

Wake

Considering how late they'd turned in last night, seven was early to be up, but a nightmare had jolted Claire awake. Its aftershocks kept her edgy, so she had to get outside. She picked up two galvanized watering cans. Water sloshed onto her bare feet.

Incredible how needy everything was already, even after the deluge the valley had gotten in late May. Out past her well-watered kitchen garden, the forest shimmered tinder dry. Cicadas chivied already. Above the trees, the glassy sky looked as if it'd been scratched, the skeletal clouds were so famished.

She started with her potted herbs and cherry tomatoes and moved on to the calendulas, daylilies, and nasturtiums. *Puttering*, Joy called it; but Joy was fourteen.

She refilled at the faucet several times. The water hammered the metal cans. It roiled, folded, and purred.

There wasn't a fourteen-year-old alive who appreciated her mother.

She maneuvered the kettle grill into the garage and collected the empties they'd missed in last night's sweep. The side yard still needed watering, so she lugged the mud-slippery hose from her vegetable beds into position and adjusted the sprinkler's arc short and high. In the hiss of escaping water at the faucet, she rinsed the mud from her fingers and wiped them on her aproned midriff.

That did it: The simple touch triggered a wave of sensations she'd experienced during the hot blush of her nightmare. Tiny hands, tiny feet pushing through her flesh.

Prints of water splattered across her apron and limbs.

"Getting wet, there," a male voice said.

Her neighbor, Hugh McClelland, dressed in uniform, stood in his driveway, his shoes lacquer black. The air diffused an old-

fashioned aftershave—wind and seas, sweat and graft. He held the morning paper rolled and banded.

“Miles away,” Claire said. Droplets pattered again, and she stepped back.

Sunlight nipped a point of Hugh’s badge. “I’m surprised to see you up already. Late night, wasn’t it?”

“We kept you awake, did we?” she said. She remembered the outburst Joy had made, well past midnight.

“Not a problem.”

“You should have come over, Hugh. Matt had a steak with your name on it.”

He apologized and snapped the paper’s band. “Just didn’t seem appropriate, me partying at a time like this.”

The sprinkler swept by. Little digits pattering.

“Any news?”

“Nope.”

They were talking about the missing kayaker. Earlier in the week, Claire was weeding her front beds when she heard a helicopter. Visible above the trees, it flew up river past town, hovered a few minutes at the falls, and then made a composed turn and slow, low-flying descent, which meant a Search and Rescue trawl. Excursion craft for tourists usually climbed the falls to linger there before falling away back down the valley like a hawk abandoning its quarry.

That day, Joy and Davy had planned on going swimming at the falls. She drove them the hour-and-a-half down the mountain to the mall, Davy so distracted with excitement he wasn’t car sick once.

Hugh said, “Five days in this heat. God help his wife if she finds him herself.” The woman walked a section of river each day searching for her husband. “She’s crossed the dam already.”

Hugh pulled his sunglasses from his shirt pocket. “There’s talk on the table of limiting access to the basin. But I say try an’ enforce that. Sure.” He slapped the rolled paper against his thigh. “Well,”

he said, “make it a good one. Thunderstorms predicted, my dear. Save yourself the bother of watering.”

Sound advice from a man whose yard had fallen to dirt and weeds.

Claire entered the kitchen. Davy, all teeth-and-limbs twelve, sat at the breakfast bar. Pillowcase creases imprinted his flushed cheeks. “It’s still early,” she said as she brushed her nose against his soft, dark hair and remembered the long-ago pungent sweetness of his infant scent.

“Too hot to sleep.” He swiveled on the barstool to face her and grabbed her hands. “A piece of strawberry pie? Please?”

Her rule was no sugar before noon, but the fridge door contents were rattling before she’d opened her mouth—he slipped from her that fast.

“We let you stay up late, Davy,” she said. “Try cooling off with a shower and going back to bed.”

The pie plate banged the countertop.

“Why don’t *you* shower and go back to bed?” He popped a glazed berry into his mouth. “Lookin’ pretty frazzled, Mom.” His cheeks pleated into his father’s grin, cresting his blue eyes into slits.

She ran her hand through her hair. In the sea of her love for her children, Claire was rudderless. With a sigh, she said, “Cut me a slice, too.”

She lingered in the shower under cold water. When she got out she found Matt slumped on the edge of their bed, the twisted sheet covering his waist and thighs. He rubbed his neck and yawned.

She stood in front of their window fan rubbing her hair with a towel. “It’s only eight, you know.”

“Christ.”

He fell backward and pulled a pillow over his eyes. “The boys here yet?”

Simon and his two-year-old. Every summer Matt's brother came for what Matt called "the mountain package," a brief, controlled brush-up with the great outdoors, and all that. His own life was a desk in an office in the city. Sixty-eight floors up and sixty-eight-degree, year-round climate control. No window in sight. Child-support payments and a fierce mortgage for a studio with a healthy cemetery view. This was his first solo trip with his son. He and the boy's mother had never lived together.

"Didn't he say that Nathan sleeps in?" Claire said.

"Our kids never slept in."

"Joy does—now." She pictured passing her daughter's battened barbian disguised as an ordinary door covered with curled and faded Hello Kitty stickers. If the door was closed, don't knock.

"Don't mention Joy—I have a headache as it is."

"It's called a hangover. You drank far too much, Matt."

"Simon kept bringing me the beers."

"You kept drinking them."

"I had to piss three times in the night—you snore."

"I slept like a rock."

A lie, the very words of which created a fissure, nightmare images breaking through. She turned to face the window fan and closed her eyes. "Listen. Simon's promised Nathan we'd picnic today."

"The missing kayaker been found?"

"No."

Matt didn't know about the man's wife scouting the riverside. It wasn't like Claire to withhold information from him, but it was like her to protect those she loved. Why this detail fell under "protection" she hadn't considered.

"Well, then," he said with a full-stop, which meant *no picnic at the falls*. He was right, of course.

Claire sat on the bed next to him. "There is the pool." It was too hot for anything else besides swimming, and the little basin was perfect for Nathan, but Matt detested putting children in chemically-

treated water. “Hugh’s predicted thunderstorms, though,” she added.

“Hugh and his thunderstorms.” Matt lifted the pillow from his eyes. “Joy isn’t up, is she?”

“Davy’s up, but I told him to shower and go back to bed.”

Claire had smelled beer on their daughter’s breath last night—God, another thing she was keeping from Matt.

“I’m going to have words with her. Even Simon was uncomfortable with Madam’s performance last night.” He dropped the pillow. “But for now I’m going back to sleep.”

She said, “I need the cooler.”

“Holy crap. Garage’s probably an inferno already. Why didn’t you ask me last night?”

“I did? Simon offering to help?”

“Honestly, isn’t there something else we could do today?”

On the nightstand, Matt’s phone screen lit. Claire grabbed it. Simon phoning. “Hey,” she said.

“Our place’s so hot it smells like campfire ashes.”

Simon’s voice boomed loud enough for Matt to hear, and Matt said. “If he’s so hot already maybe he should dig out the cooler.”

Claire heard a background of conversation, laughter, and cutlery. She said, “Matt wants you to stop for ice on your way over.”

“Sure, why not? I stop for pedestrians, pets, wildlife—”

Mr. Ease, Matt called his brother. *Mr. Intense* was Simon’s retort. Matt was tough, of course, but he was soft, too. If Claire were to tell him about her nightmare, he’d be hurt for her as well as concerned. The feel of those little hands and feet pushing out.

“Hey,” Simon said, “we came to the café for the A/C. Killer waffles—huh, Nathan? Yep, he’s nodding.” He laughed. “You should see his face! What a mess! Anyway, hope you haven’t prepared a spread.”

Of course she had. She denied it.

“I’ll fill the car with ice. Might be some left by the time we get to your place.” A six-block drive. The line went dead.

Matt rose with a sigh. He made his way into the bathroom. The electric razor buzzed on. Claire thought of pressing up against her husband's buttocks, one hand stroking his naked abdomen, the other his thigh. His mountain biking, pumping up and down the trails: he was hard. At that moment, a door opened. Davy's tread in the hallway approached. Claire grabbed her towel to cover herself.

The bags of ice Simon carried dripped across the kitchen floor. Nathan, every bit his golden father, tottered behind. Davy grabbed his cousin's hand and pulled him under the breakfast bar. Sitting next to a floor fan, the two shuffled through a shoebox filled with tractors and cars, the rustling of the toys akin to the sound of ice being poured into the cooler.

"Helluva night," Simon said. "No sleep. Lost five pounds of sweat." He'd reserved the A/C cabin only to be put out of it by the campground manager, their neighbor Hugh's brother. He'd been running the campground ever since his release from jail. Drug trafficking. Simon had turned down the discount the man had offered. "I've got a toddler here," he'd told the man. The kayaker's wife was in the A/C cabin, but Simon knew nothing of the missing kayaker. He'd threatened to talk to the woman himself, to ask her to trade, but the beefy, tattooed manager had told him, "Leave her alone." Behind the counter, he kept a baseball bat. Matt and Claire said nothing about the kayaker, either.

"Kids aren't bothered by the heat," Matt said.

From under the breakfast bar came, "I am! We should get A/C, Dad. Joy wants it, too."

When Simon laughed, Nathan laughed, too, until he saw Davy's earnest look, which he then mimicked.

Matt and Claire had moved to the valley to live cleaner lives. He taught high school chemistry and PE. She made tinctures and salves sold in boutiques around town.

She shut the loaded cooler's lid. "Let's not forget to wake Sleeping Beauty."

“Long gone,” Simon said.

Matt looked at Claire.

“Was climbing into a red Civic when I pulled up.”

Matt said, “I told her last night no mall—she’d be sticking with us today.”

Simon laughed again. “She got you, huh?”

“Not funny.”

“Oh, come on, Matt, chill. She’s got a phone, right? She’ll find us if she needs us.”

From under the breakfast bar came Davy’s voice, “Aaaw, ooh, aaaw, ooh,” the fan vibrating the boy’s vowels. Nathan tried leaning toward the fan to do the same, but Davy blocked him. Simon snatched his son from danger.

Claire and Davy laid out onto the pool’s brittle lawn what they’d carried. The boys stripped to their suits and Claire slathered them with sun cream. Davy squeezed his cousin’s green floaties and said, “What big muscles you have.”

“You don’ ’ave muffles.”

“Nah, big boys don’t need ’em.” He led his cousin to the paddle pool, pinched his nose and slid under the water’s surface, the front of his trunks pillowing with air. When he came up, he flailed his arms and sputtered. Nathan squealed and pushed him back under. They did this again and again.

The men lugged in the cooler, Matt’s tanned thighs flickering shadows and delineations of muscle. Simon’s legs resembled blue-veined marble. The two were light and dark, indoors and out. Their eyes—blue and brown—shared a mirthful shape, though, and their elastic and wide grins both pushed similar boundaries.

Matt gestured toward the water. “Race?”

“You know I’ll only let you win.”

They returned with suits dripping and chests heaving. Davy had run off with friends and left Nathan with Claire. The baby sat on his SpongeBob towel stacking plastic toy buckets, red, yellow, and blue.

The men grabbed him up and swung him between them while trotting to the big pool. “’gain! ’gain!” the baby shouted. They set him on the top step of the shallow end, water up to his waist, his floaties propping out his arms, and then they leaned against the gutter’s edge, never lost for talk.

By the deep end, Davy stood at the pool’s edge, his suit wet-plastered to his insect legs. He hustled backward, ran forward, and jumped high over the water. Mid-air, he folded his legs and hugged them.

A group of boys shouting from the water turned aside as a spray shot up and showered them. Davy resurfaced, and a tournament of splashing ensued.

This flawed world had its ideal moments—yet Claire felt melancholy. The effects of alcohol? Too little sleep? The nightmare? She checked her phone for any word from Joy. None.

Nathan’s colorful buckets had been left behind. They had painted faces and holes for eyes, ears, and mouth. She took them to him and dipped one in the water. Two ears spouted a clear stream. The baby clapped. “Me, me, me.”

“The buckets sink,” Claire warned the men. “Keep an eye on them, right?”

The deep end was empty now. In the lap lanes, mature swimmers crawled placidly. The two lifeguards, the older one familiar to her, sat in shaded highchairs, red buoys in their laps. At the concession stand stood the pool’s manager, arms crossed. All the hair on his head had ended up in his eyebrows. He, like their neighbor Hugh and the campground manager, was a McClelland; the McClellands owned the town, the valley.

A whistle trilled. The older lifeguard stood on his platform motioning toward the paddle pool. His shoulder-length curls shook. “Outa there, boys,” he shouted.

Davy and another splashed through the shallow water and shot across the grass laughing and knocking into each other. They dove into the big pool. “Got my eye on you, Davy,” The guard yelled.

Claire couldn't recall his name. He worked at the school during the scholastic year—shop instructor, groundskeeper? Probably the groundskeeper, maybe both.

A boy standing next to Davy in the shallow end called, "Marco."

"Polo," called another.

Several boys encircled Davy, who dipped out of sight. He reemerged, froth and fluster. The boys turned or swam aside before he could tag them. Down he went again. Choppy wakes slapped the boys' outstretched hands. They called. Widened their circle.

Davy had bragged to Claire about being able to hold his breath "longer than anyone." As she pictured him tracing the pool's concrete bottom with his fingers, she thought of tiny hands, tiny feet. She crossed her arms and pressed them against her hollow ribs.

"Marco."

"Polo."

The water sparkled. As soon as Davy tagged someone, she'd call him over, collect the baby, and slather more sun cream on the pair. Then she could go into the water herself. She flicked a bit of swimsuit elastic over an exposure of rear sagginess. Gardening wasn't the most athletic work.

One of Nathan's buckets had drifted from his reach. Matt plucked it up and filled it with water. The "O" poured, and the blond cherub clapped.

"Marco."

"Polo."

The older lifeguard—Greek, or Italian, maybe—a hairy, barrel chest on spindly legs, adjusted his position in his chair.

The second guard, a high school kid Joy surely knew, now paced the lap pool's length. His flip-flops slapped. His red buoy swung. Zinc blotted out the features of his nose, and his blond hair shone silver-green.

Gosh, Davy had been under the water a long time. Had he surfaced and gone under again without her noticing?

"Marco."

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“Polo.”

The older guard had his eye on the boys’ ring.

“Marco.”

“Polo?”

Three trills and a sudden plunk and whoosh of water below the lifeguard’s chair, and an echo of trills from the lap pool—

Davy! Oh, my God, Davy! Claire’s feet were slapping hot concrete. Her eyes locked onto the lifeguard’s jerking red buoy.

In the boys’ circle, a froth erupted, Davy popping up. “You’re it!” he screamed. “You’re it!”

Claire’s legs jellied. She felt her her heart pounding, her gasps raspy in her throat.

But the red buoy kept moving, and the teen-guard plunged feet-first into the water right at Claire’s men.

The baby.

Two upturned buckets bobbed in the water above the steps. In the gutters lay two deflated green floaties.

“Matt!” Claire screamed.

Simon laid Nathan on the SpongeBob towel and knelt beside him. “He didn’t move. He didn’t move.”

The older guard, arms crossed over his chest, feet shoulder-length apart, stood above them. His hair fed rivulets of water down his leathered back. He said, “Saw him pulling off those floaties, next thing I knew, by God, he’d slipped under.”

Simon rubbed his face with both hands. “We were right there. Right there.”

Matt, holding an arm around Davy, stood to the side as if transfixed. It was unlike him not to be comforting his brother. His and Davy’s swim trunks dripped. Davy’s feet were larger than his father’s. “Not a move,” Matt said.

“No, not a move.”

The guard squatted and placed his hand on Simon’s back. “They don’t, sir.”

“Just lying on the bottom,” Matt said.

Simon dabbed a towel at Nathan’s arms, his chest and legs. The baby’s lips puckered, and then began sucking on a phantom pacifier—he’d screamed when Matt jerked him out of the water.

The manager from the concession stand ambled to them. He looked down and raised his thick eyebrows, wrinkling his scalp. “The baby okay? She wanted to know.” He nodded toward the stand.

A woman in cargo shorts and hiking boots sat in the shade of an umbrella, a backpack at her feet. Her limbs had the lean and veined androgynous look of the endurance athlete, her hair was short and white. The kayaker’s wife. How long had she been there?

Above the whoops and shouts of swimmers, Claire now made out the roar of the falls. The woman and her husband had swum to safety. Their upturned boat, though, got stuck, the currents of the undertows slapping and popping it about.

Matt would have gone back for the boat, too; he would have.

The guard patted Simon’s shoulder. “I’ll leave you folks to it. Should that baby show any signs of chestiness, get ahold of Dr. McClelland.” The men shook hands.

At the concession stand, the manager offered the kayaker’s wife a sandwich and drink.

“I should go sit with her,” Claire said. “Offer my condolences.” She wouldn’t, though. Claire’s tendency was to withdraw into herself at the sight of someone else suffering. As wrong as it felt to her, she found herself incapable of putting it right.

Matt shook his head. “That would be premature.”

The urge to place her hands on her belly overwhelmed Claire, but, she resisted it.

He flung open the cooler. “Come on, we all need to eat.”

Matt talked reluctant Simon into a beer at the concession stand. Davy lumbered after them, begging for ice cream. Claire checked

her phone for messages. Beside her, the baby sighed ragged, his sleep uninterrupted.

Matt presented himself to the kayaker's wife. He gestured towards her untouched sandwich and drink. She closed her eyes and nodded. He took the can she held, opened it, and handed it back. That's the way he was, kind and considerate. The woman smiled and sipped. Her husband, the papers had reported, had celebrated his retirement just a few months back.

Davy's friends swarmed to the stand, sweeping him into gaggles and pinches. They exchanged fists of change—coins sticking to their palms—for ice cream bars, cones, and popsicles. Two plump, deep-cleaved girls dipped into the shade. When the girls left, the covey collapsed into a cackling pile of elbows and knees. Last year, the girls wouldn't have made the boys so nervous.

A cell phone played the opening notes to Van Morrison's *Brown-eyed Girl*. Matt set down his beer. The manager stopped wiping down his countertops. Both looked at the kayaker's wife. The white plastic chair beneath her shifted.

The cell-phone tune played. Matt squatted before the woman. He took the sandwich and drink from her hands and set them on the ground. She then burrowed into the pack at her feet.

Above the shouts and cries and splashes of water, the mountains shimmered. The heat-bleached sky failed to show depth, and there was no sign of Hugh's thunderstorms. The cicadas pulsed.

The kayaker's wife dropped her phone into her lap. Matt seized her hands.

As this went on, Simon approached Claire. "Apparently there's been a drowning and a body's been found—that woman's husband. She's the one in the cabin I reserved." He stretched himself alongside his son. The baby's chest rose and fell. Simon stroked him. "Christ," he said. "That could be me."

The heat obliterated Claire's effort to respond.

The widow stepped out of the umbrella's shade and into the sun. A thin and crooked stem in the harsh light, she leaned against

Matt. He led her out the pool's exit as Hugh's cruiser pulled into the parking lot.

The pool grounds had nearly emptied now. Tree shadows had lengthened. The sky directly above me stretched like ironed linen, not a wrinkle of life, but at one end of the valley it gathered, folded, and darkened.

A black beetle, on its back, pedaled the air. Claire flipped the poor creature. It shambled away from her over the brittle grass.

Davy sat with a girl on the edge of the pool. Their legs dangled in the water. When he laughed, he covered his mouth with his hand.

The younger guard cleaned filters while the older one leaned against the bar, a beer in hand. He and the manager laughed; the two were a couple. Now she remembered: the younger lifeguard was a boy the pair fostered. Tim, a classmate of Joy's.

Nathan squirmed. His lips sucked. He'd been asleep more than two hours.

"I'm trying to do the right thing here," Simon said. "What do I tell his mother? *Do* I tell his mother?" The baby scrunched his nose and sneezed. Simon drew him into his lap. The blond head wobbled. His chubby arms jerked, briefly spastic.

Claire had no idea about words. She was the keeper of secrets, wasn't she? Not telling Matt about her nightmare or about Joy's beer breath. She checked her phone for messages. Still nothing.

Nathan yawned. Claire handed her brother-in-law a sippy-cup from the cooler. "Give him juice first," she said. "His blood sugar's low." The baby grabbed the cup, a fierce frown on his puffy, reddened face.

Davy ambled to their pitch. "Everyone's gone now. Can't we go, too?" He flopped across the baby's SpongeBob towel and was snoring within moments. Nathan crawled from his father's lap and leaned against his cousin's torso.

A dry wind kicked up. Down the valley, thunderheads. Claire thought about Joy. Had the girls left the mall already? The mountain curves were not easy to maneuver in a torrent. She worried about the little red car's tires, their profiles. She closed her eyes. Her limbs felt weighted. She longed to get in the water, but the heat eviscerated any desire to move.

In her lap, her phone vibrated at last. The girls were nearly home. It was no given that Joy would bother sending a message; now, maybe, Claire could enjoy a swim?

A crow on the ground jumped into flight. The rescued beetle was nowhere to be seen.

She stood. At that moment, Hugh McClelland's cruiser swept into the parking lot.

This time last year, Hugh's wife left him. His teenaged stepsons had wanted to stay, but she took them with her to the city.

They turned onto their block and approached their drive. Leaves and twigs skittered up the street and a red hatchback pulled away from their curb. Simon said, "Joy was drinking beer last night, you know."

Matt said, "What?"

Claire placed her hand on her husband's shoulder. She said, "Will you and Davy pull my patio pots under the eaves? I'll talk to her."

At Joy's stickered barbican, she knocked without knowing what she'd say, when all she felt was thankfulness that her daughter had made it home. Hinges squeaked and Claire stepped back, startled.

Joy had grown taller than Claire. Her eyelids were sparkles of blues and pinks and her lashes were black prongs. She pressed her lips, an uncomfortable-looking dry red, and then said, "Is there something you want?"

"I'm sorry. It's—" There she was, the one apologizing.

Joy turned and clomped across the room. White platform heels with red soles. A white miniskirt. A hot-pink T-shirt. Wasn't it just

two weeks back that Matt had hauled away a pink princess bed, a pink carpet, curtains, and frills? Father and daughter assembling minimalist oak furniture?

“Is Dad still pissed?”

Claire shook her head, but hadn’t she just scrambled from the car to be here first? She said, “Running off wasn’t a huge help.”

“Yeah, well.”

Downstairs the others entered the house, doors slamming. Claire stepped into Joy’s room and closed the door.

“And explain the drinking?”

“You guys don’t even know what good beer is.”

Thunder rolled.

“God, Mom, your face. I’m joking.” She folded herself onto her bed and squirmed backward to the headboard. She said “Jackie’s sister? Skinny Melissa? She took us straight to the food court to chow down. Shoved in so much crap—all in one go. Then she hauled us to the bathroom.” She stuck her finger in her mouth. “Barfing?”

Claire nodded.

“Jacks did it, too.”

“That was going on in my time.”

Joy’s face expressed disgust. “Yuck, huh? Give me a break.” Like her father, Joy ran and biked ferociously. She twirled the strand of hair. “Saw the McClelland twins at the gas station,” she said. “Claimed to’ve found the kayaker. They—” She pinched her nose, her expression turned to one of disgust. “Well, Jacks and Melissa got to barf again. They aren’t much, those two.”

The girls, or the boys? Claire said nothing.

“They’re so stupid, fishing at the dam, anyway.” Off came the heels. She kicked them to the floor. “I mean, seriously yuck?”

Lightning flashed. The room grew dark. Claire flicked the light switch. “Look,” she said, “it’s been a long day. You owe Daddy an apology.” She’d tell him that Joy had said she was sorry to her. He

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wouldn't understand their daughter's opening up to her as remittance for an apology.

"Do I have to apologize to Uncle Simon?"

Claire crossed the room to her daughter's window. She said, "Nathan nearly drowned today." Outside, thunder rumbled.

"What?"

"He took off his floaties. The lifeguards saw it and were on their way to rescue him, but Daddy pulled him out."

"Oh. My. God. Are they at the clinic?"

"He's here."

"He's okay?"

"We think so." Tree branches oscillated and swayed. Leaves, pinecones and fragments of twigs bounced and tumbled along the curb. Thunder again. She touched the pane and recalled her nightmare. She couldn't stop the fluids draining, her skin vacuuming onto the squirming baby. In life, hers had not squirmed. Had simply stopped moving. She said, "Your father and I lost our first baby. A little boy."

Joy's headboard banged the wall. "What? What's this?"

Gone. Just gone. "It's like that sometimes," the nurse had said, removing the heartbeat monitor. "No reason why."

No reason why. The autopsy explained nothing. What happened happened. The birth of *Why Us* came only after they held him in their arms.

The pane's surface distorted a reflection of Joy, softening her makeup, blurring her features. For the first time, Claire saw herself in her daughter, while outside a gray and grainy wall of water approached like breeze-blown curtains.