

## THE SAILOR'S HORNBOOK FOR THE LAW OF STORMS

It was only when Olivia started back to the house from the We-Tote-Um on the corner that the realization of where she was and the reason she'd been called back to it really sank in, possibly for the first time since she'd arrived there.

The plastic-beflowered flip-flops she'd bought at the same convenience store five days earlier slapped against the soles of her feet. The dusk smelled of sun-warmed grass and citronella, as if in defiance of the weather report she'd switched off before she'd started off on her errand. As she walked, the same predictions spilled from the radios of the cars that pulled around and past her.

She stopped in front her grandmother's house, took in, as if for the first time, the awnings eyebrowing its windows, the whitewash girdling the trunks of its pecan trees. White-painted, past its prime, it was clearly the last home of a woman grown old without kin close by or a husband.

She slid the telltale packet of cigarettes she'd just bought into the front pocket of her shorts. She didn't want to have to explain to her mother that she'd held out as long as she figured she could. Buying cigarettes had just seemed too easy: like falling back into the adolescent shuffle forced on her by cheap flip-flops. She'd stood in front of the worn counter at the We-Tote-Um with the roll of strapping tape her mother had sent her out for and the old request — *pack of Camel Lights in a box, please* — had felt like the answer to a burning question she hadn't even realized she wanted to ask.

— *You-all already got all your supplies?* the clerk had asked her. *If things turn out like they say, you're gonna be needing more than that roll of tape now, to get yourself through this.*

The cigarettes, handed over, had felt like a talisman. As she walked out of the store, the clerk had admonished — *don't let those matches get wet now.*

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The weather, upgraded the day before, christened as *Delia*, was about to bear down on them, her arms extended to embrace all and cradle it close: white sand and wild water, palms lashed by the wind. But for the moment Delia was still some other far-off island's calamitous problem. Once Olivia was inside the house, she stopped at the doorway to the dining room.

"You'll wish you hadn't bought those cigarettes," her mother warned her, looking up from the papers spread across the dining room table. How had her mother guessed? "Don't you remember how hard it was for you to quit in the first place? And how much harder it would be to stop now?" She sighed. "But I guess it's not up to me. Do you think your grandmother went through all this," she added, "every single hurricane season?"

Olivia felt grateful her mother had decided to change the subject away from her transgression. "Hard to believe," her mother kept on, "she must've had somebody help her get plywood up every time and she never bothered to tell me. Did you gas up the cars like I asked you?"

"Yeah." Olivia slouched in the doorway. Earlier, she'd driven the block from the house to the We-Tote-Um three times, no wonder the clerk, who either worked back-to-back shifts or was the only employee of the store who hadn't already evacuated, was beginning to know her. First to fill the tank of the Honda she'd driven from Chattanooga when her mother's call had finally come, expected for so long that in the end she'd forgotten to expect it. Then the car her mother had rented a few days before that. And finally, the black behemoth of a Chrysler that had been her grandmother's, so unroadworthy that everyone preferred to throw away money on rental cars rather than drive it. Now, the three vehicles were parked nose-to-tail in the oyster-shelled driveway hugging the side of the house like a continuation of the funeral procession that had neglected to depart. Olivia sat down at the table. "What next?" she asked, reaching for her mother's list.

"The main thing now," her mother said, "is just all this packing." Over their heads, the house creaked, a ship headed home.

Olivia looked up. "Will it hold?"

“Don’t be dramatic, Olivia,” her mother replied. “Of course, it’ll hold.”

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The narrow dining room was where Olivia’s grandmother had retreated when frailty, recognized first by Olivia’s mother but fiercely contested for months, left her unable to climb stairs. It was still cluttered with trays and bedpans, canes and walkers, the sickroom history of a gradual decline.

“Are you hungry?” Olivia asked her mother. The dining room depressed her. She pushed back her chair.

“Pull out those cold cuts,” her mother said without looking up from her papers. “I don’t know how the two of us are going to eat up all this food before it starts spoiling.”

The plywood Olivia had nailed over the window above the sink dimmed the high-ceilinged kitchen. She reached for the light switch. The table was piled high with cardboard boxes she’d collected from the dumpster behind the We-Tote-Um; the counters were covered with Tupperware containers, nested each inside the next, bearing the masking-taped name of its owner. She opened the refrigerator hopefully, as if she hadn’t already had five days of the Jell-o salads it contained.

She had no choice but to make another meal out of some next-door-neighbor’s syrup-soaked ambrosia. She nudged the refrigerator closed with one hip and carried the big bowl down the hall. “I set the tray of cold cuts on the table,” she said as she passed the dining room. “I’m going out to the porch to watch the sky for a second.”

Something — she wasn’t sure whether it was habit or a desire to keep checking on the sky — kept pulling her out there. The porch was the place visitors had always been met, where family arrived for their allotted slice of summer had always been greeted. But even after all the recent traffic to the house, the porch’s floorboards were still liberally floured with pollen. She sat down on the swing at one end of it with the bowl of ambrosia balanced on her lap.

The bit of sky framed between the porch’s columns had gone the pale orange of cut melon. It was swathed with high, wispy, quick-moving clouds. From over the bay came the flicker of lightning.

“Clouds’re moving fast,” her mother said from the doorway behind her. “I guess it was good Colin changed his flight and got out when he did.”

Olivia had been the one who had ferried everyone who couldn't afford to be stranded to the Tallahassee airport when the weather — barometric pressure, the latest news reports from the far side of Cuba, the advisory flags fluttering over the bay — had started to demand their attention.

— *You'll be all right?* her husband Evan had asked her as they stood at the gate waiting for his flight back to Chattanooga. The sky beyond the airport's plate-glass was marbled almost white, and Evan had asked her if she would be all right so many times in the past few weeks since the morning when her water had broken months too early that she didn't realize that this time he meant, because of the storm — and because for the next few days she'd probably be stranded in the same house with her mother.

— *I'm sorry*, her brother Colin had said later, when she stood with him at his gate, and then she had made the opposite mistake and thought he was apologizing for the fact that he was ducking out early, avoiding the domesticities their grandmother's death had brought with it.

“No. I meant about what happened with you and Evan. What with all this other stuff going on, I didn't even get a chance to say anything until now.”

No one else had said anything, either. “It's all right.” She slipped on her sunglasses

The day of the memorial service, when they'd all walked from the church to the river, she'd looked around and been struck by the obvious: none of them knew anything about how to eke a living from a small Florida town facing out toward the water. Life had taken all of them elsewhere. Denver was the place her uncle and his wife called home; her mother had her own life in Birmingham, one finally friend-rich and sociable after the lean years spent there as a recent divorcee. The members of what had always been called during Christmas dinner conversations *the younger generation* were content to move in their own separate orbits. Colin claimed to hate the south and had taken up sloppy, hiking-booted residence in Seattle. Olivia was in Tennessee. In order to get here, her cousin Allison, the eldest, the one who'd majored in Classics and now waited tables, had had to take a Greyhound all the way from Tucson, Arizona.

The house would have to be sold. As soon Olivia pushed open the front door for the first time, arriving too late for the good-bye she'd hoped for when she left Chattanooga, she understood that. The humidity that had cracked the flagstoned walk said it all, as did the insistence of the cicadas in the bushes that shrouded the porch in a perpetual twilight: *going going gone*.

Wind hit the side of the house like a handful of gravel tossed toward a window. “This house,” her mother sighed. “Tomorrow we’ll have to start packing up all the dishes.” Olivia pushed the porch swing higher with her foot. Once, she’d wondered if she’d recognize the event in her life that would mark the transition from *blithe* to *bowed down* when it came. She’d assumed — also idly, because she’d been in her early twenties then, and though she thought she was eager to move ahead, to be wiser, to be *older*, she mainly wanted just not to be asked for her I.D. in bars — that it would be a transformation that came all at once, shocking in its suddenness.

But she was thirty now, though still occasionally asked for proof of her birthdate when she bought a bottle of wine. Five days ago she’d driven south. The interstate had been a dark, piney corridor whose purpose was just to shuttle her from one place to another, and by the time she reached the southernmost border of Georgia she’d realized that the transformation to adulthood that had seemed so hypothetical to her ten years before resided not in particular, life-changing events but in the domesticity occurring between them.

Earlier in the day she and her mother had scrubbed and silicone-caulked the old-fashioned tub and filled it with fresh water. They’d swaddled the television console in the living room in plastic garbage bags according the instructions of FEMA’s internet site.

Now, the still air felt oiled; sponge-thick and heavy. “Can’t take a bath,” she said to her mother. “Too much trouble to unwrap the TV to watch it. Guess I’ll go up to bed.” She slowed the porch swing’s to-and-fro arc. “Wind’s died down,” she added, standing up.

Her mother reached out to pat her shoulder awkwardly as she passed through the doorway. “It’s good you could take this time off. Think you can sleep on the sofa?”

It was her great-grandmother’s clawfooted monster, legendary for requiring, during its long-ago move into the house, that all doors between it and the second-floor library be removed from their hinges. The nap of its bottle-green velvet had long ago been rubbed almost through to the backing.

She shrugged. “Who knows how much sleeping we’ll get? Wake me up if you need me.”

“All right,” said her mother. “You do that too, honey.”

When she reached the top of the stairs, she could tell her mother had been up sometime before her: the way to the library was illuminated by a plastic-hooded nightlight running fingers of light along the hall's dusty baseboards.

Its glow left the ceiling to darkness, made her think of long-ago visits, when her mother and grandmother, tidying up after supper, had washed their grievances along with the soapy dishes in the sink downstairs, and Colin, the youngest, had translated the sound of those worn arguments into a fear of the dark.

During summer visits, the rule of her grandmother's house had always been that children should be seen and not heard (children should use their inner resources and ride fat-tired bicycles to be found in the garage to the beach or the community pool every morning). Because of that, she and Colin and Allison had sometimes dined on hors d'oeuvres filched from the tray set out on the porch during the cocktail hour that began at five and ended long after nightfall; they'd been happy to be banished to the sleeping porch that ran along the back of the house, where they slept in narrow beds with iron headboards. Amidst all that was left — the elaborately-turreted dollhouse, a savaged orange felt donkey leaking sawdust from mothholes, four bisque-headed dolls in a grubby shirt box — of every child who'd ever slept there before them.

During rarer winter visits, Colin slept on the sofa in the library, and Olivia and Allison shared the hulking bedstead now dismantled and ready for shipping to Denver; the bed where, the Christmas Olivia was eleven, Allison had whispered to her what she realized later was a surprisingly precise explanation of blowjobs.

Earlier in the afternoon, after scrubbing and filling the bathtub, she and her mother had contemplated the sleeping porch's dormitory-like expanse and realized there was no way she could sleep out there, where three screened-in walls were unprotected from weather.

She fumbled for the lamp just inside the library door. Her mother had already made up the sofa. Its cushions were covered with yellowed sheets, the pillowcase on the pillow plumped at one end flecked with a spattering of decades-old cigarette burns. A flashlight was stood up on the coffee table beside it like the glass of water she'd always demanded at bedtime when she was a child. She picked it up and recrossed the room to turn off the light. All these delicate ceramic *things*, so easy to knock over in the dark. How would they possibly sort them and pack them?

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In the end, it was always a rite of passage — to let the lifesaving certificate earned through hours put in at the pool lapse the final summer before you started to college. Her cousin Allison had started that tradition the same summer she stopped shaving her legs. Until their grandmother's memorial service, none of the cousins had been back to the house at the same time or for longer than a quick walk on the beach since then.

But when they were little, the trunk in the hall had contained the plunder of the high seas, and the sofa serving now as Olivia's bed had been pressed into service, sometimes as a lashed-together raft; once or twice as a galleon. Hurricanes were just exciting possibilities to be tracked on the map distributed by the Tallahassee news station. Every summer Allison longed for an epic evacuation inland. Colin was mostly interested in testing his crawl stroke in water where water should not be.

Olivia was the one who looked forward to hoarding food and supplies; who liked thinking of the house as a boat with its hatches battened down. She'd gained a propensity toward seasickness as she got older, but even before that she'd always preferred land to water and hesitated on the sand before striking out from the shore.

Two days ago, as she'd sat in the church waiting for the memorial service to start, she'd realized that being in a snug dark-paneled building so much like a ship was probably as close to being out on the water as she'd ever get now. The beams above her head had been crafted to withstand things, and the bellpull dangling in the nave slipped like nautical rope through the hands of the old sexton who leaned and pulled and released and finally let the bell toll.

She knew any architectural similarities between the church and a ship weren't completely unintentional. The shallow spread of the bay was only three blocks away, and each of the church's stained-glass windows was curved at the top like a porthole and contained its own representation of water in slices of milky green glass. Two blocks away in the opposite direction, on a knoll out of reach of any Hundred Year's storm, sat the old city cemetery, full of sun-scoured headstones in a testament to all those things that could not be stopped, like the weather. In its oldest quadrant, blackberries volunteered themselves, to cover up the scarred ground, to mingle with the roses planted for those who had drowned in the bay or died of yellow fever.

Olivia's grandmother had thought she was doing them a favor with her instructions. What the sea gave, she might well have said, it would also take back for itself. She'd made Olivia's mother promise to let things end at home, and the last breaths she took had been like drowning. *Nothing at all like some gentle tide going out*, Olivia's mother had said. Her hands were busy with the black plastic they were using to wrap valuables away from the wet.

She convulsively smoothed the plastic stretched tightly over the top of the television set like a quilt on a bed.

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Olivia sat up. From somewhere within the darkness outside came a clanking, as if a garbage can lid had been rolled down the length of the street. She couldn't tell if she'd slept or not, only that the darkness inside the house was more complete than it had been. Somewhere, power lines had been blown down. Either that or the bulb in the nightlight in the hall had just, coincidentally, burned out.

She realized she and her mother had wasted precious time in the afternoon, when they'd wrapped the record player whose next home would probably be the Salvation Army in plastic. FEMA's guidelines had made it clear: *concentrate on those things that have the most sentimental value or might be worth most.*

They'd forgotten about the print that had always hung on the wall in the library. She fumbled for the flashlight on the coffee table and let its beam play over the frame above her grandfather's desk. The print was just a copy of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Proserpine*, but when she was little, she'd believed it was real art. Its wood frame sealed in a single patch of light and the gloomy folds of green silk conjured from oil paint. Later, as a teenager, she'd wanted to possess Proserpina's sulky mouth, or at least her abundant chestnut hair.

There was still something arresting about the way the model meant to be Proserpina looked back over one shoulder, the pomegranate that would trap her in the underworld raised to her lips. Olivia stretched to unhook the frame from the wall, then walked into the hallway and leaned it against the doorjamb.

The survival of the larger painting in the hall, much beloved of her grandmother, who'd always claimed it as a superlative example of the American Naïf school, was beyond her. But the others, a solemn photograph of a mother cradling an infant in an elaborately-stitched christening gown, the meticulous pen-and-ink Colin had done of the house when he was in high school, she could reasonably lift and carry. She unhooked each of them from the wall and then paused at the top of the stairs, juggling the frames.

Somewhere, downstairs or next door, a screened door kept slapping open and closed at the mercy of the wind. The light from her flashlight jolted out over carpet runner as she started down. In an art history class she'd taken in college she'd read that Rossetti's model for Proserpina had been a friend's wife with whom he had had an affair; that her discontented

stare had mostly been an indication of her unhappy marriage. But years ago, when she and Allison had taken time out of a long summer afternoon to examine the picture, she'd felt certain that the glare Proserpina leveled at them could just as easily have been that of a teenager caught breaking her curfew, and for a moment she — fifteen to Allison's seventeen, and the two of them about to sneak down to smoke a joint in the back yard behind their grandmother's roses — had felt her first faint flicker of pity for her mother, who in this house on the ocean always had to be both mother and daughter.

She looked at the print as she started down the stairs. Its concern still seemed not to be Proserpina's journey, but whether or not there was a link between those who were taken away and everyone else, seeing them off from the shoreline.

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"Not *candles*," she protested, walking into the kitchen. She leaned her armload of pictures against the closest cabinet. The instructions broadcast on the news had been adamant in their prohibitions against open flame.

"There wasn't but that one flashlight," her mother said. She sat serenely at the table. "And I couldn't sleep."

The flicker of the candles slid over the china arrayed on the table, the plates stacked neatly in cylinders, the seemingly infinite supply of saucers, a bulbous tureen.

"There's that one I left down here," Olivia said, feeling for the extra flashlight on the counter and snapping it on. "For emergencies. And mine to add to it." She moved around the kitchen, snuffing each candle with an economical gesture, her forefinger moistened, pressed quickly to thumb. "Does that give you enough light to see by?"

Outside, rain drummed like fingers, like running feet, against the boarded window. The flashlight's beam gave the china an almost toothlike luster. She pulled out a chair from the table and sat down.

"It's enough." Her mother tilted a plate so that it caught the light and began to wrap it in a sheet of newspaper. With her foot, Olivia nudged the box sitting open on the floor between them and peered in. It was three-quarters full; each disk of plate paired neatly to the bulge of a cup. She bent down for a sheaf of newsprint.

"The Haviland," her mother said. "For Allison."

The china patterns had been divvied up before everyone left for the airport, a set for each grandchild, even though the three of them had hung back, not wanting to choose.

“Guess we won’t have to worry about all this if the whole place blows down,” Olivia said.

It all looked the same to her, these riotous clusters of flowers, and garlands, and nosegays. She reached for a stack of cups and began to bundle them up. Every painted bud was a fist; a pale delicate clot, rosily tinted. The rim of each cup was a thin band of gold.

“Those Victorians,” her mother said from the other side of the table, “they sure did love their roses, didn’t they?”

The best ones, her grandmother had always insisted, were the old ones, the hardy, sweet-smelling ones that smiled in the face of black spot and Japanese beetle, the ones that survived.

It was one of the facts of Olivia’s upbringing that she knew this. Every summer she and Colin and Allison had been pressed into service, believing it a punishment for some mysterious transgression they hadn’t been aware of, required to go along in the back seat of the Chrysler, and before that a forest-green Buick, with the shears and baggies and quart jars full of murky willow tea.

The best roses, their grandmother would explain as she drove down the county-maintained roads, were no longer so easy to come by. They’d been replaced by frail temperamental beauties that had to be coddled.

But the old ones still outlined the bare spots where the foundations of houses had been; had brawny, wrist-thick stems to attest to their age, were named after women with singsong French-sounding names: Marie Pavié, Clotilde Soupert. Were sometimes nameless, their provenance swallowed up by time.

Her grandmother had discovered — from experience or book, Olivia never knew which — that the old roses grew most luxuriously around the graves in old family plots left untouched by horticultural fashion or fad. It was the job of whichever grandchild sat in the back seat to watch for poison ivy, for snakes; to hold the shears while she pondered where along the stems to make the decisive cut.

Sometimes the roses were showy shrubs with exceptional blossoms, and sometimes they were thorny puckered buds no one now alive could remember the name of, but they had all bloomed with equanimity. Their canes wandered over ornate markers huddling on the shady lee-side of

defunct country churches; they flourished behind bits of lumber strung together to fend off gaunt stands of encroaching turpentine pines.

Olivia didn't know if there were even graveyards like that anymore, turning back into salt marsh or forest, where tradition kept graves adorned with shells and mementos and bottles turned iridescent by sun; where she had once been ten years old with sweat trickling between her shoulder blades as she stood patient with the shears, and the sun had grazed the tops of live oaks swathed with moss, and then swung even higher.

Her grandmother had stooped in front of the graves, her hands careful on the stems, and explained how the marble-carved statuary tree trunk was depicted as broken in two to indicate a life cut short. The shards of blue-and-white plates scattered on a grave were placed there to break any last chains between possession and owner. Lightbulbs planted at the edge of a plot might light the deceased's way to the next world.

The overgrown family plots contained a code that didn't mean a thing to Olivia: her thoughts were focused on getting to the beach and on keeping her feet off the oblongs of dirt her grandmother so carelessly knelt on.

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Beforehand, Olivia had imagined a hurricane as something that struck suddenly, the force of it swung at the house as deliberately as a pick-ax. But outside the kitchen, wind rushed and paused, sounding more like a crowd in a hurry to get off a bus. The rain was wrapped in a roar that bore little resemblance to the sound of water, but there was something else that ran thinly beneath that, a small, plaintive voice that fretted and picked. Olivia eyed the plywooded-over window. "Should we move into the hallway?"

Her mother was transferring the contents of the top shelf of the china cabinet to the kitchen table. "We're fine," she said. "Don't you think?"

"Is this the storm? Or just what comes before it?" It seemed important to Olivia that they know for sure. "I'll turn on the radio."

"It's not like we're right on the beach," her mother pointed out. As soon as Olivia stood up, she handed her a cup.

The sound of the radio was worried at by the nattering voice of the wind. What could it tell them that they hadn't already learned? They knew not to be fooled by the storm's calm eerie eye; to stay inside, away from doors and windows.

In an unhurried voice the deejay was reading off the locations of shelters. Her mother's mouth worked nervously in a gesture passed down from her own mother that Olivia had always sworn would never be handed to her. "Your aunt Ginnie wants the Cinderella silver," she said, brooding over a plate. "She says it goes perfectly with her china. But she's not related by blood, and it's all written down in the will. All this silver goes to you and Allison and your brother." These objects, discussed, sorted, packed up, were all that was left. The house had been built solidly, to last, to be handed down, but it would not be.

On the day of the funeral Olivia's uncle had made sure there was an off-duty police officer stationed at the house while they were at church, but her grandmother's wish to be cremated had meant no procession from church to cemetery, had done away with any need for deferential treatment from motorists who'd hang back in respect for the dead as they passed. Once they walked out of the church, they'd just straggled on foot the three blocks to the river.

No one stopped them. The priest just stood at the bank with the urn under one arm and then her mother and uncle reached in and tossed.

Ash had spilled from their hands as if they were scattering seeds, and then a current of air off the river no one had thought to plan for, a gust that could have been Delia's first precursor, snatched and cast it back toward the embankment. Olivia's mother and uncle stood and listened to the priest as he continued the prayers, while Olivia watched a little boy standing in the shelter of his mother's legs, no kin at all as far as she knew, as he danced from one foot to the other in impatience and then yanked his shirt over his face.

Her mother put down the plate she was holding and tilted her head, listening. Overhead, the house shifted and creaked, stiffening its spine, fighting back against wind.

Olivia swiped her face with the tail of her shirt. It had always grieved — would always grieve — her mother to see her cry.

"Once we sell the house, we won't ever come back here," she said. She reached for another sheet of newsprint and picked up a plate.