

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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four

The trees scratch her dress as she runs through the damp, dead forest.

Her feet crush the clay and branches covering the forest bed as she eclipses the edge of the woods. It gets thicker between her toes with every step.

She's almost shimmering in her white dress, a sleek wedding dress, exploding from the wake of the grey trees of the forest. The dress is marked with charcoal slashes and splashes of thick clay. It used to be beautiful. Maybe it's more beautiful this way. Dirty. Worn.

Tattered, broken, soaked.

Her legs are covered in smoky debris up to her calves.

The wind is slowly gaining strength, fluttering the silk valleys far behind her.

Something's building. A cliff. The edge of the ground stops her cold.

The earth breaks off here into a deep, open fog, roots and all. She's holding on at the edge. The lace arms of the dress end in sharp points on the backs of her hands. A second, woven skin.

She and her dress glow against the titanium sky.

Winds pick up, and her veil goes floating into the fog below, devoured by the clouds. Her arms reach away from her hips like a tiny, upside-down V.

Her hands like roses, her fingers springing from the ends of the arms of the dress like trembling petals. Eyes closed, expressionless.

The clouds thicken, and she opens her eyes.

White-cloth forearms melt into a deep, deep red as her arms start to bleed profusely beneath her sleeves. She looks down at them, the wind changes direction, and the mess starts slinging across the front of her dress.

The wind changes direction again as the fog from the crevasse rises. She pushes herself and is soaring down to meet it, maroon streams like ribbon from her arms. She disappears into the confusion.

This is Maura's dream.

Everyone needs a mantra.

Om let your money concerns be flushed down the sewer by the hand of Poseidon.

Om may your glitter lip gloss grow tumors in your cheeks, so sayeth Rama.

Om your only way to freedom is on the business end of a speeding city bus, as David has foretold.

Okay, maybe not that last one, but you get the point.

Om may I have strength to run out of my exam room and into Maura's.

The use of Sanskrit mantra, where the sounds and vibrations made by the words mean just as much as or more than the words themselves, is designed to put the different bodies at ease and connect them with a higher brain. This is common in Vedic studies.

And I thought I felt alive before. This was more than electrochemical—this was high-tension lines. Children near me could get cancer.

I can tell you the average amount of neurons in the human brain. About one hundred billion, if you're interested.

I know how many ridges there are in a dime. For your information, that'd be one hundred eighteen.

And it's actually called *milling*, by the way.

I know so many things, but can't figure out how I got from inside my room to outside hers.

Om I have courage enough to open the Goddamned door.

Om shall I speak volumes of wisdom and make a good impression.

Who was I kidding? Impressions are for the impressionable.

Maura sat by herself, legs swinging back and forth, on the edge of the table. Black hair curved under her chin; plastic, pastel green dress with faint polka dots everywhere.

"The doctor's gone to get someone to restrain me," Maura said shyly.

My ears were ringing.

Maura held out her hand to me, proudly showing me a thin film of blood on her palm. Blood is never blue inside the body, contrary to what many people think. See, blood gets its red color from the iron in hemoglobin. And since all red blood cells contain hemoglobin, and each molecule of hemoglobin contains four atoms of iron, all blood in the body is either bright red—arterial—or dark red, depending on the amount of hemoglobin present. Blood sometimes appears blue because veins are white and very opaque, and lets little light through. It makes dark red blood look blue through skin. They call dark red blood *venous blood*.

"I almost can't believe I did it," she said.

"What did you do?" I asked her. Glass on the floor.

"You're really slow," she told me. "I hope all of our trips together won't be me explaining everything to you."

Maura just smiled and looked past me when I asked her what she meant. She didn't care that I was standing right there in front of her. We'd been phoning for what felt like forever, and the wall was more important.

People rushed around in the hall outside in a whirlwind.

I just looked back at her, scanning her elfish face up and down, as my ears continued to ring. Her eyes hit the floor under me.

"You're standing on me, David." Maura pointed to my shoes.

Sure enough, as I looked down, I was stepping on tiny drops of blood that surely came from her hand. Glass on the floor next to the wall behind me.

My ears weren't ringing after all. Maura had pulled the fire alarm.

Schadenfreud, noun.

Malicious satisfaction. From the German *schaden*, meaning "damage", and *fruede*, meaning "joy".

I grabbed her by the wrist of her bloodied hand and pulled her right off the table.

"Shit, let's go," I said. The rush is better when you're on the run.

"Let go of me!" I let go. "What for?"

Things can only be as good as the anticipation that precedes them, but I couldn't have an-

ticipated this.

“Are you deaf? The alarm’s going off,” I said.

“As long as it’s not boring.” What a smile.

No matter how hard I pulled, Maura didn’t budge, didn’t falter. Didn’t follow me.

She had to follow me. I was there to rescue her.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said.

I asked her, why did she want to stay there?

Because she’d never been caught pulling a fire alarm before, she told me. She wanted to see how much it would matter to people before and after they knew it was a false alarm.

Action, reaction, observation. Watch how fast they run. If they scream. If people get knocked over in a frenzy of confusion and get trampled by athletic shoes with bubbles of air in them.

“Well, now you know, so let’s get out of here,” I pleaded with her.

“David,” she said softly, “stop.”

Here comes the sun. It’s all downhill from here.

“Look out there. They’re worried to death and wondering what’s going on. There are people asleep being waken up because of this. They’re gonna have to do this all over again, and will spend days, maybe weeks, cursing me after the firemen get here and say it was a prank. Doctors writing charts will forget what they wanted to write in fifteen minutes, and it’ll be an hour before they can get back in the building.”

My hand went from holding her hand to being held by it.

“They’re so alive right now, David, and they—”

“They have no idea,” I finished.

I was someone who understood.

I’m a pillow.

Maura looked through me while I kept pulling at her.

“Let’s just go. Before police come,” I said.

“David, *let go*.” I thought she was going to cry. She would have cried, and she would have wiped her tears away with that messy hand, making everything worse.

We stood in the hallway while people scurried past us.

We felt the breeze of lab coats and file folders moving by.

“So, why did you come here?” I asked her. You know, other than the whole fate thing.

“It was something to do,” Maura replied innocently. “What about you?”

“Drugs.”

“I see,” she said. “I like a guy who knows how to get things.”

I smiled. I actually smiled back. I hadn’t smiled in months. It was a really goofy fucking grin that only goofy fucking people smile, and I hated it and everything it meant, but it flew like a flag from my cheeks. At least I didn’t laugh.

This time, I didn’t try to pull Maura out of there, I just started walking slowly and she followed beside me. Our hands, cradles to each other’s.

We turned the corner as slowly as we could.

I kept thinking, what a coincidence we met here today. What a strange way to meet someone you’ve met, but never met, before. Maybe I’d told her I was going to be there, and couldn’t remember telling her. Whatever or however the reason, it was done. I’d finally seen her bell-shaped black hair and her steel-blue eyes. I’d seen her hopelessly petite ankles above open-

toed heels. I'd seen her short, chewed-up fingernails and short, chewed-up toenails.

I had seen Maura, and Maura had seen me.

We stopped in the reception lobby. The receptionist was on the phone with the fire department, trying to figure out what the Hell was going on. These days, fire alarm systems are tied directly into local emergency department systems, and the local authorities have to be notified of fire drills when the alarm is involved. I remember wondering if the receptionist's concern was for patients and records, or more for figuring out if she should take any of her personal affects when she left the building.

"I think this is going to be interesting," she said.

I asked her what she meant.

"Us. We. Me and you."

A beat.

I started back toward the open doors, to the blaring sun of the outside. I looked back at Maura, and she spoke to me. She tried to talk some sense into me. Give me one final chance to escape, to opt out, before I was in too deep to walk.

"I won't make you feel any better," Maura said.

"I know," I told her. I was intent, fiercely intent.

"I won't make you love anyone any more," she said.

I know.

"I probably won't even give you a better orgasm," she said.

I know.

And her heart tried to break.

