

Night Terror

by Juhi Kalra

She wakes to the feeling of something out of place, hauls her unwieldy body out of an unfamiliar bed, and limps over to the window. Nothing outside the window is familiar, or even possible. She is hundreds of feet off the ground instead of in her single story home, in a room that is swaying to unheard music, and where there should be ground there is only water. The sky seems close enough to touch, and is all around her, as far as she can see. Nothing is in focus. She reaches for her eyes, to adjust her glasses, but they are not on her face. She turns back to the bed, which is no longer there. There are no glasses to be had, as there is nothing to set them on. It is light outside, but inside this room, hundreds of feet in the air, everything is dimly unfamiliar. She rocks a little, reaching out for something to hold, instead finds herself holding on to her belly, nausea rolling in her stomach like the rolling of the room. Back at the window, she holds tightly to the sill, unaware of the tearing of her palm from the broken pane she is leaning on, looking outside to make sense of the incomprehensible. The water below her is like the sky above, stretching in every direction. She sees the wave rising before she feels it, and all the smaller buildings below her, --are they really houses?-- sway as well. The bile in her stomach rises along with a recognition of fear. If she is alone here, where are her children? In what unfamiliar room, in what danger?

Her sight adapting to the dimness, she finally sees the signs of crowded, broken survival all around her. A door in the hallway, with 30E in brass letters glinting dully on its polished surface, lying sideways on the floor like a beacon. Spaces juxtaposed by half fallen walls, creating a jigsaw puzzle of clothes and papers, timber and re-bars jutting out of the floors. She hears their familiar voices before she sees them, coming down what seems like a tunnel, towards her. The man strides to the window, searching below for something that she cannot see. No words are spoken, yet she understands that the

child needs to be sent away, for his own safety. Although she can hear his voice, she cannot see the child. And then he is gone, somewhere below them, and she knows she will not see him again. But where are her girls? Where is everyone else? He is distracted, working on ways to save them until the end. She has no idea what the end is, but is suddenly cold. He reaches behind her, hands her the red cardigan unasked. Time passes as she clutches tight to her sweater, and he moves around the room of this lone building standing in this devastation. Below them, through the night, in wave after inexorable wave, everything known and familiar disappears under the onslaught of the water. Outside, finally the sounds of all she has known being engulfed by the rising crashing water. The leviathans of the sea, within their cages, diving deep into the water to survive until the last minute. And now morning, or is it just the spinning of the earth changing time within minutes, bringing the knowledge that no one is alive but the two of them. And instead of clinging to her in these last moments, he is still looking for ways to save himself. Nothing really matters.

Now she is falling through the broken window as the building bends at right angles, snapping at the floor below, the terror of knowing the inevitable fall, spiraling...tumbling through the open air...past the familiarities of a lifetime...landing in the water...going under...down...down...being in it breathless...lifeless...timeless. Being in that final fall, alone.

I wake to the Southern California June gloom outside my window and within myself, knowing the terror of the solitary final fall. And climb out of bed anyway.

