

Home

Spring 2010

Winter 2010

Autumn 2009

Summer 2009

Spring 2009

Autumn 2008

Summer 2008

Spring/Summer 2008

Winter/Spring 2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

Christina

by Calvin Nguyen

Outside it rained and the rain came down hard and flat, little popping bulbs of water that carpeted the crimson brick yard.

Alex's eyes flitted back and forth til he was sure.

Through the panoramic view of his window he watched raindrops fall in so perfect a pattern, it was like they came down along invisible strings. He thought about how long these strings would have to be and they would have to be very long indeed, there would have to be kilometers of them climbing all the way up to the surging clouds overhead. That was much too long and there were really no strings, he was sure. If there were, how could they not sway and swing and spin around each other in the wind before finally ending up in hideous knots? Then who would unravel them? And how long would it take that person?

But there were really no strings on this day. Of that he was sure. Not today nor at any other time.

The rain fell heavily. Striking the ground it made a monotone thud. The thudding on the red brick of the well-kept courtyard was so loud that if Alex closed his eyes he would think it was clumps of liquid mud falling from the sky. Ugly heavy thick filthy mud.

Glancing up he noticed with disappointment that there was no thunder to go along with the rain.

When he was a boy, he had always gone out to play in the backyard of home – real home. Real home that was good, not shared like this one. He often missed real home, sometimes so much so that the feeling was like a ripe blue bruise on his leg banging against a blunt object. The backyard of real home was grassy and smelled fresh like this courtyard in front of him. Except that it was much smaller and less nice but also nicer. And there had been a rotting wood fence all around that was the gray-purple color of wet gangrene. A frightening tall hemlock tree had towered on the west side of that backyard, and dangling from one of its mammoth branches was a swing he used to rock in, leaning back as he flew forward, making the most of his momentum, building speed and height, sometimes bending back til his head was closer to the ground than his feet.

One day when he was on the swing, the sky had opened up and let out a bellow that was like the earth cracking apart and becoming two big halves and the force of the crack enough to send the two halves speeding away from each other. He had felt the bellow shake inside his chest and down through his legs, and the rumble and size of it made his knees buckle against each other. He had run inside, crying, and his mother caught him in her arms in the kitchen and his father looked at the two of them coolly, asking didn't he remember what he was told about the thunder? That you could tell it was coming once you saw a flash in the sky. And nothing was so bad when you knew about it and were ready for it. But that day he hadn't noticed any flash in the sky and didn't know what his father had meant.

Now, he wasn't scared anymore. He wouldn't be scared even if he was outside with nothing between him and the clouds above that looked like they were molding over with black putrid anger. He knew what thunder was. Just ice-cold air turning very hot very fast and exploding high up in the sky, quite far away from where he was safely sitting. In his heart he hoped thunder would come to disrupt the drabness of the late afternoon.

"That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil - this is the gift of God," he heard his father's firm voice read.

Footsteps from behind startled him.

Jerking his head around he saw the tall wide blue shape of Wally coming toward him.

"I brought your blanket," Wally said, wrapping it around his shoulders.

Despite not being cold he took one corner of the blanket and pulled it across his body so it covered his chest. He knew that if he didn't do that Wally would and he didn't want Wally that close if it could be helped. Wally used aftershave that was strong and smelled like cheap women's perfume.

"Your wife is coming," Wally said.

For a long while he had known there was an unpleasant odor that was very near him, and it was the scent of drying saliva on his chin near the mouth. He hoped Wally would somehow become aware of the saliva, without his needing to mention it, and wipe his face with a damp hot cloth.

"Your wife's coming to visit," Wally told him

He nodded.

"She'll be along in a little while."

He nodded again, this time more vigorously.

Wally was happy with that and went away.

The blanket covering him had been washed with good detergent that seemed robust yet mellow. He was delighted with a lingering trace of fabric freshener that was like spring and flowers.

"That fella," he heard Wally say to a trainee behind him. "He was a doctor, a heart surgeon. Operated on celebrities, politicians, the kinds of people that could afford him. One time his wife showed me a couple home decorating magazines that had photos of their house in them."

"You don't say."

"Some things you wouldn't ever know from looking, right?"

"I suppose not."

"You should see the Cadillac his wife drives. His name's Alex. Say hi when you get a chance."

They walked away.

Looking down he caught sight of his left hand clutching the edge of the blanket, and for a second it shocked him that his fingers were so big and swollen-looking. The skin of his fingers was rough and dry and the color of them reminded him of manure. His skin didn't look like skin. It was like the flesh of his hands was wrapped in dirty flypaper.

Outside, the rain gained ferocity. The sky was decaying and the pearl and silver parts of the sky were bleeding away into ominous ash gray. He watched the leaves of the courtyard trees, still vibrant green, and the bright yellow sunflowers bend as the rain smacked them.

“If a man is lazy, the rafters sag,” his father read in his ear. “If his hands are idle, the house leaks.”

Green tree leaves made small echoing claps as raindrops crashed and died against them. He reached out with his arm and waved a low-hanging branch away so that they could pass through.

His other arm he kept over the head and shoulder of Chris, his baby sister, who looked up at him.

“Your hands are fair, Alex,” she said. “They look like girls’ hands.”

“Do they?” he said, pretending not to be pleased.

Behind them their two cousins followed. The cousins were a young boy and girl, both shy. They didn’t say much but he could sense they were impressed by his mature demeanor. He maintained an aggressive pace through the rustling trees and the cousins struggled to keep up and he heard their panting.

The ground was wet and soft. They went uphill and whenever he planted his shoe into the dirt it always sunk a little. Wearing sandals Chris had trouble with her footing, and as she held his arm tightly to keep her balance he felt her warmth cut sharply and deeply through the cold night air.

They hiked for a time, and he started to worry that the cousins would start to complain, when there came light between the trees, a dark azure glow that told him the sea was close. He yelled out that they were almost there and everyone was infused with new energy. They started to run and the glow got closer and closer and bigger and bigger until it wasn’t a glow anymore but the palpitating blue face of the stormy Burrard Inlet. Ahead of them a rocky beach stretched wide and dark. The tide was high and the colossal waves blasting in looked like chaotic and dangerous wild beasts. He felt an instinctive urge to stay away from the water, but instead pressed everyone to get a closer look. They followed him, Chris at his side. She looked at him and said his sweater was nice and he had always looked good in white. He replied he had gotten the sweater for school in the fall. He’d get her one too if she wanted. She told him she wished he was home more often because it was like not having a brother at all, the way they wouldn’t see each other for ten months a year. He had gone away to school every year, and next year things would be even worse because she would start high school and he would be stowed away as a freshman at university. He needed to go and study, he replied, he had a lot of things he wanted to do.

“Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.”

In front of them stood a rickety pier that extended a long way into the water, its warped wooden planks veiled increasingly by shadow as the darkness hovering over the sea swallowed it up. They stopped on the beach and took turns daring each other to walk alone to the end of the pier. He knew eventually he would be the one to go, he was by far the oldest and biggest. Finally he stopped protesting, and strode forward into the mouth of the night. When he reached the end of the pier he turned around, caring about neither the darkness nor the faint yellow city lights on the other side of the Inlet, and squinted to see if he could make out Chris watching him.

The rain eased slightly. Beyond the expansive window in front of his chair the rain thrummed the courtyard in a subdued cadence. He kicked his shoes back and forth, left foot forward then right foot forward then left foot then right foot again and again and again, the clacking of his shoes against the spotless marble floor rhyming with the rain landing on the red brick outside. He tried both feet forward at the same time then both feet back and then both feet forward again then both feet back, and giggled at the different sound.

Then, without warning, soft fingers touched his shoulder, and he knew whose they were instantly.

“Hello Alex.”

“Hello Christina,” he said.

Her fingers massaged him, applying pressure to the stiffness of his shoulders before moving to his neck and head. He was always surprised by the firmness of her small hands, and each time she put her fingers against his skin it was stunningly fresh and new, like he had never felt her touch before. Her fingers were so unique and extraordinary he couldn't think about them without feeling how much he needed them and how much he hated the idea of someone else having them.

She ran her hands through his hair, her fingertips coaxing the tired inert blood in his head to flow. He felt refreshed, and when she patted him playfully on the back of the head to let him know she was done, he felt bravery gush forth from inside him.

He asked her to come with him. She asked where. He told her nowhere far. She followed him down the hall of the empty house into his room. He closed the door and mumbled something about wanting to get to know her better and feel closer to her. Her face was blank. When he kissed her and she didn't push him away, he was overwhelmed more with relief than pleasure or excitement. But once it had gone on long enough to make him feel safe, it tasted ten times better, and then it was a hundred times better, and then the miraculous softness of her body that he hungrily gripped against him was a thousand times better than anything good he had ever felt in his life. He leaned forward so that she stumbled back, tripping over her own feet and crumpling down on the bed. She said no but the no wasn't strong enough and he kissed her again and again so that she would have nothing to say. They were both on the bed now and he fell on top of her, trying to unbutton and unzip his pants with one hand while with the other he touched her where there was only a tiny bump because she was too young and it felt like he was caressing the chest of a teenage boy, and when he had finished loosening himself he put his hands into the waistline of her white pajamas and pulled down as hard and as fast as he could, to make the motion irresistible.

“What?” she said.

He stopped and suddenly he was very afraid.

“What?” she asked him again.

“I...” he said. “You...”

She leaned back and took a deep breath and watched him with empty eyes. All the desire in his body and spirit was robbed from him, and he felt cold and weak and in terrible danger.

“Mom and Dad and everyone else,” he said in a whisper.

“What are you talking about?” she said. She faced him and behind her was the wide sterling-clean window that looked like a flawless slab of ice.

“You know,” he said. “Everyone.” His life, his future, were in mortal danger.

“I don't understand what you're saying. Tell me what you mean. Tell me now.”

“I'm saying you can't, Chris. You can't you can't you can't let anyone know.”

She stared at him blankly, eyes wide and unblinking.

“You can't tell anyone, you understand?” he said in frustration. “Do not tell anyone! If you do, they're going to laugh. They're going to laugh at mom and dad, and they're going to laugh at us. Can you imagine that? Can you think what they would say if we had a baby?”

Her face broke apart like someone had hit it very hard with their fist, and she began to cry.

“Don’t, don’t,” he said, irritated. “Just stop, will you? You won’t have a baby. I’ll take care of you. Everything will be fine, perfectly fine. Just as long as you don’t tell anyone.”

“Alex, oh Alex,” she said. “I feel sick. I’m leaving. I want to leave.”

As she got up in haste the diamond studs in her necklace flared luminously, and after she had gone away he thought about it and couldn’t remember when or where his sister had gotten a necklace like that.

Wally came into the room quietly and straightened the blanket on his shoulders for him.

“What did you do?” Wally said. “I’ve never seen her like that.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he said.

“I hope you didn’t say anything mean.”

Moments later he was alone. The sky was black now and looked like a monstrous shapeless leviathan and he was alone with the sky.



Calvin Nguyen writes and lives in Vancouver, Canada. He recently graduated from the University of British Columbia. "Christina" is his first short story publication.

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