

Into the Storm

TATIANNA WILLIAMS

Olivia sits in the chair near the silent radio and reaches for her brush with a trembling hand. “It feels like it’s been raining for days,” she says.

I turn to look outside only to be met with opacity. The steely blue shutters that distinguish our house from the bright yellows and pinks of the neighbors’ homes are barred tightly against the west-facing window. By now the sky is as dark as molasses and in the hurricane it feels like time moves just as slow. Olivia wraps her thick, black hair around her head, pressing the brush through the tight coils her sweat has revealed. I’ve watched her do this twice since the storm began. It’s one of her coping mechanisms. I say nothing to calm her, because I don’t know what to say.

I asked her to come here with me, to run away to this country and live in the quiet house I grew up in by the sea. We were running from our skin, and I convinced her it would be better here. Now we’re trapped in our hillside abode with Irene battering our windows and our souls turning against each other. Nothing I do can provide the solace she finds in the heavy brush as the bristles run through her hair and crawl against her scalp.

Before we boarded the plane, she squeezed my hand until it went numb. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed the color off my lips as we said goodbye to the turmoil. We landed at dusk, welcomed by the sticky air and the warm remnants of sunshine hidden in the asphalt. It smelled like home.

"I spoke to Jenny yesterday," she says, knocking me out of the memory. "And it's only getting worse. Guess how many have been killed in the past four days?"

I sigh and look at her. Her dark eyes aren't sad, they're seething. "How many?"

"Twenty-two, Alex. One of them was seven years old."

I look toward our son's room. The massive 'Z' emblazoned on his door is slightly crooked. "Then it's good that we're not there, isn't it?"

She ties her orange scarf around her head and knots it tightly. The contrast between the fabric and her cocoa skin is beautiful. "How can you say that?"

I don't answer because I don't want to have this fight. She furrows her eyebrows in disgust. "You of all people should be enraged. They killed your brother! Meanwhile our people are cowering like mice."

I light a candle, maybe to assuage her anger, and place it on the mantel. It's lavender and chamomile, a fragrance she likes. "We're protecting ourselves, Olivia, and our son, remember him? Do you really think I can forget that they killed Aiden? I left because they killed him, not in spite of it." She shakes her head, but I ignore her. "You grew up in that god-forsaken country, where being black is all but a crime. Tell me, what do you think we can change in a place where the government takes its cues from the Third Reich?"

"Do you even hear yourself?" she asks incredulously. "We can join the fucking rebellion."

The candle on the mantel teeters as a gust of wind circles the house. An overhanging branch scrapes the zinc rooftop and makes Olivia's skin crawl. I try to tell her we made the right decision when we left, but she now seems paralyzed by Irene's howl.

For me it's nothing new. I've weathered three hurricanes and an unexpectedly vicious tropical storm in this house; it comes with the territory. But this is her first time, and in the midst of the storm that is tearing us apart, she longs for the fear she knows.

By afternoon the brunt of Irene's wrath has come and gone, and I think Olivia and I have run out of new things to say. Zachariah wakes and calls out for mommy. I bring him out of the room on my hip—though Olivia insists that, at three and a half, he's too old to be coddled—bouncing him as I make my way to the kitchen. It's just about 12:30 PM; I'm surprised but thankful that he slept for so long. He was out during the worst of the storm.

I make him a snack from the collection of boxed goods we've hoarded and alternate between watching him eat and watching Olivia pace. The battery-operated radio is in her hand now, still silent. She fiddles with the antenna, waiting to hear something discernible. I'm about to say her name when Zachariah drops his plate into the sink.

"Can I play now?" he asks. His voice reveals no trace of worry or fear, and we smile at him, though our smiles are false.

"Did you eat it all?" she asks.

He nods, beaming at her with an aura of innocence that only a child can emit. She rests the radio back on the windowsill and walks over to him. I study her as she plants a kiss on his forehead that looks like goodbye.

"Very good," she says, "Yes, you can go play now."

He skips toward his room, and by the time I go to open the first window, I hear the familiar sound of Legos crashing onto the hardwood floor.

"Do you need help, Alex?" She asks, turning her attention to me.

"No, I've got it."

"Have you thought about what I said? About going home?"

I turn away from the window to face her, "Olivia, I am home."

"We are being legally murdered because we're brown," she reminds me, as if I don't know. "You can't ignore or pretend it away."

I wince as I scrape my knuckle against the wooden shutter.

"Our people are dying for being born on the wrong side of history, and you're content with running away. I hope you can live with yourself, because I can't."

I press my lips together and try to remember the life we left behind. I think of my brother, Aiden, and the blood that gushed from his chest and stained my hands as I struggled to keep him alive. "*Keep pressure on his wounds,*" someone kept saying. I think of the first time Zachariah kicked in my belly and the unforgiving St. Louis snows of mid-February that accompanied his birth. I say nothing more to Olivia.

With the window finally open I see that the rain has stopped, but the neighborhood is drowning. The coconut and banana trees that used to line the now overcast sky are uprooted. Part of someone's roof is impaled in the windshield of our car. And I recognize the sound of people crying for their dead.

Olivia stands beside me at the window and closes her eyes. She says a prayer for those who've been lost. There's a fire ablaze within her, one that her fear has ignited, and I think there's nothing I can offer to make her stay. I can't keep her here, just as she can't make me leave.

I open the rest of the windows and shutters in the house, and I tell myself she's abandoning us selfishly and running from Irene—daunted

by the devastation of an experience she's never had before. But as I watch my neighbors wrestle with fallen trees, broken glass, and dying loved ones, I realize that the danger she's heading toward is more treacherous and far more deadly than the one she's leaving Zachariah and me behind to face. □