

THE AIR IS FRESH, AND SWEET

By Vytautas Malesh

The floodwater was sluggish and deep. On day two it was up to the gutters. I was sixteen. We were stranded on the roof watching black-blue water swirl slowly around our home, over our old Toyota, across the river, and out, escaping. Gone.

My mother was trying to keep her spirits up under the pretense of keeping our spirits up. She had been trying to remember the words to “Up on the Roof,” but could only remember the refrain. *Up on the roooof...* My baby sister would cackle and coo and smile and clap and cry and scream. Dad hadn’t spoken since the water came up over the threshold. That’s when he ordered us to climb the ladder to safety.

“Up on the roof,” he had said. It stuck.

The top rung and side rails of the ladder just barely cleared the water line. The water line was just under the gutter. Inside the gutter was a tennis ball. I didn’t play tennis. We didn’t live in a tennis neighborhood.

My dad’s Toyota was right under me, on the river side of the cottage. I stared sulkily at its parking place where it lay, thoroughly waterlogged and ruined. I was to have taken it out the night before, the night the flood started. I was to have driven up to Shannon’s – just hanging out, like we did. And up on the hill, too, not down in the valley with my family and our one shared car, the auto yard, the trailer park, the swamp, and everything else on the port side of a Union Pacific caboose. Up on the hill, the place to which nearly everyone else in town had evacuated. Even our neighbors.

“See that gutter?” My dad had asked me, pointing to the cottage next door.

“What about it?” I said.

“See that water coming up over the side? Should be going down the spout. Idiots never clean their gutters. That’s gonna ruin their roof eventually,” he said.

I pointed to our own gutter, where—unbeknownst to me at the time—the tennis ball created a blockage, where water sloshed up over the side of our gutters as it did the neighbors.

“That’s different,” he said.

Those idiots had known to get to high ground. As the rain came in, we waited. As the emergency sirens sounded, we waited. As the water crested up over the banks of the river, we waited, until the whole thing burst open and all there was to do was wait. We had waited for a day, to see how it went – that’s what my dad suggested we do. See how it goes. We lived in a two-bedroom summer cottage standing in as a full-time residence in a freshwater river valley – there was only ever one way it was going to go, but my dad wanted to wait and see. When he made up his mind that we ought to head to high ground, we were waiting on my mother to get back from the grocery store.

Earlier that day, I had begged and whined, wheedled and moped, to get the car.

“I have errands to run,” my mother said.

“Please?” I asked, stretching the word out beyond decency, overlapping the space in the conversation wherein my mother would have said no, hoping to crowd it out and make room for a yes.

“No, we need groceries. You can have it when I get back if your father doesn’t need it,” she said.

“Fine,” I said in a way that I thought told her clearly that it was not.

I knew my father wouldn’t need it. He worked at the auto salvage yard a half mile up the road. He walked to work, he walked back. He liked the quiet. He liked the rhythm of his footfalls. He liked the solitude, and the time to remember whatever needed remembering. He worked long days and did not usually go out at night, preferring to drink, silently and to excess, in front of the television.

We would have had the car back by seven if she’d gone to Safeway and nowhere else, but she didn’t. She never did. Not even in the pouring rain of a flood advisory. Not even when the clerk at Safeway told her that torrential rains were coming, and that while evacuation had not been ordered per se it had been strongly advised for residents in low-lying areas.

For mom, a trip to the grocery store was an excuse to visit friends, to gawk at strangers, to buy ridiculous knick-knacks from the antique store, to buy bottles and bottles and tubes and tubes of paint to go with the unused collection of art supplies that blocked off the front door to the living room.

“The light’s best in here,” she said when I complained that her easel was in the way of the TV.

A bubble erupted from underneath my feet. A blank white canvas popped up like a struggling swimmer, then lay flat on the water and drifted away, leaving a thin trail of gesso in its wake.

“Up on the roooof,” My mother sang.

Once on the roof, Dad didn’t talk or cry, or try to console us. He didn’t try to make up a plan, or talk about swimming for help. He stared off at some point beyond the river, beyond the houses, beyond the tree line, one thousand yards away. Dad was gone.

I didn’t know why we hadn’t been rescued yet. It was a small town. Someone should have noticed. The ratio of boats to people—bass boats, mostly, a few pontoons, some Maxim ski boats, some Bayliner deck boats, a smattering of Jet Skis—approached one-to-one.

On the other hand, we hadn’t lived there long at all – we’d moved in, switching schools, over winter break. A new kid can’t compete for attention against Christmas loot and first sips of champagne on New Years. A new kid doesn’t get valentines. Nobody cares where a new kid goes for Spring Break, and everyone assumes a new kid who came in over winter break will be gone by next fall.

I listened to my mother try to remember more than four words from an old Drifter’s song while my sister spat up, cried, laughed, and cooed, and while my father slowly dissipated into nothing, like wood rotting in water, or perhaps sinking down and being overgrown, like how moss clung to our roof in fat green clumps.

In a boozy haze, years later, he would tell me he didn’t remember anything about our time on the roof.

“I had a lot on my mind then,” he would say, slurring everything together into “otonmymineden,” but I understood. They were divorced six months later. He’d known. She was surprised. Acted surprised. I don’t know. She tells me her side of the story so perfectly and so consistently that I don’t believe it anymore.

“I thought things were fine. Just fine,” she says literally every time I ask about it. “Isn’t that right, sweetie?” she asks my sister.

“Just fine,” my sister says without looking up from her homework, her eyes evasive. They would rather be anywhere but where they are.

“And then a few weeks after the flood, he comes home from the yard and says he wants out. What do you want for dinner, honey?” She asks me.

I tell her I’m not staying, usually, or sometimes whatever she’s already having. I don’t need anything special. Jokingly, she’ll offer me tuna noodle casserole, or tuna fish sandwiches, knowing how much I hate them. I decline, and we eat hot dogs and macaroni and cheese, or we have Hamburger Helper. Sometimes I order us pizza. I can never stay long. I will never stay long.

“Something happened to him, but that’s all in the past,” she says when she gets tired of the topic. That is everyone’s cue to end the conversation, immediately. The word “past” is a line we do not cross.

On other nights, in his home, my dad goes on at much more considerable length.

“The things you love about someone at first are the things you hate later,” he says.

Her impulsiveness. Did I remember all the junk she was always bringing home? I did. Did I remember the painting? I did. Did I remember the dog? The macramé? The furniture reclamation? The sewing? The book clubs? The hiking? Hosting scouts? Trying to host a foreign exchange student? The singing? No, not during the flood, but the church thing?

Yes, I did, sort of.

None of it lasted more than a few weeks. Except the painting. She bought gallons of paint, he told me, and never put more than a few brush strokes on canvas. She loved applying gesso, though. She loved slathering it on thick, layer after layer, until it smoothed over the fabric of the canvas, until it was as perfectly impermeable as she could make it. He would get ever-so-slightly misty when he talked about the canvases, or maybe rheumy. The canvases were works of art, he said, but they never had art on them.

The canvas that emerged from the house, the one that popped up before me, I had knocked from the easel. I was angry, and when the canvas emerged, I was unrepentant. I feel bad in hindsight, sort of. Silly, at least.

“You said you’d be back by seven!” I whined when she finally came home from the grocery store at nine.

“Well, I wasn’t,” she said.

I stomped into the living room, looking for some way to vent my rage and frustration. I raised my fist back to smash through her canvas, but I restrained myself. I swallowed the anger. Sullen nevertheless, I rapped it on the side and sent it to the floor. I would decide later, when she found it prone, wood-side up, gesso down, whether or not to boast cruelly that I had knocked it down, or to shrug innocently and suggest that it just fell on its own.

In the kitchen, she was telling my baby sister what she had bought. A set of nearly matching antique cups. Some old 45s. A poodle skirt – could my sister believe it? A real poodle skirt from the fifties!

I stomped my foot in the archway between the kitchen and the living room.

“You promised!” I said, hot tears welling up, throat swelling, arms trembling.

“Okay, settle down,” she said in a sing-songy laugh, looking toward my father for commiseration, for mutual reassurance, because hey, how about teenagers today, eh? But he stared into his drink—bourbon, neat, in a coffee cup—and pretended not to hear. I remember that now, that little thing he didn’t do.

“Everything was perfect! It was going to be perfect!” I shrieked.

“That is just about enough,” she said, her voice increasingly stern. She was gearing up for a real lecture, about to lay it on thick and strict, when her eyes popped open and her hand, which had just formed into a disciplinary pointed finger, dropped to her side.

“Oh. Damn,” she said, and I sensed as much as saw the gush of flood water crossing the threshold.

Dad sprang into action, unplugging lights and appliances. Mom grabbed my sister in one arm and a grocery bag in the other.

“To the car.”

We burst out the door – the water was up to our ankles and over the rear wheels of the Toyota. Mom gasped. Dad cursed. A tennis ball floated past my feet.

“Up on the roof,” dad said.

I had barely heard the rain coming down. It was incessant, and so much else was on my mind. It had become background noise, like a radio you’re not listening to. Outside for the first time in hours, the sudden irrevocability of it was dreamlike. Reality was not so inevitable as this flood, which had overflowed the banks, devoured our back yard, was swallowing up the trees: there, the rope of the tire swing dipped down into the water like a plumb line.

Dad fetched the ladder from the side of the house – my mother went first. I held the paper bag and the baby. Me next. Dad handed the baby and the bag to me to hand my mother. One by one and bit by bit we made it up.

Night had fallen early and dark rain whipped and fell on our huddled backs. Across the river a transformer popped in a flash of daylight, then another, and a third, throwing us into chiaroscuro relief. Our faces in those three moments are in my mind indelible; the absolutely blank expressions of people who are just beginning to understand that they have lost it all, and a baby, oblivious to everything, confused, uncomfortably wet, but excited by the novelty of utterly alien and new experience.

I think I thought that the water would recede and leave everything like it was. Water washed away dirt and rinsed away soap, and this would be no different. Yes, that is what I thought, clearly. I still had designs to make it up to Shannon’s parent’s house that night. I was still freshly showered and wearing my best clothes. I had been waiting just inside my bedroom door playing out the rendezvous in my mind. My mother’s tardiness, before it cost me my evening and sent me into a rage, only prolonged and sweetened the agony. Twice, I lay down to masturbate, but twice I got back on my feet after a furtive bit of grinding and lip biting. I didn’t want to use myself up before I saw Shannon, which I was sure I would, soon.

But instead, we, my family, spent the night huddled together for warmth, my mother praying inexpertly—she had little experience and no knack for words—my father still disturbingly silent. Then, when the hard rain broke, we sort of drifted apart as if sickened by one another’s smell. The rain dampened everything. The air was thick and wet. Breathing was laborious. Our fingers pruned up and our feet itched in waterlogged shoes. Somehow, we slept.

My mother woke up first. Or perhaps had stayed awake.

“Let’s see what we’ve got, okay?” she asked my sister.

“Are you a hungry baby? Is my little baby hungry? Let’s get you some food!” she said, and put my sister to her breast with one arm as she peered into the one grocery bag she had salvaged. Her smile never changed, but something else in her face sank away, or fled. The paper of the bag peeled away in fibrous strips that flopped over and clung to one another like dead or listless eels. I knew she had grabbed whichever bag she had not intended to grab. One bag, doubtless, was full of a variety of nourishing, if inexpensive food. Dry cereal, still crisp in

its wax paper bag, or fruit ready to be eaten up peels and all. Maybe a couple of chocolate bars, which she would reveal with a flourish, cheering our spirits and reuniting us as a family, just like on TV when it wasn't blocked by my mother's easel.

Instead, inside the bag were the old records she had purchased, and two of the cups from the almost complete set. No poodle skirt. That, surely, was soaked through and ruined, the poodle peeling away from the rest of the garment, floating ghostly and dancing in the current, restrained about the neck by a leash of sequins and silk.

But there was food. She had rearranged the contents of the bags on her drive home. I can still imagine her stopping at red lights and pulling out the contents of one bag to cluck and coo over, putting those contents back into another bag, taking something out of the second bag, smiling at it, putting it back in the first. And so instead of a poodle skirt underneath the records and cups were four cans of store-brand tuna fish, packed in water.

She passed them out: one to me, one to my father (who took one without so much as a nod of thanks or word of acknowledgement), and then she took one for herself.

"Someone will probably come for us soon," I said, placing the can on the roof beside me.

"Oh, you're speaking now?" my mother asked.

I tried to glare at her and roll my eyes at the same time to signal that no, I was not. I plucked the tennis ball from out of the rain gutter at my feet and threw it towards the river.

I looked for a place to be alone. The best I could do was to move from where I'd been sitting – the southeast corner of the roof—to the southwest corner, the side away from the river. A tiny exhaust pipe jutted up out of the roof. It was the only cover to be had, and I tried to make myself small behind it.

"Well, we can just keep ourselves company, can't we? Want to hear a song?" My mother asked, and she began to sing.

"Up on the roooooof..."

We passed a long day in damp silence, rain falling on us all the while. We closed in on ourselves, huddling into tight little balls of one back and two elbows each. Still, nobody came. Day had never really risen, but night fell again, still hot despite the rain and gloom. Out of boredom and hunger, I ate the can of tuna.

I hid behind the slender galvanized steel pipe and stared westward. The land rose up away from us. Somewhere, to the west, there was some line or point the water did not rise above. Somewhere up the hill, where Shannon was, everything was warm and happy, and dry. I shoved chunks of soggy, smelly tuna in my mouth, chewed, gagged, swallowed, and watched. In the distance, up the hill, lights came on. In our neighborhood, lightning no longer flashed. The storm had spent itself of fury, and now dragged itself wearily across the sky in retreat.

The rain slowed on the second day, but the water did not abate. We remained by ourselves. I suppose to anyone looking back, the family on that roof as a cohesive household was over and done—three people sitting by themselves, refusing to acknowledge one another?—but it didn't feel that way then. I thought I was being perfectly rational by pretending I was alone and refusing to talk to my parents. If mom had just done what she had said and had the car back by seven, I would have been stranded up at Shannon's, warm, dry, and in love. My dad had never been much of a talker in the first place, and so his catatonia didn't register as much more than an extension or aggrandizement of something that had always been there. Mom was mom—self-absorbed, scatterbrained, and too busy caring for a baby to take care of me, I thought.

In hindsight, I suppose that having a baby up on the roof in a dangerous flood would have scared the hell out of me. We all panic differently. After the flood, Mom stopped all her little hobbies – the collecting, the painting, all of it. Maybe it's significant, maybe it's not. Maybe it's just because she had to have a job after the divorce. I don't know.

I ate the last can of soggy tuna. I took it without asking, or without regard for anyone else. I still don't feel bad, and I still hate tuna fish. Following my mother's lead, I had left my other, empty can out to collect rain water to drink. It still tasted a bit like tuna, but it was potable. I managed to gulp it down without retching too much.

The neighbor's house groaned. A great bubbling noise erupted from the other side, and then there was quiet. I suddenly became very aware of sinkholes, of the possibility of being washed away by the flood water. I thought of floating away, down the river on a piece of debris. Shannon would rescue me, and I would give an interview after, to the news, a Red Cross blanket draped over my shoulders, my lips blue, a Styrofoam mug of weak coffee steaming between my trembling hands. Heroically, I would face the death of my parents and infant sister with brave stoicism. My courage, my perseverance, inspiring a nation.

I had drifted off. I didn't sleep, I don't think, but I dreamed, and when I came back around I heard my mother speaking – not to me, not to my sister, but to my father.

“...and when the water clears, we'll be all back to normal. You won't have anything to worry about. You'll get extra hours cleaning up the yard, and you'll get more money. Everything's going to be just fine! And we're going to be happy and healthy, and we will just laugh and laugh about this – ha, ha, ha!” she said.

She wasn't really talking to my father. She was saying words loosely directed to my father, but at my sister. That wasn't really true either. She was talking to herself, for herself. She would be happy and healthy. She would laugh about it. She was laughing about it. She started laughing, loudly, and clutching my sister to her chest. Her laughter was short and clipped, like a cough, before it turned loud and wailing like a cry. It got louder and louder. She held my sister and laughed. The laughter became percussive, like repeated commands to a bad dog, and then raspy, like coughing.

I stood up. My mother, facing north, kept laughing. My father, facing east, continued to stare straight ahead across the river. I took a deep breath, and I dove off the roof and into the front yard, swimming frantically west toward the road, toward the hill.

I didn't hear anyone call after me. I don't know if they noticed. Dad says he doesn't remember that or anything else about our time on the roof. I've never gotten to asking mom before she mentions that everything is in the past. My escape is not part of her story.

They may have called out, though. Or they may not have. I wouldn't have heard, I don't think. I'm not a strong swimmer. It took everything I had just to keep moving forward. I had water in my nose, in my ears, in my mouth.

In the plunge I found the water neither shockingly cold nor bathwater warm – it just was. It was the same temperature as the rain, as was I. I dove in deep, not quite down to the ground. Below me, somewhere, was our yard of dead patchy grass, a narrow, uneven walkway of cracked concrete pavers in need of edging, and our mailbox. Away to the west was the hill. The road ran north and south, parallel to the river, and I followed it. Trees and rooftops broke the waterline to either side, and I smelled pine resin, and something else, something like ozone or electricity. I thought of the exploding transformers from that first night, and I swam headlong into something floating on the surface.

The neighbor's dog bobbed lifelessly along the surface of the water, still tethered to the tie-down stake corkscrewed into their front lawn. Maybe they'd forgotten about it. Maybe they'd abandoned it. All those tennis balls in a neighborhood where nobody can afford to play tennis were dog toys. I cried out in surprise, I swallowed oily water, I spat it out, and I swam away.

Bursts of impotent rage notwithstanding, I had maintained a perfect stoicism while on the roof. I never panicked. I never cried. Suddenly, as I swam, I was sobbing for that dog that I didn't even know. I thought to unclasp its collar, to let it float away to wherever the current took it, but I could barely keep myself afloat. I paddled back and tried to unfasten the collar. The dog was cold, and its flesh repulsed me to touch. I frog kicked away, and did a weak and slow breaststroke until I could swim overhand again. Once I could, I swam as fast as my arms and legs could go.

It felt like I swam for hours, but I got picked up not a half mile from my house, still swimming, "thrashing like a windmill," one of the men in the boat said.

"Where'd you learn to swim – a basketball court?" one man said.

"If you hadn't been slapping the water so loud, we wouldn't have heard you," said another.

I recognized the third man – my neighbor. His chin was rough and stubbly above his blue overalls and beneath his baseball cap. He idled the motor of the little fishing boat while the others hauled me up and in.

"Your family around?" he asked. I nodded in between gasps.

I wanted him to take me to the hill. I wanted him to take me away from where I was, to keep going in the direction I was headed. That's what I tell myself I wanted. That's what I believe I wanted. I think that if I had asked him, he would have taken me. But I didn't.

"Your dog," I said, but I couldn't get the rest out. I was exhausted, and I was losing consciousness. I gestured with my head and half pointed with weak, trembling arms. The boat headed back toward my mother, my father, and my sister. I was passing out.

My neighbor looked down at me and furrowed his brow, then he looked back toward his own house, and he understood.

"Oh," he said, "damn."

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