

***We Pray For Rain***

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There are words not used anymore. They are not banned, you can pick up any dictionary. Flip, skim, and point. But these words have little meaning now, except when talking about the past. The past is rarely discussed, not out of ignorance, but contempt. Contempt for the actions that led to this dystopian present. Words like floods, foliage, raincoat, swim, and drown have no use. Bodies of water have not all dried, but the common person is not allowed near them. They are strictly reserved for the population's valuable water source.

When I was a child, me and the neighborhood kids played with spoons. We'd dig for pebbles in the clay hardened driveway, sometimes finding bones or plastic. When it rained, the terrain softened, allowing for an easier dig. With nothing to do but explore the confines of our yards, we prayed for rain like so many before us. A ritual of wanting that was ours. The desire often went unanswered, but we did not grow hungry, or drown in dust from a drought. Our desire for rain was impractical, fueled primarily by boredom. We were too young to understand that our prayers were aligned with our elders. They also prayed for rain with their own anxious rituals.

As we grew older we became aware of the drought, an almost taboo subject to discuss. Hushed pillow-talk and news hour snippets revealed to us what our parents had failed to. Sometimes I wondered if it was this lack of communication that caused many of our planet's hardships. There were times when the rain stopped completely, or at least it seemed too. Then some unsuspecting afternoon, a cloud would form. The heavens opened and rain would fall. A built-in break, a pass from work, everyone went outside to relish the

gift. An unspoken permit to drop your tasks and witness the miracle. The collection fields would sound a pittering symphony. Those who believed, thanked their god. Those who didn't thanked the open air.



I was always told it was a blessing to be bright, but now I know that an analytical mind is a curse. I'm always thinking, even when on the brink of sleep; as I am now. Drifting from one unsettling nightmare to the next, not knowing where reality and dreams depart. My eyes flutter in the bright dawn, there's Johnny in the captain's chair. He looks down at me with that classic half-smile, as he loosely holds the binoculars above my head.

"Don't worry Annie, we're almost there, I can *just* see it..." He always trails off, as if he continues to speak in some reality that I'm not a part of.

"I-I'll be glad to step on dry land again..." I said. "I don't know why I'm so nauseous."

"You're just seasick is all, I remember my first time out on the water..."

Johnny fades into the background and darkness returns, another fretful nightmare begins.

I can see it in the distance. The fog dispersing enough to make out a hedge of trees, mythical mangos perfuming the air, fresh palm. I stretch out my arms, reaching over a churning sea. *I can't make it, I can't.* The fog clouds my vision and I sink into the black ocean. The dark heart of wanting forms a wailing from my depths.

The sound of a sputtering engine stirs me, I sit up wide-eyed.

"Don't worry Annie, that's what the oars are for!" John, always smiling, always telling me not to worry.

"I'm not worried John, I just feel awful."

Truthfully, I am too sick to be worried, but as is the curse of an analytical mind, I'm always thinking, even when ill. I lean back on the plastic boat pillow and recall the details that led me to this motorboat adrift an angry ocean.



In our society, we work for water. It is now the most expensive luxury comparable to saffron and vanilla. These luxurious crops are now a thing of the past. I am part of the precocious cusp generation that experienced the before times, when things were only beginning to decline. I was only ten when construction began on Salt Flat Central Park. It took some time before denial faded into action. The periods of rain grew further apart, and people realized the grave importance of finding alternate water sources.

A group of engineers invented a wide-scale method of salt water desalination, and Watr 2.0 was created. The process is complicated, and I won't pretend to understand how it works, but from my understanding, the desalination changes the chemical composition. This product Watr 2.0, looks and functions like water, but has an acrid after taste, almost of plastic; and I've heard rumours it causes cancer. The byproduct of the desalination is briny salt, and lots of it. Some of that salt is commissioned for building parks, like Salt Flat Central. Some is packaged and given away, and the rest is taken to the salt fields. Salt reigns, our own twisted version of snow.

It is the hope that someone will invent a cure for our planet's disease. Can water be created? Can Watr 2.0 be improved? Can storms be manifested? These are today's musings

among modern scientists. Yet science has become less pragmatic, and more religiously hopeful. Divinations of the past, like dowsing for water, are now a popular past time; and much of our technology has declined.



I recall the day I met Johnny, not that long ago. I had gone to read at Salt Flat Central Park. I was sitting on a park bench when I noticed him in my periphery. He had a dopey mauve bowler cap, a book sprawled in his hands. Thumb on the binding for support against the lapping wind. I found him strange, not many people held onto things of the past. Yet he looked like someone out of one of those history books about the 1900's. Materials like cotton, leather, even books are no longer made. They are all relics, found in dusty free stores. No one gives a damn about them, they only care about work, water, and the TV. Now we cut our hair short, and wear linen and recycled polyester. Our life revolves around things that take the least amount of water to produce and maintain.

My eyes widened when I realized he was smoking a pipe.

"Excuse me..." I waved him down. He looked up, with the face of a child caught fibbing.

"Is that tobacco? Where'd you get it?"

"Am I supposed to willingly answer a stranger's accusing question?" He was mocking me.

"Well, I'm Anne, so there, we're not strangers anymore." I could give it back.

We stood silent for a moment with locked eyes, equal.

The scene loops in my mind, how his face transformed emotions as quick as lapping waves.

"Well Annie, there are ways to get the things you want, if you know how to look for them."

We learned about each other quickly; one of those cheap romance novels where two strangers meet by chance and spend the entire night weaving the past together until it circles them like a noose, binding them forever. I discovered he was several years older than me, I myself had just turned nineteen. He worked at the local water plant, a high up position, arranged by his well connected late father. Johnny spoke in hushed tones about having access to things I'd never dreamed of. We realized how similar we were, two souls gripping onto a dying past that no one seemed to care about. Johnny introduced me to a world I thought was gone forever.



Water collection plants employ the highest volume of workers, these plants are found in every city. In towns with the highest probability of rain, you can find several. Those who don't work at a water plant, are likely to be employed at a food biosphere. Few romantic positions exist in our society, everyone works for survival. Except for maybe the rich. I grew up in the working class, unaware of the covert withholdings and privilege of the upper class.

In the biospheres, where I work, no frivolous crops are propagated, only those requiring the least amount of water. Our diet consists largely of chard, cactus, sweet potato, corn, and amaranth. Meat animals are restricted to chickens and goats. The feed animals are few, and fed GMO plant-based diets. They drink Water 2.0 and wail in small pens. Animals still live in the wild, but barely. Any known water source is surrounded by electric fencing. Thirsty animals are shocked repeatedly for want of water; although I'm sure the clever animals

have their secrets. My father is a custodian, one of his duties is removing the electrocuted animals, or scavenging them for meat.



Johnny and I were inseparable from the day we met. He showed me his secret world, the world of the rich. During hard times everyone suffers, but the rich and well-connected will always suffer less. Johnny had inherited his father's home, and his wealth. Beneath his house was a private biosphere; he had access to real water, and had two chickens and a goat. He grew and toasted his own tobacco, and made wine from composted berries. His hobbies would appear industrious, but these were just hobbies of a rich man with too much time on his hands, and not enough fear.

At this point I stopped going to work, as we settled into our routine of playing house. I, the spoiled housewife would sleep in, while he went off to work at the water plant. I spent the day reading, listening to records, preparing lavish meals from fresh produce. Some days with a pang of guilt I would take baths. I spent hours in the tub, smoking pipe tobacco, and eating strawberries with real goat's milk cream. Since the womb, I had never experienced the ethereal joy of being submerged in water. In the evenings we drank homemade wine and made love. Things seemed perfect, I don't know why we had to leave.

On a chilly Sunday morning, John and I had gone up to the salt flats. I stood near the edge of a cliff considering the black sea.

“You thinking about jumping in?” He came up behind me and put his arms around my waist.

“No, *well maybe*... I was thinking about the waves carrying us away to somewhere better.”

He dropped his hands from my waist, and began to pace in front of me. His face had darkened and he was rubbing his chin with a vacant stare.

“Well, I um...” He muttered.

“What is it John?”

“There *is* a place I know of... an island.”

“Yeah sure.”

His eyes narrowed at my sarcastic tone. I had only known him a couple weeks, and had started to notice a change in him. He was quick to anger, and I felt his friendly mask had started to unravel at the seams. I altered my tone.

“Okay, tell me about it...”

“Well, remember I told you about how I scout for water at the plant. Once a month I get to take the boat out in search of any nearby islands that might have a water source. I wasn’t sure if I should tell you, or anyone really, but last month I think I found something.”

I tried to hold an expression of enthusiasm as he continued.

“I’m not sure, but when I was scouting I was able to make out a line of trees with my binoculars. The trees weren’t withered, they looked plush with life, there *has* to be water there! I couldn’t make it all the way, I only had enough gas to get back to shore. I knew if I told the board of directors at the plant, it would be ruined like the other water mines. Another water source drained, for nothing.”



I didn't know how to respond, it seemed like a childish made up story.

"Well, what are you thinking?" I replied.

*"What do you mean, I want to go there... I want us to go. I want to live!"*

"I'm not sure... it seems risky."

"Do you want to go with me or not?" A flash of anger.

"You know I love you John, what's wrong with you!"

"When the time comes, you'll just have to trust me."

I felt disconcerted after our conversation and suddenly sick. The excess of water and fine things that had been denied to me most of my life suddenly felt dark and unwelcoming.

Like I was a pig being fattened up, to what end I don't know. I went back to my parents after that, I needed to get away from his madness for awhile. A few days later Johnny dropped a letter off at my house, it read:

Meet me at the water plant at 5 AM tomorrow. If you love me, you'll come.

I'll explain everything then, there's not much time left. Bring only one suitcase, just things you'd like to have, I'll have everything else we need.

The following morning I went to meet him. I had planned to break things off, but I still packed a suitcase. Part of me was undecided. I had let fantasy consume me, imagining what it would be like to live with him on our own private island. In the end I conceded, it was naive of me to agree to go, but he was so convincing. Johnny told me things were getting worse, and his secret lifestyle of luxury wouldn't last much longer, especially if the

authorities found out. Apparently they were planning to close the water plant in our town, and evacuate everyone to a nearby city.

He said he had been planning for something like this for years, he had everything we needed to create a life for ourselves. I straddled the liminal space between the boat and the dock, after much sweet talking, I decided to give my life to the ocean.



There are myths of lost islands in the ocean that receive an abundance of rain. It seems it would be easy to find these treasures, but in a lot of ways society has reverted to an earlier period of humanity. We no longer have the ability to charter islands, gasoline is too precious. Even water boating is a dying field, the cost is too great, and the results too few.

I know the differences between then and now. Because, unlike many of us, I love to read. I know that there used to be toilets filled with water. Now we pee in buckets that we set outside to be picked up by the water plant. We compost our movements for nutritious soil to grow the crops. I know there used to be swimming pools, and freshwater lakes as big as an ocean. I know people enjoyed curling up in a cozy bed on stormy days; and that little kids would put on rain boots and go outside to play in puddles. Most of what I know about the past, I've learned from books.

Water 2.0 is used for showering, laundry, washing, and drinking for most who cannot afford the real thing. Yet these tasks are rationed. Water is turned on two hours in the morning, and two hours in the evening. The water cycle is no longer a cycle, but an enigma. We are

all children in the hands of nature, rudimentary and frightened. As if waiting for two stones to spark, we pass time in awe and fear. Many things have reverted. Awesome is no longer slang for something enjoyable, but has reverted closer to its original meaning. We use it to describe the rain and the lack of rain. Awe, to be filled with terror, dread, and wonder. How fear laps so calmly at the edges of our mind, like a tide waiting to rise.



“If we go, it’ll be forever, you understand that right?” Johnny’s last words before I joined him on the boat echo in my mind. I am awake now, the recollection of the past few weeks jarred me back into the reality of our situation. We are in a boat, in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight, and we’ve run out of gas. I try not to panic, afraid for our future, and afraid of Johnny’s reaction to my fear.

“John, how far are we from the island... you think we can finish rowing there, right?”

“Yeah, yeah of course, I could see the outline through my binoculars... the sea is pretty calm now, I think we should make it in an hour or so...yeah I’m pretty sure.” He said.

“Alright then, you need help rowing?”

“No, I got it, just lay back and try to relax, I don’t want you getting sick again.”

“Okay, I’ll try... you said you packed some medicine in one of your suitcases, right? I need something, I’ve got a terrible headache... all this sun.”

“Honey, don’t you think we should save that for the island, we’ll need to ration in case something happens, do you really need it, or can you try to hold out?”

“I really need it!” I was exasperated, a panic rising in my throat, like my subconscious had realized something long ago and had selfishly waited to tell me.

“No. Just drink some water.” He said sternly.

I reached towards the suitcases Johnny had packed onto the boat, he grabbed my hand.

“Don’t go near those suitcases.” He threatened.

“Why John, why can’t I touch the suitcases?” I didn’t understand why he was being so controlling, maybe the heat was getting to both of us.

“You know what, go ahead Annie, if you don’t want to listen to me, if you can’t trust me, then go ahead and open it.” He raised the binoculars to his face, and stared out into the empty ocean.

I reached for the nearest suitcase, it was heavy and fell towards me. I unclasped the lock and popped open the lid, it was filled to the brim with books.

“Johnny, why is this suitcase filled with books?” I asked shakily.

“Uh, I knew we’d get bored trapped on an island, I just thought I should pack some entertainment, you know... I thought you liked reading?”

I reached towards another suitcase, this one was lighter than the first. I opened the suitcase to find some loose papers and rags. I felt faint, overcome with the realization of our present situation.

“There is no island, *is there?*” I whispered.

Salty tears ran down my face, I couldn’t escape the salt.

John didn’t reply, just kept staring towards the barren horizon.

I understood now that it was all a fantasy; like a twisted Robinson Crusoe. There was no island, he had made it up, an escape both mental and physical. Now we are stranded in the

sea, two tiny insignificant beings in the hands of mother nature. We are held here, time has stopped.



The ocean is the new desert. Wild, uncharted, and dangerous. On the edge of ocean cities you can see miles of stretching wind turbines in the shallows of the sea. Most settlements are near the coastlines, the inland areas quickly became uninhabitable, and people flocked towards water plants. Explorers tried to venture into the ocean for awhile with sailboats and old-fashioned ships, but many did not return. Those who did return, told of horrific storms that would appear on the horizon, how the wind would pick up to unimaginable speeds. The ocean was now a foreign planet to us, barren from algae blooms and riddled with dead zones. The cruel waters held hidden treasures we couldn't access, and hungrily fed off the land.



"Johnny, say something!" I demanded.

"We need to start rowing if we're going to make it to the island before that storm hits." He had lost his mind, unwilling to face what he had done, trapped in a privileged reality where he believed the world was his for the taking, that he was somehow more powerful than nature.

"Storm..." I muttered. I hadn't noticed before, but thick swelling clouds had formed on the horizon. I had never seen something so grand, the clouds were majestic and

colored like bruised flesh. They began to sing in rumbles and cracks. I could see the golden flashes of lightning against the blackened sky.

I picked up an oar, and nudged Johnny with it. We began to row, alternating strokes, directly towards the storm. I think I was as mad as John, deep down I had understood my fate when stepping onto this motorboat.

He began to weep, finally breaking, and apologizing repeatedly. I could no longer hear him as the wind picked up. My face reared stoic towards the crashing waves. I always felt that the lack of water would eventually kill me, kill all of us. I didn't imagine my death as the result of too much of it. For me drowning was just a tragic story I had read about, it didn't seem real. As the waves broke up our tiny boat, I knew it wouldn't be long before I was sucked under by a towering wave; I had no idea how to swim. Yet, a serenity fell over me. I felt decidedly lucky to give myself over to the sublime, rather than slowly slipping away on a dying planet.



