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Water and Abandon

Robert Vivian

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FLYOVER FICTION

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WATER
AND
ABANDON

ROBERT VIVIAN

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Set in Minion by Bob Reitz.

You might say I was paved for this,
to give my face to a river.

“BLUE HANDKERCHIEF,” MARY RUEFLE

Many waters cannot quench love, neither
can floods drown it.

SOLOMON 8:7

*This book is dedicated to all the rivers of this world,
for what they give to us, and for what they take away.*

1

One year after the body of his seventeen-year-old daughter, Kelsey, was recovered from the Sicangu River, Hank Little drove his truck to the end of a state road looking out on the water and parked awhile, cradling an open beer between his legs. The sun was going down and even the polluted Sicangu looked beautiful in the fading and canted light, with here and there a necklace of spangled brightness lifting only to fall back down where it lay briefly shimmering before it disappeared. He sat looking over the area of water where his girl had been brought up to the surface with all manner of debris clinging to her, weeds, vines, flecks of wood chips and bark, even a shredded white plastic bag that had somehow managed to wrap itself around the apostrophized arch of her foot like it was covering up that part of her for modesty.

He saw her again being slowly lifted out of the water, the piet -like quality of her limp body with her head lolling to one side exposing her long and graceful neck, the bluish cast of her glistening skin in the faint afterglow of an underwater sheen, the lash of long, wet, dark hair across her face that had nearly stopped his heart cold the second he saw it. She had looked so peaceful coming up,

like she was sleeping and not bloated at all as he had been so cautiously warned, as beautiful as she had ever been and even more so because of the blueness somehow, which he couldn't bring himself to admit to anyone, not even to Sam. Two goggled divers flanked her on either side, their masked faces impossible to make out for expression, the bright orange respirators making some kind of hissing noise as the three of them surfaced in a general froth of air bubbles, a sound he had to keep reminding himself ever since was only air and breathing, as if to fight off a rising sense of drowning within himself. Sitting there in his truck at twilight with no one else around and taking repeated tugs at his beer, he figured he'd be seeing Kelsey like this for the rest of his life, her lips the same purple color of violets that Sam kept in a flower box above the sink at home.

He remembered saying calmly to the three other searchers in the boat, *Here she comes* when he saw her materializing out of the murky water, coming up out of the depths so slowly it was almost like she was reluctant to ascend, her body a broken altar unto itself upon which he kept dying every day since she'd been found. He didn't know what made him say such matter-of-fact words, but there was no accounting for what grief and shock could make a person do or say. Watching her come up like that was something he'd never seen before, not even in the movies, the memory of it so vivid and clear that at times it was all he seemed to see in everything around him, her body rising up again and again out of the slow-moving current. And sometimes he secretly wondered why she didn't just keep on going, keep rising from the water all the way into the sky, shedding the plastic bag on her foot maybe but otherwise keeping everything intact, going higher and higher at the same deliberate speed with which they had brought her to the surface. On that day he'd gone quietly out of his mind while Sam was openly hysterical, both of them trying to face the brutal

and unbelievable fact that their only child and daughter was dead and drowned and never coming back.

Three weeks before they found her Kelsey had left the house at one in the afternoon and never returned. The Pritchard boy saw her walking at 1:10 under the tree-lined sidewalks on Magnolia Street, and because he was sweet on her like most boys in the neighborhood he had called out a greeting; but she just smiled and walked on, not saying a word, which wasn't like her. He'd never know why she hadn't called him to pick her up like she always did to drive her the half mile home: he didn't like her walking around by herself even if it was Dark Vespers, Nebraska, the only town she'd ever known.

Being able to get ahold of her easily was just one of the reasons why he'd caved into her and Sam's constant and pleading demand for him to buy her a cell phone, so she'd be easier to reach. But when they pulled her up from the water her cell phone was nowhere to be found. All they had found was a series of small puncture wounds on her arms and legs, almost like snakebites, that probably occurred while she had been under thirty feet of water. During the autopsy twelve hours later they also discovered that she was three-and-a-half months pregnant, a fact that was almost as hard to take as her disappearance and death had been. They were on the verge of becoming grandparents in their early forties and hadn't even known it. They ruled out that she had been raped or drugged and found nothing unusual in her system except the dead male fetus. And all of it led to a swarm of overwhelming questions that wouldn't leave them alone and threatened to tear them apart.

Why hadn't she answered the Pritchard boy when he called out to her? Where was her cell phone? Where did those puncture wounds come from? But most of all, why had she walked away that day? Why?

He sat in his truck and drank, watching the river and the light

going down across it, not really caring how drunk he got or how long it took, only that he did. They'd been dreading this day for months, but now that it was here he was almost relieved. On the seat next to him were four other cans of Budweiser, the last one he had consumed crumpled up on the floor with a little foam leaking out. Ever since Kelsey died he and Sam could barely stay in the house together, and when it got to be too much they took off in different directions, him driving around lonely dirt roads for hours and Sam going out to Walmart under some pretense or other where she'd wander down the aisles. About half the time she couldn't even remember what she had gone out there to get, but the bright fluorescent light of the aisles and presence of other people comforted her somehow, which was more than he could manage to pull off. Most days they drank and watched TV like zombies, or Sam cried in his arms as he held her halfheartedly, glancing over her shoulder to catch the bottom line on ESPN.

He'd been dreaming of her every night for weeks leading up to this day, the sixteenth of August, Kelsey pulling up in a candy-apple-green Camaro (she was barely old enough to drive), smiling and waving at him as her long brown hair streamed out the open window, telling him she was going to be a movie star or a lawyer or a saint who took care of starving kids, all in the same breathless sentence. In one dream he saw her walking out of the water in a nightgown with her whole budding body showing through, holding out her hands and crying out to him, which he had no answer for then or now. He was always seeing Kelsey in the oddest of places, in the reflections of store windows downtown, in Sam turning in a doorway, in other girls her same age walking down the sidewalk and laughing up a storm. A year was a long time to have her gone, and while it seemed that most everyone who had known her had moved on, he and Sam hadn't or couldn't. Just didn't feel right somehow. But at least the river he had come to hate and fear was

peaceful this twilight evening, the first time he'd been back since they had gotten her out of the water, and he was grateful for that. He had brought along simple building materials for the anniversary, a cross and some quick-drying cement. After one more tug at his beer he finally told her what he'd come to say.

Kels, it's been a year now since you've been gone. Can't hardly believe it. Tell the truth we're not doing so good without you right now. I have a lot of questions for you, baby. But I know they can't be answered. I still have to ask them anyway. Why did you walk away like that? God, Kels, I don't know what to do anymore. I keep thinking I'm turning a corner, but it's a blind alley every time. You're still not here. Mom's taking it pretty hard. Suppose she always will. I don't know how to comfort her anymore. Everything reminds me of you, kiddo. If you could somehow just let us know you're okay, then maybe we could start putting the pieces back together again. I've been dreading this day for a long time now. I didn't know how I'd take it. Same for Mom. She's home. I think she's home. Your mom has us seeing this therapist, but it doesn't really help much. She's a nice enough lady, but I just can't get into it. I don't want to hear any more words. That's all she's got for us. Every person I've seen in the last twelve months keeps saying the same damn thing over and over, how sorry they are for our loss. Our loss, that's what they call what happened to you. Seems awful polite and genuine but I still sometimes want to tell them to fuck off, which I know isn't very nice. I guess that's just the standard response for something like this. We're sorry for your loss. I used to think I was a pretty strong individual, you know, but I guess I ain't much of one. Not too strong at all. But if you could just let me know, Kels. If you could just do that. Wouldn't have to be much. Some little hint or sign. That's all, baby. I just miss you so much. I miss you so much, baby.

He drained the rest of his beer and threw the empty can out the window before wiping the back of his hand across his eyes

and letting out a stream of profanity, banging the heel of his hand against the dash a few times so hard he caused a small crack in the windshield. Then he got out of the truck with his load of materials and started walking down the sandy slope to the river, looking like a man determined to follow through on something no matter what it might cost him.