

WATCHING THE WAVES

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As the hurricane neared the island the citizens went into overdrive. Bank ATM's were running out of money. There was an hour long wait at the gas stations as the citizenry filled their tanks while hoping that the gas would not be needed. There was scarcely any water left at the many water depots. People were filling containers of all sizes and shapes from roadside spigots the flow of which would be discontinued just before the hurricane hit. Long lines formed at Kelly's and Dolly Madison the two hardware stores. Supplies of plywood were running low long before the meteorologists calculated that the island would receive a direct hit. Most adults had endured at least one of these storms before and were taking no chances. Non-perishable food was stockpiled.

All schools were closed two days before the projected time of arrival to give the teachers and staff a chance to make their own hurricane preparations. The school children were delighted. Nothing pleases an island child more than the thought of a hurricane with days or weeks off school to come.

The wind was picking up as Marissa ran across the street, jumped the sea wall with the expertise of an Olympic gymnast and tumbled on the sand careless of the grains which coated her cornrowed plaits. She would pay for this later when her mother, vexed and exasperated, roughly brushed at her hair for a full hour before finally giving up the fight between hair shaft and sand. Marissa made a total of seven cartwheels before she fell. It was a record. She danced around with her hands in the air screaming her own name for the crowds.

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Marissa was a skinny little girl with knock knees and buck teeth which still had to be straightened. She had her father's flattish nose and dark skin and her mother's thick coarse hair and full lips.

"Ain't no pretty here." Her brother Jontae who was seventeen, would say teasing her.

Marissa didn't mind. Pretty was overrated. If they knew her thoughts they would see pretty. But no one ever asked Marissa what she thought.

The beach was as it always was with one or two persons walking for exercise and a few children playing in the sand. Gusts of winds roughhoused with the waves and the surf was high crashing against the white sand. There were no boats out today. Everything was being secured for the oncoming storm.

Marissa could hear the men hammering plywood and shutters over the windows of their houses. In preparation for the storm community spirit soared and everyone was assisting their neighbors. The men cussed creatively as they worked salting the government, the weather, their tools and sometimes even God.

"Them people gouging you at that hardware store."

"You would think that they would have a little more damn compassion for they own people."

"I swear I f---king paid double the price for this itty bitty piece a plywood."

"Watch yourself bei. That was my f—king hand you almost hit."

"We ain't gat no checks and balances. That's what's wrong."

"Government could do what they want when they want. Just getting rich off the people."

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“God does only work for the rich.”

“Y’all f---king idiots voted them in.”

“Not me. Now you know I don’t go for that.”

“Who evacuating?”

“You crazy, eh? And leave my house for the tiefs?”

“I fucking work hard for the little I gat so I staying here.” My house sound. I fucking built it myself. This house could stand any storm. The Bible say don’t build on sand build on rock. That’s what I did.”

“I hope your God here when you homeless ‘cause if he bringing this hurricane here then he and I need a serious talk.”

“Well, I taking my family and going.”

“Me too. The house ga be here. I hope you here when we get back.”

“Bei, don’t fucking play wit me. Gone then. We ga be just fine.”

“Just don’t expect me to come here to rescue you on no jet ski.”

“Ain’t I just tell you we ga be fine?”

Marissa kicked off her shoes, looking back guiltily to see if her mother happened to be watching, then ran as fast as she could down the almost deserted beach kicking up the sand behind her as her bare feet dug in and out of the grains. She was almost eleven years old. Her birthday was in a month. She was born on the cusp of something. This made her unpredictable and hard-headed. That’s what her mother always said. Her mother was determined to tame this child born on the cusp.

It wasn’t often Marissa had time to herself. Girls didn’t. Girls were born to work her mother said. Her mother said that after having had three boys Marissa was her joy.

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Marissa thought it was just because now her mother had someone to help her with the housework. Every morning Marissa was awoken at five-thirty by her mother. She was expected to get herself ready, clean her room, (because a lady never left her room messy or her bed unmade), then help with breakfast before going to school. Her three big brothers and her father never helped with breakfast. They just grunted, ate, and stared at their phones. After everyone had eaten Marissa washed the dishes and made sure the kitchen was presentable while her mother got ready for work.

“I don’t like to see a dirty kitchen when I come home to cook. It defeats the purpose if I am tired and my kitchen is dirty and tired too. So make sure we have clean to meet us at the door, little Marissa,”

Her mother worked in a bank downtown and she needed some time in the mornings to make herself presentable as she reiterated every week.

“This pretty don’t come easy,” she said.

Her dad took the boys to school. They were in the high school. Her mother dropped Marissa to her school. She always fussed in the car.

“I hope you finished your homework, Marissa. I don’t want to get a phone call from any of your teachers. Education is power and you are getting the best education we can give you. You do your part and we’ll do our part. Is that clear Marissa?”

The only answer was “Yes Mum,” before she scrambled out of the car.

Marissa always completed her assignments. Her homework was always the first thing she did when she got home from school. Marissa loved school. School held no surprises. It was the same routine day in and day out. Marissa liked routine. Routine calmed her. She was smart and hardworking and usually first in her class, but her mother

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never seemed to notice. She credited her earnest child with many imaginary faults. Marissa blamed this on her brothers. Her brothers were wild and loud. They laughed about their homework and never studied. They got away with being rude to their elders. They were stubborn and sly. Marissa did not consider this unusual. Boys were different. She knew this. And perhaps her mother thought because Marissa had three brothers she would be the same.

In the afternoons once she had finished her homework and her chores, some of which she thought her mother made up on the spur of the moment, (Sweep the living room, Marissa. Iron this tablecloth, Marissa. Use the broom to dust off the front door, Marissa), she was free to roam the beach. She taught herself how to jump from the sea wall instead of using the old people stairs as she called it. It was hard at first and she did sprain her ankle once, (and received a beating for being stupid), but she found that she had a natural ability for acrobatics. It must come from one of her past lives she surmised. Marissa believed in past lives, and magic, and fairies and aliens. She secretly believed in many things that her brothers would tease her about if they knew.

When she sat on the beach with her short legs curled under her and the sand tickling her thighs in a pleasantly scratchy way, she watched the rippling waves and saw all of her lives spread out before her.

One of her classmates asked her once if she had ever wanted to be a mermaid and Marissa laughed at her. She was never a mermaid and she never wanted to be one. Life under the sea was too dangerous for Marissa. There were too many predators under the sea. And it was too dark. Besides, gills did not seem to be too agreeable. They were just ugly. Lungs were better. Instead she had a life in the clouds. There were people in

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the clouds, people who floated from place to place and never ate. Marissa had lived up there once, but she found them too listless. That's what living in the clouds does to you. The essence of the cloud makes you lethargic. When she lived up there she mostly slept.

She had lived on a mountain in a cave all by herself. Every morning she sat at the mouth of the cave and was mesmerized by the crystal light of the sun on the snow and ice. She spent many years in her high cave. There were times she turned away from contemplating the peaks and went exploring the stalagmites and stalactites in gigantic underground caverns where the light was gloomy glimmers of the sun flickering through the rocks. Here strange skinny people lived who subsisted on rocks and bugs. They were friendly and welcomed her, but Marissa missed the sun and she missed the ocean so she returned to the island to watch the waves.

Sometimes it seemed as if a million invisible beings were pouring cups of suds along the shore in a synchronized rhythm. And sometimes the surf burst into the air in coordinated explosions like a mechanized fountain. Marissa loved the ocean all of the time.

There were some days that she ran as far and as fast as she could and avoided all of her neighbors; the girls playing sand games, and the boys diving into water to show off their prowess. Sometimes she felt social and became the leader of any group she joined inventing crazy games which were spun in her imagination. Sometimes she just sat and looked and counted the waves as they broke along the shore until her brain got all mixed up and she no longer knew if she was counting forward or backward, yet the waves still came.

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Then when the sun looked as though it was thinking of going away she took the steps back to her house. It was ordained that you could jump down, but you had to climb back. Marissa had to be home before twilight was well established or night fell. If she was late then she endured Mum's slipper and her ranting as she listed the many calamities which would have befallen Marissa in the dark. Or she got three hard slaps on her behind from her Dad which hurt even more and were not accompanied with any words.

There were things to do before the storm came so Marissa did not linger on the beach today. The wind and the waves were steadily building and it was time to go home.

Home was louder when her brothers were there. They liked to shout. Marissa went in through the garage to the back door. They all entered the house this way as it led into the kitchen. Her mother was standing over the stove frying chicken and acknowledged her with a smile. There was a large bruise on the side of her face which was not there when Marissa saw her last. That meant Dad was home too. They had had a fight again.

"Peel some potatoes, then put them on to boil for the potato salad", her Mum directed.

"Yes Mum."

Marissa could hear her brother shouting in their back room. They had a large bedroom suite and television room at the back of the house. Her father had built the addition when they became teenagers. He was a contractor with his own business so it was easy for him to assign a work crew to his house. The boys' addition was bigger than the other three bedrooms combined. It had its own entrance out to the back yard so her brothers would not disturb them when they came home at night after their jaunts to the town. Her brothers seemed to live their own lives separate from the rest of them. They

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watched wrestling and other manly shows and played shooting games on their wide screen television. They emerged in the day only to go to school and eat. This was the last year they would be together because Carl the eldest at eighteen would be going to college next year. Then the other two would follow like falling dominoes, one a year.

After her father built the extension her mother began calling the boys her boarders.

“I have three boarders,” she would tell the neighbors. “Non-paying boarders. I only see them when they need to eat.”

And the neighbors would joke back,” Girl, Cassie that’s the way these things go. God only give them to us for a season. Your boys are men now and you know how men go.”

“Girl, I certainly do. They’re like a different species.”

“What do you mean like? They different that’s all.”

Cassie joked about this quite a lot until her husband heard her one day. She had to get her jaw wired after he broke it.

“The boys are men now,” he told her. “Show some respect.”

Marissa stayed home from school for a few days to take care of her mother. For many weeks her mother was only able to drink from a straw. Eventually Cassie’s jaw healed and she carried on. Marissa never heard her mother mention her boarders again. Her brothers never mentioned it either. They didn’t care in the first place. They only listened to their father and did what he told them to do. Sometimes he would cuff them to get them to see the right way. He wanted them to do well in life. He was an average man with an average life. He wanted his sons to be extraordinary so he was serious about their education even if they weren’t.

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The last time he punched Carl he received a punch in return and there was a big fight. The refrigerator door was broken and all the dishes were dragged off the table. Marissa and her mother locked themselves in the bathroom and did not make a sound until the brawl was over. Then they came out and cleaned up the house. Her father didn't speak to Carl for two weeks after the fight. But they seemed to be friends now. Her father even took Carl out drinking with him on the odd Friday.

Once the potatoes were done, Marissa poured them into a colander to drain. She then transferred them to the bowl and placed them in the refrigerator to cool. This was necessary because potato salad involved mayonnaise. Everyone knew that putting mayonnaise on hot food would make you sick.

"Anything else you want me to do, Mum?"

Cassie scooped a large chicken thigh out of the fryer and placed it on a cutting board covered with paper towels. She was a full sized woman yet her actions always conveyed grace and lightness.

"Set the table first. Then find all of the lamps and make sure they are working. You will find new batteries in the hall closet. Once your father finishes with the shutters and the power goes off this house is going to be dark."

"Yes, Mum."

The constant banging outside her house and in the community was making Marissa nervous. She didn't like the dark either. The dark brought terror and no rescue. Marissa had never lived through a hurricane that she could remember. She wondered if it could be worse than the preparation.

"Turn on the T.V. I want to hear the news." Her mother called.

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Marissa detoured from the dining room and turned on the television. The news has already started. It was all about the hurricane. It was if nothing else was happening in the world. The hurricane was now a category three and headed directly for them. It was coming up the south side. They lived on the south side. The meteorologist was talking about storm surge now. Ten to twelve feet he said. The storm was strengthening. People were being urged to evacuate.

Marissa tried not to listen. This hurricane sounded like a monster. She believed in monsters. In one of her lives she had lived in a monster infested valley. They were huge and hairy and had talons instead of fingernails. They came to get little children on nights when there was no moon. As she watched all of the children around her being taken Marissa planned her escape. Using magic she dug a tunnel to the sea. She reached the shore and saw the waves dancing and leaping in their frills of white. Then she looked back and realized that the valley had disappeared. She was free.

Marissa checked all of the lamps by turning them on. She was going to choose the brightest for herself.

The door behind her slammed and she jumped.

It was her father.

“Hey, Marissa.”

“Hey Dad.”

She reached up and kissed him. He liked to be greeted with a kiss. She did not have far to reach. Her father was average height as it was calculated in the mid-twentieth century. All of his sons were now taller than him.

He pushed her away impatiently.

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“Why are all the lamps on?”

“Mum said to check them.”

“All of them, all at once?”

Marissa stepped back quickly. She was very attuned to her father’s moods and heard from his voice that he was extremely annoyed.

“No, I was just...”

“Just what?” he said swatting her to the ground as if she was a fly.

Marissa curled up and lay very still. She was quiet. Sometimes this worked. This was not one of those times.

He leaned over her and repeated, “I asked just what? Answer me girl.”

She had to answer now or it would be worse. She kept her eyes closed. “I wanted to see which one was the brightest.”

Her dad chuckled. It was a good sign.

“Still afraid of the dark, Marissa?”

“Yes.”

He chuckled again. She was safe.

“Ass,” he said as he kicked her then walked away still laughing.

During dinner her mother watched and listened to the television news and her father and brothers ate with one hand and manipulated their phones with their other hand. Marissa concentrated on the escalation of the wind. The gusts were increasing in intensity. She crossed her fingers under the table.

“Please, please let it be short,” she breathed out as a prayer not expecting God to answer.

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The power went off just as Marissa and her mother finished washing the dishes.

“Don’t be afraid, little Marissa,” her mother said. “We have lots of lamps. It will pass soon.”

Marissa reached for her mother’s hand. The warm contact eased her fears.

“Where y’all going?” That was her father shouting at the boys. His voice moved in concert with the wind. Each syllable seemed to be a booming extension.

“Dad!” That was Jontae. He was always whining.

He received a cuff at the back of his head for his impertinence.

“This is a storm, boy. We stay together. You gat that?” Her father punctuated his last question with another cuff to Jontae’s shoulder.

“Oww, Dad. That hurt.”

“It was supposed to,” her Dad replied.

There was a heavy clunk as the wind picked up some sort of equipment which could not have been securely fastened and threw it against the house.

Her father swore loudly.

“I need to keep eyes on all of you. Cassie, where’s Marissa?” He looked around squinting in the gloomy light until he found her. “Go get some games out of the cupboard. We’re going to sit this out together. Hurry up, girl.”

It was the best night Marissa could ever remember. To the counterpoint of the furious wind they played Uno and Go Fish. Then her brothers played Knuckles with her father. Marissa winced every time a loser had to get the forfeit knucks which was knocking the cards against the loser’s knuckles. They were cruel, taking aim from high up and bring the cards down hard on the hand in front of them. Yelps of pain followed.

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As her mother brushed the sand out of her hair Marissa was happy that she was forbidden to play. Despite the storm raging around her house she felt safe in this one room with her brothers, her father, and her mother. She thought as long as they were together she was safe. She never liked to be alone in the dark. And past the shadows cast by the lamps darkness loomed. She listened to her mother's tinkling laughter like percussion bells played in time to a snare drum. Her mother always laughed despite the situation in which she found herself.

"Ladies should be happy," she always told Marissa. "Ladies should smile and always, always present a pleasant demeanor. Do you know that a smile lifts your mood, Marissa? You should always smile. You should laugh often, not for anyone else but for yourself. You control your smiles. I want you to follow this rule."

Her mother had rules for every facet of life. She had learned them from her mother, and her mother had learned them from Marissa's great-grandmother. This is how things worked on the island. Land was passed down through the generations. Generational land was sacred. Misfortune would befall you if you sold it. So too it was with the rules for living. They were the same as they had been in the centuries before because mother passed them on to daughter and father passed them to son. Though the country moved with technology and was rich in the externals of the twenty-first century, the rules and the customs remained the same. Land kept you bound to your ancestors and loyal to your country. Rules protected you and kept you safe. Marissa understood this. She was almost eleven and almost no longer a child and as the old people said approvingly she knew how to behave.

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But Marissa knew that following rules blindly made you fragile. Her mother was fragile. Cassie was bound by rules which smothered her imagination. Marissa treasured her imagination.

The hurricane escalated until they could hardly hear anything else but the boom boom of flying wood or the crack of falling trees. Once they heard screaming, but her father forbade them to leave the house. Then there was a sustained screeching like a peacock in pain which turned out later to be a tornado that decimated a house five doors down. They were playing Monopoly by then. It was difficult to concentrate but their father insisted that they pay attention to the game. Then the wind died down dramatically as if someone had flipped a switch on wind volume.

Marissa needed to use the bathroom but she was loath to leave this new safety. The game continued just like the wind which was now sounding a monotonous drone.

“Well, we lived through the first half,” her father said. Then he noticed Marissa walking away with the brightest lamp. “Where you going girl?”

She had almost gotten away. She knew what would happen now. Predictably her mother said, “Let someone go with you.”

Little girls did not walk around in the dark especially during a hurricane. It was her way of protecting her daughter.

“I alright,” Marissa mumbled. She had almost made it.

Carl grabbed a lamp and jumped up. “Come on.”

“I alright,” she repeated but he didn’t listen.

Miserably Marissa followed him to the bathroom. Outside the wind was rising again. Quick bursting puffs as though it was smoking a huge cigar.

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Carl stood in the bathroom waiting for her.

“You can go,” Marissa said.

Carl sucked his teeth.

“Girl, you know you don’t give the orders around here.” He pulled her arm. “Get in here.”

Marissa put a smile on her face and did as she was told. It was always easier if she did not resist.

“Do you want to go before or after?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Carl closed the door and they were alone with the shadows created by the juxtaposition of the two lamps looming over them like silent monsters.

“You know what to do.”

Marissa pulled down her panties bent over and clasped her ankles. She smiled as he assaulted her. A smile lifts your mood.

When he finished he washed himself in the sink and gave her a wet wash towel to wipe herself. “You still gatta go? Then do it.”

She sat on the toilet and peed as he played shadow puppets with his hands. After she flushed she made to go to the door. Carl was scandalized.

“Girl, wash your hands. You know the rules.”

“Yes,” Marissa answered.

The first time was the worst. She still remembered the first time clearly. They had moved into the new house and it was her first time alone in her new bedroom by herself. It was very dark and she was whimpering when her father came to comfort her. Yes, the

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first time was the worst. That is not to say she grew used to it, No, that never happened. It was always a shock when one of the men in the house came to her room at night in the dark. But Marissa learned that first time what she could bear. That's a good lesson to learn at five.

Sudden gusts of wind made the house shake and the windows creak as she and Carl walked back to the living room. Then the hurricane freight train started again.

She stayed next to her mother for the rest of the night finally falling asleep. It was the sweetest sleep of her life.

The aftermath of a hurricane is not depressing at first. Despite the devastation people are glad to be alive. This lasts for about an hour then the reality sets in. The power was off of course because most of the power poles were lying in the middle of the roads, across roofs and yards, or just smashed to smithereens in the ground. Transformers were tilted drunkenly beside some of the poles. Trees covered every surface, uprooted, overturned, fallen. Some people found their roof in pieces and others found them in one piece but in a neighbor's yard. The people sighed, grumbled and got to work.

Marissa filled buckets of water to place by the toilets. The water could be off for days. She helped to clean up the yard though her little arms could only carry branches one by one. Her brother Tanque joked with her as they worked.

"What's that you carrying Marissa, a twig?"

"Oh no, Marissa! Put that down. You might hurt yourself. Not."

Tanque was always quite kind during the day. He was only sixteen and just initiated.

"Mum," he called. "Let Marissa go play. She's worked hard enough."

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When her mother agreed Marissa smiled at Tanque and ran to the ocean.

She could hear her mother calling after her, "I know you have homework. You need to do it during through daylight hours. The world does not stop because of one hurricane, Marissa."

It was true. Despite hurricanes and tornadoes and night monsters the world would continue just as her world would continue.

Marissa ignores the other children who have been set free and runs far down the beach. She plans to wash herself clean in the salt sea and watch the waves which were now just yapping puppies, soft and cute instead of the savage barking dogs she had imagined during the storm.

Except for the children the beach is deserted. Adults have more important things to do after a storm. Marissa sits in her favourite position enjoying the feel of the sand tickling her thighs. The smell of the ocean is strong today. She can also taste it on her tongue salty and fishy. The sea is taking its time pulling itself back in. The clouds are pirate ships in white and shades of pink. The sun shines on the water creating a path straight to the ships. A hermit crab comes and perches by Marissa as if he too is mesmerized by the sea. Then a soft puff of wind has him scuttling into the sand. The gulls come back, their raucous cries echoing as they search for food.

Then Marissa notices the sand bar. It stretches far out into the shallow water. It is a miracle of an anomaly only seen at the very lowest ebb of the tide. It is a bridge to freedom or to heaven, or just a pretty walk between dangers. Marissa is tempted. Just a short walk she thinks to herself. The sand bar extends in gritty brilliance as far as she can see. Marissa looks around and sees no one else. She steps onto the sand. It is warm and

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soft against her bare feet. It beckons her along. Some parts of the sand bar are as wide as a boat and other sections are merely a step wide with the ocean lapping prettily along the sides. It almost seems as if she is walking on water so Marissa continues her stroll. And she thinks, *“Perhaps, just perhaps it would be good to keep walking.”*