

The Heart of the Storm

I slide my cell-phone off of my ear.

“Shit.”

The rain is strong, slightly cool as it covers my face. I lean over the railing of my balcony and stare down from the third-floor, rain-drops gliding over my eyelids, rolling off of my lips. I slip my cell-phone into the back pocket of my jeans and watch the rain envelop my head and then fall to the earth, following each drop until it splashes onto the palm-leaves below. The cigarette I am holding has gone out, but it's too wet to relight, so I flick it out into the onslaught of rain.

I turn my back against the monsoon and peer into my apartment, but the glass of the sliding doorway shows only my reflection, and that of the storm. A few steps closer allows me to see inside. New TV. Rusty-orange couch. Walls plastered with posters of people who lived in tragedy and died too young.

I slide open the door and step inside. The cold air of the apartment chills the wet denim and cotton against my skin. My girlfriend is blow-drying her hair in our bedroom. The wind from the growing storm rushes past me through the open doorway as Heather turns off the blow-dryer and for a split-second I want to turn around and leap head-first off of my balcony, but her voice interrupts me.

“What are you doing?” She doesn't look up at me. “You're gonna let all the cold air out.”

She floats through the living-room and heads towards the kitchen, her body wrapped in a pink towel. She starts brushing her hair and opens the fridge.

“I thought you were gonna pick up a few cases after work?” She closes the door with her knee, holding her towel in place with her free hand. She still doesn’t look up. “Everyone’s gonna show up soon....”

“I didn’t go to work...” I start to feel my pulse throb inside of my ears. “And I don’t give a shit who is coming over or when they are getting here.”

Heather freezes at my sudden outburst and glances up at me, but then quickly averts her eyes and continues to brush her hair. She re-opens the refrigerator and pretends to search for something.

“I just got off the phone with a friend of yours.” I walk up and stand behind her.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Is it true?”

“Who were you...what are you talking about?” She turns around and faces me, placing her hairbrush onto the kitchen counter. Suddenly self-conscious, she readjusts her towel.

“Is it true?” I am unable to move my eyes, so I stare through her until she is forced to look away.

“Is *what* true?” She swallows, trying not to choke on her words. “I don’t even know what you are talk...”

I grab her throat, kick the refrigerator door shut and slam her up against it. I press my body up against hers until my face is an inch away and I smell her hair – the usual smell of cigarette smoke is masked by a crisp citrus. Her towel falls off but she is too stunned to stop it. She tries to swallow and looks up at me, a thin veil of tears coats her eyes. I loosen my grip around her throat so she can speak.

“I’m so sorry, Ethan... I...”

“Get out.”

“What?” Her eyes narrow at me.

“Get the fuck out. *Now.*”

“You are going to end us... just like that?” Heather starts to cry again. I feel distant, yet continue to stare into her. Nausea kicks in.

“*You* did this. *You* ended us. Remember that. *You*. Not me.”

She tries to touch me. I grab her hands and hold them above her head, pressing them against the barren metallic surface of the fridge. I lean in closer against her naked body and place my lips against her ear, her once desirable skin now acting only as a barrier against my anger.

“Get the fuck out of my apartment,” I whisper. I throw her hands back down at her sides and turn away.

“If I leave right now Ethan, I’m *never* coming back.”

I don’t respond.

I grab the pack of smokes on the kitchen table and head back out onto the balcony. The sun has almost set and the evening monsoon is about to unleash her fury upon the valley. The rain is still assaulting my balcony.

“Ethan!” she screams, but her voice is muffled from behind the closed glass. “I enjoyed it!” She is still naked and begins to bang her fists against the door, trying to get my attention.

“He’s better than you in every way! I fucking loved it! Do you hear me Ethan? I fucking *loved* it!”

I fumble for a cigarette in the rain and try to light it, but my hands are shaking. The storm avails me not. Heather stops screaming. I watch the sparse canopy of palms on the

horizon get raped by the wind. Lightning starts up behind the mountains and the thunder rips over the peaks and soars out over the valley. Startled, I drop my cigarette over the balcony. My soaked clothes cling to my body.

The front door of my apartment slams shut and I hear Heather clamor down the three flights of steps towards the parking-lot. The erratic beat of her heels against the wet concrete mixes in with the thunder and the wind. She slows down as she comes to the path below my balcony and I can feel her staring up at me, but I continue to gaze towards the brooding storm at the foot of the McDowell range. Her car starts up and she drives out of the parking-lot.

I walk back inside of my apartment, leaving the door open so the melody of the monsoon can sweep over my emotions. The Absolut bottle in the freezer sticks to my palms as I dislodge it from its icy casket – the rim pinches my lips with an ice-cold grip as the vodka races around the backs of my teeth and crashes into the bottom of my gut. I finish the bottle off and drop it onto the floor. The liquor burns at my insides while it attempts to migrate from south to north, but I flick on the hot-water faucet and hold my hand underneath it until I'm sure I won't throw up.

I'm shaking.

I grab the first bottle of pills I can reach from the cabinet above the sink and pour them into my mouth. The hot water scalds my hand as it soothes me out of gagging. I swallow the last cluster of pills still stuck to the sides of my mouth and then I pause – the image of the gun stored above the fridge ripples through my mind.

I spin around to face my refrigerator and reach for the back of the cabinet above. My hands leave an imprint in the dust that covers the aluminum case of the gun. Smith & Wesson M&P 9mm. The vodka is coursing through my veins as I take the gun out of its case – my

reflection stares back at me through the mirror finish. A wall of water slams down over my eyes and my stomach knots up. I clutch my sides and lean over; the tears trace the edge of my eyelashes before they drop away. The floor reverberates with a dull thud throughout my apartment as I crash onto the floor.

I curl up into the fetal position and reach out for the gun on the floor to my side – I realize I have no feeling in my arms. The vodka on my lips is giving way to the taste of blood. My phone begins to ring from my back pocket but my attention remains on the gun in my hand. I sit up a little, propping my back against the refrigerator door and look into the barrel of the gun, but I can't see clearly through the tears that continue to flood my eyes.

The gun doesn't fit easily into my mouth, so I have to push the barrel past the front of my teeth – the gun screeches like a chalkboard against my canines and bicuspid. My eyes are forced shut by the pressure on my mouth and the tears trickle out, skating along my cheeks past each side of the gun.

I think of my family.

I think of my friends.

With each thought a new tear blazes through my eye-sockets. The steel is cold against my tongue. I can feel the drool that is pouring out from the sides of my mouth cover the gun and slide down over my hands and the sides of my arm. There is a flash of heat throughout my body and I begin to gag. My body lurches over and the gun falls from my mouth as I purge vodka and blood through nostrils and clenched teeth.

As I struggle to breathe I realize the faucet is still running and I look up – steam slowly rises from the sink. It takes everything I have to pull myself up from the floor. I lean over the

sink and hold my hands under the burning water as I calm my mind. My phone starts to ring again and I close my eyes and weep into the steam as I answer it.

“Hello?” I eek out in a raspy voice. I try not to choke as the inside of my throat swells up with pain.

“Ethan, it’s Clint. You okay?”

“Umm....” I cough. “Yeah, man....”

“You wanna go to Zipps tonight for the game?”

“Yeah....” I pause as I look at the gun on the floor that is covered in blood-tinged vomit. “I’ll meet you up there in a bit.”

I place the phone on the counter – my hands are bright pink with minor burns. The faucet squeaks softly as it shuts off and I notice the heart of the storm has reached my apartment. Thunder and wind shred through the palms just past my windows. I spit into the sink and head out onto the balcony.

A bird is caught in a gust of wind and I watch as it soars high above the valley. I lean back into one of my white wicker chairs, propping my feet over the balcony railing. I close my eyes and let the cold rain penetrate my skin, each drop washing away my thoughts one by one until there is only a singular feeling – hatred. The water has eroded everything else. A shockwave of tears flashes beneath my eyelids – each tear carves a searing trail through the raindrops on my cheeks – but I shake my head and clench my teeth until they are abated.