

Cumulous

On the foggiest day of the year, when the clouds fell to Earth like angels and blanketed the world in a steel gray Heaven, the rain made its way into Bee's home. It came delicately, spun from the fog and the wind and the cold and leaked between the windowpanes and into the living room.

The fog swirled over Bee's head where she sat on the couch, curled up under a quilted blanket, a deck of tattered and torn Tarot cards in her hands. She split the deck in two, stacked the pile in her left hand onto the pile in her right.

Bee's mother perched criss-cross on the floor. There was a blanket draped over her, too, thick wooly socks on her feet, and the red fuzzy pajama pants Bee had bought her for Christmas covering her legs.

Bee held the cards out to her and she took them, laying them one over the other on the floor.

"I don't believe in this stuff," Bee told her mother, which was a lie, but a practiced one. "Hm." The cards took shape as Anne laid them, forming a diamond on the carpet. She turned one over, then another, holding them up to Bee. The Magician. The Tower. The Hermit.

The rain clung to a corner of the ceiling. Beads of moisture coalesced over the naked drywall as Bee asked what her cards meant, as if this mysticism could calm the cumulous clouds inside her.

They came to the end of the cards and Bee's face fell. She sat back against the couch, said "Fat lot of help that was."

"You know what will help for sure?" Anne said. Bee leaned in closer. "Hot chocolate."

The rain watched as Bee slid off the couch. She sat on her knees and helped Anne scoop the cards up. They stacked them into a high pile and Anne put them away in a drawer in the corner of the room. As they got up to move to the kitchen, the rain began to drip downwards, stretching toward Anne like long, reaching fingers.

“I could use your help,” Anne said.

Bee looked up from where she sat at the kitchen island, her thumb still halfway to scrolling her phone.

“With what?”

“Clean up, child,” Anne said. Bubbles stuck to her hand, and she flicked them at Bee.

Bee got up and sidled next to Anne at the sink. Anne handed her a mug and a sponge, and Bee scrubbed at the dark circles of chocolate left behind.

“Why don’t you believe the cards?”

Bee didn’t stop cleaning the mug, and she didn’t look at Anne when Anne asked the question.

“Cause they’re not real,” she said. She placed the mug in the drying rack and started in on a pot. “They’re just cards.”

Anne shrugged. “Strange things can happen.”

“Not that strange.”

“Strange enough,” Anne insisted. “For instance, I asked for a child that believed in magic and I got you. That’s pretty strange.”

Bee rolled her eyes. “*You’re* strange.”

Anne grinned. She flicked more bubbles at Bee.

The rain made itself at home. It settled into the corners, underneath the wallpaper, in the pipes. It hid itself in places it didn’t think it’d be found.

Bee only half noticed. She bounded down the steps wearing a sweater with a blanket overtop like a cape, saying, “God, Mom, it’s freezing.”

Anne caught Bee’s hands as she reached for the thermostat.

“Layers,” she said.

Bee paused.

She turned Anne’s hands over in her own, said, “Why are your hands so clammy?”

Anne shrugged. “Change in the weather is getting to me, I think.”

Anne pulled the blanket from Bee’s shoulders and wrapped it around herself.

Bee said, “Doesn’t help that it’s 50 degrees in here.”

Anne lead Bee to the TV. They sat on the couch together, Bee’s head on Anne’s shoulder.

Anne watched the screen, but Bee's thoughts were elsewhere, drifting in and out, swirling around in her head. She looked up and saw fog sitting on the ceiling.

She looked down and saw Anne wipe her hands on her jeans.

The rain grew. Each time the clouds opened up outside, more made its way inside. It kept Bee awake at night, with the way it tapped on her windowpane to be let in. It sent her to linger outside Anne's bedroom door, listening silently for her Anne's snores, before Bee was able to make her own way back to bed.

One day, Bee said, "Maybe we should get out of the house for a while. Want to take a walk?"

Anne looked up from where she stood hunched over a cookbook filled with index cards in Anne's scrawled handwriting, recipes she'd learned from her own mother.

"Are you feeling okay?"

She asked it not because she and Bee didn't often take walks together, but because those walks were for the days when Bee's head was so full that even the house couldn't hold all her thoughts.

"I'm fine," Bee said. Mostly true. "I just thought getting outside would do us some good."

Anne hesitated. She flipped a page in her cookbook.

"That's not like you," Anne said. "Want to watch a movie instead?"

Bee shook her head.

Anne said, "Sorry Bee, I'm feeling a bit under the weather, to be honest."

Bee watched her mom.

She said, "Are you okay?"

A drop of water ran down Anne's nose. It splashed against the plastic pages of the cookbook.

"Are you crying?" Bee asked.

Anne said, "No."

Bee got up to hug her anyway.

Anne slept a lot after that, catching catnaps on the couch, going to bed early and waking up late.

Bee kept an eye on her as best she could. She sometimes slept in a sleeping bag on Anne's bedroom floor, and she'd wake up when Anne stepped over her throughout the night to stumble to the bathroom.

She made her tea. She made her broccoli and cauliflower, tomatoes and carrots, chicken and fish.

Anne said, "Sorry. I haven't really had it in me to cook," as Bee pushed a dinner plate her way.

Sometimes Anne spent a lot of time in her bathroom. Bee wasn't sure why. It wasn't a stomach bug that plagued her mom. Usually, Bee left it alone. Waited in the living room or the kitchen for her mom to emerge.

Bee sat at the kitchen table, a deck of cards in hand. Minutes ago, Anne had gotten up and disappeared to the bathroom.

Bee waited. She shuffled the cards.

She said, quietly, "What's wrong with Mom?" and split the deck in two.

Bee couldn't read the cards, but she spread them out anyway and looked for answers in their softened corners and dark illustrations dulled after years of use. The Empress stared upside down at her. A caped woman walked alone in a snowstorm on the Five of Pentacles.

Bee got up and walked into Anne's bedroom.

Water spilled from underneath the closed bathroom door. It soaked the carpet, made a lake out of Bee's nest of blankets on the floor.

Bee tried the door handle. It didn't budge in her hand.

She knocked, called, "Mom, you okay?"

Anne said, "Back up, Bee."

Bee backed up. She heard the lock click out of place, and then the door swung open.

Rain water showered Anne. It came out of nowhere. Droplets formed directly over her head and drenched her hair, slid down her skin, clung her clothes to her body. Goosebumps raised on her arms, and she shivered.

Bee watched, and Anne watched her watch.

Bee said, "How long?"

"A while now," Anne said. "Off and on. I didn't want to worry you."

Bee nodded. She opened her mouth to offer Anne dry clothes or an umbrella, but realized neither of those things would make a difference.

Bee walked past Anne into the bathroom. Water sprayed her shoulder as she pulled dry towels off the rack and began mopping up the floor.

The cards were drenched. Bee saw them when she walked through the kitchen to take the sopping towels to the laundry, saw how they dripped off the table, blurred and smudged like a lost thought. She stopped, propped the towels in one arm on her hip. She picked up a card, and it tore in her hand like paper.

The rain ate away at Anne bit by bit. Bee only noticed because she was looking for it.

She looked for the way her mom started to smudge around the edges, as though she was beginning to blend into the walls. The rain followed Anne wherever she went. It wrinkled her fingers and toes. Bee spread towels across the couch cushions, got up after Anne every morning and replaced Anne's sheets with dry ones.

"At least you don't have to shower now," Bee said. "And you can automatically water the plants whenever you want."

Anne smiled, but it was tired. "Saving the earth one drop at a time."

They didn't read the cards together anymore. Not that they could have, with their old deck binned and Anne's ability to ruin any new deck they would buy. That was just fine with Bee. She didn't want to hear what they had to tell her, anyway.

Days went by. Weeks. A month or two. Anne lost her color, woke up one day to find that the rain had washed it away.

Bee had seen it coming. She saw that way each day drained Anne, drew closer and closer to black and white. She'd known what was happening, but knowing that something is going to happen and having it actually happen are two different things.

"Oh," she said when Anne splashed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where Bee stood making tea and oatmeal. "I mean, it's not that bad."

Rain puddled on the hardwood where Anne stood. It edged towards Bee's bare toes.

"It could be worse," Anne said. "At least I'm still here."

Bee frowned. She handed Anne her oatmeal and set her tea on the counter. "Don't say that."

Later that afternoon, Bee went out into their garden and dug up a mountain laurel bud, roots and dirt and all.

She carried it inside and to Anne's bedroom, pushing the door open with her hip and walking to stand beside Anne's bed.

"Mom," Bee said, and Anne rolled from where she was laying on her side.

She sat up, left behind a silhouette embedded in the sheets like a stamp.

"Cup your hands," Bee said.

Anne cupped her hands. Bee placed the mountain laurel in Anne's hands. Dirt trickled from her fingers, ran down her forearms in dark trails.

"Now you can be pink and white," Bee said. She leaned forward and kissed Anne's cheek, and water dripped down her face.

"I'm tired, Bee," Anne said.

Bee looked over from where she sat on the couch. She saw how Anne's eyes had sunken in, how she looked smaller than she ever had, how Bee could almost see right through her. She looked like fog, like Bee could breathe and it'd blow her away.

Anne tipped her head against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. Bee wondered if she was used to water getting in her eyes now, up her nose. She wondered if it was hard to breathe sometimes.

"Do you want to go to bed?"

Anne nodded. Slowly, shakily, she raised from the couch, careful not to jostle the mountain laurel she cradled in her hands.

Bee followed her back to her bedroom, tucked blankets around her that Bee knew would only shield her from the rain for a few moments before the water made its way through to her skin again.

Bee sat on the other side of the bed throughout the night. The rain ran in rivers to where she sat, soaked her socks and her pajama pants. Bee closed her eyes, listened to Anne's raspy breaths.

Bee could see through her mom. Could make out the markings on the wall behind her that had been Bee's growth chart when she was young.

She didn't say anything to Anne about it, but throughout the day she'd occasionally catch Anne looking at her arms, *through* her arms.

Dirt cascaded from Anne's hands. Her muddy footprints patterned the floor.

Bee sat closer to Anne throughout the day. She didn't mind that the rain fell on her too. She wanted to lean on her, rest her head on her shoulder, but there wasn't enough of Anne left to do that.

Bee pointed to Anne's hands. "Look, Mom," she said. "Your flower bloomed."

Anne smiled. She said nothing. The rain had stolen her voice now, too.

By the time night came around, Bee could hardly recognize her. It was hard to even remember a time when all of Anne had been there, when the rain hadn't taken up so much of her.

Bee asked, "Do you want to go to bed?"

Anne shook her head. She stood at the end of her bed. She dripped water and mud. She looked at Bee imploringly, with translucent eyes that flickered in and out like a wave.

Bee joined her near the bed, standing close enough that the front of her shirt got wet.

Anne smiled, small and sad, and it wavered at the edges. Bee closed her eyes, because sometimes it was hard to look at Anne, and this was one of those times.

"I wish it could have been me," Bee said. She felt fingers in her hair, just barely there, like a ghost. Dirt rained from her head, the mountain laurel catching on her ear and resting on her shoulder. She leaned into the touch. Water ran over her nose and her cheeks and down her chin. "I wish I could take it from you."

Anne kissed her forehead, and it felt like a breeze.

When Bee opened her eyes, Anne had disappeared.