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When the Water Comes

Bayou water isn't supposed to be salty. Salt fogs everything up, makes it cloudy like cataracts in the eye. Luke grew up in the Barataria Basin, in a fishing town named after a pirate, so he knew all about water. He knew beneath the black matte of tree reflections and the duckweed skin and algae blooms, bayou water is supposed to be a clear, pin needle green kind of water. With thin skeins of silver laced along the surface, floating there like arteries on ghost skin.

Bayous are born in fresh water estuaries, hugged by the wetlands and the Mississippi: a river forged from Late Itaska's crystal cold Minnesota ice and Rocky Mountain snow melt. Fresh water carried thousands upon thousands of miles before emptying out into the Gulf.

The Gulf, that's where the salt water is—2,500 quadrillion liters of the shit. The Gulf maws like a monster at the wetlands' feet. Snaps its corroded sodium teeth at the bald cypress trees. Their exposed roots plunge downward, trunks like spindle arms with clenched fists. Trees that punch the water.

When Luke thought of the bayou, he thought of Aggie's Seafood Café. It sat right out there on a dock. It had sat there for three decades at least. The kind of place that fried their crab claws up from a tub of six-month old Crisco and rendered bacon fat. That served boudin balls and catfish nuggets doused in crawfish sauce. The kind of place that had an oyster platter and a shrimp platter and a frog leg platter served with red cabbage on the side.

When he was a kid, MawMaw Jean took Luke to Aggie's every Sunday after church. He'd always finish his sandwich and vanilla ice-cream scoop fast, then twiddle and fidget and kick the table legs until MawMaw said he could go out on the porch dock and play. It was hot out there, the kind of thick green air that

hugged you like a second skin. The cicadas all buzzed from behind curtains of Spanish mosh, and the water lapped up against Aggie's creaky wood dock like it was licking lollipops. Luke would grab up handfuls of the chalk white gravel from the parking lot, and he'd climb up on the porch's big wide wood railings. Dangle his scuffed sneakers over that water and fling those pebbles, skip-skip-skipping out toward the air hole.

That's what he called it back then. The air hole. That's what it was. It was a hole. Out there. Hung up in the air. It was always there. It'd always been there. That spot. Out over the water, hovering about nine, maybe ten feet from the surface. A circle all shimmery-like, like the skin of a bubble, translucent and swirled up. Like someone punched out a perfect oval of bayou water and tilted it ninety degrees and stuck it up there in the air about thirty feet past Aggie's porch.

On clear days, when the sun filtered through the Spanish moss and caught the air hole at just the right angle, you could see through it. See what was on the other side of it. It was night dark through there. And if the swamp cicadas and barking treefrogs around Aggie's calmed their chitters and *tonk-tonkings* for a second, you could hear sounds through the air hole. Other place sounds. Singing insects that went *chicka-chicka-chicka*, and birds that didn't hoot but harped. And sometimes big sounds, like the clip of massive hooves slow walking through starch grass. Animals with snouts that puffed out immense, soft snuffles.

Luke didn't think much of it, not back then. The air hole—that was just target practice. He aimed the pebbles at it and flung. Sometimes they'd whip under it or over it, and he'd see the splash and ripples in the water on the other side. But sometimes he managed to hoop one through, like a basketball into a net. There'd be no splash then, no ripple. The pebble never came down, or if it did, it came down in that other place.

Luke would fling his arms up in his victory V and yell "Score!" to the only things listening out there: the herons and egrets. Or a napping gator that couldn't care less. Or sometimes a docile turtle chilling out on a bobbing log.

That spot above the water. It was like the Spanish moss and spider lilies. It was just part of the place.

"Was it there when you'er a kid?" he asked MawMaw Jean.

"Mmm-hmm." She pursed her lips out and tucked her chin in when she nodded. Made an accordion of the saggy flesh at her neck. "It been there the whole time."

“Didn’t no one ever go through it?”

“Can’t reach it, son. It too high up there.”

“Someone must’ve.”

She leaned back big in her recliner, the one she pulled up real close to the TV now that her eyesight wasn’t so good anymore. She squinted up at the ceiling and thought about it. “I heard’a one boy. One of them Bilky boys up and disappeared. They say he rowed himself out there with a big step ladder and jumped on through it.”

“What’d he find?”

“He up and disappeared, didn’t he? He ain’t around to tell nobody what he found.” MawMaw kicked up her slippers on her footstool and reached for the remote. “Don’t put no stock in dat story anyway. We all tried t’do it too, and you can’t jump up there from no step ladder in no boat. Boat rocks you right off it. That Bilky boy probably just runoff up north like they all do.”

As Luke got older, he stopped playing out on Aggie’s porch, so he forgot about the air hole. Sometimes it popped into his thoughts like a firefly, lit up for a second then gone again in another. He had other things to think about.

The water was coming in, sneaky, cottonmouth-like. Luke didn’t notice it until he was in high school. When he was fifteen he got a job working the airboats, driving the tourists out into the bottom line hardwood swamps. Deep in, where the gators built their nests and hatchlings slithered around the tupelo gum. Luke gave the tourists marshmallow bags. Told them it was *swamp crack* and let them feed the gators. Or he’d ride those tourists to the non-woody grass wetland, where he could accelerate the motor up to top speed, and they’d bullwhip through the cattail and duckweed at 35 miles an hour. Tourists liked that kind of thing. They gave good tips if they got to throw marshmallows and see baby gators and ride real fast.

But the water kept rising. Coming in from the Gulf. It turned the wetlands brackish. Only the black mangroves could withstand the salt. Luke would drive the tourists out for miles and there’d only be oyster grass as far as the eye could see. All the other grasses shriveled up. Trees started withering. The critters and gators and turtles got scarce.

They named the Gulf right. The Gulf gulps everything up.

When it took the coastal road, the one winding through that thin inlet that connected the town to the bayou, that’s when Aggie’s closed. She couldn’t afford

house-raising the restaurant, and the water was coming in real bad around that time. With the road flooding so much, people couldn't even get to the parking lot. Customers became unreliable, then sparse. Aggie couldn't keep it up anymore. On their last after-church brunch, with half the chairs turned upside-down on the tables and only Aggie working both the kitchen and the front, she told MawMaw Jean she was using her life savings to head out west. She had a daughter who lived out there.

"Santa Fe," she said. "It's a desert. No water gonna get me there. If I never see water again, I'm happy." Aggie cocked an eye at MawMaw Jean. "You and Luke should head out, too. 'Fore it's too late."

"We'll be a'right," MawMaw said. "We in town, raised up a bit more then y'are down here. 'Sides, my daddy's daddy built that house from nothin'. I gotta keep it up for him."

Luke let MawMaw and Aggie talk, and stole out to the porch to sneak a cigarette. He stared out at the air hole and tried to imagine Sante Fe. Figured it smelled of limestone, of sage, of burnt piñon. The desert stretched out like skin. Aggie said land there was 7,000 feet above sea level. No gulf, no river, no floods. Just dry air and red sunsets, and sand that whispered with the wind, and a million-trillion stars.

One night, Luke snuck out. He took one of the boats from work and motored it out to the air hole. Aggie was gone, and her porch sloshed with water run straight up to the threshold.

Luke hadn't ever seen the air hole at night. Without the sun hitting, its outline was near invisible. Even knowing exactly where it hovered, it took him an hour to find it. He had to catch sight of it at just the right angle. When he finally managed, it glowed bright as a street lamp, a warm oval shining out of black night nothing.

Luke was taller, and the water was higher. The air hole wasn't nine or ten feet up anymore. Only about five or six. It hung there like a painting on invisible wire. Luke pulled the boat right alongside it. He could peep his head over the edge and see straight through.

He saw a sunny world through there. A pink sun, an alien sun, like a rose in the sky. He figured night here meant day there. It was an opposite place. Grasslands stretched out for miles in all directions. The earth undulating, and distant mountains so high they lost their tops in puffed out clouds. There was a river,

too, a frigid mountain run-off river edged in water grasses the likes of which Luke hadn't ever seen. And Luke knew every kind of plant that grew along the water. Knew them all. But these were strange ones. They bloomed with nubby buds of every color that shimmered in a shifting rainbow along that river.

Luke pressed his finger to the hole. There was a slight pressure, a bit of tingly resistance. Its energy thrummed up his forearm in warm blood shivers. He pressed his fist into it. After a little give, he popped his arm through it like it was stretched cellophane. A warm breath gusted his hair. He smelled plants like thyme and soil like brown sugar.

He tried to lift himself up, like he would on a windowsill, but his palms couldn't get a grip on anything. That cellophane pressure wasn't enough to hold any weight. The best he could manage was to dip the top of his head through, just his forehead and his eyes, so he could twist his view to the periphery.

Off to the side, he saw a knot of trees thrust up, arms spread wide as if preparing to take flight. They were umbrella-shaped trees. Like the acacias that Luke had read about somewhere. But these weren't acacias. They bloomed with white flower bursts that reminded Luke of magnolias. They dropped petals in the wind like snowflakes.

Lounging sleepy beneath the shadow of those trees were potbellied horses. Shaggy spotted ones with thick leg cannons that made it look like they were wearing fuzzy boots. A few dipped their necks down to the grass and munched. Their tails swatted the falling petals as if they were flies. One horse swung its big head around and stared at Luke. Its docile black eye peeped out from a curtain of bangs. It blinked long, white-tipped lashes at him.

Luke was overcome by a powerful urge to jump through that hole. To land hard on his knees in that grass. To go up to those horses and pet their necks. To run his fingers through that thick mane of theirs. His muscles twitched with the urge of it. He figured he could make it. If he jumped high enough and dove head-first, he could push himself on through the hole and land inside it.

But he remembered what MawMaw Jean had said about that Bilky boy who disappeared. What if Luke got through to the other side and couldn't come back? MawMaw was getting frail. She relied on him for the paychecks, and the groceries, and the cleaning, and the upkeep of their house.

A jaunt around that beautiful, otherworld place on the other side of the air hole, at that particular time, didn't seem to Luke worth the risk of leaving Maw-

Maw Jean on her own. So he chugged up the engine and steered the boat away, and didn't think again about Aggie's and that hanging window to that other world for a long, long time.

The water kept coming.

In town, the sidewalks went slanty. House foundations sank in bedrock gone soft. Cracks in the asphalt ruptured like earthquakes. But instead of lava, the cracks spat water. And it wasn't that local bayou kind. No, it was that Gulf water. That salt. The corrosive stuff. It didn't evaporate, but sizzled like a skillet in the hot swamp sun. Foamed like white wave wake that spat venomous vengeance up at the townspeople crowding around to get a look. The town put up the orange traffic cones around the street ruptures, trying to keep people back while they patched it. But for every patch, another two ruptures cracked. Saltwater is heavier than freshwater. It slugs down low. That caustic saltwater was creeping in below the topsoil, sneaking in through the underground and eating its way like acid up.

As the years went by, the town flooded after every rain. Murky, muddy dirty water pooling around houses for hours, then days at a time. Those rainstorm floods lingered longer and longer, until finally the water just flat out refused to drain away. It stayed, made its bed in the streets. Stagnant, rancid, gathering in the dips and basins and soggy soil areas between the houses, running over the driveways, sloshing up against car tires.

One by one, the neighbors put up their for sale signs—sale signs for houses that nobody wanted, that would never sell—and hitched their trailers to their cars and packed it on out of there.

“Maybe,” Luke posited to MawMaw Jean one day, “we should leave.” They lived on a street near empty of people. Gone were the Castors with their big, grinning white American bulldog, Dorothy, who rushed about with her muscley wide-set legs and slobbered happy tongue kisses over everyone. Mr. and Mrs. Guillory left too, and took their king cake cookies and praline pecans with them.

Worst of all, the Fontenots left—with their daughter Margaret. That particular sale sign snaked Luke's gut, twisted it right up like wet rope. Margaret, the pretty girl with the sheet of moon shadow hair and blossom soft shoulders. She called Luke over whenever he walked past her porch, leaned over her railing and bubbled at him even though he spent most of the conversation looking at his shoes. Margaret, who waited patiently for him to catch up to his colt-gawk limbs, his awkward frame, his shy way of looking down and showing off his red flushed ears whenever

she smiled. Knowing he would grow into himself one day and finally ask her out, she waited, and he waited, and they both waited and waited only for her to move away the very minute, it seemed, before he could muster the nerve.

“Everybody’s goin’,” Luke told MawMaw Jean. He had his toolbox sitting on the coffee table. She had her feet up on her footstool and the T.V. on.

She pursed her lips. “Nuh.”

He’d been patching up water rot along the house’s baseboards for weeks, it seemed. The bathroom pipes squealed, the plumbing beneath the house warped from too many flood waves. The last hurricane punched a hole through the porch, flung off the storm shutters and shattered four windows. Luke wiped the grease and sweat from his forehead with his shoulder sleeve. “The repairs are costin’ more than I’m makin’.”

But MawMaw Jean wouldn’t hear it. She wouldn’t leave that house. Her daddy’s daddy’s house. A fourth generation Creole cottage with a side gable roof, dormer windows, and four French doors opening out into a pretty white gallery lined with trellises. MawMaw would sit out there beneath the pink-painted Eastlake brackets with her iced tea to cool off in the summer.

MawMaw wouldn’t leave that house, and Luke wouldn’t leave MawMaw.

That house was her anchor, and she was Luke’s. Anchors find purchase for you, hook you, and hold you safe. Anchors are the steadfast, sturdy heart that tethers you, keeps you from floating out to sea. But the thing about anchors is, if you catch your foot too tight in their chains, they yank you off the boat and drown you.

When no one was looking, the water crept in and took the off-ramp road to the highway. So when the hurricanes came—as they always had, though not with such frequency—evacuations were impossible. The sirens wailed, screamed at everyone. *Run! Run! Hurricane’s comin’!* But there was nowhere to run. No way out. The coastal road was already overrun, the back ways to the highway already submerged. Those with boats loaded them up and never came back.

With the roads closed and evacuation impossible, Luke and MawMaw Jean had to huddle up in the attic while the surge took the first floor. By that time they knew there’d be no way out. They were prepared for it. Luke stocked up the attic with canned foods and plastic jugs of water, and pillows and blankets to keep warm. Some puzzles and board games, too. Luke even put in a sky window up there, cracked it right through the house’s head in case the storm surge was a big

one and they'd have to escape out to the roof. So while Luke and MawMaw hunkered in the attic, down on the first floor, MawMaw's recliner, her footstool, her TV, plus all the things she'd gathered throughout her life and the antiquities left to her from her daddy and daddy's daddy swirled and crashed. Some got swept out the door when the surge pulled back. The rest were broken and rotted and had to be tossed.

It was like MawMaw's soul got swept away with all the things lost, with her house now busted beyond repair. Wind and weather blustered through the holes in the house. The hurricane chomped out big pieces of the infrastructure, pieces Luke couldn't fix. MawMaw's heart withered in the cavity of her chest, crinkled into a ball. She curled into herself. Her skin thin as paperbark.

They had no electricity. No plumbing. No roads to drive down for supplies. Luke raided the grocery store, its products spilled out from half tilted shelves. Loaded up everything, and converted the living room into a storage pantry. Broke apart and reassembled the old stove so it would take wood.

The town was a ghost town. That last surge didn't pull back all the way, leaving half of the main drag and the whole south side of town underwater. Underwater forever.

That included the doctor's office.

With all the bacteria and dust kicked up by the storm, the air got moldy. It was heavy putty air. A cough settled in MawMaw's lungs and wouldn't let up. Her breath gurgled. Like the water had seeped into her, settled in her lungs, clogged up her capillaries. Her lungs were wetted, heavy sponges.

Luke tucked quilts around her shoulders as she shivered in bed and tried to breathe. The air was so thick with water you needed strong lungs to gulp in any oxygen, or else you drowned in it. MawMaw wasn't. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't do it. One day Luke brought her breakfast to her room, only to find MawMaw Jean wasn't there anymore.

He had nowhere to bury her. The graveyard was submerged. Luke plunged his fists in his pockets and shuffled around town, searching for somebody, anybody. The church and priest and parishioners to mourn her, the band to blow sorrowful brass tunes as they walked her casket to the crypt—all of them gone. MawMaw had tucked away savings for a second line to play her funeral, a funeral Luke couldn't give her.

Grainy melancholy gripped Luke like gray bricks. He became a solitary figure

in a washed out world, traipsing through knee-level sludge waters, seeking out purchase on whatever bits of raised land he could find. Gripped by a lonesome atrophy of spirit without any tears. He didn't want to cry anyway. Didn't want to add another damn drop of water to the place.

Then he remembered.

That hole hanging in the air out at Aggie's.

That *land* on the other side of it.

He thought, that's a place to go. A place where there wouldn't be no water. A safe place.

He scrounged up an old tin motorboat. Plugged its holes and fiddled with its motor until it finally chugged into action. He pattered that leaky thing out across the bayou, looking for Aggie's. The building was all underwater by then, so he had to take a six-foot pole with him and dap it down, stab the over-swollen surface, trying to find Aggie's roof. He struck a hole right through it, the shingles were so wet with rot, with whatever the fish had eaten away. But it was Aggie's sure enough.

Luke jumped right in that water, clothes and all, and swum down to feel out where the porch was. He found it. Then he swum out the thirty feet. He dove on down, looking for that hole that wouldn't be in the air anymore. That would be deep underwater. He didn't know what he thought he'd find out there. It was basically black, down in the deep, murky depths of that bloated bayou. Blinded by saltwater, Luke couldn't see a damn thing. But maybe he'd see the air hole—now a water hole, he thought—through the murk. Like maybe it would be glowing and guide him like a lighthouse. Or maybe he'd catch it at just the right angle, at eye-level, and see the land through it, that framed picture portrait.

But the water was so dark and dirty. It stung with so much salt. So much shit in that water, chemicals and stuff from the houses and factories it took with it. Luke's eyes about burned out of his head. He couldn't keep them open down there.

But he could feel it. Feel the tingling energy of that other land reverberating through the currents. That warm, gold, ecstatic hosanna that moved over his skin and buzzed in his brain. It was there, always just a little bit farther. Just a little bit deeper. Just out of reach. Like he was circling the cusp of it at all angles.

Luke bopped up and down and up and down. When he got tired, he rested his fire-licked arms on the side of his slow leaking boat and wiped the water from his eyes. His skin pickled into white wrinkles. His clothes as heavy as weights. Hours

and hours. His eyes burned. His bones froze. His muscles seized up. He knew his body couldn't keep going much longer. That if he kept going, one of these times he'd dive down and wouldn't have the strength to pull himself back up to the surface.

But still, he hoped. He kept diving, swimming through, pushing his arms and kicking his legs. Fighting that water. Waging war against that water. His ears popped from the pressure. His head pinched. He was getting more and more tired, gulping air with heavy lungs each time he emerged. He gasped as he broke through the surface. Night fell on an empty world filled with long-dead cypress trees and silent cicadas.

Luke decided he wasn't getting back in that boat. Wasn't gonna drive it back to shore. What shore? There wasn't anything left to go back to.

So Luke swam and swam. Held onto the little kindled candle flame in his heart, pinning all his hope on finding the air hole, that window to a safe place, a refuge from the water. He knew deep down in the murky black salt, he'd see again the golden window of sunlight and grass and acacia trees. That the water hadn't took it like it took Aggie's, like it took everything else.