

The Forth Level

by Jocelyn Johnson

If not for Marlo, I'd of stayed at the house off Reynes Street, drinking warm beer and watching the water snake in, finally been forced up into the dry, dusty attic. Matter fact, I was checking the hatch to the attic, when Marlo came by—a phantom at my second floor window.

"Hey Booker, get out here, you loser," he shouted, startling me. People have called me Booker since I was a kid. My nose was always buried in worn library pages: King or Rice or Barker.

"Get out here or I'll break your goddamn window."

"Not my window," I answered, took a sip of warm beer. I rent the place.

"C'mon, Man, don't make me climb in and leave Celene by her lonesome."

I still wasn't gonna come out, but I did go to the window. There was Marlo's bearded face behind thick panes of glass. He was floating on a piss-poor looking air mattress plunked right into the rising flood water.

I could see his daughter, Celene, crouched down beside him. She's thirteen years old and rail thin with an outbreak of freckles on her light brown face. I hate to look at her. Celene's so young, I know, still she looks like Marcie—rail thin, too, except Marcie was dark instead of light; Marcie, my wife, for what the word is worth now.

When I pushed open the window Marlo said that the whole goddamn city was flooded. Everyone had left already, or either gone by the stadium. They were taking care of people there, flying them out and away. To hear him tell it, the stadium was the start of a fairy tale.

Marlo said only losers went down with the ship. I couldn't deny that my ship was filling fast with muddy flood waters. Inches from the first-floor ceiling, library books floated like paper boats. In the end though, it was Celene's stark silhouette that convinced me to go with them.

We must have been a sight, the three of us on the sagging air mattress, floating toward the stadium over flooded city streets. The storm was over, but in its wake heaps of brush and trash troubled our path. Rear view mirrors broke the surface of the water like croc eyes. Marlo tried to navigate with part of a storm drain pipe pulled out of the water.

Marlo pushed past sunken neighborhoods til finally the city rose out of the wetness, then we abandoned our

makeshift boat on a soggy stretch of lawn. Thirsty and feverish, we walked beneath towering district buildings.

Squinting into the sun, Celene was the first to see them: a band of policemen had gathered on a bridge above. Celene asked if we should call to them, if they could help. But it was the way she asked that got me—a small curl of hope wrapped in layers of doubt and suspicion.

I looked closer at the scene unfolding. Three teenaged boys laid against the highway at the policemen's feet. Their arms were splayed out like the corpse we had seen in the water. Beside them, a postal van's doors gaped open.

I figure those boys were driving that van out of the city; fast ride to safety with the U.S. mail blowing out the back. But the police had stopped them, restored Law and Order. Shiny black boots hovered over shiny black faces as we passed down below. Celene didn't ask again.

When we finally reached the big, beautiful stadium, Marlo and I started whooping and yelling. We joked about how it'd be dry in there—how they'd feed us chicken noodle soup, cradle us like babies. The great milky breast of America, Marlo hollered, which made Celene blush.

Men milled around the concrete patio that circled the stadium, like scalpers, surveying us. A group of shirtless boys called us toward one of the entrances.

"Tickets. Tickets," the middle boy joked, throwing his hand out. He flashed a rough smile, revealed rotting teeth that made my own mouth ache. He had a white t-shirt wrapped around his head like a mummy.

"Naw, really—you want smokes, something to smoke?" he said, his face firming over his decaying smile. I shook my head, not waiting for Marlo to answer.

"There people here?"

"Lotta people. Lotta people."

"Help?"

"Everyb'dy say help is coming, any minute now, any minute now." I hated the way mummy-boy repeated himself.

Celene seemed worried but Marlo headed straight for an entrance: a dark stairwell leading up into the heat. He paused and looked back, gesturing for us to follow. I turned and took one more look at the tangle of highway, and then at the stadium, rising from its foundation of concrete and steel. I made my decision to stay with them.

We camped out that first afternoon and evening on the second level among families. All at once, everybody was babbling about the storm. Normally I wouldn't have paid much attention. People mostly run their mouths just to hear the words spill out. But the storm had focused things for me and I was glad to be out of my sinking ship—nearly hopeful. I listened.

Helicopters been rescuing sick people, old people from the fourth level, they told us.

Buses are coming first thing tomorrow.

A hundred buses.

Rafts to get us outta here!

That afternoon a warm light shone over the half walls of the corridor. Celene lay back, exhausted, not five feet from me. Sweat glazed her skin, made her freckled face glow like an angel's. Her long legs spread out in front of her like a stretch of road. Marlo slouched beside her, his beer and battered-fish belly spilling from his t-shirt; his bearded face irreconcilable with hers. I watched him fall into a dead sleep against his daughter's arm.

But then the light faded, and still there was no food, no water. Night filled the hallway and then the power went spotty. I woke to the blue-green stadium lights hissing like a giant insect overhead.

A few feet away, I could see this old woman who'd been camped out beside us. She'd risen up in the darkness but the flashes of light marked her path. Pitch black, then she would be a few steps closer. Dark again, then I'd glimpse her filthy torn blouse, her chipped red nails reaching out. Her curled feet seemed to float above the concrete floor like a flip book of old photographs or an old stop-motion movie. After that, the power went out for good.

On the second day I woke up in the stadium to the din of people. It was barely dawn, but new bodies had arrived in the night. Poor people, lost people, colored people like Marlo, Celene and me. I don't know how many. Hundreds? Thousands? Great waves of people washed over the half-sleeping bodies on the floor. The old lady in the torn blouse no longer looked scary, just frail—somebody's grandma. She told Celene that she had a heart condition, then went quiet again.

It was the same with my wife, Marcie. She stopped talking, too, after we'd come home from the hospital the second time. For months this heavy silence grew between us. Then one night I went to sleep with Marcie's cool limbs beside me and woke to a hot rumple of sheets. Down the narrow stairs I found the front door unlocked and wide open. Bare footprints pressed into the mush of the front yard, leading out to the road.

There was, of course, *talk* of her going. I had tried to ignore the whispers when I walked toward Holy Cross to

catch the bus to work.

Oh him, he's a'right but he's with that crazy woman. Too thin now, she was pregnant you know. Yeah they went by the hospital. But no baby came home with them, they said.

On the second level, I watched over the half wall as people came to the stadium. The new arrivals seemed to have a brightness in their eyes. I figure they felt lucky to be arriving somewhere—out of the water rainbowed with gasoline, the mosquitoes, the nauseating smells. I could see their thirst, their need, their hope. My own. I just mean to say, I was hungry, I was thirsty and I know what it feels like.

The new people brought new rumors and spread old ones:

Help is on the way, any hour now, they said.

Someone got their cell phone up, they gonna bring helicopters, water this morning.

Someone found a radio signal and heard, for sure, they gonna take us outta here today.

—But no noodle soup, no milky breast; too late for that already.

Curled up, Celene fell into a fitful sleep and Marlo shook me into wakefulness.

“I’m gonna go find water, find out what the fuck is going on,” he said. “Just don’t let anything happen to her, Booker.” He gestured toward Celene asleep against the wall. He looked at me like when we were kids; like I knew something no one else did and he’d cash in on it eventually. I just nodded like someone else’s head was on my shoulders.

Long minutes passed and Marlo didn’t come back. Celene woke like she’d had an awful dream. Immediately, she turned to me and asked where Marlo was.

“He’ll be back any minute now, any minute now,” I said.

By mid-morning a swampy heat filled the stadium. Men shed their shirts and sweaty bodies pressed too close. Celene drew her legs in and together we listened to the shifts in the rumors:

Up in XXX seating some fool got a keg of beer. But don’t go up there, brother, ’cause it’s getting wild up there, dangerous.

Some young men passed through the sea of people and pawed at Celene. They were just boys, really, but baring sharp, werewolf canines. A look of terror shadowed her face, but she almost hid it. She jeered, kept her chin up and those boys just moved past; their eyes still roving hungrily through the crowds. You could do awful things

here if you wanted to. Who would stop you? Where is there to go? Matter fact, it's just like in our neighborhood— the same, really.

I sat there and tried not to see, not to hear them. Just like I had avoided the looks of pity at the hospital, the way the nurses stiffened as we passed— me holding Marcie up by her armpits. By then Marcie's deflated belly was lost beneath her hospital gown. They said our baby boy had just come too early, his lungs not formed right. But I knew they could have saved him. They have tents of oxygen, machines that could have made him breathe.

"Something's not right, Booker" Celene said pushing up to standing. Her eyes darted frantically through the faces of strangers. I stood too, trying to see what she saw. "Marlo should be back by now," she said. She was barely 13 and slight, still she started to walk into the crowd.

I didn't know what to do so I grabbed her thin arm, too roughly. Almost immediately I let it go. How do you keep someone near if they want to leave? Celene looked at me oddly, sank against the wall and began to sob. It was a rich, unsettling sound which rattled around in my chest, my lungs. I started talking, desperate to silence it.

I told Celene everything would be all right now. I said if Marlo wasn't back in exactly 15 minutes I would go find him. I pointed out the old woman in the torn shirt camped out next to us. Celene could stay with the woman. I'd go and bring her father back, I promised, I lied.

Minutes passed and a band of ragged kids came running down the breezeway. Hours passed and Marlo still had not returned. When Celene looked up at me, I knew I had to go or she would.

I asked the woman next to us to watch out for Celene and she nodded. She tried to smile but the effect was not quite right. In the hours since sunrise her face had gone oddly bluish. I swallowed dryly, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Celene reached out and touched my arm as I turned to leave. She whispered, *thank you*.

As I pushed through the ragged crowds, looking for Marlo, I made a list of things in the city I'd probably never see again: The low house on Tupelo with chicken feet behind a stained-glass window; the old man in the corner grocery whose breath smelled like cough drops and wine; the slope of Marcie's breast full of milk and aching and no new baby boy to feed.

When I met Marcie she was new to the city:

"You all eat red beans and rice with everything here," she said. She had a way of making an ordinary plate of food seem special and strange. With Marcie, I too had something new to offer besides straight words from borrowed books. I had my familiarity with the ward's back alleys; my uncanny ability to avoid croc-mean

policemen and drunken tourists straying through neighborhood streets — tourists who could afford to go to the stadium when I couldn't.

After a while I gave up on looking for Marlo. There were too many people. I could barely push through. Besides, my head ached fiercely. My throat burned with thirst. I made my way back, past the wretched bathrooms, to the old woman on the blanket.

She was sleeping and I didn't see Celene near her. I squatted down near her to ask where Celene had gone.

When she didn't answer I shook her narrow shoulder. She was propped against the wall, but her head rolled heavily to one side. I rubbed my own eyes and saw that hers were dry and vacant. *She's dead*, I thought, but then I saw her eyelids fluttering in and out of consciousness.

I looked around, but I knew at that moment it was over. I knew I should have stayed in my borrowed house, in my tomb of an attic, and waited for the water to rise. I pictured myself laying back into the flood water without even flailing—or already drowned, floating among boats of books and old photographs left from the last tenant years ago.

I am a quiet man. I read books, scary books mostly, watch old movies. I drink beer alone or with Marlo sometimes. Marlo usually drinks too much and I'm embarrassed for him. He's got his daughter to think of: Celene standing in the kitchen's yellow light, her narrow back over a sink.

I had to find Celene so I called for her on the second level. I walked through the halls, called her name and looked at the people laid out like debris: sad people, desperate people, crazed people.

Right before dark, somebody grabbed me as I passed them. It was a rotund lady, wearing a matted blue robe, her hair a wild veil around her face. Her eyes rolled back like the women at church that my Ma used to say had the Holy Spirit, but I knew had something dark and burning in them.

"*Someone stole my baby*," the wild-haired lady wailed, drawing her face to my face. Her breath smelled like sour milk.

"*There are monsters here. Fucking monsters! They gone and took my baby up to the forth level, to the sky boxes! The monsters gone and took my baby up!*"

She held a moment longer, then finally she let go of me. I was so rattled by the look of horror on her face, walking away I had to check my own arms—they felt so heavy—to make sure that the baby wasn't hidden there.

I walked all night and called for Celene til my voice grew thin and brittle. I called for Marcie.

In the morning I stumbled up to the third level. It was darker up there, but a little less crowded. It smelled like shit and no water to wash it away. Men and boys milled past me, their eyes dead and dark as zombies. Almost immediately I heard gun shots ring out from the level above.

I pushed my way to the half wall, looked over the edge. I could see hundreds of men in military uniforms below, circling a barricade around the stadium. The uniformed men sent the people from the stadium *back in, back in*. Massive lines formed against the walls of the barricades like a serpent coiled and squeezing.

I looked past the barricades at the whole fair, stinking city: the tall district buildings and the squat neighborhoods beyond them still underwater. *My city*, New Orleans, flooded, buried, lost. How would Marcie ever find me now?

It must have been mid-morning when I ran into Marlo on the third level. He just appeared, like a specter, out of the crowd. His T-shirt was ripped and gaping. He smelled yeasty and dank like beer gone bad.

"Jesus Christ, Booker, I thought I'd lost you forever," Marlo said. An awful upside-down smile lit up his hairy face: hope covering something darker. He threw his arms back as if to hug me.

But then his eyes darted around me. He was looking for Celene, of course, and she wasn't there. His arms fell to his sides like clipped wings. I noticed he had a small plastic bottle of water, half empty, in his right hand. The top was open.

"Where is she? She's okay, right?" he asked. I didn't say anything.

"Where the fuck is she?"

I waited a moment longer, mumbled something under my breath. Marlo's face began to redden. His shoulders drew back. The plastic bottle creaked a warning beneath his fist.

"You were s'pose to keep her safe," Marlo growled at me.

"*You* were s'pose to keep her safe," I growled back. Each word I spoke rang painfully in my skull; each syllable ground against my already raw throat.

That's when Marlo loosened his grip on the water bottle. I watched in slow motion as it slipped from his hands. The bottle bounced once and poured out its meager contents on the urine-soaked floor between us.

I lurched forward, wanting to kill him for leaving Celene with me, for letting the water spill. But before I could do anything, I felt Marlo's fist collide with my jaw. My teeth clattered and shifted. The taste of blood wet my tongue. And I was on my knees in the stadium. I think I heard people gathering, laughing. But all I could see were feet and the puddle of water between us. I considered lapping at it, like a dog.

It was late in the afternoon, my mouth still salty with the taste of blood, when I saw her: rail thin, muddy jeans, her freckled face clouded and lost. I tried to blink it away, but she was still there in the madness. She was searching for someone to help her, turning toward me. I felt a sick, upside-down smile spread across my face. In the end, I did not call out to her. I did not reach out and touch her arm. I stepped back, trembling, into the shadows.

I blink again and now the sun is setting. An old man shuffles past with plastic bags tied over his bare feet. As it goes dark, we both stop to listen. The men above us have started to wail—a high keening, and there's nothing to do about it. It's just a sound that sweeps up in you, wraps around your organs, your heart, til you are wailing too.

Every minute more people push up into the darkness. They talk in hot, dry whispers that itch and burn in my ears:

The whole country is flooded, the whole world— they say.

Everyone is stranded. Why else wouldn't they come to help us?

America is flooded, buried, lost.

It's too late. It doesn't matter. It's the same really. Down below, families drift and disappear like ghosts. So tonight I will go further up into the darkness, up to the fourth level, to where the monsters roam.