



Eight

A terrifying cliff of wave towered over him, the water laden with the shattered remnants of houses, trees, vehicles, all manner of ruined chairs, sofas, tables, plus masses of dirty grayish clothing floating on the brown water as far as he could see. Some of the

garments were animated, were actually people, he realized, and now more of the debris became animals and people, dead, all corpses, some already swollen, drifting nearer and nearer to him in a sodden, overwhelming pack that sent him screaming into the morning and produced curses from Miguel and Hector.

Edward lay on the cot, his chest heaving with fear, his breath half strangled. "Sorry," he said. "*Me pesa. Una pesadilla.*"

Grumbling without malice, they rolled over in the narrow beds and dropped, exhausted, into sleep again despite the bright sky and a sun strong enough to penetrate even the narrow basement windows. They'd only gotten into the still warm beds at five a.m., when Jesús, Ernesto, and Tino, who worked day jobs, got up, and the room was filled with the breath of sleeping men and the various exhalations of their bodies and their clothes, both hastily washed and never really clean. Edward judged it to be early, maybe ten, ten-thirty, and knew he should sleep, but when he closed his eyes, the wave rose again as if it had been implanted on his retina, bringing an intimation of water and flooding and seas of corpses: A Rising.

How strange that so vivid a dream could be the product of fading news pictures of Hurricane Katrina. He had stumbled on them during one of his many forays to the library, a wonderful institution although maybe not the right place to find Kara. Oh, it had phonebooks and directories and the Digital, which he must remember to call the internet, but none of those produced Kara, who must live an underground life similar to his own. Unless she had lost her craving for sun and light, Edward guessed that she worked by day, probably in some job tending children, so she might be anywhere. The roads led out in every direction, the compact CC replaced by this sprawling beast without division between the river and the Highlands. Still, he believed so strongly that Kara was in this ancient place that he sometimes found it hard to imagine her life separate from his own with a circle of new acquaintances, strangers to him, and a distinct, and perhaps different, experience. Besides, the idea that she could be anywhere else was so profoundly discouraging that he always returned as quickly as

possible to the practical details of his search. His latest consideration was a cell phone. If Kara had found work, she might have one of those. But who would she call? Who would he call, for that matter, except her?

With such thoughts, Edward lay restless for what he judged was another half hour before he got up and retrieved his clothes from the end of the bed. Stepping cautiously around the close placed cots, he opened the door to the unfinished half of a basement dominated by an oil tank, a furnace, and a broken down billiard table littered with their landlord's household rejects. A narrow corridor amidst this junk led to a dank shower room with a sink and a toilet, all stinking of mildew and worse, where he shaved as best he could without a mirror and washed his face and hands. After the gloomy and congested air of the basement, it was a relief to climb the short flight of steps to the street, which, had an almost unnatural clarity with blue sky so intense it seemed to quiver and sun turning the dingy sidewalks white and the pavement, silver. From deep, deep shadows, every line crisp, emerged garish shop windows full of sales and offers, and noisy motors and delivery trucks panting bluish fumes, but there were few pedestrians except the usual loafers on the corner, a couple truant teenagers up to no good, and a phalanx of short, heavy women with shopping trolleys and restless infants.

Edward bought coffee and a roll at the 7-11 before setting out to the supermarket for sushi, the closest thing to what he thought of as regular food. Once fortified, he would plan his search route. This was his typical morning program, and he usually enjoyed the long walk to the big market, especially now with spring advancing when there were new things to look at daily. All the older tree species were budding up, the early crocuses out, and daffodils and tulips just visible as green straps and fat exploratory cylinders of leaves.

But today, despite the brilliant weather, Edward felt uneasy, a subtle echo of his nightmare. The dream was just one of a sequence of disturbed nights that left him with the after taste of memories he could not retrieve. He had retained the images of the hurricane dream only because he recognized the source and identified with the plight of the evacuees, who were, like him, refugees within their own country.

The difference, of course, was that while they had proper documents but more trauma, he was adapting well so long as he disregarded certain weird psychic states. He'd about mastered Ancient English and his Old Spanish wasn't bad, either. *If I only had documents, I'd be set*, he thought, for even in this age of libraries and internet, he was knowledgeable about plants and water control and sewerage, and, as far as he could see, there was a clear need for expertise in all three. Papers were not impossible, either, if Maria, Hector, and Miguel were to be believed. All three of them spent many waking hours calculating the costs and making contacts and comparing strategies: how a Green Card might be obtained, where to purchase a false Social Security card, and whether the risk of a phony birth certificate was worthwhile. Maria was especially anguished because her three young children were still in Mexico with their grandmother. She had pictures which she shyly showed the night cleaning crew: small dark haired children with tentative smiles as if, posing on the outskirts of Hermosillo, they could see the far away strangers who admired them. Maria lived to bring them north, and she studied the ramifications of documents like a saint with a testament.

Edward's priorities were different. While the others came to establish a beach head of opportunity for wife, children, parents, or, like Miguel, to send money home for a little house or farm, he had only to find Kara, and he would know what to do. This belief kept him walking the city streets, making long excursions in every direction, searching for a woman with reddish hair and a dappled face.

Later, he was to wonder at his patience, at the curious state of mind that had planned for no more than the barest survival. Of course, his work was exhausting, physically hard without the exhilaration of life outdoors, but his passivity had its roots in the disjunction between his present and his rapidly vanishing personal history. Time, abused, had swallowed his former life in the CC, leaving him adrift with only his search for Kara as an anchor. Truly a citizen of neither the old nor the new city, he nonetheless survived quite easily until one spring night.

The van had just arrived at their last job, Edward's favorite, because the building overlooked the river that he loved and because a couple of nearby buildings raised on pylons brought him an intense, if unfocused nostalgia. The crew stepped out onto the quiet street, the city chilly and virtually empty at near two in the morning, and, just for a second, he thought he heard peepers calling down near the river. Wheezing and self-important, Dave descended to unlock the service door, and Edward and Hector stepped aside to let the others enter before bringing out the heavy equipment. They were standing hidden by the open van doors, when two dark SUV's and a sort of bus with bars across its windows roared up.

"La Migra!" Hector, who was blessed with a quick, decisive mind and a strong sense of self-preservation, bolted into the narrow alley, and without thinking Edward followed. Had he hesitated, one or both would surely have been seen, but as the other workers scattered across the empty, harshly lit street, the darkness of the alley took them in and the agents' excited shouts covered their footsteps, enabling them to gain a collection of dumpsters. Once squeezed between brick and metal, Edward dared a glance back.

All he could see was the van blocking the mouth of the alley. Wails of protest came from the street, demands for papers, Dave's voice, furious on his cell phone, and a cry of despair that Edward feared came from Maria. He had an impulse to go back, to try out his Ancient English, to bluff his status, but Hector put his hand on his arm and shook his head.

"Will they search here?"

Hector nodded. "Dave will tell."

That sounded about right to Edward. They watched until the commotion moved further from the head of the alley, then, crouching, Hector edged from behind the dumpster to a sagging metal mesh fence. Reaching as high as he could, he hauled himself up, the mesh creaking under his weight, while Edward watched the head of the alley for the lights and silhouettes that must follow them. Hector swore softly and eloquently, before Edward heard the thump of his landing.

"Andale, andale."

With a last look back, Edward scrambled up the fence. It had lost some of its support ties in Hector's ascent, and, loose from its posts, the wire wobbled and swayed. He got his leg over the top just as a whole section flopped towards the alley, nearly toppling him onto the ground, and he'd have lost his balance if Hector hadn't grabbed his leg. Edward was momentarily stuck, the serrated top of the mesh sawing into his thigh as he struggled to swing his other leg over. Then he dropped beside Hector and they bolted.

Edward's idea was the darkness of the river_ when in doubt he still moved toward water_ but Hector pointed toward the bright center.

Edward protested. The stretch of empty parking lots, ringed by old office buildings and small apartment houses, struck him as dangerously open and far too well lit.

"No, no, I know a place." Hector dodged along the mottled black shadows of the street trees and favored alleys where cans and dumpsters provided cover. Confident in his own private geography, he ran remarkably fast despite a cigarette habit and the coordination required to unbutton and discard his SafetyKlean shirt in flight, a ploy Edward copied. Looping away from the river and interstate, they reached a street with small shops and sour orange lights. Hector stopped, panting. Edward bent over, hands on knees, to catch his breath, astonished equally at their near capture and narrow escape. Hector punched his shoulder gently and nodded. "Okay," he said.

Edward had gotten turned around in their flight, but Hector led the way confidently, navigating the maze of short streets around the tall white towers of the hospital and heading toward the night emptied center and the gray shaft of the Travelers with its winking top light. Edward kept looking over his shoulders for black SUV's and sinister buses and perhaps that is why he did not notice the young men loitering outside a boarded up storefront. Hector did, and hesitated, but then it was too late _ they were only yards away. There were four of them, all dressed alike in a curious Old Style, enormous loose pants perched on their hips, baggy oversized shirts, and wide, bulky hoods that half shadowed their faces. They wore heavy pendants and necklaces that glittered under the street lights, and projected, despite

extreme youth, an indefinable air of ill-controlled menace. As one, they pushed themselves off the wall and blocked the path of the sidewalk.

“Nice night,” he said, and Hector tried a “*Buenas noches.*”

“What we got here?” asked one of them rudely. His skin was an unmarked light brown and he had black hair and empty black eyes suggesting infinite boredom.

Hector ignored him and made to step past, but one of the strangers grabbed his arm.

“Hey! We don’t want any trouble,” Edward said. “We’re walking home from work.”

“*No drogas,*” added Hector and pulled his arm free.

“Work, eh?”

And another said, “Money.”

“*No dinero.*”

“Don’t fuck with us.” Suddenly, like a storm over marshes, the unstable atmosphere turned menacing; a short, stubby gun appeared in a small hand. Edward froze, as one of the boys, broader and more muscular than the others, searched his pockets for a wallet.

“We didn’t get paid tonight,” he said, still angry. He hated being touched by strangers. He would have liked to smack the prying hands away and maybe send him *into water*, too, but one look at Hector’s pale frightened face, warned Edward these boys were serious, were not, despite their youth and jewelry and clownish duds, to be messed with.

They ruffled through the wallets, shaking them upside down. The total take, \$3.15, seemed to offend them deeply. They began swearing and shouting, as if Edward and Hector had deliberately set out without cash to annoy them, and when Edward extended his hand for his now emptied wallet, one of them struck him in the face.

He had been frightened, or at least, alarmed, until that moment when his anger at the raid, at the loss of Maria’s hopes and Miguel’s farm, at their ridiculous flight through his city, his *own* city, at this final indignity of being robbed by children with a weapon, blew up. He swung his fist into the boy’s midsection, cutting his knuckles on a heavy chain, then kicked out with his left foot, catching him on the side of the head. Hector broke free and stumbled

behind a parked car as a terrific bang rang in Edward's ears, and then, somewhere close, a siren shrieked. The boys hesitated; Hector shouted, and Edward dove after him as the rear window of the car shattered in an explosion of powdered glass.

Whirling blue and red lights lit the street and, for an instant, Edward was suspended between before and after, in one of those moments when Hartford became transparent, when he seemed to be in two places at once, when the lights and lots and apartments, even the glittering skyline, darkened into _ what? A marsh, an ocean, a wide, tidal river fathoms deep? Reality was dissolving around him, before Hector jerked his arm, and they broke into a heart thumping sprint to the corner. Shouts and a lethal popping sound inspired them to chance a driveway that proved blocked by a stout board fence. Careless of the noise, they tumbled over into a narrow yard. The house was a tall triple family with porches at the back. As they tiptoed up the steps to crouch behind the solid half wall that shielded the lower porch from the yard, a neighbor's dog began to bark frantically. Edward could not think what they would say if someone threw up a window or opened a door. Nervous, he rose to move on, but Hector shook his head and pulled him back down. Police lights swept over the trees and shrubbery. A moment later, a rectangle of light appeared on the grass in front of them, and they heard the sound of a sash rising. Edward closed his eyes and tried not to breathe.

A hoarse, angry voice shouted at the dog, which showed no sign of listening. The sash went down again with a bang and after an interval in which they wondered if the angry resident would venture downstairs, if the door behind them would open, if they would hear pounding footsteps on some unseen external stair, the light went out. Edward opened his eyes. In the combination of street and moonlight, he saw that Hector's face was bleeding. His own felt as if it had taken a few bumps, too.

"Who were those people?" His voice pitched barely above a breath.

"Punks, gangbangers. Wannabe Latin Kings, probably."

Finally, the dog fell silent. Hector nodded, and they crept out to the street. A smell of pollen from some blooming tree brought Edward an almost unbearable, but unfocused, longing

for lost spring nights, for water and marshes and Kara, all gone but for the memory of that evanescent scent. Hector coughed softly to break the spell, and they turned toward the glow of the center city, following a circuitous route which brought them within a block of the four bright lanes of Main Street. They chose a narrow parallel way, darker and safer, straining their ears for approaching cars and peering down every alley and crossing, until, after much hesitation, they raced across the wide road before the Interstate entrance and darted into the parking garage adjoining a fancy big hotel.

Edward grabbed his arm. "There's someone in the booth."

Hector stepped forward, checked out the occupant, then, pointing to a security camera ahead, flattened himself against the wall. After a moment or two he gave a whistle, low but carrying, which roused the night manager, short and plumb with heavy glasses and a great deal of slick black hair. Jorge, one of Hector's many compatriots, recognized a friend. He returned to his cubical for a moment before gesturing that it was safe to approach. A quick conference in very fast Old Spanish ensued: Because of the unlikely possibility that the garage might be visited by the Migra, they had to be sheltered without leaving any record. Jorge considered the camera placements for a moment, before opening the shuttered door of a cleaning closet and motioning them inside. "Leave in the morning through the hotel," he said and closed the door.

Hector slumped against a trash barrel, his face gray striped in the thin bars of light, and closed his eyes. "Get some sleep," he told Edward. "We won't be able to go back to the room."

Edward leaned against the door frame, but, with his legs at an awkward angle, he found it hard to sleep although the garage was very quiet. No more than a couple of cars went out, and he heard only a single entrance, a woman in heels who chatted for a moment with Jorge about a delay on the Interstate that had brought her in "at this ungodly hour." A sympathetic laugh from the booth. Her heels clicked on the cement, and some sort of cart rolled noisily toward the door of the hotel. He dozed again and then he had his usual sense of morning,

which, formerly triggered by dawn coming in over the marshes, amazingly persisted in the face of so much night light and the absence of morning windows. He nudged Hector, who took out his cell phone. Nearly 7 a.m. In the morning light, Edward saw a wash of blood down his friend's face. At the utility sink, he cleaned the nasty looking wound, which proved to be nothing worse than some small glass cuts and a bad bruise, before scrubbing the spots of blood from Hector's white t-shirt. Edward had a cut lip and torn up knuckles, but they figured that they would not be too conspicuous. After waiting several minutes until the stream of entering cars slowed, they eased open the closet door.

Edward brushed off his pants and straightened his shoulders. Through the doors to the hotel, onto a vividly carpeted corridor, and out through the main entrance. Easy enough. They were just entering the lobby, bright with marble and chandeliers and floor to ceiling glass, when he heard Hector catch his breath: uniforms ahead. Migra? Edward didn't know, but seizing Hector's arm, he forced himself to speak loudly in his best Ancient English.

"So do you believe FEMA? Kara's still waiting on a trailer. I can't believe it. And they're nowhere near the Ninth Ward. A bunch of goddamn incompetents, I tell you."

Hector nodded but wisely kept his mouth shut.

"I said to her, I said, when you think our tax dollars are going to this. What's it coming to? And you know my situation. How long I'm going to have to wait to get back? How're they going to run the city? You know."

They reached a strange multipart door. Hector stepped in, showing Edward how the compartment revolved, and he followed. Out on the street he took a deep breath.

"Keep talking," whispered Hector.

"I got a buddy," Edward said. "Maybe we can stay with him. But it shouldn't be necessary, wouldn't be, if damn FEMA'd done its job. I tell you."

Halfway down the street Hector broke into a laugh, the gloom and anxiety of the raid, the seizure of their friends, the loss of a week's pay plus their wallets, even their own

weariness momentarily forgotten. They would have had breakfast to celebrate, but they were flat broke until Edward happened to put his hand in his back pocket and felt a bill. A twenty.

“Yo,” said Hector. “They missed that. Breakfast after all.”

Edward looked at the bill in silence and *felt water passing over* _ an old phrase suddenly remembered. Where had this come from? His light weight summer pants, that’s where, donned on yesterday’s spring morning. So the money came from before, but, in one of many mysteries, it was good, still good, for Hector was already headed for the station café, debating between an egg muffin or a sausage on roll. Inside, Edward handed him the money, almost unwilling to hold it any longer. “We must save enough for a little something for my friend,” he said and sat down heavily at one of the tables.

They slept the morning in Joseph’s tent, the old man cheered with the gift of eight dollars and change, and even more so by their account of their narrow escape. “Do they come here? The Migra?” Hector asked. He was noticeably nervous in the semi-transparent plastic shelter.

“Naw. And they better not. I didn’t fight for my country to be asked for papers by some damn uniform.” Joseph reached into his clothing, still consisting of many, if lighter, layers despite the mild weather and jingled some metal tags on a chain. “Nor papers for my guests, either,” he added stoutly.

Nonetheless, as soon as he waked up again, Hector was on his cell phone, his narrow face as stolid as ever, his voice animated. One of his countrymen ran a restaurant _ they might need a dish washer or a bus boy_ and another ran a garage. He knew tools. He thought he could secure work for Edward, too, whose Ancient English had facilitated their escape. Hector chuckled every time he thought of that. In the afternoon they set out to see about work, and it was not until the small hours, when Edward was unable to sleep after his new duties in the restaurant, that Joseph was able to ask what he had wanted to know from the very first morning in the shelter line.

“Hector’s right,” the old man said in a whisper. Edward noticed, not for the first time, that his voice was oddly carrying. Though Joseph barely spoke above a breath, you could always hear him, as if his meaning were carried by some medium more subtle than air. “Your English is perfect now. Like a native’s.”

“I have a good ear,” Edward said. Hector had secured a room over a dubious garage in exchange for night watchman duties. Edward would join him in another night but had felt obliged to return and report to Joseph. Now, lying in the broken darkness under the pylon, he was unsure that had been a good idea. He’d forgotten the dampness, rocks, and grit that underlay the tent and the unwholesome blankets that constituted the bedding. And, of course, Joseph’s curiosity.

“Tell me,” the old man said, “where you really from?” Aqueous light from the interstate stanchions filtered through the plastic to glitter in his eyes.

Edward again felt the characteristic dislocation of *before and after*. “I’m sort of a visitor.”

“I know that. Of course, you’re a visitor. Not meaning to stay, either, right? Not like your friend, who’s committed himself body and soul to the old US of A. The question is a visitor from where?”

It might have been the hour or the strangely filtered night lights or just the weight of secrecy, for Edward said, “The future. The future here.”

“I knew it! I suspected the first day. I’m getting so I can spot them!”

“Them! You’ve know others?” Edward sat up in his eagerness.

“Didn’t I say so? You didn’t think you were the only one, did you?”

“I came to find Kara.”

“Well, there you are. They’re around. And where do they wind up? Even a man of some education like yourself _ I’m right there?”

Edward nodded.

“You wind up under the overpass and working for companies that grind the faces of the poor. Temporarily, at least. Some do okay; some don’t.”

“And a few go back,” Edward said, though he could not remember the source of his conviction. “A few go back.”

“I figure most go back, sooner or later. This sort of visit’s not natural, is it?”

“I don’t know,” said Edward. “What’s natural? Maybe whatever happens is natural.”

“Oh, a philosopher, I see.”

Edward shrugged. “But Kara_ could you have seen her? Reddish hair, lots of freckles, very pretty, a bit depressed.”

“That why they come, do you think?”

“I came for Kara. She was _ yes, she was sick.”

“Maybe the shock helps them for a while,” Joseph said. “Course, who can be sure? Most ‘visitors’ are kinda closed mouthed about their relationship to present reality. Can’t say I blame them. Now you come looking for someone, so you’re maybe in a different category.”

“I guess, but have you seen Kara?”

“No. Not likely to, either. Women go about things differently, you know that. Young woman like that isn’t going to bunk out here.”

“I think she’ll have gotten a job caring for children. She taught young children back before.”

“But if she was depressed maybe she wanted to change her life. If I were you _” there was a rustle as Joseph leaned forward across his insulating pile of trash bags and plastic sheeting, “I’d go look for students. The colleges, the student bars, coffee shops. A pretty woman, not too old, would fit right in with them. That age, there’s always room for one more.”

“Where?” asked Edward, his mouth dry with hope and fear.

“Why right downtown. They’ve converted one of the old department stores to student housing. And if not there, try up Zion hill at Trinity. You just have to arrive in the right place at the right time.”