

## STORM DAMAGE

The sound of gentle rain seeps through the open hotel window. A Nor'easter forecast to bring strong winds and torrential rains to Boston had unpredictably veered seaward, its fringes bringing a low blanket of clouds and coolness, but no umbrella-bending gusts, and only moderate precipitation. Vibrating against the windowsill, raindrops mute a blend of voices and music rising from the noisy bars at the intersection of Kenmore and Commonwealth several stories below. Neil stops spooning Lora, his wife of fifteen years, and rolls on his back. His eyes follow a thin crease of light that slithers the length of ceiling, created by an opening in the ill-fitting curtains.

He looks at her form, nightgown gathered up above her waist where he had been stroking her earlier. Her back, her hips, her thighs, a hint of breast—touching her should have aroused him, but had not, and this was his fault. The weather had unleashed memories but wasn't itself a distraction. Before bed, he had been ready to present Lora this one missing piece of his past, had practiced arranging the parts like a manuscript, only to find the pages scattered in his mind.

After a dozen sales trip to Boston over the years, Lora had finally decided to join him. Early on in their marriage, each time the trip was forthcoming, he had asked Lora to come; *to see where I grew up, the house my family lived in*. Year after year she had politely declined, and eventually he stopped asking. A few weeks ago, as the two coordinated their calendars at the breakfast table, Lora out-of-the-blue announced her intention to go with him to Boston—answering a question that had gone unasked for years. *I think I finally get it*, she had said as the

two of them packed for the trip. *It's not about your family history, it's about her. Alex what's-her-name.*

She was right, of course. He'd been damaged goods when Lora met him and had treated his emotional wounds as gently as a nurse tending to a burn victim. But for the entire length of their marriage, he had secretly believed that only Lora's presence on those Boston streets, in the Boston buildings, breathing the Boston air, could exorcise completely the painful memory of Alex that confronted him every trip he took there. He had worked out the psychology of it: The house he'd grown up in with his family had been razed ten years ago. That year he had walked by the empty lot, and visualizing the house was easy. The next year the entire block had been replaced by an apartment building. Standing on the sidewalk, facing a gyros restaurant with a purple awning and yellow trim around the door and windows, he struggled to picture his boyhood home. The following year he could not conjure up any image at all. When he got home, he anxiously paged through old family albums to find photos of what his mind could not recreate. If replacing one thing for another could do that for a happy memory, what might it do for an unhappy one?

He had grown up in Somerville, north of Cambridge; then attended college at B.U. Brooklyn is home now, but when people ask him where he is from, he still says, *Bahs-ton*, in the accent his parents had, but which he never acquired. Lora had been raised on military bases all over the U.S. and half the reason she married him was to literally *settle down*. He had married Lora, in part, to put Alex behind him once and for all. She had succeeded; he had not.

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Earlier that afternoon Neil had closed a sale; then met Lora at the Fine Arts Museum. Later, he led her down streets from his childhood, showed her the six-story apartment complex in Somerville where his parent's bungalow had once stood; on the BU campus he pointed to the 6<sup>th</sup>

floor dorm window which had been his opening to the world his freshman year. Lora smiled but was quiet. They dined with his client and his client's wife, talked about sports and movies, drank mid-priced wine, and kissed on the cab ride to the hotel. Not a word about his old flame.

They kissed on the elevator. In the hotel room, over the sink while brushing their teeth, they kissed again, and laughed about the pointlessness of their dinner conversations.

But in bed, he was not aroused. Touching her skin should have done it, but instead of reaching around her, turning her head slightly and kissing her, he had turned away. He wondered if she had waited all day for him to open up. If so, he had failed her. She had fallen asleep, or worse—had feigned sleep to avoid intimacy.

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Hours later, he is awake, and she is sleeping soundly. He cannot sleep because he assumes that eventually Lora will ask him, *Did you love her more than you love me?* The correct answer—the answer he most certainly will give—is, *No, of course not.* But she will read something in his expression, and know he is lying. And he knows Lora must know this, or else he would have been telling stories about Alex as easily as he had shared the rest of his past. In his present life, the relationship with Alex—long ago, and abruptly, terminated—is like a driver's distraction, just enough to pull your eyes off the road, just enough to be dangerous if the conditions ahead become uncertain.

The sliver of light on the ceiling thins and widens rhythmically in the steady pulses of warm wind coming through the curtains. The changes are minute, but just enough to draw his attention. As if a muffle has been removed from his ears, he senses a deepening, a denser quality to the rain. The combination of light and sound act as triggers; he pictures the old Tivoli Theatre that they had passed by that afternoon, when the skies were clear, when he said nothing. Now,

with Lora sleeping beside him, with the rain releasing heat from the asphalt streets and cobbled sidewalks, his mind flails helplessly at the onslaught of memories about Alex.

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In the fall of his junior year, a late October nor'easter had been building slowly, deceptively, taunting Boston with the possibility of a near miss. A lengthy Indian Summer was to blame for the city's uncharacteristic hopefulness; two weeks of blazing sun had preceded the inevitable turn towards a true New England autumn. While no more than a constant drizzle had fallen during working hours, heavy clouds brought an early and foreboding darkness, giving a hint of things to come. A streetlamp's light then, as now, had seeped through a crack in the shades of the windows in the chemistry building where Neil worked as a lab assistant. Alex worked several tables over. She had a dancer-like figure, long neck, slim but curvaceous body, large bright eyes and a constant smile; but it was her kinetic nature that had drawn his attention. She was constantly on the move, stepping forward and back, side to side while waiting for the centrifuge to stop, or for precipitates to form, or for the calculations to reveal patterns. They had spoken casually from time-to-time, lab-talk mostly, nothing personal. He knew other lab techs who had asked her out—unsuccessfully.

"Looks serious out there," Neil offered. "I'll finish cleaning up, if you need to go."

After she left, he cleaned the last of the dozen micro-centrifuges. The thin line of white, filtering through the lowered shade, flickered back and forth across his face. He wiped the counter surfaces quickly, but precisely, hoping to make it back to his off-campus apartment before the storm kicked in hard.

He walked briskly across the quad. The drizzle was more like a mist, but the wind had picked up and tiny pellets stung his face. He thought he saw Alex in the distance, hovering under the awning of the Humanities building. *Probably waiting for someone.* The pillared facades of the buildings offered some protection, but then came Granby Street, its entire length leaving him exposed; it was as if the weather gods had waited patiently, cynically, for just the right moment, as huge drops punished the pavement, soaked him within seconds, and chilled him with successive increases in wind gusts. He ran past Barkman's Hardware and the McDonald's, picked up speed alongside St. Nicodemus Church, its burnt timbers, boarded stained-glass windows, and padlocked doors a reminder of the recent fire. He glanced sideways at the old Tivoli Theatre—a stage theater—with its lights on. His jacket was pulled up so far over his head he almost didn't notice the main door slightly ajar.

The Tivoli had ceased operations Neil's sophomore year. But it played host to the occasional concert, lecture, or midnight movie sponsored by B.U. No event was scheduled for the evening; no letters hung on the sign. No matter. With difficulty, he pulled the broad glass door open. In the lobby he could warm up, dry off, and wait for a lull in the storm before continuing.

Once inside, leaning against the door he had just come through, he removed his soaked and lifeless jacket, twisting and squeezing as much water out of it as his wrists could stand. Against the force of the mounting wind, he strained to close the door—successfully. He draped his jacket over a knob of the arm rail at the base of the lobby stairs and sat down to catch his breath, hanging his head between his knees. The odor of charred wood from the recent fire that destroyed the St. Nicodemus church next door permeated the theatre.

He heard footsteps coming across the lobby, and a voice with a thick Greek accent spoke, "Hey. Is private ceremony." Neil looked up to see a short, heavy-set man, with a thick black moustache, wearing a private security uniform, standing above him.

"I just want to dry off, okay?"

The man stared at the turmoil outside, took a deep breath, signaled OK, and quickly disappeared through one of the doors leading to the main seating floor.

After a few minutes, with his curiosity piqued, Neil walked over to—and gently opened—the door the guard had used. On stage, bathed in light, was a makeshift altar. Facing it was a couple in full wedding regalia. A maid of honor, best man and the bride's and groom's parents—he guessed—also stood on stage. Facing the couple, and the small crowd seated in the first few rows, was an elderly, heavily bearded priest, white collar shining from a single strong overhead theatre light. The priest spoke Greek and made a broad, sweeping gesture with one arm that acknowledged the gathering. He paused. Then another statement in Greek. How many times had Neil passed St. Nicodemus unaware of its Greek Orthodoxy?

A blast from the theatre organ startled him. Singing commenced. The guard, who had been standing off to one side, turned and repeated in a whisper, "Is private ceremony." Neil backed away. He turned around just in time to see Alex rush in from the outside. She carried the remnants of an umbrella, torn apart by the wind that was now rattling the glass doors. Her cheeks were bright pink. He could see she was breathing hard, and he helped her as she struggled to close the outer door against the sucking wind. She wore a long wool pink sweater over a T-shirt and jeans. She stroked strands of wet hair from her face. Everything was soaked and yet she seemed radiant.

"Isn't it something? That smell?" she said.

"What smell?"

"Wet wool. Here." She offered her arm, holding that part of the sweater up to his nose. "It's coming off. Thank god it's warm in here." She took off the sweater and laid it over the railing next to his jacket. She arched her back. The damp t-shirt was like a second skin, revealing her dancer's physique. Thin. Muscular. Abs! She looked him over. "God, we are both soaked!"

"Your umbrella's history," said Neil.

"Yeah," she smiled, sliding it open and shut a couple times in mock contempt. The fabric fell off completely. She tossed the remains into the nearest waste can.

Remnants of idle chatter with Alex from the lab came to him; New York family, private school, physician father, ballet since three, Mets fan—not Red Sox. He admired the dancer's control of her body. Casual precision. Relaxed, unforced elegance. He could not remember if she had ever asked him about himself.

"Got cab fare?" he queried.

"Nope."

"Bus fare?"

"Not a cent."

"What's this? Two now?" It was the Greek security guard again. "Okay," he smiled. "I heard noise. Is okay." He wandered off, pausing to squint through the glass doors at the storm outside. Then shaking his head. "Stay out here, please."

"What gives?" said Alex, watching the guard disappear again into the theatre proper.

"A wedding. You know, next door, the fire..."

"Ahh..."

He escorted her across the lobby to a door. He held it ajar while she peeked in. The organ music had died down. The priest was speaking again.

"A Greek wedding! I love it." She closed the door. "Where's the guard or whatever he is?" She tilted her head up and pointed to the second-floor landing. "Maybe we can look in from up there. It'll be warmer anyways."

After grabbing both his jacket and her sweater, he followed her long, light strides towards the stairs leading to the balcony. They tiptoed up, pausing at the landing to look for the guard. Upstairs, passing an office, they saw two open cases of champagne on a desk. Alex lifted a bottle

of Korbel Brut from one. She held it aloft and looked at Neil, widening her eyes, grinning. *Look at her*, he thought. *She's a whirlwind.*

Continuing along the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to the far back corner, they entered the balcony, staying low, and knelt side by side when they reached the balcony railing. Neil laid out the dripping sweater and jacket across two chairs on the second row, confident the clothes couldn't be seen from below, and gestured for both he and Alex to lie down so they could quickly drop out of view should someone turn and look up. When they were on their stomachs he studied her profile, the way her hair touched the floor while she was propped on her elbows; he traced the arch of her back with his eyes.

"What?" she said, suddenly turning to face him. Had he made a face?

"You're fun to watch," he said.

"I'm a dancer. You knew that, didn't you?" They both turned back to the ceremony. The bride and groom, both olive-dark with black hair, were facing one another, silent. A member of the wedding party, perhaps the best man, was speaking.

"Are you still cold?" asked Neil.

"A little. My T-shirt's soaking." She rolled over on her back and pulled off her T-shirt, setting it next to her, then quickly rolled back onto her stomach, propping herself up by the elbows. Without thinking, he did the same.

"I feel warmer already," she said, smiling.

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Completely awake now, Neil is in a sitting position; Lora twists under the covers, whispering with her back still to him—it is as if she has been watching the movie playing in his head— "It must be impossible not to think about her when you come back here." He is conscious



of the contrast in their positions, as if it might define their relationship in the future if he isn't careful. "Are you thinking about her now?"

"Yes," he whispers in kind.

"She hurt you, didn't she?"

"She was—crazy."

"I should have come with you the first time you asked." She turns around to look up at him. He cannot make out her features but senses the sweetness of a smile. She rolls back over again, and he lowers himself down, into the pillows, and resumes his reverie.

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The balcony was warming them and soon their skin was dry. After unfastening the champagne cork clip, he took a corner of his still-damp shirt, wrapped it around the neck of the Korbel bottle and proceeded to slowly twist and pull the cork. There was a barely discernable hiss. Still prone, they drank from the bottle, alternating sips. He could not see her eyes. What color were they? Greenish blue? Brown? He wanted her to move into the light, but to do so would have risked them being seen. The ceremony droned on below them. Some organ music began, and then singing.

"How come you never asked me out?" she said between sips. "You wanted to, I could tell. I wanted you to. I don't get asked out much. You know, pretty girl syndrome." It was killing him, to be only dimly aware of her contours, to want to touch that skin. "All the boys think 'no way she'll say yes to me' so they don't ask. That isn't you, is it?" It helped that he felt there was

no right answer to her question. She shrugged it off. “Well, you didn’t bolt when you had the chance.”

“Bolt?”

“Just now. Not everyone would have come up here, would have snuck in.”

"It's the champagne," he offered.

“No, you volunteered,” she said, looking him over. “You have a sense of adventure. Not everyone has that.” She leaned towards him. Emboldened, he kissed her below the ear. She smiled. He pulled himself closer to her, his chest touching her shoulder. He kissed her cheek below the eyes. She smiled again.

"Do you think we could fuck up here and not get noticed?" she whispered.

The phrase struck like an electric shock. Coming as it did after the kiss, she could have been postulating a make-believe scenario—or suggesting they actually do so. His erection was certainly real. He wondered, *Who says “fuck” like that? What kind of person talks like that to a relative stranger?* As if to answer her own question, she reached out and put her hand behind his neck, pulled him closer and kissed him full on.

“I know I could, if I had to,” she said when she pulled away. “Could you? I don’t mean keeping your mouth shut. That’s the easy part. I mean the fucking part.”

And that was how their relationship began.

They stayed in the balcony until after the ceremony, through more organ passages, more singing, more ceremonial talk, the exchanging of the rings, the final processional, until after the theatre had become quiet and all the lights extinguished.

The romance developed with furious, unanticipated energy, like the power of the nor’easter that had triggered it. Like so many college relationships, it was itself a storm, and destined to end as all storms end, except that he and Alex kept recreating the quixotic passion. They even returned to the theatre occasionally, when they felt the passion faltering, hiding in a

closet until the theatre had emptied after a midnight show; they brought a bottle of champagne each time, and they made love—“*fucking,*” *she insisted*—in the same spot on the balcony. The risk he and Alex had taken became a substitute fuel for real knowledge of one another. *Not* caring was what propelled them both forward; they avoided the intimacy of in-depth inquiry; their relationship did not so much develop as sustain the swirling intensity with which it had begun.

It was Alex who first understood the impossibility of it continuing forever; that all storms build, assault the senses, then die out. She told him it was over in the same spot where it had begun. The disturbing quiet, the sudden stillness, accentuated the realization that he and Alex had been as reckless with their feelings as a fierce storm was to the earth itself. It is only afterwards that the damage can even begin to be assessed. It took him a year—after the abrupt break-off—to realize how she had almost destroyed his capacity to love. He was another person after that. Patient. He waited for love to come. He didn’t force it. When it came, it was *being loved* that sustained his relationship with Lora in the beginning and for several years after. He modeled his love for her on what she had given him. On what she continued to give.

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His face is pressed into the hotel bed’s pillows, which are flattened against the headboard. As he turns over on his back, Lora’s hands guide him, and quickly her body is on top of his, her face inches from his. Her familiar scent breaks through the dream smells of burnt wood and wet wool. His erection, the result of the dream, is strengthened by the feel of her skin, of her pressing down on him, and by her kisses. “What I know is this,” she says, rising, poised to strike. “Without her, you wouldn’t have become you.” The wind outside increases; it sucks the shade

towards the window opening, and for a moment Lora's face is bathed in the ambient light from the streetlamps. The rain has stopped. The storm has glided by. One thing has replaced another.

"Thank you," he says, with the same softness his fingers trace along her shoulder.

"For what?" she says.

"For saving me, back then. And now," he responds. She is maneuvering him inside her.

"You are so dramatic," she says, rising and falling against him. "Isn't this why you wanted me to join you?"

Lora has waited him out—could there be a more poignant expression of her love? He sighs and tenses his stomach muscles in preparation for what is next. He removes her nightgown; the slits of light from the swaying blinds crisscross her body as she presses herself against him.

"God, how I love you," he says. He is young again, trembling with anticipation.