the streets. Lauren felt the strange excitement of the emergency, knowing they were airlifting people out of the Sepulveda Basin, that houses in the canyons were washing away, that the fire wrecked hillsides above Malibu were sheets of sliding mud. People were sandbagging their neighbors' homes, neighbors they had threatened to sue just the other day.

She fought her way home through the glutinous traffic. In the mailbox was another letter, via airmail, from her brother-in-law. Nearly indiscipherable, but the tone was clear - she had failed to write back quickly enough: "Do you will write on the paper to me?" When would she find them another place to live? Why wouldn't she come? The house was dark, the power out. As she entered she smelled chlorine. She crossed the living room and stepped down into the kitchen, ankle deep into cold pool water. The steps up into the living room had confined the flooding to the kitchen and laundry room. She waded in and unplugged the washer & dryer, in case the power came back on.

The cat sat on the top step and meowed at Lauren as she climbed the steps. Her food dishes were submerged and she didn't like it. She was a black & white cat, with a moustache, still young, very cute. She was thin and rangy and liked to catch flies and water bugs from the ivy next door and eat them loudly and with much gusto. She loved to hunt small birds and mice and bring them into the house, shred them up and pretend to eat them on Lauren's pink damask bedspread. The cat had been given to their son for his second birthday, but no dear companion, she would lie in wait for the child to walk by the big chair in the living room, attack his legs with all four claws and a mouthful of teeth, draw blood, so that soon the child was terrified of her. In fact, the cat was sitting by the pool when Lauren discovered the child, drowned, and she had always wondered if the cat had chased him in somehow, that day when she'd been on the phone, and he had pushed the sliding glass door open, and climbed the gate. He had been a resourceful child, a busy child. He had always been too quick for her.

Lauren stood at the top of the stairs staring at the flooded kitchen. She had no insurance for this. She noted that the floors, the walls, the carpets, the appliances, the drapes were all

ruined. Cracks in the walls. She stood there, chewing her nails, ripping another down to the quick. The cat meowed at her, begging.

"Shut up, you," she said.

She turned to walk away. The cat grabbed at her ankle with her claws and sunk her teeth into the calf of her leg. Lauren yelled and kicked. The cat went flying into the deepening pool in the kitchen and its head went under.

Lauren stood and watched it struggle. It started to paddle toward her, but she stuck her foot out and pushed it back, pushing its head under again. "Meow!" the cat cried when it came up again.

It clawed against the kitchen cabinets, but couldn't get hold of anything. Its head went under again and when it came back up, it yowled piercingly.

She sat down on the top step to watch in the growing darkness. Suddenly she heard a pounding at the door. She ran to open it and there was a cop in a rain slicker with a flashlight. Water from the porch roof poured down on him.

"You gotta get out!" he shouted. A crack of lightning shot across the sky, illuminating his face. "Evacuation ordered for this whole area! Do you need assistance?"

She heard the water pouring into the kitchen from the backyard, heard the cat yelping and splashing. She fought back a moment of vertigo, tried to focus.

"Uh - no - where do I go?"

"Red Cross Shelter - Granada Hills."

And then he turned and raced away to the next house.

"Oh God, oh god," she said in the empty doorway.

She grabbed a towel and slogged into the kitchen. The cat, paddling helplessly around the kitchen, lunged for her, its claws digging deep into her arms. She scooped it up into the towel and wrapped it tight, held it against her.

"What else what else what else?"

Nothing else. A wave was coming. It would wipe out this house, drown this pool, sweep away the hospital, her mother, her sister. She grabbed up a photo album, her handbag, car keys. The cat squirmed. She wedged it tight under her arm. She ran out into the driving rain. Got into her car, with the roar of waves

in her ears. Headed for the freeway - North - the wet cat shivering in her lap.