

The Mending Storm



he had fought for her life.

The signs had been in the air for days. The strange heaviness in the wind. The queer, calm stillness. Weathermen had issued storm alerts, sprouting warnings of doom as they poured over electronic maps and satellite imagery. Old men had agreed, nodding their heads, clucking their tongues, searching the skies. People in the Natchez had grabbed whatever they could load in their cars and headed north. Everyone had fled to the proverbial higher ground. Everyone except a very pregnant Jennifer Cher-Toussaint and her dog, Ladd.

Jenny was gilded money; her family tracing its roots back to the first French settlers on the bluffs of the Mississippi River. She was of the First Five: the ante-bellum, upper crust of Euro-Natchez society. As such, she was a magnolia blend of French aristocrat and Indian nobility. Still her African heritage bloomed forth in the thick plaits of the hair and in the fullness of her mouth.

Her family had owned the Toussaint Plantation since the 1820's when Natchez reached its peak as the centerpiece for trade in cattle, cotton, and slaves. Her ancestors had held on to the land through the turbulent "Great Unpleasantness," through the Reconstruction years, through two World Wars. Her father, and her grandfather before him, had served as the curator when the house was converted into a museum. Together, they had barred the doors to visiting black schoolchildren until the Supreme Court had put serpent's teeth into the Civil Rights Act of '64.

Having lived all of her life at Natchez, Jenny knew the fickle peculiarity of the weather and what that fickleness could do under the right conditions. The plantation pillars still bore the historic marks of the tornado of 1840 when twister winds had uprooted towering oaks and smashed slave cabins. Yet, knowing all this, she had ignored the signs, too immersed in the sorrow that her life had become.

Until it was too late.

The blare of the civic alert had interrupted her thoughts and sent her scurrying to the window. In the distance, past the rolling grass where she had played as a child, she saw the funnel cloud approaching, fast, seeming to hop across the ground. There was little time, no time. Certainly, no time to think. She acted on primal instinct to flee and to protect her unborn child.

She grabbed the key to the storm cellar and made her way to the kitchen, calling to Ladd as she went. The kitchen door flew back when she opened it, banging hard against the ancient masonry. The wind, having whipped up with maelstrom force, fought her like a living-thing. She struggled to make headway, shielding her abdomen against a flying hodgepodge of debris. At first, little things: a sheaf of newspaper, a seaman's cap, a milk bottle. Then, larger stuff: a slat of roof shingle, a child's tricycle, a porch chair that slammed into her legs and brought her to her knees. Ladd danced around her, yapping, oblivious to the danger. An image of him being swept up, like Dorothy's house on its trip to Oz, seized her mind and took such firm possession of it that she thought she would go mad.

She found Ladd's collar and pulled him along. He dug in, enjoying the game of tug of war. Despite his sheer doggedness, she managed to drag him beside her. Her mind worked on autopilot, focusing on the mundane, the minute, the irrelevant like the long tracks that his paws made in the dirt. Until a clap of thunder broke overhead, breaking her concentration and breaking him free.

“Ladd!”

“Laddie!”

“Come here, boy!”

She struggled to stand. The windstorm struck her down. And kept her there.

She crawled along on her hands and knees. Her sole thought was to make the safety of storm cellar before she was sucked into the black squall. Her pantyhose ripped on something sharp. The wound was deep, painfully deep, and she looked in horror at the shard culprit protruding from her calf. The sheets of rain mixed with her tears. She realized—with sudden clarity—that this was the first time that she had ever fought for her life.

The door to the cellar was in reach. Using the handle as leverage, she pulled herself up and fumbled with the pad lock. The key wouldn't go it. She paused, perplexed, to try again, sparing a quick glance over her shoulder. The cyclone had traveled at a light's breath and now loomed over her, an unfriendly shadow. She flipped the key. Success. The key was in. But...it would not turn. She tried to recall what David had said. Had he changed the lock? No. He said that the lock was finicky. He promised that he would oil it. He had promised so many things.

She jerked on the lock, wondering if she should seek the meager shelter of a distant magnolia. That thought fled when the tree was pulled from its home and torpedoed towards her like a crazy collection of spiny worms. She gave another yank on the lock, shouldering the door at the same time. The key, grinding against the inner mechanism, rotated and the U-bar slipped free.

“Ladd! Come here! Please, boy!”

“Damn you! Come here!”

Perhaps it was the tone of Jenny's voice—an imperial note that Ladd had never heard before—that made him lope to her side.

She opened the door as far as she could. Ladd muzzled through the crack and she followed close, so close that she felt the steam from his fur in the coolness of the cellar air.

She found matches at the top of the stairs. Lighting an oil lantern, she maneuvered down the earthen steps, taking care to avoid the occasional spider web and the more occasional garden snake. Having reached the bottom of the circular steps, she stopped to look around.

The cellar was much as she remembered it from the time of Hurricane Allison. That year, she had made a New Year's resolution that she would have the groundskeeper clean up in there, but David had said that he would get around to it. She thought that he had for she had seen him coming and going. Yet, the cellar remained the depository for odds and ends, the stray junk which had been removed when the mansion was converted into a museum.

Her roller skates were still hanging on the wall from an old wooden peg. Her mind flashed back to the many times that she had skated in the wide, paved lanes under the drooping trees. In happier times, she had even roller-bladed there with David. They had shared their first kiss under a huge oak and made love on a bed of Spanish moss.

She shivered at the memory or at the cold. She forgot that she was soaked to the skin. Now, the wet sent chilly aches through her body. She found some towels, ragged and frayed, under a crank-handled ice creamer. Stripping down to her panties, she dried herself off, and then unbraided her hair. It fell free, falling to her waist, enveloping her like a dark cloak. She parted it into sections and rubbed the towel down the long length of the strands. As she did so, her thoughts turned to David.

Naturally, to David.

For David had loved her hair.

He had loved to play with it while they watched TV, to brush it as they laid in bed, to tug it before he pulled her into his arms.

How could someone so gentle, so tender, so loving, commit such an act of betrayal?

She had sensed that they were drifting apart. The effervescent first year of marriage had faded, replaced by the day-in-day-out routine of a married couple. She understood that marriage was a job, that couples had to work to make their union survive. She also understood that marriage was not—could not remain—the thrilling year of the newlywed. Yet, she thought that there would be something more, more than David's gradual withdrawal and her ensuing coldness.

What did he find in the bed of another woman?

Was her skin softer than hers was?

Was her body more welcoming?

Did she wrap her legs around his lean torso when the waves of pleasure struck her?

She yanked hard on her hair, bringing angry tears to her eyes.

David had stolen so much from her.

She wanted to hurt him back.

Make him pay. Take something from him. Something that they had shared.

Her eyes searched and fell upon a set of scissors. They were shears, the primitive type, used by her ancestors for clipping sheep. She had reached for them. They felt heavy in her hands. They were made of cast iron, the type of iron not used anymore, the type that lasted for generations and turned smooth as a pebble with each generation's use. The blunted blades were closed tight. She used both hands to squeeze the handles, working through the years of rust, the years of memories. Her hands ached from the strain, but she kept at it until the spring loosened and the blades opened.

She grabbed a fistful of hair. She ran the blades against her scalp. She was rough as if it was that other woman's hair. She let go of the handles. The squeak-squeak sounded loud in the quietness of the cellar.

Then silence.

A lop of her crowning glory, according to the Good Book, fell into her lap.

The squeak was heard again and again and again until her legs, her shoulders, her arms were draped in her slashed tresses. She looked down at the pelt of hair, and while the eye of the tornado spun overhead, she cried.

Time passed as if in a mist. For how long her tears fell, she did not know. When she came to herself, Ladd was curled in her lap, his nose burrowing in her cast off curls.

“At least, I have you, boy.”

The thrumming of the retriever's tail stirred up a cloud of sandy dust.

“I must look a sight.”

She ran her fingers through her shorn locks, grimacing at the ragged unevenness.

“Salon, first thing.”

Ladd's dark brown eyes seemed to glint at her in sympathy.

Her arms encircled as much as his broad body as she could. Against her abdomen, she felt his heartbeat, beating in time to the heartbeat of her child. She pressed her face into his fur and fought back fresh tears. But the dog would have none of her sadness. He kicked free, and flipping over, stuck out his long, skinny tongue. Before Jenny could shield her face, his attack hit the mark. It wasn't a little dab. Not at all. His tongue started at her chin and slurped upward to her brow, leaving a smell of doggy slobber and dog food.

“Oh, Laddie. You always make me feel better.”

He barked and then dashed away. Picking up a scent, he sniffed loudly, his nose pressed to the ground. Jenny watched him a moment as he tracked the scent. Sometimes she wished that she could escape into his skin.

“Let's see what we can get on the short-wave. Stop boy. Lad, stop it. Let go. Okay. OK. What have you found? Not another snake, I hope.”

The dog barked and dashed back to a darkened corner of the cellar. Picking up the hurricane lamp, Jenny followed him with hesitant steps, wondering if this snake was rotting dead or was hissing alive. What she found was not a snake, but the sight that met her eyes was equally scary.

A battered cabinet that she had never seen before had been wedged into a corner of the cellar. The single drawer was open and, from what little she could see, was stuffed with papers. Near the file cabinet was a makeshift work area, complete with pens, pencils, books. Around an improvised table, pale rose stationery had been spread out, fan-like.

The handwriting was familiar.

Someone was using the cellar as a study.

That someone was David.

His handwriting was on the stationery. His initials on the leather-bound diary.

Jenny's heart pounded, beating irregularly before it slowed to a dull thud. Proof. She had found proof. Actual proof of his betrayal. Secret letters, love letters, to his mistress, to his whore. He had come here to be with her, to share his thoughts with her. Jenny's fingers curled into tight balls. All those months during his withdrawal, during the lengthening gulf between them, he was here, in this place, pouring out his love to his new beloved.

Jenny stalked to the makeshift table, her intent clear in her unclenching hand.

Let it go, her mind cried. Let it go. Nothing will be gained from wallowing in his breach of faith. Better to not know, to not read whether her skin was softer, whether her body was more welcoming, whether she wrapped her legs around his torso and held him tight when he...

Jenny stood there feeling as if she could not go forward, but could not go back. Time dimmed to inconsequential while she debated what to do. Ladd barked and pawed at the ground as if urging her on. Like him, she had to know the truth. She grabbed the diary and started to flip through the pages. The dog stopped his frantic movements and leaned his big body against her. He was her silent sentinel, lending the support that she needed for the truth.

David's handwriting was circular and slopping, but with a compact tidiness that seemed to imply he was cramming a multitude of thoughts onto each page. It was a man's script—made with heavy, black ink—and incongruent on the pastel paper. In her mind's eye, she could see him at work: his shoulders slumped over the crude table, his fingers holding his favorite fountain pen, his fist gliding across the page as he frowned in concentration, trying to get each entry correct and running his hands through his black locks when he could not.

Jenny flipped through the diary, past irrelevancies like dental appointments and notations for car repairs until the pages became a chaotic jumble.

Until one passage stood out.

A crude sketch of a heart, incomplete and lop-sided, surrounded the passage looking as if it had been drawn with a childish hand. She dismissed the sketch when her eyes saw the image.

The watercolor looked fragile to the touch. The brown of the hair was the septa of earth tones; the blush of the cheeks the pinkness of a new-morning sky. The face was deep in thought; the jaw in shaded profile establishing a firm resolve. But, it held softness too. A softness affirmed by the improbable eyelashes that curled long and by the swollen abdomen, heavy with child.

Jenny sat down—before she fell down.

And there, on the sandy cellar floor, she studied her image in David's diary.

Laddie snapped at the page. Had he been David's confidant? Had David shared his thoughts with the one living creature who could not reveal his secret? Did the dog somehow know that David would not want his soul exposed to her? To the woman who had screamed: "I hate that you're the father of my child."

Yet Ladd had led her to this dark, revealing corner. Yet Ladd had pawed the diary as if to shield it from her eyes. Ladd like David had wanted and had not wanted. Ladd like David had been unable to say what was in his heart.

A sole tear slipped from Jenny's eye to stain the watercolor. She shut the diary and secured the buckle. Only to open it again and to flip to the passage.

June 15th

My Dearest Fair,

You will never see this. You will never know how much I love you. I try to tell you, but something is broken inside me. I open my mouth, knowing that I know the words—having rehearsed them in my mind a thousand times. But words fail and I am left with silence.

Jenny read on with tearful eyes.

July 11th

You told me about our baby last night. I hugged you tight and said that I was glad. I know that you wanted to hear more and I know that I wanted to say more. But I couldn't. Once again, words failed me. I consoled myself with a kiss and with watching you fall asleep beside me.

August 8th

You are angry with me. But no angrier than I am with myself. I waited, yesterday, for you to tell me that our marriage is over. I saw the disappointment and the regret.

My Sweet, my Sweet Fair, how did it come to this?

The first year, I tried hard to be the man that you wanted. To play the debonair at every society gala. God knows that you deserve such a man. But my attempts were pretense and so hard to maintain. I felt like a phony, playing at being someone that I am not. The strain was too great, My Fair, and under its weight, I cracked. Hairlines at first, then great, gaping seams. Too soon, I was stripped down and stripped away until I was what you saw before you and rejected. And with your rejection, I knew that it was solely a question of time before you found someone else—some young aristo who could give you the roller-coaster thrill. I tried then to let you go. But I am too selfish. If I could hold on to your sunbright laughter, even if it was for a few scant moments, then I would do so. You see, I love you more than life, My Fair, and without you I am nothing.

Jenny's eyes speeded through the words even as her heart with dull deliberation.

September 9th

Jenny, I felt our baby move last night. It was either a soccer kick or a tennis swing—I couldn't tell which. Our baby did it several times during the night, and I wondered how you could sleep with all the racket going on inside you. But, sleep you did, My Fair, my precious fair.

September 10th

Tonight will be our final time together. I know now that there is nothing left between us. We have drifted too apart; the breach is too wide to mend. You told me that you hated me. I took your words, absorbed them, knew them for the truth. I felt the unendurable pain of your words...pain that I thought that I could endure until you said more...until you damned me for being the father of our baby. Those words hurt... I cannot write it. I can only take my leave of you and pray that you find the happiness that you deserve. Farewell, My Fair, my Jennifer.

She re-read the final entry. September 10th. That day was a Friday. She remembered it well. That day had started like every other day. The quiet click of the coffee timer. The smell of perked coffee. The blare of the radio wake-up. She had put her hand on her belly, and her smile

had grown when a gentle somersault reaffirmed the life growing inside her. She had turned over to tell David, her mouth forming the words. Words that died on her lips. No head rested near hers. No indentation curled the adjacent pillow. No scent of aftershave lingered on the sheets.

In the twilight hours, David had left without a word, and the brightness of the day had become Jenny's darkest night.

She closed the diary and put it aside.

She wanted to brood.

But it would do no good to brood.

She wanted to cry.

But it would do no good to cry.

She had one choice for good, one choice to pull her life together. She had to face the harsh, stark reality. She had driven David away with her foolish fears, with her immaturity, with her yearning for the social swirl. She had turned away from the man who he really was, the man who she had fallen in love with, the shy man who provided a calm harbor in the storm of life.

Throughout this all, Ladd had sat rock-still, his whiskered snout cocked to one side. His doggy stare—a look far too intelligent to belong to a canine—had never strayed from Jenny's face. He questioned her, silently, seeming to ask the same questions that she asked herself. *Where do I go from here? How do I fix this? Can he forgive me?*

The answers would not be found on the sandy floor of the storm cellar but in blue-gray flicks of her husband's eyes.

She dressed impatiently, the dampness of the clothes making them stick to her skin. With her blouse flapping, she dashed to the door. She prayed that the storm was over and that she could leave right away. She didn't want, couldn't want, a moment's delay less her courage fail. David had every right to reject her. Indeed, she couldn't blame him if she had killed his love with her unfounded accusations. But she was prepared to get down on her knees and crawl if that was the price of his forgiveness.

She put her ear to the cellar door. Ladd joined her there, restless to run free. Not hearing the howl of the wind, she cracked the door and looked at the sky. As in the wake of so many storms, the angry clouds had given way to bright sunshine. Only the tormented landscape gave reality to the fierceness of the storm.

Ladd darted out, racing to the mansion. He barked, barked again, then ran faster, his legs a motion blur. Jenny caught his exuberance and lumbered after him as quickly as her heavy belly would allow. For the first time, in a long time, she felt glad to be alive.

She had gained the wide expanse of the lawn before she saw him.

His hair was wind-blown; his jaw rough with a day-old beard. His sweater, the old, patched one that he used when gardening, was turned inside out—evidence of his haste.

David walked towards her: a man unsure of his welcome. Yet, he trod on, his hands hidden deep in the pockets of his trousers. When he neared, he pumped his throat as if his vocal cords were rusty from disuse.

Jenny stood still and waited. Later, she would tell him what a fool she had been. But now, it was his time to abandon, however briefly, his reserve.

It was his time to say: “Oh, Jenny. I love you so.” ■