

"Hurricane Helios"

Eden Hirtzel

The Mother Superior inclined her head out of the open window. It was uncommon for a patient to have windows, of course, but the Mother Superior was harmless to herself and others. Her particular disease was not technically catching, though of course that was arguable.

"The storm's coming," she commented in a lace-bordered voice. "You know that, don't you, Carla." It was a statement, not a question.

Carla perched on a table, tilting her head and staring at nothing. "Shhh," she said, "Mother, I'm listening to Handel's oratorio." The room was utterly silent, save for the rumbling of stormclouds cloaking the city.

"Oh, really, dear. Which one? The Messiah?"

Carla rocked back and forth for a minute. Mother's words took a few minutes to work their way through the thick fabric of Carla's blue wool daze. "Oh, no, nonono. Overrated, Mother. Acis and Galatea, oh happy we, part two, wind ensemble." The lifting of the flutes was like a batch of zephyrs fresh from the Coriolis Effect, heard only inside Carla's spacious cranium atrium. Carla, a mousy thing, brown-haired and pale, with bottlecap glasses that overwhelmed her oval face, was a girl of few words. She preferred to communicate through humming. The Mother figured that Carla's word allotment for the day was just about met by the two sentences she'd just proffered.

"That's nice, dear." Mother smiled benevolently, and as Carla hummed, the Mother found herself chanting under her breath (hare Krishna hare Krishna hare hare hare Hail Mary la di da earth, water, wind and fire hm de hmm ).

The door burst open. "*Mother!*"

"Oh, I am terribly sorry, Samuel." An apologetic smile was offered up, a crescent moon in the pleasantly plump solar system of the Mother's anatomy.

"You must never, ever, do that... chanting or whatever," the curly-haired male candy striper admonished. "And Carla! Carla, stop that humming!" The patients were highly

discouraged from displaying symptoms like these. Allow the symptoms, Sam was told in his training, and the disease sinks its devious tenterhooks in further, flaying the fishlike grey matter. Samuel always thought himself a compassionate fellow, but he certainly wasn't going to indulge behavior that would make the sick even sicker. Besides that, this was his probationary period. His supervisors were watching like hawks, and he needed this job. "Carla. Carla. Stop the humming! CARLA."

Carla couldn't hear him. Her hands lifted up, eyes closed behind lopsided glasses, as she waved her hands, conducting a glorious symphony somewhere deep in her head. Samuel, driven near mad himself by the ridiculous buzzing coming from the patient's nose and throat, shoved her off her perch and to the floor. A small girl of ten with the physique of an eight-year-old, Carla was easily toppled, and Samuel was a strong man of twenty. The extra force of his push toppled the circular wooden bedside table and sent it on top of Carla's back.

The miniature Mozart mewled, a kind of lightning crackling behind her eyes. She said nothing, but as Samuel straightened the table out, stood it up, and plopped Carla back on her perch with embarrassed efficiency, a grunting noise came from the back of her throat. It sounded like the first three notes of Beethoven's Fifth, but Sam heard only the complaints of the deranged.

Mother, however, was horrified. As usual. "Samuel!"

"Mother, you know the policy." Sam turned and began to leave. "No tolerance of symptoms. Carla can still be cured, and I'm sure that she'll thank me later." The door was left open in his righteous wake.

Under her breath, Mother said an Our Father and a sun salutation for the poor man's soul. Deranged as the rest of them.

A voice like fire came into the room. "Bee's knees! 'Glory be's! Holy see, mercy me, proclivity-okay, proclivity. Three syllable rhyme for-" With a dark look from Samuel, the fireworks of words silenced. A veritable hurricane of short-chopped blonde hair and tawny brown eyes stalked into the room, followed by a lankier, better-groomed male

doppelganger, who slinked into the room more like a cat than a light storm.

"W.B., don't provoke them," the lanky one said.

"I wasn't," replied the hurricane stoutly. "I was merely trying to come up with a three-syllable rhyme for proclivity."

"No good," pointed out the boy. "Try 'nemorous.'"

"Nemorous... " W.B. stopped abruptly and spotted Carla, rocking on the table and nursing a bruised back as best she could. Her blouse had been torn by the table's base. W.'s face, normally pleasurable if rather loony looking, instantly flashed from annoyed to poisonous hate.

"Venomous," she spat. "Venomous, envious, hate. Not up for debate; fixed. Cheaters, beaters, aberration abomination, disgust. The wolves in control of the sheep. *Paradoxous paradigm!*" Let it never be said that W.B. was without words.

"'Paradoxous' is not a word," sighed the boy, as he moved in step with his twin over to Carla. The Mother shook her head.

"She was humming," she offered as an explanation.

Carla was mentally not with them. She was busy bashing Samuel's face in with several bass notes and a concerto in C minor. It distracted her from her pained back.

"I don't care, Socks," spat W.B. "I am apathetic to that, in fact. Utterly apathetic to the dictionary. Mother Superior, why didn't you yell at him?!" Her indignance and anger radiated from every pore. Mother Superior was surprised that her hair didn't stand up on end a bit more.

"Yell? Winifred, why ever would I do that?"

"Mother!" W.B. was shocked. "If it was me, I would've yelled, yipped, kicked, bit-"

"Gotten herself into seclusion," commented Socks in an undertone as he tended to Carla, always the logical one.

"-scree'd, spat, pugnificated, kicked up a ruckus, and generally raised *hell-o Dolly, would you look at that storm!*" One of W.B.'s faults was that she was far too feisty for the hospital's liking and thought everyone else should be too. Another was her tendency to trail off in the middle of a sentence, usually just before a questionable noun, adjective, predicate, or in this case, a direct object.

A flash of lightning had split the sky like a too-tight pair of black jeans. Mother commented to herself that it looked like Kali descending or like the Four Horsemen had shown up at the asylum door.

"It's always been cloudy since they started shutting up everyone," Socks commented in a tone implying that the doom was just about upon them, "but I've never seen it like this."

"Well," Mother Superior explained brightly, "it often gets worse before it gets better. Perhaps someday we'll see the sun again."

Carla, in agreement, hummed a little of the Fifth, then of Bach's Messiah oratorio.

W.B. looked from side to side, then at the window. "Hey guys. Listen up. Lookahere. Hark."

"What is it, Winnie?" an exasperated Socks remarked.

"There's a window."

"Uh-huh," her skeptical twin replied.

"And you know what's out that window?"

Silence.

"Freedom. Jubilation. Satiating. Broken chains. Liberation. Freedom."

They all looked sideways at one another.

"She's rather off her rocker, isn't she," commented the Mother Superior.

"I am not!" proclaimed W.B. vehemently, pounding her fist on her other hand. The free radical was working on her crowning triumph. She was done to death with the cruelty and sheer stifling sameness of the asylum. Its goose was cooked. "I am perfectly with it. On the ball. Getting it. It's a straight drop twenty feet from that window to the street. Use the window boxes to climb down. Run like mad, too late to find out."

"You're incoherent again," informed Socks drily. However, the eager gleam in his eye and the appraising way he surveyed the streetsides and the thunderclouds above was anything but uninterested.

"I am perfectly coherent," W.B. protested.

"Oh, I don't know if getting out is such a good idea," whispered the anxious Mother Superior. Carla, however, tilted towards the hurricane's words like a starved flower.

"Mother, the worst thing that could happen?"

"We get caught and killed," Socks replied curtly, but his eyes remained fervently fixed on those streets.

"Minor details," W.B. proclaimed. "And we needn't go through the window, either. Not all of us, anyway." The gears in her head were turning, and as her eyes flicked back and forth, you could practically hear the thoughts scuttling back and forth inside her brain.

"Oh dear, oh dear," fretted Mother Superior.

"Oh, dear, so clear. Lighten up, Mother, this is our big break. One way or another." A mad chuckle came from her throat, and then W.B. went silent. Well, almost. She paced, muttering words so quiet they were incomprehensible, and a cart rattled outside the door, collecting patients' laundry. A few more minutes of pacing. She looked from the window, then the door, then the window, then the door. Growing bored, Carla started humming-but quietly this time. Socks got up, and they conversed in hushed voices.

*I don't quite know who they're keeping it a secret from, the Mother Superior reflected, the attendants or me! But with quiet amusement-and quiet fear-she watched them, from time to time exhaling an "oh dear, oh dear."*

Finally, something clicked. Socks pointed his finger at his sister, and W.B.'s eyes were lit with a flash of internal lightning almost as bright as the storm's outside.

In unison, they turned-W.B. was frenetic and animated once more; Socks had a quiet, dark excitement about him. His foot jiggled crazedly, a tic he sometimes had when he was extremely excited.

"Listen," Socks whispered, his mouth unable to stay straight, "here's the plan..."

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"*WHERE ARE THEY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN?!*" a ferocious voice boomed through the white and oak-finished hallways one month later. Forewoman O'Malley was very mad indeed.

There was no sense to it. Samuel was simply mystified. There was simply no explanation for a flock of mental patients all suddenly escaping their rooms. A mass exodus of these lunatics? Someone had to have seen something, heard something. Escaping in the dead of night was like-something ridiculous. It just didn't happen.

"Find them!" yelled the forewoman, a beast whose precious eggs had been stolen. "*GET OUT THERE AND FIND THEM.* No telling what will happen if these lunatics are out on the streets!" Hulking and heavily muscled from years in a meatpacking plant before ascending to a government job, redheaded O'Malley was not one to use volume sparingly.

An unspoken fear shuddered through the attendants assembled. Hawk-nosed doctors, nurses of all genders and sizes, attendants ranging in ages eighteen to eighty-one-all of these were assembled before Forewoman O'Malley. It was not a nice place to be, especially now, when the old and terrible fear of insane people crept through the crowd. What a horror the lack of a mind can wreak on those who have it.

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The twins danced arm in arm in the rain like the looney tunes they really were, some kind of crazy tribal dance with the rhythm of an erratic rock song. Once the storm had

hit the city, it had been a simple matter to escape. The chaos caused by the flashing lightning and the "fits" patients had been throwing because of it had been a perfect cover for "organizing" a mass escape through a most ingenious route.

"*Laundry carts,*" whooped a deliriously joyful Socks, splashing in every puddle he could find. "Bloody brilliant, W.B." His left leg was, once again, twitching.

"Well, to be fair, the ones in seclusion got out through Mother's window," W.B. smirked. Her body was tingling with nervous energy, heralding some kind of electric shock to her system. For a few steps more, she remained purposeful and poise. Then, her mock decorum broke like a tsunami wave, and she let loose a string of shrieking words unparalleled in either speed or conveyed joy. Socks wasn't even sure all of them were English.

On Carla's part, holding the Mother's hand and skipping along happily, she hummed a strange medley. One almost thought they heard the Battle Hymn of the Republic and perhaps "We Shall Overcome." Carla normally didn't deal in the contemporaries (meaning anything post bellum) but this was, obviously, a special occasion.

"Oh dear, oh my," Mother muttered, looking around her. "Are we sure this was a good idea?" But three years of imprisonment had been enough for the twins (obviously,) and Carla simply looked up at the Mother.

"Yes," she said simply.

Around them, running under cover of darkness into the forest on the outskirts of the city, where no civilized person ever ventured, was a veritable stampede of madmen, loonies, town crazies, and lunatics. The sane people were shut up under government-imposed curfew, either fast asleep or watching late-night media streams-either way, dead to the world. It was almost too easy, reflected W.B., and yet it had been so incredibly hard to convince the patients that it could be done. Thank words that the storm had kept raging for a month. Anything less than a month would not have given the little rogues enough time to persuade nearly every patient in the place to ditch town. Their hopes had been let down by a thousand little escape attempts in the past; if this one didn't work-

But it had.

As they slipped into the forest, a veritable fortress, the ex-patients felt a strange, slipping warmth light on the backs of their necks, on their heads, on the backs on their arms. Most continued on their path deeper into the trees, but Carla stopped, and thus tugged Mother Superior to a halt. The Mother had been almost regretting her escape with a mix of shame and an attack of conscience for reasons unknown-except, perhaps, to her. Thus, she was less jubilant than the rest, and a little impatient when Carla stopped. "What, dear, for heaven's sake, what?"

Carla turned and pointed upwards. Socks halted W.B. with a yell, noting that Mother and Carla weren't following them. The twins turned, and for once in her life, Winnifred Beatrix Yeats was utterly without words. For a minute, anyway.

White gold arrows were breaking the clouds, falling shattered and scattered by leaves onto the forest floor.

Of the dumbfounded group, the mute was the only one that could speak.

"Pretty." And she began humming again, as loud as she pleased. It was an old pop song done by (wonder of wonders!) an actual band, not a composer, though by now the last member of this once-popular band was thirty years gone.

Thus, the Mother Superior, Socrates and W.B. Yeats, and Carla walked into the thick woods, four among the countless others like them imprisoned for insanity. And who knows? Maybe they were mad.

And back at the asylum, Forewoman O'Malley stepped out into the sunlight-and screamed.