Sleep
Travis Kurowski

When the waters first began to rise, there was certainly panic—people hurriedly packed up their baby photos and wedding albums and left town, school after school cancelled classes for the day, then for the entire week, a heavyset woman stood alone outside Wal-Mart in jeans and a yellow tank top and told us all about the coming apocalypse—but after a few weeks of frantic phone calls and soaking men stapling tarps onto slippery rooftops, a sluggish monotony settled over the town, worry slowly having become habit, then eventually disappearing altogether. Children ceased their vigils at living room windows. People returned home, unloading their cars, bent over their boxes to protect them from getting wet. Schools reopened. The heavyset woman never returned.

It was the middle of July. We walked around in rubber boots carrying cheap umbrellas. In the evenings, we stayed indoors. The mosquitoes had come out in record numbers. The water, people said, let the bugs reproduce at a terrifying rate. Candles and spray were not enough, so even in the summer heat we covered ourselves in clothing—pullovers, jeans, and some even wearing gloves. To its credit, the rain washed away many distinctions among us—we all felt much the same as we dealt with many of the same problems. Neighbors got to know neighbors they never would have met otherwise, borrowing tools or helping one another bail water. Strangers stood next to strangers pushing cars across flooded roads and parking lots. The first weeks of the flood Sally and I followed each other everywhere—to the store, the garage, the bathroom. We would lie in bed together in the early afternoon listening to the rush of water against the roof. “It sounds like it’s stopping,” one of us would say, both then listening a few anxious minutes more in silence to see if this was true. By the end, I worked longer hours than usual at the theater, and was gone sometimes days at a time, immersing myself in the job. Sally stayed home eating microwave dinners, her water-logged bird feeders swaying in the trees outside the window like miniature corpses.

Richard Hutchinson, presiding director of the town’s only theater, phoned Alan earlier in the month and said he wanted the next show to go up in two weeks, over a month before scheduled. “People are going to want distraction,” Richard said. “We could make some real money here if we hurry. On the news they’re saying a month more of rain, maybe longer.” During the call, Alan told me later, he could hear actors already rehearsing in the director’s house.

Alan was my boss. I’d been hired on as grunt labor to help him build sets around town, at churches, high schools, whatever. It was a shit job, I knew: two bucks over minimum wage and no benefits. Plus, I didn’t like Alan, but in a one theater town where I had a couple drug felonies on my record and no marketable skills, I couldn’t be picky about who I worked with. It wasn’t that he was such a bad guy—he was actually very nice, charming, too, which was much of the problem. It’s just that Sally had noticed all that, too. “He’s a nice guy,” she said one night we were watching a Mamet movie on cable, “a nice, handsome guy.” Seeing I was annoyed by this, she teased, making jokes about me being careful to not leave her alone with him. Funny stuff. After, I had trouble being around him too long without getting hot. Not that it was his fault, I knew. But once I saw his charming, good looking face, I had trouble really remembering that.
I stood onstage next to a fifteen-foot painter’s ladder and underneath a sixteen-foot high skeleton of steel vertical and horizontal trussing spanning the stage. The red digital face of the AM/FM clock radio in the shop read: 5:30. “Five-thirty in the morning?” I asked, to no one in particular. Alan said, “Yeah, hotshot.”

We had been up three days and nights washing down Vivarin with coffee, so we were as wide awake as we were dead tired; our hands shook like Mexican jumping beans if we held them flat out. The lighting and sound people were calling Alan’s cell phone every six hours demanding to know when they could come in and start. We had been breaking our backs for ten days straight already. We had to weld one last vertical truss onto the frame before we could move on and start applying the masking and paint—start putting the magic on, Alan called it, and stupid shit like that almost made me not think he was so bad. Two weeks of work ahead of us and four days to do it in. “Ready, Rodg?” Alan said, shooting me a mouthful of teeth as he walked towards me. Charming bastard. I grabbed the 800-watt welding gun and moved up the ladder.

Problem was: we were out of wire-coiled solder. “No problem,” Alan said, “we can just do it the old-fashioned way with sticks.” “But I never stick-welded before,” I told him, which was true. “No problem,” he said, “it’s easy.”

At the top of the ladder, I braced myself against the frame. Welding with wire was a snap—any five-year old could do it. You just pulled the trigger. But with stick welding you hold a rod of solder in one hand and melt it with the gun in the other, sort of like holding a hot glue stick in your bare hand and dissolving it with a propane torch.

“Just remember to keep the rod moving,” Alan said from below. “And try not to punch a hole in the steel. And don’t hold it above your face.”

“Sure, fine, got it,” I said.

My hand shook flopping down my face guard. Then I pulled the trigger, arcing blue light towards three-tons of steel trussing only inches above my head. As I worked, my tired eyes refocused themselves along the lengths of trussing beyond: hundreds of short steel tubing welded into triangles. It looked like a bunch of little bridges.

“Watch it,” I heard Alan yell. “You’re gonna burn your fucking face off, hotshot,”

“Get the backside too,” he added. “It’s all about safety. We don’t want the piano crashing fifteen-feet down onto the dancing girls.”

From behind the tinted face guard, the piercing blue light of the welder was hypnotic, and I was so tired that everything outside of it seemed unreal and unimportant. As the gun hit the solder, melting it with the metal, small pieces of it bounced onto my arm, scorching my sleeve. “Ouch,” I mumbled, trying not to be heard.

“Roger, hey,” Alan said, “maybe you should come down. Take a break.”

“Nope. Fine,” I said.

“You want me to give a crack at it?” Alan said. I felt a hand tap against the calf of my right leg. When did he get on the ladder?

I shook my foot. “Fuck off, Alan,” I said.
“I was just offering.” I heard him climbing back down.

“Hey—no problem, hotshot,” I said. “I’ve got it.”

Sparks erupted from the weld above me as I leaned in. I hadn’t noticed before, but sweat covered my face, dripping around the curve of my eyelids. I pressed a shoulder harder into the truss beside me for support, but my arms felt like rubber; it was all I could do to hold them up. The gun and stick were like solid lead balls aching for the floor. Exhausted, I accidentally dropped the gun an inch. My arms were too weak to lift it up any higher. I tensed my muscles to no effect. The weight of my arms with that of the gun overpowered me and the nose of the gun dropped another inch, and it came away from the weld.

The free weight of the gun pulled my arms left and towards the floor. My body jerked back against the fall, swaying my entire weight to the right, away from the truss I had been leaning on, and completely off the ladder. Panicked, I jammed the nose of the gun against the metal above me in order to catch myself. The last thing I saw after the tip snapped off and the gun began spitting fire was Alan frozen in place below, his arms raised as though to catch me, or the ladder, or the flaming gun, or all three, and then I hit the floor.

There are certain areas of the theater which resonate and bounce sound along differently than other areas, where all the echoes of the rain along the roof are brought to a full, luminous crescendo. It sounded like a hundred horses galloping across solid glass. The theater’s roof was made of tin and supported by an open crisscross of metal beams. Each raindrop against the roof sent a vibration into the tin which then fed into the beams, rushing and growing as vibrations crossed and doubled back upon one another, doubling in strength, tripling in strength, getting infinitely stronger. When I awoke I could swear horses were stampeding on the roof. From the floor, I could see the beams shake. I was captivated by the rush of the rain and could not help feeling that the water sounded hungry.

My head ached. The ladder lay beside me on the floor. Alan was lying on top of me. I assumed, at first, that he fell too—that this was just how we landed. Then I remembered that he was on the ground to begin with. To my right, I could see the welder had been picked up and rolled offstage. Alan’s face lay on my chest, his mouth open like a child’s. He looked stunning, and reminded me of portraits painted by Lucian Freud. A bone pushed in and out against the skin of Alan’s cheek as he clenched his jaw in his sleep. I looked up to the rafters. The echoing rain sounded like brutal animals crashing across the rooftops looking for gold. I slowly lifted Alan’s body, so as not to wake him, and pulled him off me.

As I left, I shut off all the lights and locked all the exterior doors. In the doorway, I flinched at the light from outside. A wall of water covered the morning sky. My blood felt thick. I shook my head, closed my eyes tight and reopened them to wash away the tiredness and heaviness of my muscles and bones. Then I headed out into the downpour and across the parking lot to where my truck was parked.

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I didn’t feel like myself, but continued driving.

Even the roads that weren’t flooded were at the least covered in a thin film of water, which turned solid black when hit right by the light. On top of this, the rain didn’t seem to be
made up of drops, but looked instead like a gigantic vibrating glass curtain. Driving wasn’t impossible, but it was near that. Radio and televised news reports had carried numerous warnings about the dangers of driving in the storm and daily long lists of traffic accidents were broadcast.

The trip home usually took fifteen minutes. I took the rural bypass around town so as to avoid traffic lights, and, though this route was perhaps not faster, I could at least maintain speed the entire way without stopping. I do not know why the two boys were out that early—it was not even six in the morning yet—but there they suddenly were, at the edge of the bypass, where it takes a ninety-degree corner and heads back to town.

As for cars, I was alone on the road. Or so it seemed; in the rain, I could only see fifteen or so feet ahead of me, and then it was all white like quartz stone. The boys ran right out in front of me, just as I was coming around the corner, and in my daze, my exhaustion, I didn’t even swerve. They looked about twelve-years old. The first boy—the blond—hit the edge of the right headlight and bounced off into the grass ditch. It was as I was watching him skip off, that the second brown haired one flipped up and his back landed against my windshield. I must have, I assumed, hit him head on.

I didn’t even pull over when I finally stopped the truck fifty feet down the road. Though the second boy’s back was still on my windshield, I couldn’t quite place yet what had happened. I almost thought he had jumped at me, or that someone was playing a joke. For an instant I thought I was someone else, that I was looking through someone else’s eyes at a rougher, less lucky life than my own. I opened the door and stepped out into the rain.

I felt the other boy looking. Though I couldn’t quite understand the child on my hood, for some reason I certainly understood that I had seriously hurt the first boy. I felt anger, and that I had to do something about it. I walked back to where I saw him fall, leaving my truck running and the door open. It all seemed a dream in the thick weather and haze of exhaustion.

In the ditch, the boy’s left leg was bent grotesquely up towards his shoulder. As I approached him, his eyes lit with anger and fear. He sat on grass, piles of boulders and loose gravel scattered around him. He didn’t take his eyes off me as he pulled himself slowly backwards towards the bushes behind.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I said as I moved closer. “I only want to see if you are hurt.” His eyes welled up with tears but he didn’t cry. As I left him alone and walked back to the truck, I realized my fists were clenched tight, like clubs.

The boy on the hood came off easily, and I slipped him into the nearby bushes. The blood came off in the rain as I drove.

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After sleeping until after nightfall, Sally came into our bedroom to wake me and asked if I thought I would be up for going out. It was Sunday.

“Let’s bake some bread,” she said, “and bring it over to Denise’s.” Denise and Sam were two married friends of Sally’s from before I knew her. Sally’s would tell me stories of Denise and her when they were young and wild, some of them from only just a year before. Denise and her
running cars into telephone poles. Denise and her stealing men out from under other women’s noses. Sally had found a recipe for beer bread with sharp cheddar cheese and scallions.

“That sounds great,” I said.

“It’s perfect,” she said. “A recipe we have to buy beer for.”

Sally had only that year been divorced, and though she didn’t like to admit it, certainly not to others, she divorced her husband partly because she had met me. As I saw it, Sally had an entire life I was not a part of, an entire group of friends and relatives I had yet to know. Never having been married myself, I saw them then as friends from her other life, the married one.

Our life together had been so far a difficult one, but I was determined to make it work. Considering that her other relationship hadn’t stood the test of fidelity, I was determined to prove that ours would, and told her so constantly. “You are the only woman for me,” I would tell her, and she always said she felt the same.

I was so tired I didn’t remember walking to the shower. As the water ran over my face, I had difficulty remembering if I had really hit those two boys or if it had all been a dream and I wrestled the idea back and forth in my mind, talking to myself and grunting in the cascading drops. When Sally came in to say I had been in there for half an hour and was I ever getting out, I finally noticed that the water had turned cold and I had forgot to soap myself.

Denise and Sam were just having dinner, so they invited us to join them on their screened-in porch.

“We never sit outside anymore since the rain,” Sally said to Denise and took my arm and led me outside. “It will be a treat.”

After dinner, Sam brought out three bottles of Nouveau Beaujolais.

“Look at the rain,” Sam said, pointing off of the deck into the suburban street beyond their house. “Look at it next to that streetlamp. It’s so powerful. It’s like it’s coming down out of the sky.”

Denise laughed, covering her face up with her napkin. “That’s so stupid,” she said. “Coming down out of the sky.” Sally and I both laughed, too.

“Not out of the clouds, I mean,” Sam said, defensive. “But right out of the sky.”

“Where else is it going to come from?” I said.

The rain did seem beautiful. In the light of the lamp the millions of tiny drops of water formed a waving, glittering surface.

“Porches are nice in this weather,” I said, putting my hand on Sally’s leg. “It feels safe and secure.”

“Why is it,” Sam asked, still looking away from the table and out into the weather, “that we have to see what we don’t want to be a part of, in order to understand how well off we have it where we are?”
It seemed I couldn’t help think about how the entire year was like that for Sally and me. She would tell me how bad it used to be for her and we would be happy for the moment that much more.

As we got into the second bottle of wine, I began to recall the accident: flashing eyes, blood smeared on the windshield, the dead boy’s weight. I pushed it out of my mind and focused my attention on Sally and Denise’s conversation. They were discussing spousal E.S.P., and Sally was telling her about recent studies that said after time couples began to read one another’s minds in ways that could not be explained through body language.

“Not Sam and I,” Denise said, not looking over at him. Sam was staring again out at the weather. “We used to before...,” she began to say and then stopped. Denise noticed that I was listening to them and suddenly turned to me. “Never get married,” she said in a loud voice. She smoothed her napkin against the table.

“She means us,” I said jokingly, turning to Sam. “Not you two.”

Sam turned his head to me. He poured another glass of wine, emptying the bottle. “It’s true,” he said. “After you get married, it’s like ‘snap,’ there goes the connection. It’s all about dividing responsibility then.” He took a sip of his wine.

“Say like today,” he started again. “I was at work and Denise called and said she had a hip problem. Osteonecrosis. Tells me her hip is going to fall off sometime and at least by the time she is thirty she is going to need a hip replacement. Okay, I say, and hang up.” Denise looked up at him but didn’t say anything and suddenly I wished I was still holding Sally’s leg, and reached over to take her hand in mine. “Well,” he continued, “later, when I got home, Denise wondered why I didn’t give her more attention.”

“Support,” Denise said.

Sam smiled and took her hand. “Support. Why didn’t I give her any more support.” A smile settles over Sam’s mouth and eyes. “Well, I say, this morning our son Jimmy has jumped off the bed and landed tooth down, so all day at work I’m thinking my son is going to have gray teeth when he gets older or at least going to need them removed. Then Denise calls with the hip. So: I’m at the construction site where I work thirty hours a week if I’m lucky, if the jobs are available, and I get no benefits, and I have a new son whose teeth are going to need to be pulled out and a wife who is going to need her hip replaced and I think, great. And what I tell Denise is that next time she phones, she had better have good news.”

I noticed Denise move her hand off of Sam’s and down onto his leg. I was about to do the same with Sally, when my cell phone rang in my pocket. It was Alan.

“It’s Alan,” I told Sally, kissing her cheek. “I’m going to walk inside and get this.” Sally seemed to flinch her head to the side for a second, but then put her hand on my neck and gave me a deep, searching kiss.

“Whew!” Denise yelled, lifting her glass. “Alright.”

Inside, I put the phone to my ear. “Hey, Alan. What’s up? You tired?”
“Just listen for a second,” he said. It sounded like he had been crying.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Roger, listen—I saw the news. I saw the news reports. I’m at home now, in front of the television.”

My heart stopped and I pushed myself to breathe. I pulled back the window curtain and looked out at Sally on the deck.


“I saw the boys, Roger, I saw the boys. They had one boy on television, a little blond one, and he described your truck. He described you, Roger. I heard him on the news.”

My throat was dry and my voice raspy when I spoke. “Why did you call, Alan? What do you want to do? There are lots of trucks like mine. Lots of guys my build.”

“It was you—the time, the truck, the route you drive every time home.”

“What do you want?” I said.

The phone sat quiet for a moment. I stared out the window, my gaze resting, as usual, on Sally. She pulled at her underwear with her hand and rearranged herself in the chair.

“I want to tell you something, a secret of my own.”

I suddenly thought about my time with Sally, when she was still married, but didn’t say anything. I couldn’t keep my mind focused on the conversation and stared out the window. I noticed Denise staring back at me and so I quickly waved and then looked away.

“Sally’s pregnant,” Alan said into the phone. “She’s pregnant.”

My attention snapped back to the phone in my hand and I closed the window curtain. But, “What?” was all I could think to say.

“It’s mine,” Alan said. “The baby. It’s mine, it’s mine, it’s mine, it’s mine,” he said, then hung up. I shut the phone and pushed it into my pocket.

Out the window, the three of them were smiling and talking animatedly. Sally was poking Denise’s thigh with her index finger. Sam opened the third bottle of Beaujolais. I waited a moment, then pushed open the door and walked outside into the laughter.

“Oh, Roger,” Denise said, “we were just talking about the time I wrecked my car. It was the same weekend Sally wrecked hers. We were helping a girl named Miranda move—“

“You were getting plastered,” Sam said.

“Yes—and we were helping her move. Or trying to. Anyhow, we were driving down the road and I suddenly put the car up onto the curb and ran into a telephone pole. On the passenger side.”
“I almost died,” Sally said, laughing and reaching out to grab my hand. I didn’t move, but she seemed not to notice and continued. “Roger—she doesn’t even remember! Can you believe that?” All of them laughed again, and I cracked a grin. Dead boys. Alan.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well,” Denise said, “that was the night I met Sam.” Sam held up his wine glass in a mock toast and grinned wide. “He was with some other girl, but she ended up puking the night away out back, so we stayed up all night talking until sunrise.”

Sally stood up and came over to me, embracing me and leaning against my chest as she listened to Denise talk. I could smell lavender in her hair.

“I was tee-totally drunk,” Denise said, “but we fell in love.”

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Two days later, the rain finally stopped and the water receded. The newspapers announced on the back pages of section two that the boy’s burial—Peter Olson’s burial—was to be held at the Episcopal cemetery on the other end of town. During the first months I expected a police officer to drop in some day, a phone call to come, but nothing happened. The boy’s life slipped into the malaise. I quit my job building sets and began to apply for acting jobs again—which was how I got into the theater in the first place. Money was tight, but we made it by, and I rarely saw Alan. Nothing came of the accident, and I never mentioned it to Sally. Eventually I received a small but good role at a repertory theater in Boston playing Hamlet’s friend Horatio, and we moved out east. Three months later, at Boston General, our son was born. Nine pounds, seven ounces. Holding the child, then, now, it seemed something ornate I couldn’t get a hold of, couldn’t quite figure.