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JASON GUISAO

Our Babies Are Coming Home

In the half-light, Loulie wakes from a hazy nostalgia. Oaken-sharp bangs lick at her eyelids, paper thin. A foreign scent drifts throughout the bedroom, sweet and sour from the incense ash and something else. Her husband Amos stands in the currents of light pouring in from the bedroom window. The curtains, pushed aside, reveal the entirety of the front lawn and the boulevard below. Amos is naked, his undergarments scattered on the carpeted floor. Burn scars embellish his buttermilk back, while motes of dust dance along the lines of his silhouette. There is a deep stain stamped into the sheets where he slept hours before.

I can see them standing there, Lucretia. Just beyond the patio, Amos says.

Did you take your medicine?

I don't remember.

Amos turns to his wife as she rises, the sheets and woolen covers falling from her body like flaking skin. She stands tall, her beige nightgown kissing her kneecaps. She considers herself a plain woman. Thin lips, with a small sharp nose, and shallow cheekbones. An oval dimple sits perfectly at the tip of her chin. Irises like the black of night glint in the rays of the sun as if stardust had been molded into their center. Loulie grabs a towel from the closet and ties a knot at her husband's middle. He glances at the wet stain on the bed. She notices and cups his face in her callused hands.

It's okay, she says. Go bathe.

He leaves for the bathroom as Loulie pulls the dampened sheet from the bed. Amos's feet stamp into the ground like miniature mortar shells. Outside the window, the bayou rises from its sleep. Dew like droplets of wine rest on

the sea of green below. The paperboy is up and about, his bronze skin sleek as a new penny on the grit road. He throws the newspaper against the door and catches Loulie's gaze from the window. She smiles and waves, and he nods in return. It is an August Sunday and the Baton Rouge mugginess enters the house from every crack and crevice. The wooden plank flooring groans and the stairs whisper at each step. Loulie strides like a ballerina, soundless and nimble. Each movement of her foot, the next step in a familiar dance.

The kitchen is simple. Amidst the hanging pots and pans, there is an overwhelming quaintness hammered into the wallpaper and the floor tiles. A breeze arrives from the window, bringing the marshland with it. Loulie drops the sheet effortlessly into the sink and turns the glossy faucet. She grabs a bar of soap from the chestnut cabinet above and scrubs away. Her hands move briskly and sternly, as if she has been washing sheets all her life. As if work is all she has ever known. She can only think of Amos upstairs in the bathroom, washing the smell of urine from his body. She can only think of January 15, when the Creole woman from across the street flung herself out of her front door and onto the pebbled road, hollering: Good Lord, Nixon said it's over! Our babies are coming home!

Loulie opens the front door and steps out onto the patio. She hangs the scrubbed sheet up on the clothesline and steps back into her home, fastening the door shut. She grabs pecans from the glass bowl centered on the dining table and toasts them in a skillet until they are fragrant and browned. In a few minutes the pecan waffle breakfast is complete. The aromas barrage her nose. She smiles to herself, satisfied, and pours orange juice into a cup. Amos enters, fully clothed, and constantly glances out to the patio. He sits at the table and smiles grimly—all he can muster. Loulie has made no food for herself. She simply sits across from Amos, a glass of tap water in her hands, observing him as he saws at the waffles with his knife. His wifebeater tight against his broad chest and tucked into carpenter jeans. His musk springs from his jagged arms. Loulie takes a sip of water and studies his windswept face over the glass cup, the shadow around his lips so prominent in the dimly lit kitchen. His shrill cheekbones and warped nose. His eyes like sapphires chiseled into the top of his face. Loulie thinks he is beautiful.

It's good? she asks.

Yes, ma'am. It's always good.

It's beautiful out today.

He grunts gently in approval, chewing with his mouth closed, pecans crunching between his teeth. She thinks back to his naked body at the window. Amos glances at the lawn beyond the patio once more before his next bite. There are two waffles left.

You thinking about working with Reggie again?

Yes, ma'am. Figured I'd see him tomorrow, he says.

You think you're up to it, with the headaches and all?

I don't know.

You gave me a scare this morning, Amos.

I know. I'm sorry.

Did you take your medicine?

Yes, ma'am.

Okay. That's good. Are you feeling better?

The headache is gone. Reckon it's the painkillers that did that.

Good. You keep taking your medicine and get more sleep, and soon the rest will get better too.

Yes, ma'am.

Love you.

I know, he says, finishing his last waffle.

By midday, Loulie is fast asleep in the rocking chair on the patio, the skin of her lids rippling above her musing eyes. In her dreams, she is a younger woman, her clean fingernails brushing through violent coarse stalks. The sun dips into the horizon, contusing the sky purple, red, and orange. She is home with her father in Macon. He sits alone on the wooden porch, his eyes unmoving and far off. The lines etched in his brow and lips are like the rings spiraling in the base of a tree. She can see antiquation in his eyes and in his graying mane, a plague ripping her in two. She stands against the tides of weathering and time, naïve and unaware that her efforts to cure her father's dementia are in vain. She watches him fall asleep in the black of the night, remembering the quickening of her beating heart when she grabbed the Drano from his shaking hands. He had mistaken it for milk.

Loulie opens her eyes at the sound of rushing water. Half of the sky is still lit by the setting sun. The moon, in its milky ferocity, rises and begins to illuminate the sky. She follows the noise into the house. Upstairs a light shines brightly from underneath the door of the bathroom. She frantically climbs the staircase, her feet scraping against the edge of each step. She reaches the top within seconds and swings open the door. Amos is in the bathtub, water falling against his clothed figure from the shower nozzle. Dirt falls from his body into the tub like sins cascading in clumps. He shivers, his eyes scanning the room in milliseconds and soon resting on hers. Loulie crouches in front of him, her large eyes as soft and sparkly as pooling honey. He stops hyperventilating. His eyes focus on her fingers, then her lips.

I'm so dirty, he says.

I know. It's okay.

The water is cold against his skin, trickling down into the trenches of the burn scar along his back. Loulie unloops the buttons on his overalls and pulls his legs out, the left leg first and then the right. Her hands pull the wife beater from his chest like a scissor piercing through the cloth. Loulie places

her hand on his brow and feels for warmth but finds none. The swirling wind beyond the pane howls her name. And then the bayou goes silent. She can smell gumbo radiating from the backyard several houses down the road. An afternoon barbecue fills the air. Amos is motionless, unsure of what to do. His panting is at an end, but his heart punches his ribs. His wife grabs a bar of soap from the cabinet adjacent to the sink. He grabs her hand, his eyes pleading with hers.

I'm sorry. Please, he says.

Come, Amos. Let's make you clean.

In the half-light, Loulie wakes from a hazy nostalgia, a thin line of spittle protruding from the corner of her mouth. The bedroom is tranquil in its gloom. The radiance of the sun peeks through the translucent drapes. Morning bird chirps trail up and down the boulevard. Loulie places her hand over her yawn. Amos is naked, his undergarments scattered on the carpeted floor. Goosebumps pepper the nape of his thick neck and shoulder blades. The blood passes like bullets in the veins coating his forearms. Loulie rises from a dune of bedspreads and joins her partner by the window.

They're on the patio now, Lucretia, Amos says.

No one is on the patio.

They're so close now.

Did you take your medicine?

I don't remember.

Loulie sighs and makes the bed as Amos stands unmoving. Her thin wrists fold the blankets back, fatigue under her sockets like eyeliner. She grabs a towel from the closet and ties a knot at her husband's middle. She leads him to the bathroom and opens the medicine cabinet. Capsules and bottles of pills crowd each shelf, but she grabs the white bottle of pain killers. Amos never blinks. As he bathes, Loulie leaves for the porch. A new paint odor stems from the planks. She is alone on the porch, despite her husband's unnerving visions. The lush bayou is crisp in the gaze of the sun. She plans to make chamomile tea.

When Amos arrives, beads of water dribble down his arms. Loulie tells him that she has decided to call in sick: Who needs welders anymore anyway, the war is over. And I'd rather spend my time with you. She sips from her tea. I don't think you're healthy enough to work with Reggie, she says.

Okay.

They won't go away unless you get more sleep and take your medicine, Amos.

Lucretia, what if you're wrong? What if they never go away?

Her father appears in her mind's eye, his ragged baggy overalls covering his skeletal limbs. Placing his lips to a bowl of milk. Walking him to the dinner table. Washing the caked grime from his body and praying that the decrepitude is soaped away as well.

It'll all go away, Amos, because I'm taking care of you, she says.

Amos leaves for the upstairs bedroom. Loulie follows him with her large eyes, his calves coolly flexing at each stair. She turns to the sink and washes her mug of tea. Soap suds cast themselves onto her thin wrists. She turns the tap off and dries the mug with a nearby hand towel, then opens the front door. She stands alone once again, passions bottled in her stomach like the child she had always wanted. *Always needed.* There is a thought in the form of saliva on the tip of her cracked, sundried lips, so fragile and hopeless.

Leave us be, she whispers to the shadows on the patio.

Her hair rises against the bayou's sugarcoated drafts. And for the first time in countless years, she sobs. Not for her father, or for the husband in the bedroom: she weeps only for herself. Her hands tremble and wipe the salt from her cheeks and mouth. Snot drips from the tip of her nose. In the distance trees sway like the ebb and flow of the ocean. A small car speeds by, the exhaust from the muffler dispersing into the atmosphere. The noxious air, a black, and then a purple, and then no more. A stifled thud echoes off the walls inside the house. Loulie turns and sticks her head into the house and listens.

Amos? She hollers up the staircase.

There is the vehement shuffling of feet and then a bang. Loulie latches the door behind her and rushes up the stairway. A dresser blocks her way into the upstairs hallway, a barricade to keep out his visions. Amos grabs the nightstand from the bedroom corner and lodges it against the dresser, his eyes wild and tortured. He tries to grab a small table at the end of the hall, but Loulie lobs herself over the barricade and catches him by the arm, his muscles pulsating against her hand. She squeezes with all of her strength. He stops, his back to her. All is quiet in the house but Amos's labored breathing.

Hush now, she says.

She leads him into the bedroom and sits him in a chair in the corner. She lets go of his arm, a red handprint tattooed into his tricep. He can see the brokenness in her eyes, the layers of fatigue carved into her skin. Her slouched shoulders, her greying hair and gaunt cheeks, her sugared irises dimming.

I'll get your medicine. Don't be sorry.

Yes, ma'am.

Loulie moves the dresser and the nightstand from the staircase and enters the bathroom, grabbing two pills from a white box in a nearby cabinet. She grabs a plastic cup from a bag above the toilet and pours tap water into it. Amos is in the room, his eyes unmoving and far-off. She feeds him the two

pills and hands him the cup of water. The lights are off. The drapes are pulled over the window, the bayou a blurred painting beyond the glass. Their body heat warms the room; their skin is the only illumination as the sun outside reaches the highest point in the sky. She hands Amos the glass and he finishes it within seconds, the veins lining his Adam's apple flailing at each other like meandering rods. He falls asleep with the glass gripped firmly in his right hand. She removes his sweatpants gently so as to not wake him, and with her remaining strength lays him in the bed.

In the half-light, Loulie wakes from a hazy nostalgia. The chair is lodged underneath the door knob. Amos is naked, his undergarments scattered on the carpeted floor. His body is curled into a ball in the farthest corner of the room. Loulie leaps from the bed and scurries to him. He's got his hands over his eyes like a blinded child.

They're in the room, Lucretia, he says.

It's just me.

I tried to keep them out, he says, pointing to the chair-lodged door, his eyes never leaving his lap.

Amos, please. Let it pass.

You said you'd make them go away.

She pulls him onto her chest, wraps her arms like boas around his expansive back. His deep breaths synchronize with hers in the dimly lit room. There is a muffled whine between her breasts, followed by a wetness. Out beyond, the skyline is bleached. The bayou's trees are beginning to change with the coming season. Richard Nixon gives his second inaugural speech. The World Trade Center officially opens in New York City. The last soldier is called home from Vietnam. The paperboy is up and about.