

El Niño

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The clammy fog oozed along the ground, accompanied by a chill, as the sun receded for the day. The chronically inaccurate TV weathermen might have gotten it right for once. A storm, enormous even by local standards, was on its way, with its mudslides, downed trees, and swamped streets. For the community under the bridge, the fog, and the warnings blasted from bullhorns on cruising patrol cars, signaled that the inevitable evacuation could be put off no longer.

He wasn't the first to decide to leave and he wouldn't be the last. He had delayed abandoning his spot. It was cozy down here, cool in the summer, although cold on days the temperature dropped. The cops didn't permit open fires beside a four-lane city street, but he had a heavy jacket, a blanket, and a rug in which he could wrap himself. And he had his wine that warmed him.

His territory was a wedge of land beside the bridge abutment, encircled by a flap of cyclone fencing that he could shut with a lock he “found” in the hardware section of a supermarket. This allowed him to accumulate and store more than his share of stuff. The problem was that it couldn't all be moved at one time. He knew a place that'd be above water when the deluge hit. But during the several trips he'd have to make, his things would be untended there, up for grabs by anyone who happened upon them.

A woman paced in front of her possessions mounded on the sidewalk. He had eyed her

ever since she had settled beneath the bridge weeks ago. She carted her stuff with her on her daily rounds to cadge money and food. From what he could see, she steered clear of drugs and prostitution. And she avoided her no-rent neighbors, displaying a persistent paranoia that kept her life solitary. So, in the present crisis, she appeared uncertain as to what to do, or whom to ask for help keeping her things and herself safe. He figured that, wherever she wound up, her only protection would be a knife, a pearl-handled, four-inch switchblade, that he had seen her cleaning on several occasions.

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In the thickening gloom, visibility was measured in single-digit yards. She saw his silhouette as he approached. She rammed her hand into her pocket, the one in which she kept her knife, and moved back two steps. He stopped, extending his hands, palms out. She could make out his face and halted her retreat. They'd never spoken at length, but they weren't strangers, as none are who share the same limited space.

He said, "I sure could use yer help ... and I kin help you." Saying nothing, she listened as he explained that he needed someone to watch his stuff at a new place while he made the trips necessary to relocate. In exchange, she could share the space and store her stuff there, too.

Her silence continued, her hand still in her pocket. She glanced to her right and left. Both provided possible escape routes. He went on, "We'll move you first. You stay there whilst I go back and forth fer my stuff. But we'll have t' hurry. The storm's started. This place'll be unner water in no time."

She didn't reply, looking at him, then the street, and then her heap of bags. At last she nodded and gave a tentative smile. He showed a wide, gap-toothed grin that gave him a sinister look. Startled, she stumbled back another step, but didn't run. He shielded his mouth with his wrist and lowered his head, still looking into her eyes.

Withdrawing her hand from her pocket, she stepped into her pile of things. What followed was rushed activity. She carried her entire household. He took his first load. Out from the cover of the bridge, they were greeted by violent wind and rain. He struggled to pull a bottle from an inside pocket.

Twenty minutes later he returned for the rest of his cache. Carrying as much as he could, he took two more trips and over an hour to complete the move. By then, water was above the curb, lapping the sidewalk.

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The rain continued into the night. A police SUV began the last run it would be able to make below the bridge. The swift water that engulfed the street was already up to its bumper. The driver swept his spotlight searching for stragglers, or any others unable to understand, or unwilling to acknowledge, the danger they were in.

The vehicle slid to a stop. An officer jumped out, submerging his boots. He waded into the beam of the headlights and grabbed the naked body floating by, face down, the pearl handle of a knife sticking out of its back.

* * *

The door was ajar when he had returned with his burden. He hesitated before entering. She huddled in the dark. He sat beside her.

“This guy broke in after you left. He didn't know I was here. He went through our things and found dry clothes. He stripped off his wet ones. He heard the click of my knife opening and attacked. I swung and got him in the back. He crawled into the street.”

She let the man put his arm around her. He looked over their possessions.

“You done good, girl,” he said. “You done good.”