

Spill

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The awareness comes to her while she sits on the stairs outside of where the house used to be, a stick in her hand. She pokes at the mud, her other hand crammed beneath her chin as her mind wanders from thought to thought, steam curling around cracked and jagged figures in the earth. Her small frame is clothed in a too-large t-shirt and hunched over to see her work better. There is nothing to do. The unforgiving sun beats upon the back of her neck, burning her hair and filling the atmosphere with sulfur and Softee™ Indian Hemp Hair & Scalp Treatment. The stick strikes the earth, deepening the hole. Her belly sloshes, hungry and overfull. She is going to throw up.

Her eyes cut to the legs standing beside her. She has nowhere else to look: beneath her the hole looms dark, eager for things to be buried in it; above her mother's eyes lie in wait; to look anywhere else is to see only more people standing around, shedding timid shadows all over the street. Her mother's feet are small, average at best, but they dribble over the sides of her sandals. The skin on the bottom of her heels is dry. There's a crease on her left foot, slashed right where the arch meets the heel. Her pinkie toe is twisted and the nailbed has been overrun by thick layers of flesh. Despite the richness of her skin, her feet are white — dusty and cracked. Thirsty, but not for the kind of rain that seeped into their house and then swept it away. It's cruel: being surrounded by water on all sides and still being thirsty.

A maxi taxi pulls up beside the street curb, music thumping loudly, the bass pushing against her eardrums. The door to the minibus slides open. Immediately the crowd surges forward, then draws back as the man who opens the door yells out, "Two! Only two seats!" He looks at her — bones and a belly — then her mother. "You — the Miss and the child!" Her mother grabs the hand with the stick as they're helped up onto the huge platform that makes up the floor of the vehicle. She's plunged into the tinted hold, splintered windows shattering the faces of the people within. In this semi gloom, she can tell that some sit with their mouths open, tongues just shy of rolling out. The heat of the day penetrates the metal frame. No one fools themselves into thinking it's done its worst. It's unbearable, but everyone bears it: the stench of stagnation; the wafts of sweat, burnt hair, urine; a dampness that refuses to dry. Her mother steps up behind her, a crumpled and

wet pile of bills clenched in her hand. She pays the man at the door: blood for her daughter and sweat for herself.

She counts fourteen seats, including the driver's seat and the doorman's seat up front. Between the bodies pressed close, she counts twenty-five people inside the hold. Eight are standing. Six are on the floor, seated with legs, arms, heads tucked in. There is space enough for two more. She and her mother squeeze in that small space, dirt smearing their palms. The door slides shut, the meagre flow of humid air from outside ceasing. Everyone holds onto the back of the person in front as the maxi taxi begins to move. There are no poles to hold, no hooks to grab, only the constant effort to remain vertical. It is a world made up of the haggard faces of people who have been sweating their lives out for a long time, in one way or another. She sits, sweat slicking up her armpits, as the pull of the engine causes her stomach to clench up on itself. Her head throbs in time with the music, and the vehicle groans, and beneath all the surface noise she hears what might be the underbelly: creaking floorboards, crashing waves, flesh slapping against metal.

Sitting directly across from her is a woman, flesh thick and swollen. For a long minute she stares as the woman's thighs jiggle from the bumps, wondering if the fat pulsating with the bass will melt like butter does and waiting for the flesh hanging over the side of the seat to drip onto the dirt covered floor. When it doesn't, she looks away in search of something else. The driver's assistant is counting the passenger's fare, money he now holds in his hands. *Hundred n' one, hundred n' two, hundred n' three . . .* He mouths the words to himself, smiles in satisfaction and begins counting again. Beside her sits an old man and woman. She watches as sweat cascades down the old man's neck to meet the yellowed collar of his limp shirt. He turns his head and smiles at the woman beside him, revealing black holes in his mouth where teeth should be. The driver yells something and turns up the music. The vehicle stops. She can't see past the mass of bodies to the door but can feel the pressure rising as more people try to squeeze into the rear, trying to fill the cracks. The driver's assistant can be heard swearing that there's enough space, yelling "There's room for five; five more!" No one says that there's no more room. The bass increases, the vehicle picks up speed.

There's a crack in the hull of the vehicle, right beside her knee. She squints, looking into the crack. Everything is blurred and it takes a few moments before her eyes can focus enough for her to make out images. *Cars; people; cars; buildings; rust, rot, peeling paint; red, green, yellow lights, or holes where they should be; thick black car exhaust; a McDonald's; a KFC; street vendors; rooftops, water stains, cars; people, people,*

more people; babies, children; skinny legs; umbrellas, wrists, ankles, tan arms, black arms; blurs for faces; skinnier legs, almost non-existent. The vehicle slows down and stops. Outside, bodies stand yelling, shouting, pleading, arguing. Stubbornness and misery underlie every word called out and heard but not listened to. Men and women and children are pulling bodies on to dry land, faces and bellies bloated with the flooding water and red from the sun; bellies bloated from the ocean and the rains that wouldn't stop. They cover them with tarps.

Her sister was one of those bodies: two hair puffs floating in the water, dress billowing around her, belly protruding upward. She was the one who found her. Already, they were to go somewhere else. Her mother had decided they would leave the place where the house used to be, had decided it days ago when her daughter couldn't be found despite her pacing up and down the streets, despite her wails and screams that faded to hoarse cries the longer they continued until her mother had nothing else to say and think except *leave*. They were leaving her sister where the floods deposited her. They needed to go but her sister needed holding. And where could she hide the hair puffs and the belly and the Dead when all the aid that ever came was intended for the Living—they only help the Living and don't care about the Dead—what to do but *drink*. And so she drinks her sister up and drinks the water that keeps lapping at her sister's feet, her sister's knees, her elbows, her neck—

When she throws up, only water spills from her mouth, slowly trickling down her lips. She heaves, and there's more, gushing from between her teeth. There's yelling, from the swollen woman, from the old couple on the floor, from the man by the door who's dropped his money into the water that's now filling the maxi taxi. The water eddies around the passengers. It won't stop filling the hold. Fingers tap at the inside of her belly, a warning. Someone begins crawling up the small space inside of her throat.

She heaves and heaves and heaves, and the water laps higher and higher.