

THE WAY IT IS*C.E. Lawrence (C. Bugge)*

You lie on your bed late at night listening to the swoosh of passing cars in the rain on the street outside. There's a round, rumbling sound as they roll over the manhole cover in front of the building, a double, one-two percussion as the wheels pass over the metal cover, first the front and then the back wheels. It's a friendly sound, like a hollow drum, and it keeps you company as you stare at the tiny silver stars swirling around in your lava lamp. You imagine each star as a lost soul, caught up in the hot liquid of the lamp, forever circling around each other. The stars are swimming in their purple lava bath, the cars are plowing through a February thunderstorm, but you are warm and dry on your bed, covered with the quilt your mother gave you for Christmas. You lie listening to the raindrops hitting the air conditioner. You see the words the sounds spell out in your head: *plunck, plop, thrrat, rat-a-thwop plat.*

You're always happier when it's raining, especially at night when you don't have to go out and you can lie on top of your bed with your mother's quilt wrapped around your knees. It's a comfort, the rain, and you begin to imagine what would happen if it never stopped raining, if the water from the East River

began to rise until it flooded its banks and everyone would have to move to higher ground.

Move to higher ground.

There is no higher in New York—downtown, where you live, is flat as a skillet. The water would just spread over everything until the city was under water. It's what happened in New Orleans, but New York has never suffered from a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina... only man made disasters.

What rained out of the sky that day was death... death in the form of religious fanaticism. You've had your bout with mysticism, and you're still not sure that trees don't have spirits, but you have trouble understanding the allure of organized religion.

But there it was that day, swooping down like a big, ugly bird of prey, suddenly swallowing the southern tip of the island. You've tried:

Talking it out.

Crying it out.

Swallowing it and moving on.

But what you can't stop is the image of your sister, arriving with the rest of the catering staff, so excited, so happy to be working at Windows on the World. You remember the phone call the night before:

"How are you going to fix your hair?"

"I don't know, Kelley... I haven't thought about it."

You tried not to dampen her enthusiasm, but you never had her keen spirit.

You were the sensible one, the quiet one, but she was the one people looked at when she entered rooms—even though you were identical twins, it was always her shining, eager face that drew stares.

“I’m going to put mine in French braids. I think that will be elegant but it will keep it out of my face.”

French braids. Her snow-blond hair, wrapped around itself in a coil like strands of DNA... endlessly repeating bits of information, genetic codes that mapped out the existence of a human being, a single organism. And now these strands exist only in you—but you feel not so much like a human being as leftover matter, like the tail of a comet that has passed on into another star system.

You were supposed to be there; you had your clothes all carefully laid out the night before, but you awoke in the night with the flu, with chills and vomiting that shook your body and left you breathless and sweating. It seems like such a crummy excuse now, though, and you are left with the feeling that you should have been there. But this is the way it is: you weren’t there.

Kelley was there, though, no doubt on time as usual, bouncy and bright in her starched white chef’s coat. What she wanted from life was so simple: to cook for people, to make and serve them well prepared, healthy food. What was so unreasonable about that—why, you wonder, was it too much to ask to make a life out of nourishing people? She planned to open her own restaurant someday—a small, intimate place with good prices and even better food. You

would work for her—you were always more comfortable in your position as second fiddle, and she was always so gracious, so grateful to you for your devotion.

A car passes by outside, hitting a large puddle and splashing rain water onto the sidewalk. You imagine a pedestrian jumping out of the way, like a Laurel and Hardy movie. Except that Stan Laurel eventually would end up pushing Oliver Hardy into the puddle by mistake, then, feeling bad about it, would whimper in that high-pitched whine of his until a sputtering Hardy forgave him.

Forgiveness.

Your last shrink was a Buddhist and encouraged you to forgive—forgive yourself, forgive others, and ask others for forgiveness. Good advice, except that how could you ask Kelley, when she wasn't here anymore? Please forgive me for not dying with you, Kelley.

You've tried saying it to her departed spirit, but you don't really believe in life after death, so it never feels like anyone is listening.

You glance over at the matte knife on the bedside table, its blade reflecting silver in the glow of the lava lamp... like the gleaming silver planes that rained down on the city that day. In books and movies people always use razor blades, but a matte knife is so much easier to handle. You imagine sinking into the warm water in the bathtub, letting it cover your body. It will only sting for a moment, you think, and then a long slow slide into unconsciousness.

And then you will be with Kelley.