

Galveston, Texas, September 2008 – Waiting for Ike

Galveston always has a way of making you feel unwelcome. But as the Island breeze caressed her face, Katie scolded herself for the uncharitable thought. Pelicans glided in a V above her head. And though the church door was locked – something she'd dreaded since she'd seen the closed gates to the parking lot – the statue of Mary Star of the Sea stood proud. Katie crossed herself. She wasn't as religious as she'd been brought up to be, but the gesture came naturally in front of the Basilica. They say that as long as the statue stands, the Island won't go under. Katie shivered, though the breeze that had teased her earlier had given way to scorching Texas heat. She shielded her eyes with her hand. Sometimes sunglasses were not enough. She had a strange vision of the Island devoid of trees, shining mercilessly in the sun, like the skeleton of a dead cow picked clean by buzzards in the desert, hot and desolate. Would this happen after the storm? Like Mama, Katie hated to give in to Island superstitions, but an ominous thought at a time such as this was safest chased away. She willed her mind to conjure a more pleasant image. Her eyes searched for the pelicans she'd seen moments ago, but they were gone.

Mama didn't like the Island either. It was Daddy who kept her here. Daddy and the house. Not just any house, but one of the more imposing mansions on Broadway, a bona-fide Great Storm Survivor, the very argument Daddy had used to urge Katie to come back home for Ike. Katie shivered again, though even in her car, with the AC on, the heat was causing her to sweat into her favorite dress. She wouldn't be able to wear it later, to Daddy's hurricane party, and she would have loved George to see her in it. Though perhaps George wouldn't even come. She said a quick prayer that she was wrong, but she had that sinking feeling already, the one she got when she knew in her heart before it even happened that he would disappoint her. "Shoo," she said out loud, wishing to chase away the premonition. She turned the volume up on the car radio and searched for a happy song.

She took the Seawall, an unnecessary detour, out of sheer sentimentality. The bin of paints in the back of the car rattled. She could hear them over the music. Were those the sounds of her ball and chain? Did she have to drag these paints around forever as punishment for having been conceited enough to fancy herself an artist? She tried to shoo away those thoughts too, made herself instead look at the water. Really look, not just see it without taking it in. For the ocean was nothing short of a miracle and Katie knew that people often take miracles for granted.

Only fifty miles south of Houston, the Island felt like a whole world away. It seemed to Katie both endless and confining, depending on her mood. For this narrow sandbank, less than thirty miles long and only three miles wide, possessed its own talents for mirage and sorcery: It could at times feel so stifling and small Katie wanted to scratch her skin off. That's when it felt like she'd seen each and every one of the Island's sixty thousand or so inhabitants once too often and there was nowhere to hide from their endless small-talk and barely disguised curiosity. Other times it seemed like this was a vast and magical universe, the small Island containing more wonder than the whole world itself, a concentrated type

of wonder that made it unnecessary to travel anywhere else. For wasn't her one true love here? Also Mama and Daddy? Didn't the sky melt into the most glorious sunsets, didn't the surf smell and sound divine, and weren't you able to see everything, from large cargo ships, to cruise liners, tiny shrimp boats, and happy bouncy dolphins roll in and out as you stood still, moored into a sense of quiet contemplation? You had it all in Galveston: the sweet charm of the old houses in the East End Historical District, plumerias and oleanders, gingerbread trim, porch swings, and gas lanterns creating a fairytale atmosphere, the sometimes aggressive energy of the Seawall with its loud motorcycles and never-ending stream of tourists, the tacky shops of the Strand selling swimsuits and beer and candied apples, the beaches that were peaceful and those that were not, the historic cemetery with its haunted beauty, abandoned warehouses speaking of a glorious and tragic past, bars with live music that could transport you to more charming and melodious times, and those that plunged you into drunk tourist hell, modern lofts downtown with high ceilings, overpriced granite countertops, and spectacular views, the occasional alligator lurking in the nature preserve, the haunted mansions and stores selling old nautical artifacts that smelled like the interior cabins of a ship. Sometimes Katie relished the joy of getting lost in the complex and ever surprising universe that was Galveston. Other times she felt lonely, listless, and bored.

Today the water looked calm. Almost blue. You'd never have guessed there was a bad storm brewing. Her friends in Houston had thought she was crazy for going down to the Island instead of staying put or driving north to Dallas. Her friends were not from Texas. They didn't know. They couldn't, like her, recall the sweaty, miserable hours stuck in a car on the freeway before Rita. That time Mama had prevailed, and Daddy would never let her forget it. It was why they were staying now. It was why they were having a party. George had not wanted to leave either. George who was from up North and had never lived through a hurricane. He'd insisted Katie come down, fished for an invite to weather the storm at her parents' house – a more sturdy structure than the garage apartment he rented. Katie only hoped he hadn't changed his mind at the last minute.

She tried to detect any trace of a shiver on the water, a warning of some sort. It wasn't there. Her fear of storms, and Mama's too, contrasted their overall no-nonsense dispositions. Mama and Katie were the only ones who didn't believe their house was haunted. Even Daddy, when drunk, liked to tell stories of the ghosts he'd supposedly seen. And Katie knew when he was too drunk to care about entertaining the guests. He wasn't merely putting on a show. She'd bet her life he believed all that nonsense. Mama laughed it off, but it made Katie think sometimes. If there were ghosts in their house, could it be they made themselves known to everyone but her and Mama? Even George, who under normal circumstances didn't like to visit her parents, said he'd felt "a presence" one time or two. If there was such a "presence," why had it never made itself known to Katie or Mama?

Was this another way in which the Island rejected them, denying them its magic? For the Island's rejection was never a straightforward thing. Having committed the ultimate sin, unthinkable for a BOI, of crossing the Causeway and moving to the Mainland, to Houston, no less,

that impossible maze of concrete and multi-lane highways, Katie knew that the Island would occasionally still try to lure her back. Sweet breezes, pelicans, long beach walks at sunset, the balmy water to sink her feet into, lush hibiscus in bloom, a thin crust of salt on her car on mornings after she'd spend the night at her parents', the unmistakable whistle of Island birds, even the occasional pleasant encounter with people she'd been certain she didn't want to see. If there were ghosts in their house, Katie was certain, they'd have manifested to tease her with their stories, to try to lure her back only to disappoint her later the way the Island always did. "Push-pull," Mama called it, and also "the energy is sometimes open, sometimes closed." Katie's visits were either so magical she wanted to move back, or so dull she sped all the way back to Houston and sighed a big sigh of relief when she saw the city's skyline in the distance. Her relationship with George complicated things, of course. It was just like the Island, this patch of sand that seemed devoid of eligible men, to offer her a glimpse of love just after she'd started feeling more settled in her new life in Houston, more involved in her classes at the university, more at ease with a group of new friends and a bunch of new hangouts. But like the Island's magic, George was a mirage of sorts. When she came for long weekends hoping to see him, he'd sometimes be elusive, sometimes eager, sometimes fun, other times broody. Though he was not from here, George was like the water. Never the same. But just when you tired of its brown unattractive color, it'd treat you to an unexpected afternoon of Caribbean blue.

Katie had a feeling that this visit, despite the church being closed, would be a pleasant one. The water was calm and actually pretty for once, and she was happy to see it, charmed by the pelicans as if she'd never seen them before, then later awed by the presence of her own childhood home, the mansion that to her awareness was beautiful but not haunted. Daddy shouted a loud hello from a ladder. The neighbor's kid was up on a ladder too. They were nailing the windows shut in preparation for the storm. It made Katie's heart race a little. Before she entered, she took a moment to touch the Storm Survivor plaque their house had been awarded a few years back by the Historical Society, a badge of honor bestowed on buildings that had made it through the 1900 storm – the greatest natural disaster to ever befall the United States. Or was it the world?

The metal felt warm, like a living being. She let her fingers soak up its heat, as if it were a promise that this time, too, their house would make it out ok. She wished the plaque could also guarantee that George would come, but that kind of miracle was probably beyond its powers.

Inside, the house smelled like rose scented candles, palo santo, and sage from the Witchery, wood polish, and delicious food. Mama wasn't running around frantic trying to load up the car to evacuate. Mama was in the kitchen wearing a black sleeveless shantung dress, mixing the pink contents of a large crystal punch bowl.

"When in doubt, add more rum," she said, and Katie realized her mother had started to self-medicate her fear of storms away early in the day. "Grab a glass, honey."

The punch was cold and tasted like sweet Texas grapefruit. Katie waited for the hazy relief of the alcohol. Mama pulled a tray of canapés out of the oven. She wore a starched white apron over her black dress, and

it had a bizarre effect, like a maid's uniform or something. Katie grabbed one of the canapés and burned her fingers. The house, she knew, used to have servants back in Galveston's glory days, before the Storm of 1900, when the cotton trade had kept the Island unbelievably rich. A cook, maids, a nanny, a coachman. There were servant's quarters above the garage for the men, and maids' rooms up in the attic for the women.

"Maybe I was the cook here in a different life," Mama would say on occasion. The kitchen was her favorite room. But then again, anyone who loved to cook as much as Mama did would love this kitchen. It was the kitchen that got her to plead and cajole until Daddy bought the house. It was way too much house for them. But it had fallen into disrepair and rumor had it there were inheritance squabbles and other sordid scandals, so the mansion had been cheaper than expected. People were afraid of it too. They thought it was cursed and haunted. It was said that tragedy always struck its owners and no one family could last here long. Mama and Daddy had lasted over twenty years. Born on the Island but having rebelled against its notions early, Mama had spent too much time away to believe speculations and superstitions. She wasn't afraid of ghosts or of a house rumored to be cursed. She wasn't afraid of hard work either. While Daddy was busy at the hospital, Mama had hired and fired several crews of contractors and in the end completed the most laborious parts of the restoration project herself. The house was her work of art, her vocation, her project, her full-time job.

Katie grew up with strangers at the breakfast table every weekend. People from Houston, mostly. People describing the Island as "quaint" and "charming," though Katie also heard words like "backwards" when her mother went into the kitchen to refill a coffee pitcher or grab one more platter of her famous beignets. The weekenders invariably saw ghosts. They left the Island thrilled and satisfied. It was ironic that the one person who knew each nook and cranny of this house, the person who had lovingly restored it and kept it in good shape, had never encountered any signs of the dearly departed.

They say the veil of life and death is thin in Galveston, and both Katie and Mama knew that the mansion, while neither spooked nor cursed, had seen its share of early demises. Yet there had never been a creak of the old floorboards or a reflection in the old mirrors nor a gust of cold air the two women had ever perceived that wasn't perfectly accounted for by phenomena having everything to do with the physical world and its scientific laws.

"What time will George be here?" Mama asked, and although the rum was loosening her up, Katie felt herself grow flushed and flustered.

"He didn't say. I hope he hasn't changed his mind." Speaking her fear out loud made her heart race a little. Mama gave her a sympathetic smile. There were no secrets between them. There had never been. Katie could not remember a time when she and Mama hadn't gotten on. Not even during her teenage years. Katie never rebelled against her mother. She rebelled against the Island instead, and that rebellion was one more thing that strengthened the bond between them. "I must freshen up. In case he does come." Between the sweltering afternoon heat and sitting in the car, she felt wilted and sweaty.

“Eat first,” Mama said. The canapés had cooled and were delicious. Katie also eyed a platter of muffalettas from Maceo’s, and Mama, following her gaze, cut a quarter sandwich in half and offered it to her. “Then go and draw yourself a bath in my tub. You need to relax, baby. You’re always holding your breath, waiting for that boy to disappoint you, but so far he hasn’t.”

Katie bit her lip. That wasn’t entirely true. She’d cried on Mama’s shoulder many times when George had canceled or postponed their dates in order to fix someone’s house or play guitar in an off-Island bar after she’d driven the fifty miles from Houston just to see him.

“Not in any big way,” Mama said. “Not wanting to go to a concert or dinner when you’re in the mood but he’s tired is not a major letdown, Katie. I think he’s the kind who shows up when it counts.” Mama was partial to George because he worked on and off as a contractor. She took to anybody with a love of old houses. Daddy was not as impressed. But right now Katie took comfort in Mama’s good opinion, an opinion fueled mostly by Island gossip, for as soon as Katie had started seeing George, Mama had asked around and found out that, compared to other Island contractors, George was reliable. “Best horse at the glue factory,” Daddy had said, and both Mama and Katie had laughed – because how did that even make sense?

“You don’t want to drive yourself crazy with your worrying,” Mama said now. “Eat, drink, take a bath, get dressed, and he’ll be here. I’ve set out dresses for you on my bed. And you might want to wear those torturous shoes I got from Gina. Might as well keep them. They kill my back.”

Mama looked younger than her age but at times she talked older. Katie closed her eyes and savored the perfection of the muffaletta, the tangy olive salad, the mortadella, the Italian bread. Nobody made a muffaletta like Maceo’s, not even in New Orleans. She willed herself to give in to the pleasure of this moment and to stop worrying about George. She tried to savor the anticipation of a bath in her mother’s claw-foot tub, of the dresses and shoes carefully picked out for her. Mama was fuller in the chest, but her things mostly fit Katie, and their tastes didn’t clash the way those of other mothers and daughters did. They loved the same things. It was one of the excuses Mama used whenever her friends or family accused her of spoiling Katie. “Why not? It’s so easy to do!”

Mama opened the double door fridge and over her shoulder Katie saw how stacked full of provisions it was. She figured the service fridge in the mudroom must be stacked full too. She wanted to say something, then changed her mind. How had Daddy talked Mama into staying for the storm?

“I didn’t put George in your room,” Mama said. “I figured your Daddy wouldn’t like it. Plus with so many days without electricity it can be a drag.”

Katie had not quite thought that far ahead. It was the aftermath that tended to be worse than the storms, but her fear clung to the dark and ominous event itself.

She took another sip of her drink. Mama found what she was looking for in the fridge. She placed a watermelon slice in front of Katie, and Katie grabbed it with two fingers and bit into it. Juice drizzled down her chin and onto her dress, but she didn’t care. The dress was mussed up anyway.

“Get some soap on that, Katie! Lord almighty, sometimes you act like you’re the princess of the mansion and there are servants here to take care of you.”

Katie obediently stepped to the sink, and Mama sunk a clean dishcloth in soapy water to dab at the spot. Up close she smelled like Mama. Sweet, slightly vanilla, but a bit acid too. Like fear. Mama sweated right under the nape of her neck when she was scared, and Katie knew it because she sweated just the same. She must have been a child of ten or so when she figured it out. She started touching the back of Mama’s neck, like a barometer for danger. She did so now, and Mama jerked away.

“Go upstairs, Katie. Take a bath. It’s mighty hot today, don’t you think?”

Katie nodded. She figured Mama was right. It was mighty hot, hot and sticky, and it was best for them not to talk about their fear. The hammering outside grew louder. It started grating on her nerves. She hoped she could drown it out once she got in the bath. She topped off her drink and took it with her. She meandered slowly up the wooden stairs. In the hallway, the doors were open. She wasn’t used to that. The rooms that Mama rented out to Houston people were usually closed off. As a child she’d liked knowing which had vacancies, and she’d liked going in there to play. As an adult they held little interest.

But now the doors were open, and Daddy’s boarded-up windows made the rooms completely dark. The beds shone as beacons of hope, draped in Mama’s white sheets. Upstairs was always a little hotter than downstairs, but the dark rooms with crisp beds held the kind of freshness that was elusive in long Texas summers. The floorboards under Katie’s feet felt cool too. Mama had polished the wood to perfection. Katie wiggled her toes, happy that she’d abandoned her shoes in the kitchen. She could imagine Mama kicking them out of her way, laughing and scolding her under her breath. She really could be quite the barbarian. Five minutes home and there were sandals strewn about and a puddle of watermelon juice on the counter.

What Mama hated most was when Katie got into the freshly made up guest beds. She hadn’t done it since she was a child, but now Katie felt like sinking her face into one of the white pillows, inhaling Mama’s signature laundry freshener scent – lilies and jasmine. She wondered which of these beds was George’s, and her heart hung onto the hope that he would come. She lingered in one of the rooms, then talked herself out of it. Mama had worked so hard. There were even bottles of water on the nightstands, candles with matches, old radios, flashlights, the occasional oil lamp. It was almost cute. Katie saw her reflection in one of the mirrors and paused to look at herself. A guest once said they saw a ghost in this very mirror. A woman in a nightgown, her long hair unbraided. Katie pulled off the elastic from her ponytail. Her hair fell to her shoulders, her curls a mess. But the mirror only showed her own face, a smidge of pretty with a whole lot of tired, the shine of youth almost masking her sleepless night tossing and turning worrying about whether George would come, and whether staying for the storm would be pure hell.

She looked at the double bed with its pristine pillows. No, she would not defile it, though it called to her. Maybe Mama had put George in this room. Maybe they could make love and look at themselves in the mirror.

She tiptoed over to Mama's bedroom. There were three dresses on the bed. She smiled. One never would have expected a small place like Galveston with a whole tourist district filled with tacky stuff, to also offer a boutique as sophisticated – and as expensive – as The Firm on Postoffice. Katie couldn't afford to shop there, but Mama, whenever she was bored, binged on designer jeans, soft, sleek dresses made in California, and even surprisingly comfortable scented shoes made of recycled plastic. Katie was happy to enjoy the spoils of these shopping trips. The dresses set out for her had been barely worn, they had that just-bought newness to them, and the scent of the store still lingered in the fabric. She liked the lavender slip on top, but she thought she saw white lace under it and knew she'd like that better. Not that what she wore mattered if George didn't show up.

The banging outside grew louder, an ominous reminder of the danger ahead. Katie turned on the radio. It was the kind of alarm clock radio you'd usually find in hotel rooms, and Mama had made sure there was one next to every bed in this house, including her own. Ever attentive to detail, Mama would set them all to the jazz station, and liked to turn them on for the guests when she did turndown service, the way the historic Tremont House hotel downtown did. A trumpet moaned into the darkened room. Katie tried to lose herself in its sound, to ignore the persistent droning of the hammers. She took another sip of her drink, turned up the volume, then shimmied towards the bathroom.

Mama had set out peppermint soap by her claw-foot bathtub. Katie let her clothes fall to the floor, pushed them with her foot, then waited for the water to gurgle into the tub and the soap to foam up. When she finally sank into the fragrant bubbles and pulled her head under water, the hammers were finally gone, the trumpets from the jazz station a blur, and she thought she heard voices downstairs. It was one of the tricks and echoes of this old house. No wonder guests believed in ghosts and other apparitions. The people talking might have been outside in the yard, but you could sometimes hear them like they were in the house with you. The perils of not replacing hundred-year-old glass. But how could anyone take out the slightly curved old panes that had survived storms and other tragedies, and replace them with something new just for the sake of practicality and insulation?

She wondered if Mama and Daddy had fought over this party, wondered why Mama had given in, besides the giant fiasco of their evacuation for Rita which was, in the end, no trifling matter. She wondered who would come. Her heart fluttered between hope and fear. What if George did, in the end, decide to evacuate? It wasn't too late. At least, she didn't think so. 45 had had more traffic traveling away from the Island than in the direction she was going. She'd felt like the lone madwoman on the road driving towards danger, but amongst the ranks of people driving away, she could see how her boyfriend and all the other guests they expected could easily fit and get away in time. It might thin out still. There was a trick to evacuating early, before the masses. There was another trick to evacuating late. Tonight was ripe with opportunity. Maybe they could all leave. Maybe George could talk some sense into her parents. But that scenario was too preposterous to contemplate.

It wasn't until she was drying her hair with one of Mama's fluffy white towels, when the banging noises from outside had ceased for good,

and through the fog of plaintive jazz on the radio she heard the engine of a truck, that she remembered the paints. *Fuck*, she thought. She'd taken her duffel bag out of the car and abandoned it in the hall. The bin of paints, though, after torturing her with its rattling all the way here, had completely escaped her mind. She knew she had to get it out of the hot car. Could her paints maybe catch fire? "*Family survives hurricane in Galveston mansion but dies in fire.*" She imagined the ominous headlines. She so didn't want to step back out there now that she was clean and freshly scented. She didn't want to sweat into the nape of her neck, didn't want the sour smell of fear to trail her as George led her upstairs and hopefully undressed her. She could ask him to get her paints, she thought, but as soon as that crossed her mind she had to laugh. If George showed up, she would fix him a drink. If George showed up, she would fix him a plate. She would draw close to him like a cat, protecting him from Daddy's scrutiny and from his own contrary disposition. If George showed up, she knew it, she would not ask him to do a thing.

