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AMID THE FLOOD OF MORTAL ILLS

At first they didn't know what to think—they'd heard all along that it was possible, the oceans rising so that a majority of the U.S. would be underwater—but as the what if turned into reality and Florida and then Mississippi and then Louisiana and Massachusetts all became submerged, those in the Midwest couldn't all but help realize, almost instantaneously, like a shared dream across thousands of miles, that everything would be different from now on. Their cushy, easy, selfish lives no longer existed. Benji worked on the Skyline Luxury Condominiums as a welder. His office was a steel beam a foot wide and twenty stories high. From up here he could see the food lines for the soup kitchen down the street. About a mile up was Tent City, where the refugees from the flooded states lived. Millions had arrived in the first weeks. No one knew what to do in the beginning. The interstates and airports had been shut down because of the traffic. Some trekked here on foot. Hotels were booked by the first ones, then the streets were filled with transients and homeless, then the cities and state finally stepped in, FEMA started shipping in trailers, but those were soon filled. That's when the Tent Cities started sprouting.

The places were filthy. Benji did volunteer work at them for a while, handing out peanut butter sandwiches and daily essentials like bars of soap and toothbrushes. But there wasn't any running water or sanitary bathrooms. The port-o-potties were filled to the brim almost always, and the disposal of waste was almost nonexistent so that trash whipped around in the breeze like confetti. The city started to build twenty foot high fences just to keep the trash in the camps and out of the so-called city limits. Out of sight, out of mind, Benji supposed.

Out on the horizon he saw a large yacht with smoke rising from the deck. The passengers were barbecuing it looked like. Where they got their meat, he hadn't the faintest. He hadn't had a steak in months. He tried not to let it bother him, though. He had too many other worries. With all the refugees and the shortage of land, his rent had nearly quadrupled for his small apartment, costing him nearly \$4,000 a month for a basement studio, food prices had skyrocketed to unbelievable costs—an ear of corn was

about \$10—and he had a kid on the way. A wife and baby to feed and put a roof over. He was going to be a father. Him. He could hardly believe it.

He returned to the job at hand, welding a steel beam to an L-joint supporting what will be the 21st floor of these high-rise condos. It was a cool job, he had to admit; he enjoyed the welding and he even enjoyed the height, even if he was afraid the levees wouldn't hold and he would go tumbling end over end into an unfathomably deep and unforgiving ocean.

Looking back out to the barbecue he noticed panic aboard the yacht. Flames licked the sky from the deck, much larger than they should've been. The fire had leapt from the grill and caught the boat on fire. Several people scrambled, shooting the fire with extinguishers, but the blaze soon spread and became stronger, almost to the point where Benji could feel the heat radiating. That was when he realized that no one was going to help. There was no Coast Guard coming to the rescue. He could do nothing. Not from here. And neither could his coworkers. Each of them stopped working one-by-one, almost as if their attentions were a large domino effect, and stared out at the flames framed by the rising sun. They watched collectively as each of the passengers dove into the crystal blue waters. They didn't have any other choice. It was either stay put and burn to death or jump and swim to safety. Then the yacht sank.

Sarah, Benji's wife, greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek and a "How was your day, honey?" when he got home that evening.

"Good," he said. And it was. "Saw a boat sink."

"Really?" He nodded. "Oh my God! Was anyone hurt?"

He shrugged. "I don't think so. They weren't too far out. I saw three or four make it to shore."

"Jesus. Did anyone help them?"

"Not that I know of."

"I hope they're okay," she said more to herself than to Benji.

He kissed her belly, and he could feel the baby squirm in his wife's womb. Sarah flinched.

At seven months, she'd been experiencing a lot of pain. The doctor had said that was all normal, though, and that they shouldn't worry. Their baby was healthy and would be beautiful. Sarah just said she wanted the damn thing out of her.

Their little basement apartment didn't have any windows, so despite it still being daylight outside, their living room looked like it was past midnight. One lamp cast the room in an orange glow, and dust, no matter how hard Sarah had cleaned, swam through the air like a school of jellyfish. It became hard to breathe at times; dust mixed with mold and gagged them. The floor was being eaten away by water damage so that the cracked concrete foundation showed. They were sick all the time because of it, both of them suffering from chronic coughs and walking pneumonia. Benji'd promised himself and Sarah that before their child was born he would find them a better place to live. But there just wasn't anything out there. Scanning the classifieds didn't help; the rooms were gone before the ink had dried on the paper. More people were coming in everyday, and unless you were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, literally at the landlord's doorstep when the house or apartment or condo became open, you didn't have a chance at landing it. That was just the reality of the matter. There wasn't anything Benji could do to change that.

"News said the water rose twenty feet today," Sarah said. "Twice as much as they were expecting."

"Any cause yet?"

"They're clueless. I don't even think they're trying to figure it out anymore."

She set the table. Instant potatoes and spam. Fresh produce or meat was impossible to come by. Too little food for too many mouths. Why they were bringing in another was beyond Benji. He and Sarah had planned the pregnancy. They'd talked about it. How great it would be to have a baby around the house. The little pitter-patter of footsteps. They never discussed the burdens a baby would bring. The sacrifices. The kind of world they were going to be bringing him or her up in. Their decision was shortsighted and naïve, maybe, but it was something to look forward to.

"Do you think the levees will hold?" Sarah asked.

"Hard to tell."

She paused a moment, cradling her belly with her arms like a basket of bread. "What'll we do if they don't?"

They'd never talked about this neither. They avoided the subject like if they discussed it, it would imminently happen. By doing so, they were able to cling to the belief that the waters would cease to rise, recede even, and uncover more land so that the refugees could start anew, so that they could, too. It was a childish impulse, to ignore their problems in hopes that they would go away on their own volition. But they weren't the only ones that did this; Benji was sure of it. Perhaps all of humanity suffers from a chronic plague of arrested development.

On the news the government offered suggestions, to stay calm, to get on the roof of your house, to stay put until someone came to rescue you. No one Benji knew planned on taking that advice.

Sarah flinched and grabbed her stomach and sat down. Benji jumped to her, afraid that she was going into labor prematurely. She grimaced, and her eyes watered, and the veins in her face looked like they could pop at any moment. He just stood by her, waiting to hear what she had to say, for her to give him instructions on what he should do. He knew better than to talk at that moment. There wasn't anything he could do but just be there for her. Sarah breathed quick, irregular breaths. She grabbed his arm and dug her nails into his skin. This was the worst it had ever been. Benji was convinced she was going into labor, that he needed to grab her and carry her upstairs and try to catch a bus so that they could get to the hospital to have their baby, their baby, Dear God, they were having a baby.

For the first time, the fact that Sarah and he were having a baby really sunk in. It was like he could feel the entire weight of the universe bearing down on him. The burden was so immense, so strangling, so paralyzing that he stopped breathing, and he was overcome with this sudden overwhelming urge to flee and to never come back.

Eventually, though, Sarah's shoulders relaxed, and her breathing returned to normal, and her nails no longer dug into his flesh. For a few moments they sat there in silence, Benji's arms wrapped around Sarah's shoulders, and her chin resting on his arm.

"We're not stupid, are we?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know," Benji said. "Could be."

They went shopping the next day, Benji's day off, for baby stuff. They couldn't afford much, so they milled around second-hand stores and Goodwill, but most shelves had already been picked clean. So they bought what they could. They bought a crib whose mattress was so soiled that the fabric had been stained to an olive color in places, but they figured they could bleach it. They purchased a teddy bear and a stroller and different books they had read when they were kids: *Winnie the Pooh* and *Curious George* and *Prince Caspian*. The stroller was missing a wheel, but Benji could fashion one out of something, perhaps steal a wheelbarrow wheel from work. They bought used blankets and pillows and one of those toys that attaches to the crib and plays lullabies. Nothing fancy, but Benji was glad to be able to do this one domestic thing, as if life still resembled some sort of normalcy.

As they left the store, their new belongings crammed high in a wobbly shopping cart, the sirens sounded. Sarah and Benji were in the parking lot, halfway to the bus stop when they heard them. Back before the flood, they had been used as tornado sirens, but now they denoted one thing: a levee might break. The parking lot, luckily, was mostly deserted. A few cars were parked, and an unattended child sat in a toy rocket ship that had long ago stopped working. They didn't have to worry about panicked crowds or mobs of people. But they didn't know what to do, either. They'd both seen images of what had first happened in Florida, then Massachusetts, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, until it had reached their shores. The water destroyed everything. Buildings were demolished, cars tossed, trees uprooted, bridges collapsed. And there wasn't any stopping it. Oklahoma is flat ground. There isn't any high ground. If the levees failed, they all would die.

So, with no other option at hand, Sarah and Benji simply stood in the parking lot and peered around them, waiting for the water to submerge the city they had both grown up in and had lived their entire lives. They didn't cry or hold hands or tell each other that they loved each other. They didn't see the point. They just waited for their oncoming destruction.

But the waters never came. Eventually the sirens ceased, and they could hear the birds and cars and trains again. It was a false alarm. They'd had more and more of those lately, once every few weeks it seemed. They hardly fazed Benji and Sarah anymore, really. The bus even came on time, full to the hilt of other people, dazed like them, staring blankly out the windows.

One of the few luxuries Sarah and Benji maintained was a doctor, Dr. Remington. They had an ultrasound appointment, and they hurried after dropping off their new items at their apartment and ended up only being fifteen minutes late, a new record.

Dr. Remington's office was located in an old daycare that had shut down because of problems with DHS. This had happened before the flood, actually. Benji remembered having read about it, something about one of the young girls inappropriately touching one of the toddlers. Forced oral sodomy or something like that.

The nurse called Sarah's name, and she and Benji were led toward the back. Sarah weighed in, and then they went back to the examination room where the nurse took Sarah's blood pressure. It was elevated, 140/90, and the nurse pursed her lips and made a sucking noise, almost as if she'd expected this, and told Sarah that the doctor would be in to see her shortly.

Doctor's offices had always given Benji the creeps. Despite doctors' attempts to make examination rooms welcoming and warm, they always seemed so cold. On the counters there would be macabre replications of skeletal systems or the digestive. Soap and hand sanitizer were abundant, as if advertising the place was a harbinger of filth and disease. The paper that adorned the examination table proved that they did not want you, the sick and infectious, to make contact with any of their belongings. Benji always felt like something to be studied and poked and prodded and measured. And when he left, he always suffered an unshakeable feeling of shame.

Dr. Remington came in. She looked tired and weary. Purple bags held up her eyes like dams. "How're things?" she asked with a more upbeat tone than he'd heard in a while. Her bedside manner was probably second nature, unflappable despite what was going on outside. "Good, I hope."

"About as well as they could be," Sarah said. "We haven't drowned yet."

Dr. Remington forced a chuckle and slapped on some latex gloves. They were covered in a white, chalky powder and left little remnants behind on whatever she touched. She smiled reassuringly, prepared her stethoscope, and listened to Sarah's heartbeat. "I'm worried about your blood pressure," she said. "It's awfully high."

"Considering the circumstances..." Sarah trailed off.

"No excuse," Dr. Remington said. "Have you noticed irregular urinations?"

"Irregular?"

"Darker. Discolored."

"Not that I'm aware of. I don't normally study the toilet after I go, though."

"Any pain?"

"While peeing?"

"While urinating, yes."

"No."

The doctor grabbed an otoscope and examined Sarah's ears. Sarah looked distressed and worried. She began to rub her hands together like she had terrible arthritis.

"Pain in your kidneys?" Dr. Remington asked.

"I didn't even know I could feel my kidneys."

"This isn't a joke, Sarah."

"I'm not joking. I've never noticed my kidneys before."

"Lower back pain then."

"I'm pregnant. What do you think?"

"Have you had a hard time keeping down food or loss of appetite?" Dr. Remington asked.

"Option one yes. Option two absolutely not. I'd eat the ass end out of a rhino if there're any left."

"I get the feeling you aren't taking this seriously."

"Just tell us what is wrong!" Benji yelled.

Both the doctor and Sarah blinked at him and leaned back as if they needed to get a better view.

"Nothing is wrong," Dr. Remington said. "Your baby is perfectly healthy. If Sarah's high blood pressure continues, though, she could simply suffer damage to her kidneys and the baby could be born prematurely."

"Simply?"

"It's just a possibility."

Sarah placed her hand atop mine and patted to reassure me. "That's it?"

"Well," Dr. Remington said, "there's a remote possibility that you could develop preeclampsia."

"Oh, preeclampsia. Of course. Why didn't I think of that?" I said.

"And what does that mean?" Sarah asked.

"It could lead to seizures. Stillbirth. The mother's death."

"The mother's death?" Sarah asked.

"Your death." The doctor readied the ultrasound machine and then plopped neon blue gel onto Sarah's plump stomach. "But like I said, it's a very remote possibility. Odds are you're going to be fine. Just fine."

A picture appeared on the monitor. It was one of those three-dimensional images where Benji and Sarah could make out the baby's features. This was the first time they'd been able to see their baby in such high definition. Benji could perfectly make out the little nose and ears and fingers and it's clamped, shut eyes.

"You still want the sex to be a surprise?" Dr. Remington asked.

Neither Sarah nor Benji answered. They both stared at their child as if in disbelief. This tiny little thing would forever be in their care. There was no escaping that fact. It would come. It was inevitable. The sun will rise tomorrow, the spring flowers will bloom, taxes will be due, rent has to be paid, you will grow old, you will fall ill, you will die, the waters will continue to rise, and it will be born and Benji couldn't help but think this is wrong, so wrong, all of it, her and he and the baby, every last bit of it.

It was a boy. A baby boy. Benji never really had a preference, boy or girl. It didn't really matter to him as long as he or she was healthy. He had to admit, though, his preference of health didn't stem out of any concern for the child itself. The baby had always been more of an idea, an abstraction. Mainly, his concern was that he wouldn't be able to afford a sick child. But now, once he had seen the baby during the 3D ultrasound, his child had become real. The baby was now tangible, and the burden he carried palpable.

Benji got to work before dawn. Floodlights illuminated the skeletal structure of the high-rise. Red steel loomed up above, and a light mist fell, making the scene look almost eerie. He clocked in and lumbered onto the elevator shaft along with his coworkers, but before they felt the familiar jolt of the elevator moving up, his boss ambled out of the darkness. He looked tired and dirty, as if he'd been working for hours already.

"The levee," he said, gasping for breath, "we need every man at the levee."

Before he had time to explain, he dragged Benji and the others to his truck and drove toward the levee. Just like with the high-rise, floodlights illuminated the grey concrete. Droplets of water like sweat clung to the surface, making the wall sparkle as if coated in twinkle lights. Benji could smell the salt even more so than usual. His boss led them to an impromptu elevator shaft powered by pulleys and levers rather than a generator. This had been an overnight operation. Benji'd worked enough construction to know that this was an emergency, one that drove the city to panicked measures. A dread came over him as they lurched upward and settled into the pit of his stomach like acid.

The view over the levee stunned Benji. The waters had travelled nearly a mile in two days to only a few feet below the levees. Perhaps the siren heard yesterday hadn't been a false alarm but a genuine scare. It seemed only a matter of time before the levee broke. If that happened, the destruction would be devastating. The entire city would be destroyed. Buildings would collapse. Houses obliterated. Cars and trains and trucks strewn about like Hot Wheels. Worse yet, there wasn't any place to run. If the waters had risen like this here, it would be the same worldwide. The whole Earth would soon be underwater. Everyone would die.

Hundreds of men scrambled in the dark applying mortar and building the wall even higher. They worked tirelessly, shoveling and lifting, cranes swinging steel beams as quickly as they could. An operation of this magnitude would take weeks, even months of planning in advance, but yet this had come to fruition almost overnight. It was an awesome sight, really, that Benji couldn't help, despite the danger it represented, but be awestruck.

Canoes and boats travelled up and down the wall carrying supplies. It was odd that the waters were so calm despite the drastic rise. It was like the flood wasn't an act of nature bound by the laws of physics but was instead supernatural. Benji expected to see large waves crashing, knocking workmen over, and whitecaps as tall as buildings. But the waters looked like a vast, opaque mirror, reflecting the night sky in a deep navy.

"It won't hold for long," Benji's boss said. He was a big man, had been working construction longer than Benji'd been alive, and had canine-like jowls and bicuspid. "We got to get a half-mile up by tonight if we're going to survive until tomorrow." He slapped Benji on the back. "Get to work."

Benji could feel the humidity and the salt in the air. Sweat and sea clung to his pores so that his flesh took on the texture of sandpaper. A man, his face cast so deeply in shadow that it looked like he wore a black, silk mask, handed Benji a wheelbarrow full of brick. Looking at this familiar tool, he couldn't help but think that the wheel would fit his unborn son's stroller perfectly.

The man pointed down the line. In the dark Benji couldn't make out where exactly the man was pointing, but he headed in that direction anyway. The walkway was narrow, and men smoothed grout in order to fix more brick to the wall in haste. They cemented each one by hand. Small bricks. Stone. Marble. Granite. Limestone. There was no plan. No engineers or architects. These were just random men, building random segments out of random materials. The wall wouldn't hold. Benji knew it wouldn't. Later this morning the waters would break through the dam and destroy the city. Everyone would die.

Benji's immediate thought was to call Sarah. She was still at home asleep, their child still developing in her womb. But what would he tell her? That the end was near and that he wouldn't be able to make it home in time? That you will spend the last moments on this earth alone and so will he? He couldn't do that to her. It'd be better if she was asleep. Maybe the city won't even sound the sirens. What would be the point? There would just be panic. Let them go peacefully. It was the least they could do.

The sea began to churn. Tumultuous waves crashed into the wall, sending the waters up and over the men. Some even fell the few stories to the ground. The boats carrying supplies rocked violently back and forth, the men fighting to hold on and not fall overboard. Bricks dropped. Benji heard screams. They didn't seem to come from anyone in particular. They were just random. Some close. Others far away. But all were frightened.

A man reached for Benji. He was in a canoe. The supplies he was carrying were already unloaded or overboard. He pleaded with Benji to help him, to pull him to safety. Benji grabbed his arm and tugged until he had two feet firmly on the wall. "Thank you," he said. "You saved my life."

The oars were still miraculously in their holsters as the canoe bobbed and thrashed. Benji expected the small boat to be taken away, smashed into pieces against the levee. But it stayed put as if tethered there, though Benji could see that it was not.

As all the other men clamored down the wall, the waters calmed as suddenly as they had turned violent, the whitecaps returned to the dark blue of the sea, and the waves ceased

to chop. The waters had risen several feet in a matter of seconds. And there was the canoe still, floating evenly with the wall, the city's last, great hope at survival.

The sirens began to blare as the sun broke the horizon and the first rays of crisp, morning light illuminated the city. Benji's eardrums throbbed from the shrieking sirens, and he knew that once the sea overflowed he would die. His wife would die. His unborn son would die. Everyone he had ever known or did know or would know would soon be dead. His cushy, selfish life would be lost amid the flood of mortal ills.

But if he stepped out onto the canoe and paddled away, he could stall the inevitable. He would still die, but he would not die from the flood. From exposure maybe. Or hunger. But not by the waters. To be the last human being alive. What would that feel like?

He stepped out into the canoe and faced the city. Hundreds of people stared back at him, frozen in terror in the streets, just waiting for the water to break. News of the levee failing had travelled across the city, and everyone would by now know they were doomed. None seemed content with their fate. But none fought it either. They simply stood idly by, waiting for the end to come. Benji grabbed the oars, but before he pushed off and rowed out to sea, he waved to them. Not one of them waved back.

Those poor people, he thought. If only they could help themselves.