

FLOODGATES

Usually when Alan comes out to get the paper, he can see mailboxes and manicured front lawns for fifty yards or so to the turn at the bottom of the hill. In this early light, just three houses down, only the top course of porch shingles are visible above the slowly swirling muck. There's no paper this morning and, like the last two days, no mail in the box or power evident anywhere in the neighborhood.

The water is deep enough now to squirt out between feet and flip flops as he steps to the high end of his curved driveway. Where the other end meets the asphalt, it could be to his knees. Normally at this time, the street is full of passing commuter sedans and mommy vans. He can still make the reflective yellow road stripe, defining the bend in front of the house, before disappearing below the rising edge of flood water.

Across the street, the Skeltons' jacked up Ram truck cuts a wide wake as it navigates out of the cul-de-sac. He hasn't spoken with either of them since the New Year's Eve party. Bill takes it slow, feeling with a tire for the edge of pavement as Karen, on her knees on the passenger side, leans back to strap the toddler in the child safety seat. They make the turn and both little Krystal's hands fly up, like doves just released, to wave at him.

"Hello, Precious," Alan cries out, slowly raising one hand like a peaceful Indian from an old cowboy movie saying, 'How.' But of course they have the windows up and can't hear, acquainted with the sorely missed luxury of hard-blowing A/C. Sliding back around, Karen,

one of his wife's first neighborhood friends, fixes him with a stare and presses her forehead against the window. In exaggerated mime, she opens wide and mouths the 'A,' gnashes teeth together for the 'SS,' then pulls her lips in a silent circle to convey the 'Hole.' Alan turns, eases both hands into the pockets of his cargo shorts, and watches as they slowly make it up the hill and turn out of sight.

It's then he notices the weathered old man, partially obscured in the clump of scrub oaks between his place and the house next door. Alan glances up at the angry gray folds in the low cloud cover, jerks his shoulders in half a shrug and calls over, "We gonna get a break, Charlie?" Rubber boots are already scooting through the shrubbery, heading Alan's way.

"It's coming back," he reports. "Didn't ya get the forecast?"

"No. Our phones are dead," Alan explains, "Don't have a charger to work in either car." The exaggerated eye roll reminds him the old guy has no use for cell phones.

"Floodplains are full," Charlie says, "from here all the way to Galveston Bay." He heard the news on the AM radio he brought inside from the workbench. He tells Alan he has an old shoebox full of batteries.

"When you need em," Charlie offers. "They said a stalled tropical storm like this can dump twice as much rain as a hurricane." He repeats the terms, 'barometric pressure,' and 'all time record rainfall,' in consecutive sentences before the metallic sproing of an opening garage door across the street draws their attention. Next door to the Skelton place, a guy lifts dripping cardboard from six inches of the milky tea around his ankles.

"Hey," Alan calls over but the man, in plain view, disregards the call and the wave and positions himself to avoid eye contact.

“In all the years before your house was built,” Charlie shares from the side of his mouth, “none of the houses this high up the hill took water, ever.” Through other informative sessions with his neighbor, Alan knows his property served as sluice of sorts, draining the high side of the fairway behind his house, through a culvert beneath the bend in the road, to the drainage ditch beyond the houses across the street.

The empty lot provided a community amenity, for a quarter century, everyone called ‘The View.’ The cut through the tall pines displayed a slope to the seventh green and the majestic swoop of fairway leading to it. When residential prices went high and vacant lots went scarce, The View went to a custom builder with plans for a tall, two-story that would change all that. Residents petitioned to revoke the building permit, claiming all the needed fill dirt would violate protective covenants and divert the natural flow of surface water.

“They figure, if the view was still here, maybe they’re high and dry right now.”

“But, hey man, I’m just the guy who bought the place,” Alan points out. In three weeks, July first, would be ten months. “It’s not like I built it here.”

“You can tell yourself that, son,” Charlie counsels. “Tell them that, too. Now that they’re waist deep in muddy water, with snakes and fire ants floating through the house, you’re the only available target.” Charlie turns up his jacket collar as fat raindrops splat in silver dollops. “Tell them that. Not like they’ll hear.” Thunder rumbles from beyond the tree line like empty oil drums rolling down long flights of concrete stairs.

“I better check on Carleen,” Alan excuses himself, with a head nod toward the house. “She’s probably as sore as I am this morning.” The old guy takes the fake and turns back toward his place next door.

“Let me go check the forecast,” Charlie calls over his shoulder. “Let you know what I find out.” The strange quiet makes him think of the old days, when all the neighbors looked like they came from branches off the same family tree. Now, on normal days, you could see full-bearded men with peculiar scarves wrapped around their heads, casually walking up their driveways like they were somebody else. Cars would fly by with windows down and music thumping and, even though you couldn’t understand the lyrics, it sounded like cussing.

Alan thinks about floating clusters of fire ants and carefully chooses his footing, looking to get a visual through the shallow brown filter over the front walk. Between steps he glances up, looks at how the tall white porch columns stand out against the wet brick façade, and sees that the fresh start he hoped for might be the worst mistake of his life.

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Some couples start with counseling. Others think having a baby will make everything right. The doctor told her that would require fertility drugs and an element of luck. Alan and Carleen searched available homes around the city, thinking a move from their starter home in a slowly deteriorating neighborhood could be a reset for them. Other factors spurred their decision: banks dealing subprime mortgages like cards from the bottom of the deck, and the other woman in question living right down the street from the old house. When they stood in front of that stately new house in an established, upscale community, it seemed a whole lot like an answer. It looked like a level of status neither ever had. They put all their assets in one pot, borrowed heavily, and overpaid for the place in Lake Crest Country Club northwest of town.

Her friends thought the new house was lovely. It would take a lot of decorating and furnishing, but new houses do. There was the betrayal, anger, and disillusionment she needed to

dam up, but this would be an engaging diversion. Some of her favorite shows were on HGTV and with this, she'd star in a brand new episode, all her own.

"All I ever wanted was a decent, stable home," she confided to her husband on the driveway, speaking through the first tingle of welling tears. She leaned her face into his chest and pressed her hand around the silver teardrop suspended from her necklace. It held the rare positive memory she had of her mother. Encapsulated in the pendant was a single mustard seed.

"That's all, just a normal place, a stable household," Carleen told her husband as they stood in the kitchen of their new home. "Enough with the drama and chaos, already."

"Well, Baby," Alan smiled and hugged her, "this place might just do the trick."

Carleen remembered her twelfth birthday as another of their mother-daughter parties. "If you have faith, even as small as this mustard seed," Beverly attempted to recall the verse, "sometimes a dream can, you know, come true." Growing up, they moved a lot. Her mother's emotional life spiked in prominent peaks and prolonged valleys. Her highs and lows were lived out loud. When she was on the upswing, Beverly might take Carleen by the hand and dance before the full length mirror, singing over her LaserDisc collection of Broadway musicals.

"I feel pretty," she would try, often to lyrics of her own imagining. "I feel playful and pretty," she sang, "clever and witty." During those up times, male suitors seemed to materialize from the foggy surrounds of Bev's reality. When the down times took over, they dissipated just as quickly back into the mist.

Carleen had three daddies by the time she was fourteen. Only one asked her to call him that though, an older man her mom called Ed when they moved into his house. For a change, she wasn't ashamed to tell other kids where she lived. Their time together with Ed lasted the longest

and, with college approaching, he made the generous offer to help with Carleen's tuition, under certain conditions; Beverly would get help. Counseling, psychiatry, drug therapy, whatever it took to level her out. But conditions and Beverly were a volatile mix. The night of that conversation, she jammed what would fit of their belongings in two Samsonite pieces and the backpack Carleen carried through high school.

"If you think you'll put me in that kind of box," she shouted Ed down on the way out the door, "You can take that tuition money and stick it." With a show of uncharacteristic restraint, Bev added, "where the sun don't shine." They checked in to an extended stay motel facility and extended their stay until it was time for the start of fall semester. Ed actually came through with the money to cover her freshman year. Carleen moved to the dorm. Beverly moved to the west coast. Someone told Ed it was San Francisco. They never found out for sure.

The commute from the new house to her old job would run Carleen through the center of the city at rush hour, both ways. She opted to take a long-vacant office manager position at a church just twelve miles from the house. For those first few months, she carpooled with Phillip, the associate pastor, who lived close by. The corner of his house was visible from the new guest bedroom, through the cut in the trees.

"Is there something I did wrong?" she asked Phillip one day in the office when she noticed him staring at her.

"No, not at all," he said, turning his head toward the window when he felt a blush coming on. "It's just that it seems," he paused, "like you've always been with us."

"In a way," the thought occurred to her, "Maybe I have."

For Alan, the new home was a shorter commute to his job at Titan.com. Business at the e-commerce distribution center was booming. He was in his eleventh year with the company, promoted twice, and supervised 16 people in the warehouse. The seven bone-weary years he spent as an oil rig hand, adrift out there in the Gulf of Mexico, made his present position seem like the shot he was due. He figured half his days were probably gone. For as long as he could remember, he knew he wanted more than the meager portions life always seemed to dish out.

Janice, the upbeat HR lady calling from the corporate office, caught him at his desk one Monday morning. She was sending a new employee to shadow his operation. His personnel file cited his ‘decisive, and dynamic management style.’ “And talk around here is,” she went on, “you might get a shot at Zone 4 Manager. Just keep up the good work.” For that, he told himself, he was ready. Every morning, when his thirty year old mentality peered into the mirror through forty-two year old eyeballs, he saw a window closing.

Alan found out his new shadow person, Eva, was the niece of some big shot up at corporate. Maybe she could drop a good word for him sometime. The drive home took him right by the gym, where he stopped almost every day. The new face at work shadowed him there, too, taking advantage of the 30-day trial membership through the company. Eva, a pretty, perky twenty-eight, invented a new protocol on day one, referring to Alan as “Chief.” Soon, everybody did. People noticed her nice teeth and a sly smile, and her remarkably abundant breasts found their way into warehouse conversation on a regular basis.

Walking across the loading dock with Alan on her second day at work, golden oldies blasted from a jam box. From the downbeat, Eva jumped several inches vertically and came down dancing an enthusiastic rendition of the Macarena. Two guys with packing tape and box cutters in hand feigned a few steps with her before coming to their senses.

“Didn’t I see you on Dancing with the Stars?” Alan asked as they continued up the stairs.

“Hell, I’m not a star, Chief,” she pointed out, “yet.”

Eva wasn’t shy about her natural attributes. Each time they squeezed past each other in the narrow file room, her chest raked across Alan’s arms or back, or shoulder. When they worked out together at the gym, before asking him to spot her on the bench press, she adjusted her exercise top to augment his view.

Hurricanes get headlines in advance. Panic sets in and people make frantic runs for canned goods, bottled water, and sheets of plywood. Tropical storms are expected to pass through, dump inches of rainfall and blow away. Forecasts that Abigail, the first named storm of the season, would stall, back up, and total more precipitation than ever recorded came after two days of rafter-rattling thunder and stinging sheets of sideways rain. They saw it come steady during the day and, at night, lightning behind the translucent cloud cover flashed like artillery batteries beyond the horizon.

Shortly before the power went out, local news broadcast video of pontoon boats taking families and random belongings from second floor windows not far down the hill. When the screen went blank and the ceiling fans slowed to a stop, a huge rush of adrenaline enabled Alan and Carleen to hustle all the furniture they could carry up the stairs while they still had daylight. In the garage, he cut landscape timbers into blocks to place under legs of big pieces they couldn’t lift. She stuffed plastic bags and empty pillowcases with selections from lower cabinets, carried pantry items and drinks to the table on the second floor landing.

They watched from windows in different rooms upstairs. From the same house, but in worlds of their own. He looked out from the front bedroom, his regular sleeping place since

January, which used to serve as the study. Her view was from the wing chair in the guest room on the back face of the house. Depending on which direction the rain came, each waited for a chance to crack a window and catch some fresh air. The only sounds were of weather battering the outside of the house. There wasn't much left to say.

The next morning, Alan waded out the front door on a reconnaissance mission. Water was still several inches below the threshold but, he concluded, would soon be in the garage. Stepping back, he left his wet footwear on towels spread inside the door. He started up the stairs, appreciating the carpet, warm and dry beneath his wrinkled feet. He knew where she would be. Carleen sat with her back pressed against the big chair in the guest room. Her bible lay open in her lap. Alan moved in quietly behind her and looked out the window at a different view of the vista he'd been watching over the last few days.

"God, what's he doing over there?" Alan wondered out loud. They look at a blue tarp stretched over a gable window protruding through the shingles of a single-story home. Pastor Phil grew up in that house, one of the first kids to live in the neighborhood, and moved back when his parents passed a few years ago.

"Phillip has five feet of water throughout the house," Carleen explained softly. "Got a cot and things set up in the attic. He stretched out that canvas so he can keep those roof windows open."

"Hell, it's just him in that house," Alan said. "We have the first floor still dry and two unused rooms upstairs. We could ask him to stay up here til this nightmare is over."

"Yeah," her sigh was barely audible, "I did." As her words floated up, a dream drifted back from the day before, during last light. He was on the day bed in the study, exhausted, in the

ill-defined fuzz between sleep and waking. Intermittent rain beat the roof and trickled through the downspouts. Through the sound of those fluid rhythms, spoken words bubbled up from the front porch through the thin rectangle below the barely open window.

“But, why?” The muffled voice sounded a lot like his wife.

“I can’t, my darling,” it seemed the man said, “I just can’t.” But the whistle of wind around the eaves, humming through the roof vents, obscured their words. He may have been calling her by name. ‘*My Carleen?*’ rolled around in Alan’s head, as he shifted to the other shoulder in uneasy sleep.

When Alan snapped back he found himself staring out her window at taught ropes strung from the blue tarp on Phillip’s roof. They cut across the gutter at sharp angles to disappear beneath the water. From their distance, what looked like floating bits of garbage, food wrappers and plastic toys swirled in eddies against the house.

“Well, to each his own,” Alan was thinking, somewhat surprised when his words came out loud. “Isn’t that how they say it, there in the good book?” He spoke to the patterned fabric on the high back of her chair. Continuing the struggle to create polite conversation, he leaned over and asked Carleen, “Hey, what are you reading about?” For a long moment in their mutual trance, he wondered if he spoke loud enough for her to hear.

“Forty days,” she answered quietly, “and forty nights.”

Back when they first moved in, they decided to wait on a major gathering until the house was settled and the decorating complete. That projected to line up just in time for a big party on New Year’s Eve. All the people from work, both Titan employees and the church staff, were

invited. Many said they would attend. Some neighbors were eager to see inside the house they carefully watched going up, and enthusiastically returned the RSVP.

The party was billed as casual dress, but many came dressed in holiday finery. Hostess Carleen, festooned in green satin with red sashes, set an elegant standard. There were red vests, party hats and a wide range of lighted ties.

Eva's long black dress clung to her like a hot-dipped industrial coating. Silver piping defined the curves, with a line of open ovals down one thigh to below her calf. An elongated opening displayed naked skin from cleavage to navel. Three tiny silver bells swung silently from each ear lobe.

Alan played diligent host all night, replenishing snack bowls and refilling drinks. He regularly misplaced his mug of rum and coke in the process and, on more than one occasion, ended up with a drink in both hands after finding the lost one. He sidled through the party, chatting up clustered guests in each room. The singing started with MTV replaying top videos from New Years past, right up until it was time to change channels. The screen switched over to commentators in matching stocking caps. In the background, a crowd waited to watch the ball drop in Times Square.

Alan realized he took too long wrapping up a conversation after Carleen called him to come help prepare for the toast. Just then, the direct path to the kitchen was an obstacle course of elbows floating wine glasses and appetizer plates. He took the circuitous route through the dark foyer and dining room. But his hurried steps bumped him chest to chest with Eva, coming out of the foyer bathroom. After all those cosmopolitans, the jello shots were probably what caused the teeter on those spike heels. Alan grabbed both bare upper arms to steady her. She

rolled her eyes in thanks, exhaled a silent laugh at the ceiling, and then pointed directly overhead. The cluster of mistletoe hung from the chandelier, left unlit to enhance the colored light show beyond the staircase.

In that first moment of misjudgment, it didn't seem outrageous; a quick smooch between friends, minutes from midnight on New Year's Eve. It was the second that opened the floodgates, when Eva's tongue thrust side to side between their parted lips. Neither had a clear sense of how long that moment lasted, or much of anything else, but everyone heard what ended it.

Carleen also took the less-traveled route through the dining room, carrying a serving tray of full champagne flutes for the presentation. Someone behind her flipped the switch to light the way. She turned the corner and nearly bumped into the embrace, seeing Alan's hand lost up the access hole of Eva's dress and hers undulating behind three open metal buttons on the fly of his jeans.

The tray crashed and clattered to a wobbling halt on the marble tile. Tinkling bits of thin glass exploded to every distant nook and corner. In the sudden light, the sea of foam and expiring bubbles around Alan and Eva's feet made them appear, to the concerned crowd rushing toward the commotion, washed up alone on a desert island.

Things were different at work in the weeks following the holidays. Walking past the break room at different times during the day, Alan learned he was commonly referred to as 'the asshole.' Eva was known as 'the slut,' as written on the wall in black sharpie by the mirror in the men's room. By the end of the month, they referred to Jim Nederland as Manager of Zone 4. Eva had a new job in advertising at the regional office in Omaha.

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The rain varies in intensity but seems to taper off in the last hour of daylight. As Alan cracks the window to get some air, he hears a voice in his direction. Charlie yells something unintelligible from the front yard, standing in thigh-high wading boots.

“Hey,” Alan calls back, “say what?” and wonders if this ordeal stressed the old man past the edge of crazy. But the ambient weather noise plays havoc with sound, and when Charlie seems to shout nonsense again he yells back, “I’ll be right down.”

“I say they’re gonna open the dam,” Charlie tells him on the front stoop, now about even with the water line. “Storm just about moved out, but they got to open ‘er up. Before it all washes out.”

“And the rest of us downstream,” Alan figures, “get washed out instead.”

“Nothing to do but go back inside, wait and see,” the old guy tells him. “I have two inches downstairs now.”

Back upstairs in his chair, Alan drifts in and out of sleep by the window. As darkness falls, he watches the vegetation and structures of the remaining visible landscape seem to melt out of sight. The water fills his garage, reaches the metal thresholds on ground floor doors, but somehow stops there, without seeping inside.

For the first time in days, there is no rain and an eerie quiet settles in. It’s been very dark for a long time now, without the intermittent lightning behind the blanket of clouds. The window is open as wide as it will go and fresh air washes over him to fill the dank and musty room. A thumping knock on the front door and the array of spotlight beams bouncing throughout the room bolt him up to his feet and down the stairs.

“Sir, I’m Major Martinez, National Guard.” Amphibious vehicles sit above where his driveway should be and from them, uniformed soldiers move wide, flat-bottom boats toward deeper water and the submerged houses further down the hill. “We’ll be using this higher ground, your front yard, as a staging point.”

“A staging point for what?” Alan asks, as if shaking off the remnants of a dream.

“Evacuating flood victims and patrolling for looters,” the major tells him, “we can drive vehicles down this far and take them from here.”

All night Alan watches out the upstairs window, the flashing of emergency lights on the water, small-engine boats coming and going. The Andersons, from three doors down, come in one boat. On the next, those people he always sees walking the dogs step onto dry ground with the poodles in their arms.

As first light appears on the horizon, emergency vehicles and guardsmen begin to depart. It seems the crest has passed as more and more of his driveway, and then the street, begin to emerge. As if someone, somewhere, pulled a plug, houses in the cul-de-sac across from him begin to gradually emerge. A sense of relief and closure settles over the scene beyond his bedroom window and with it, his heavy eyelids come together like curtains falling on a final act.

Later, the front door closes gently, but in this newly quiet time, the noise resounds through the house, up the stairs to reach him reclining in his chair. He wipes sleep from his eyes with the sleeve of his tee shirt. A gentle splashing catches his attention and he pulls himself closer to the window to see.

Carleen and Phil hold steady, each with an arm around the other’s waist as they wade across the front yard toward the drying pavement. With the other hand, she presses the necklace

pendant against her chest. Their ankles, in measured steps, cut four wakes behind them. As they walk away, those angular shapes continue to drift and expand, until their open ends grow wider than the house.
