

Ryan Burruss

THE GREAT FLOOD

“Say something,” she whispered. The screaming of an hour ago had ebbed. She hovered over him, inhaled the scent of salt and something else she couldn’t name. She put it aside.

“Hi,” he gasped, then coughed, shivered in her arms. The spasm made him cry out and reach for his middle. “My ribs.” He pushed the words through his teeth, carefully lifted his head, tried to place himself. He looked into her eyes. “I left.”

She kissed murmurs into his hair, trying to stay calm. The man had a nasty gash on his forehead that, when taken with the halting speech, caused a little ball of worry to form inside her. She pulled back. “Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am?”

“I’m home,” he said, “but I don’t know how.”

“It doesn’t matter. Do you know my name?”

He let his head fall back, perfecting repose or surrender, depending on the angle. “Muriel,” he said, holding back tears. “Baby, how did I get back here?”

Kneeling there, the sun beginning to dry her limbs, Jessica finally felt like she was drowning.

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The man had spent the better part of the afternoon swimming through a bottle of Tennessee whiskey, and Jessica moved carefully around the house in the way that she often did when the shadows got long. It was an act of calculated failure: by avoiding his drunken attention, she provoked it. She knew her doe-like gait antagonized the wilderness blowing through him, made him feel the bully he swore he wasn’t, promised he would never be. And with every turned cheek, each bit-back sob, the dial in him turned a little more, the volume rose. For her part, every insult, every threat, left the sting of a small victory.

She had said the wrong thing in the wrong tone—an incantation. Like a squall, he was on her before the rumble of his voice had even taken shape, the clouds in his mouth echoing slurs against her soft flesh. “Bitch,” he spat, a punctuation.

FICTION

Pinned to a beam, the man's hand holding her in place, Jessica noticed that, if you looked at their house a certain way, you could make out crosses in the architecture. His arm vibrated almost imperceptibly, but his chest heaved before her, a mockery of the way he made love. Strands of his hair scraped his beard. His breath smelled of the alcohol, of something medicinal.

Jessica wore his taunts; she watched his clouds grow denser, the winds sharper, never averting her eyes from the crackle and flash. There were steps to this dance, patterns that, while not always pleasant, created a sort of familiarity between them, a trust. This is the way it had to be, because this is the way it was.

She tilted her chin, let him feast on her stare. Drunk as he was, he could still read the lines tattooed around her eyes, her mouth; each screamed without a sound, and in that moment, the man saw himself in the wear in her parts. The wake of his rage crashed not against her stare or lips, but behind them, in another time, another place.

She watched him shift, as if something profound, religious, had cracked beneath the plates of his set jaw, his clenched teeth. She watched his hand drop, the shoulders round. The man sighed, all his tautness escaping like spiders.

She wanted him to scream at her. She wanted him to slap her across her ungrateful, stupid mouth. She wanted him to bend her over a table. She wanted anything. She'd take anything.

But he did nothing. He looked around the room as if with new eyes. "Say something!" she screamed.

She began to tremble as he backed away, and shook like hell when he gently shut the front door behind him.

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There is forewarning in the silence of birds. The television played in the front room, white noise while Jessica busied herself peeling vegetables. In the crevices of her middle, where the truth usually hid, she knew that he would not be back. There were no more storms to bear; it was an analogy bound to a craving that had passed as abruptly as it arrived, right before her eyes, as if she had been but a witness, a bystander. As she peeled the skin from a zucchini, the undergraduate literature parts of Jessica grasped the cruel beauty of having just watched a man fall out of love with her. She breathed in rhythm with the strokes of the peeler.

She wasn't sure if it had been seconds or minutes before she realized that the television was quiet and that the little hallway light was dark. Quiet flooded the house; the windows were open, but the birdsong, a chamber chorus here a half-mile from the main road, was locked away.

A shadow pulled itself across the kitchen. Jessica looked out the window over the sink, but couldn't make much of the sky; the roof's overhang blocked her view. She wiped her hands, went to the back door to investigate; there was a sharp wind coming from the east now, and her arms erupted in gooseflesh.

She didn't understand. The perspective was off, as if she were looking at a child's drawing pinned high above. There was the sun, round and recognizable, and then it was gone, hidden behind a rolling wall of sparkling gray-green, something two-dimensional and primitive become real. Trees snapped like matchsticks, the displaced air a coarse whisper coming from where the horizon used to be. Water rushed everywhere, converging on Jessica, too frozen to run away from the slam of its foamy, desperate kiss.

She felt like an astronaut, the bubbles churning around her like tiny stars. She opened her eyes to find herself floating high over her own house, an untethered, Jessica-shaped balloon. The colors were perfectly drab, the contrasts of her skin and shirt muted by the translucence of the flood. She could see her neighbors' homes, and around them, little crumbs that she assumed to be the same people that, most days, pretended they couldn't see her when she waved. *Asshole-shaped balloons*, she thought.

She stared at the eternity of water below, and that above, and understood only in context that she was drowning. She couldn't feel it.

The others, dressed in hungry clusters of bubbles, flailed and kicked in slow-motion. Jessica watched them twist themselves upside-down, swimming to surface at the bottom, frantic hand gestures like exclamation points to a sentence with no words, no subject, no verb. She watched them, and realized she had never tried to hold her breath.

The edges of the world began to blur, then darken; her head felt heavy, then light. Thoughts stretched like held notes, submerged, dissipated. Jessica felt born again, but without all the declarations and dogma and nonsense of the traditional sort of holy do-over. That breast-bearing alternative seemed less about redemption, more about diluting your footprints; submission seemed simpler, a peaceful drift toward something new, an accommodation to circumstances.

The last curtain closed, the faded contrasts melted completely away. The note held.

FICTION

And then there was a whisper, then a *whir*, a stopper pulled, and her frame was yanked and twisted through an explosion of brine and rushing, hateful water. The flood receded as it had arrived, and Jessica found herself wrist-deep in the dirt, coughing up filthy liquid with chopped, resentful breaths she never intended to have.

She pushed soaked strands of hair from her face with a mud-caked hand. She had landed in her front yard and could see a body strewn across the dirt road at end of the driveway. It was a body she had explored many times, still wearing the same shirt she had watched him leave in.

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He felt like a rescue in her arms, a stray, all exhausted bone and muscle, but beneath the cut on his head, his reddened, blue eyes were electricity. She had no idea what it was he was seeing, what frightened him so alive. He shivered and coughed like an old engine, but looked younger than he had in years.

“I didn’t think...” the man started, winced, and Jessica buried her face between his neck and his shoulder. He tried again: “I didn’t think you’d be here.” He grunted, shifted, and she was in his arms. She began to weep, and they shook together, drops of the flood falling off their limbs.

The man began to laugh, looking up at their house. He wiped his glistening eyes, smudged reddish-brown across his face. Jessica leaned into his ear. “Why did you call me that?”

The laugh trailed off. “What?”

“When you asked me how you got back here... you called me her name. You called me Muriel.”

The man winced. He brushed her wet hair back, cupped her profile in his hand. “Sweetheart, are you okay?” He ran his hand over her head, his fingers both comforting and searching. “Are you hurt?”

“My name is Jessica.”

“Your name is Muriel, darling.”

Jessica pushed back against the man. “No, my name is Jessica, and we’ve been married for the last six years. This is our house. You are my husband.”

The man reached out to her, and she let him. “My god...” he said, letting the words float in front of him. He wrapped his fingers around her

shoulders, favoring one side. "Muriel," he said, "please tell me what is going on."

His voice was different. Where before it was just a beat too quick, a touch too loud, it now held warmth around its edges. The man she married demanded things his world couldn't offer. He punched at the night like pirate radio, like no one was listening to his prayers. Now, here he was, somehow changed, somehow the same, and calling her the one word she didn't think she could bear him calling her. After all the names he had fired at her like buckshot, this lovely one hurt most.

"Muriel's dead," she said, steady as she could manage. "She was your first wife and you loved her and she died."

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know why. Why are you doing this?"

"What games are these?" The man forced a smile, something abrupt growing between the rocks and broken glass of his mind. "You're right here," he said, a tear forming. "You're right here with me, baby, exactly where you were always supposed to be. You're not dead. You survived."

He grabbed her hard despite his injuries, and kissed her, raining all his haunting onto her lips, her skin. He was something foreign, yet remembered, like innocence, like home.

He grabbed her face again. "We're going to get you checked out, and everything's going to be alright." He nodded to encourage her.

Something fluttered, and Jessica shook her head. "I'm okay, baby," she said between sobs, "I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay."

"Muriel?"

"It's me, baby. I'm here."

The man's hands began to shake, the quake traveling through his arms, his shoulders, his voice. "I thought I lost you," he whispered. "You can't imagine."

Crouched there, arms and legs entangled, they shivered, held.

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Jessica and the man began to salvage their house. They ripped out the carpet, uncovering the original wood floor, still in decent shape.

FICTION

They kept what they could, and trashed what they could not. They made love on the stairs in the middle of the afternoon.

Photographs were ruined. "We'll take new ones," the man said. Books were destroyed. "We'll write our own." The man kissed Jessica's neck. His laugh was easy, ambled out of him. Before, his laugh was something that attacked a room. Now, it could fill it faster than the tempest did.

Jessica became an effigy, an analogy, the woman the man had loved long ago, the first wife, the one who died in his arms. She was a spy in her own bed, making love each night to what her husband could have been.

She thought the hardest part would be answering to another name; instead, it was how tall he stood, how he trusted the person he thought she was with his heart. It was everything she ever wanted, and it burned like battery acid when she wasn't careful.

"What do you remember... before the flood?" She traced her finger across his shoulder, something borrowed, never owned.

"What do you mean?"

"Right before," she lifted herself up on the mattress, her head in her palm. "What do you remember? Do you remember the water? Do you remember where you were before it hit? What you saw?"

The man pursed his lips. Jessica watched him play a miracle back in his head. "It was like a dream." He shook his head, trying to line up the threads of memory. "I felt like I had been drowning... but for a very long time, longer than it must have really been." He paused. "I felt like I was drowning, but wouldn't die." He touched her waist. "I know that probably doesn't make any sense at all."

Jessica rested her head in the crook of his arm. "It does," she whispered, thinking her voice sounded miles away.

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Jessica sat on the front porch, an unread magazine in her lap, listening to the sound of crickets and letting tiny drops of sweat bead on her skin. She swirled her drink in the glass, unsure if she had put ice in it or not.

The man had gone to bed early, exhausted from another day of fixing things, so Jessica drank alone, searching for the exhale that only the liquor could bring. The trick was that it was never in the same place twice, like lost keys. The trick was to avoid getting too frantic, rummaging about your

head, tossing all sorts of things this way and that—you were more likely to cover it with nostalgia, or bury it beneath a fantasy. It was worse still if you unearthed something you never wanted to find. The trick was to trace your steps back to where you had left it the night before, anticipate how far it could have traveled when you weren't looking, and take a stab.

The man had expressed concern about her drinking ("It's just not like you, Muriel," he said), but his admonishments were so soft as to not break the skin, a ghost to a ghost. Jessica took a long drag from her glass. She tried to define who was stealing from whom. She took another drink in search of a breath, a release, figuring it had to be somewhere nearby, about where she left it.

Her heart took on water. She tried to stay afloat; her husband was cheating on her with her. She was her own bitch, her own whore. She was every slur he used to call her. She poured another vodka from the bottle resting beneath her chair.

She wanted to run out into the crickets and vanish; she wanted to punch the man, then kiss the bruise, wrap his arms around her. She wanted to fill the laundry sink and plant her face in the drawn water until everything melted.

She wanted the world to flood again. She wanted to rise, weightless, and look down on this mess she'd made. She wanted to see the soft edges of the things she thought were hers. She wanted to feel like an astronaut again, like there was something left to find.

She was past the porch now, barefoot under an almost-full moon, willing the trees in front of her to start snapping. She pinched her face up like a child, trying to conjure the wave. Nothing happened. Not even the chirp of the crickets skipped a beat. There were no more miracles. It was only after she heard the creak and slam of the front door that she realized she had been screaming.

"Muriel!" the man called in a hoarse whisper, in that way parents bark clenched orders when their embarrassment matches their anger. "What are you doing?"

Jessica put the bottle to her lips. She had turned it into a drinking game, him saying the wrong name. "I'm not Muriel," she said, enunciating each word.

She ran to him and he held out his arms for her. She hit him hard across the mouth, drew blood. She tried to take the bottle to his head, but he knocked it into the grass. "Say something!" she shrieked. "Say something!" She rained drunken punches on his chest.

FICTION

“I love you,” he said, and Jessica let out a high-pitched, choked roar, all humiliation and anger and spiders.

The man grabbed for her but she flailed him off. She took an unsteady step back, shook her finger at him.

“My name is Jessica Mulder. Formerly Kent. I am your wife. I have been your wife for going on seven years now. Our anniversary is in October. It rained at the courthouse. You were married before...” Jessica’s voice cracked, tears streamed down her face. “Her name was Muriel. She was beautiful. I’ve seen pictures—you were so happy. So young.” Jessica saw the vodka bottle in the grass, almost fell over grabbing for it. She toasted their house, took a long drink. “She died of ovarian cancer. She died in this goddamned house—she was so thin, you could feel the curve of each bone against your breathing. You told me that. You fucking told me that. She was the love of your life.”

Jessica threw the bottle and it shattered in the distance. She stared at the house, their house, all hard angles and shadow. The crickets were restless. She stepped forward, the man didn’t flinch, and she kissed the scar on his forehead, kissed his chest, felt the heavy thump of his heart against her lips. Jessica smiled without looking at his eyes, without seeing or being seen; she stumbled off into the night with only the clothes on her back, her name.