

The Crash of Waves on Shore

No people bang on my gate today. This is unusual. Usually, one or two families—adults hooded and hurrying, children trailing them like baby ducks, white surgical masks snapped to all their faces—abruptly halt when they catch the dim glow of my house lights in the fog. They shake the gate’s iron bars, point down at the lock, then at their kids. When that doesn’t work, they cup their hands together like Teresa’s hands around the rosary, drop to their knees.

I used to listen to their voices crackle in through the door speaker. Let their usual narratives—please, we’re clean, we have children, at least let them in, don’t you have a heart, you dumb bitch, hope your generators fail, hope you choke on your food, hope you die, hope you burn, you burn, you’ll burn—slap me, draw up heaving sobs from my chest and constrict my lungs until I couldn’t breathe, as punishment, until, inevitably, they moved on. But at some point, I had to hit the speaker’s mute button.

Now I just watch. Through the second floor window, its glass frosted by dust—I have all the time in the world to clean, but instead languish while the dust crawls across tile and granite—the street is empty except for the silent flutter of Fall’s golden leaves. Opposite the road clustered bumper-to-bumper with empty cars, over her gate, the solitary body of my neighbor is splayed in her yard, white bathrobe untied and spread, her yoga pants and tank-top a splash of color between the flaps. She seems a snow-angel gold-dusted by the shedding oak tree curled protectively over her.

It reminds me of my redwood. Past the sliding glass door sequestering me inside, past the dry fountain, far at the end of the terra-cotta foot path, the redwood’s muscled, rusty trunk stretches high, a wooden skyscraper, so huge my compound could snuggle in as a treehouse

crooked between two branches. A breeze ruffles the redwood's leaves. The motion is so unlike the stifled air drenching the rooms, stale as the last loaf of bread molding on the counter. Beside it, my final veggie burger unthaws in a tub of luke-warm water for tonight.

Tomorrow is the first day of canned food.

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I have always been a careful girl. First-aid kit a familiar bulge in my school backpack. Multivitamins washed down after Mediterranean salads like pill'd desserts. Treadmill. Monthly check-ups as regularly attended as the sunrise. Later, in college, water swirled in my red cup between ones bubbling with beer. No thanks, I have asthma, I said to the joints pinched between green-tinged fingers. No summer abroad to Italy, or France—airplanes crash five times a day. No sand-scratched drive to Vegas, twirl of the roulette wheel, flick of the cards, because fortunes fail more often than planes. The only way to beat probability is to tilt it toward you, weigh it down with boulders, and stop it from see-sawing.

This is why, when the headline first bannered across the bottom of the news, and my house became a beehive of men drilling steel bars into my windows, installing a closed-circuit air circulation system, suctioning doors and sealing leaks, bolting and wiring two back-up generators, wheeling bottled water and industrial-size boxes of tampons and toilet paper down to the basement by the pallet, and my parents and friends said, Don't you think this is overkill? It's just a flu. I told them:

I only want to be safe.

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Despite my precautions, every eventuality cannot be prepared for. After searing the veggie burger in a half-inch pool of melted, low-salt butter, last-stick, I plop the patty on a bun, squirt it with mustard and vegan mayo—those line my shelves in a nearly infinite line of yellow and white bottles—and take it to the living room with a bag of chips. Search the channels. The news has been reduced from daily to weekly, and now monthly. With each broadcast, the anchors' faces have decayed, become sunken and worn and creased after each word that isn't 'cure.'

Tonight is supposed to be the monthly airing, yet static fizzles across the primary channel. I flick to the biased station I usually avoid. It is static, too.

Every channel is static.

I check the usual streaming services on the TV home screen—loading signs spin stagnantly in place of logos. On my phone, 'No signal' glows in faded grey.

After letting out a long breath, I eat my entire burger, enjoying every meaty smack, every crunch of chip that cuts the silence, then I stand and wander the sculpture-lined bookshelves, searching for a movie to slide in the BlueRay player, and discover that, despite my technical manual-like planning of my seclusion, there are no movies for me to watch—because movies were never something I watched.

In the afterglow of the work day, my evenings were spent curled on the couch, nature shows and cat videos flickering, or reading animal biology articles on my laptop, or scrolling through dating apps, swiping through men and women I didn't intend to meet, but liked to look at.

Entertainment, I discover, is a need that was always watered.

Now it withers.

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A day is spent watching dust collect along the windowsill. Another, fixing a toilet's limp, broken handle. A third, counting food, scheduling supplies throughout a knee-high stack of calendars. Enough of everything clogs my basement for one-hundred years of survival. More than enough.

In a bored, slipper-pad slide through every room in the house, I find a short row of books soldiered along the guest room desk. They are the typical leather-bound volumes you'd mass order to fill space, and that no guest would ever read—*Walden*, *The Bible*, *Jane Eyre*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Sutras*.

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Weeks flick by like empty channels. In a month, only one person crosses my world's horizon, but they do not pound on my gate. Inside the grey fog clouding the street, the person—I think it is a man—wanders by. He wears a tie and a hooded trench coat; a gas mask bulges beyond the curve of the hood. The outlines of cans press against his backpack's fabric like octopus suckers. He glances at the body of my neighbor lying in her yard, then continues trucking east.

I return to the fifth chapter of *Walden*.

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After finishing *Walden*, I scrape a chair from the kitchen over to the sliding glass door, prop it up facing the redwood, spend a few days cocooned on the cushion. Stare until morning shifts to dusk, imagining existence as a tree. Feeling insects troop across my coarse skin. My roots tentacling through the dirt, absorbing nutrients like a starfish spooned around prey. Warm baths of sunlight; showers of cool rain. The wind's light caress, soft as oiled skin.

The wind is what I miss most. One night, I lay beneath the ceiling fan as it shakes on max power, buffeting my face at near-hurricane speed, but it doesn't feel the same.

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A recurring nightmare kicks me from sleep. Awareness returns with a burst of sweat, a thumping heart. In the dream, monsters made of wind pressed their breezy fingers against my house until my walls cracked like crab shells. And yet, when the house was punctured, I found that, instead of allowing in fresh air, the atmosphere drained away, and I suffocated.

I reach for *Moby Dick* on the nightstand.

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Along with movies, binoculars are something I had not considered important when planning. But now, the desire for them burns as hot as the need for wind. After finishing *Moby Dick*, I move the chair to the upper-floor window and sit, hunched over, face nearly squished against the dirty glass, trying to see my neighbor's face. Some days, the fog wraps her like an empty quilt, so that only the vague wisp of her white robe peeks from within. But even on clear days, and with the two-finger max zoom of my phone camera, she is too far; all I can make out is

the round oval of her head, feathered hair blending with grass, and the barest squiggle of her features. Her expression is what I need to know, and it is unreadable.

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The dust is everywhere—a cloudy film on the windows, a grey brushstroke across all the furniture. When I walk barefoot through the house, particles magnet to my feet, leaving footstep-shaped prints behind like ghost trails.

Before, a maid would come on Tuesdays and suck it up with a vacuum, wipe and bustle and spray, then take the noise with her on her way out so the only sign of her presence was the faint slap of sweat in a house perfumed with lemon and bleach and polish.

Outside the window, snow has blanketed my neighbor's yard in filthy grey, hiding her body.

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As I set *The Sutras* on the windowsill, finished, and the sun dies at the horizon, tinting the last light a fading red, like the coal of a backyard fire, a woman with red hair crosses by my gate. Slows at the light. A newborn baby's moon-shaped face peeks from a blanket cradled in her arm. The woman tries to scale the gate, jolting upward like a one-armed monkey, but drops back down when she reaches the barbed wire coiled along the top. She goes to leave, but jerks to a stop when she sees me. I wait for her to point to the lock, to the baby, to plead, to scream and cry, but she doesn't. She gives me a thumbs up, and, beneath her mask, I can sense a smile splitting her face that hits me harder than any harsh word.

Then she walks away. Does not look back. I trace her retreating form, my face curving across the window, dust buttoning my nose and carving a clean line in the glass, until she

disappears from view. But even after she is gone, I construct her path in my head—where she is going, what she will do. While following the branching paths, I am struck with an intense vision, a nearly zealous certainty, that whatever happens, she and the baby will be okay.

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The next day, I snap shut *Jane Eyre*, my last book, after the final word. Jolt from bed. Thunder down the basement stairs. Yank on two rubber gloves and string a bucket under my arm. Swipe in a bottle of bleach, three bottles of window cleaner, stuff in rolls and rolls of paper towels.

I start with the upper-floor window overlooking the neighbor's yard. Spray. Wipe until dirty wads of paper towels curl like a mountain of paper fists beside me, and the glass before me gleams so clear I can't even see my own reflection. I work my way through the entire second floor, baptizing every window. Empty paper towel rolls gather like tiny logs beneath the sills, in crooks and crannies. Then it's the baseboards. Hands and knees. Hard tile digging into skin.

Downstairs receives the same treatment. Furniture is returned to polished wood, lemon scent tickling up from wooden whirls. Kitchen counters buffed to a shine like old waxed cars. Trinkets are pulled down, wiped, set back in place, nothing hidden beneath them. A mop is dragged up from the basement, filled with hot water, soap and bleach. I swish the mop over every square inch of surface, then bump it up the stairs.

I become a force of clean, an agent of destruction for dust and grime, drenched in sticky sweat. But by the end, my arm muscles feel atrophied from extension, tension, motion. I collapse on the spotless floor, drag my forearm across my salt-sandpapered brow, gasp. Pain bursts in my back, my legs. I am shaking.

And yet, as I lay beneath the ceiling fan, its rotations do not feel like rebirth.

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After a bland, uniform dinner of canned creamed corn, I build a bonfire in my living room. The couches are pushed against the wall, away from the center. A wide metal pan squats in the middle of tangled sheets. Pillows pulled from my bedroom create a den of comfort for me to watch the fire's flicker.

I gather all five books, fan them out before the pan. Pluck their pages, tear them to scraps, and sprinkle them inside. A flick of the long torch lighter sparks the first flame. It licks across ink and paper, gnawing black bite marks into words, sentences, paragraphs, until the heat pushes me too far back to see them dissolve.

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My final shower is dialed so hot it feels like fire given weight—waves of it cascade down my body in stinging sheets. When I step out, my skin in the mirror is red and blistered. I towel myself off and throw on a simple dress—no socks, no shoes. Pad downstairs. My feet no longer leave a trace on the tile.

The living room is buttered with the faint trace of ash and ember. The books' remains pile like a small mountain of dust in the pan.

I bypass it, head to the sliding glass door.

It is spring now. Emerald grass ripples up to the redwood, its coarse bark painted a vivid orange in the spotlight of the afternoon sun. Above, the sky is marbled red and purple, like the best kind of bruises.

Although the sliding glass is tempered seven planes thick, reinforced to withstand the smack of .308 rifle rounds, and the suction is airlocked so tight no virus or bacteria can wiggle in, it takes a mere flick of the lock and tug on the door to open.

I step outside, and am struck with a symphony of buzzing—beetles and cicadas. The air I breathe in deeply tastes of honey, crisp apples, and the distant, fresh-flower cut of rain. Beneath my feet, the grass is dewy, soft, speckled with mud that churns between my toes.

The redwood looms before me. My hand splayed against its trunk feels like a handshake, an agreement. An answer to a question.

I turn toward the west, face the sun drifting below the horizon. Warmth, unguarded by glass, bathes my face for the first time in memory. There is no wind; that is fine. I walk forward. One step becomes ten, becomes fifty, until my feet trail the path of the lady with red hair, and the neighborhood fades behind me. I decide to walk until I reach the far away crash of waves on shore, or something stops me.

At some point while hiking along a roadside rippled with trees, I falter. It strikes me that I never checked the expression on my dead neighbor's face before I left. But then I realize she had always been smiling and continue onward.