

An Inconvenient Blessing

Rain made tears on the deprived bride's face because she could not cry. Could not, would not cry, even when her father shot the cow.

A week before, the bleached red bag-of-bones lay spent in the mud, sucked to the belly in its treacherous trap. Rainbow oil slicks at her sun cracked muzzle offered devil's promise of a drink. Thrashing had splattered her hide with claggy earth, like she knew she was doomed and had commenced her own burial. When the shadow of the man with the gun cast a shroud across her, eye white flickered, she heaved a last weary sigh and a swarm of green jewelled flies lifted in unison from their claim. The bride-to-be squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the bullet thud to shudder her body as if metal ripped flesh. Hot pain lumped in her throat and blowtorched her lids but she had no tears to ease the scorch. The fire-eater swallowed her flame. Eyelids scraped coals as they opened. The black cardboard cut-out of her father strode towards her, the hungry sun snapping at his heels.

The Land Cruiser dragged a dust cloud home to the mother, singing up a storm as she poured rum on a fresh-from-the-oven boiled fruit cake. In her doorway, husband of the ashen face furrowed by a dozen droughts, craved her comfort and rum. "Woman, wasting good rum on a cake?"

"Not any old cake. The wedding cake." Pride fermented like rum in a still. "Oh husband, our daughter is getting married."

The mother knew how to cry. Soon-to-be-bride heard the wetness in her

words and the muffle of her wish against her husband's chest. "We just need a bit of rain to green things up for her special day." The blending of her parents emptied the bride without her man. She drifted to her room to finger white tulle, hail-spotted like raindrops caught in web, till balm bathed her cut heart.

First clouds the mother sang-in were teasers, mere crowns of thunderheads, blond curls popping up from the horizon like cheeky children peeping then disappearing. The mother sang louder, the low flow from her flapping hose flinging diamonds over gasping zinnias. "Look, look, they're building." Her pointing finger was brown and weathered as the land outside her wire-barricaded oasis.

Husband swept a grimy wrist across a sweaty brow. "I'll start the home bore for you. Water must be nearly out."

"Ta. Got to keep the garden going till it rains. Want it nice for the wedding. A week till the big day."

Next morning, haze blunted the relentless eye wincing, headache thumping blaze of blue. Probably dust hanging. Mid afternoon, a gust ruffled the heavy heat and lifted a wilted tendril of the yearning bride's hair, stirring memory of her beloved's gentle touch. She raised her eyes to the west and saw that the clouds were bruised from knocking their heads against the hard sky, some cobalt, others grey, purple staining white, and still they hurled themselves against the glassiness. They groaned the torment of parched earth, of dead and dying, and the longing bride ached for their coming. "They won't make it." But the storm birds said otherwise. Elusive, mystical, tucked in the corner of an impossible dream, their black specks appeared on the tail of

their haunting cries. Sweeping the heavens with languid wings, they passed over the bride's uplifted face, blessing her day with wishes come true.

The rain messengers rallied the clouds. Crouched, fists battering the sun's fierce front, they suddenly punched through and charged across the harsh expanse to devour the tyrant's eye. The day aged prematurely at the roar of thunder and lightning striking and striking again, the back of a cowering hill. Wind whipped a fury of leaves and twigs. Drops hurled hard, pocking dust and lashing earth's burnt skin, ravaged by the drought.

As the bride and her heart raced, welcome swallows revelled overhead, spiralling up, up into the seething sky. In the shelter of the veranda, the mother urged her daughter home, towel in outstretched hands, while the father whooped for joy, "Our daughter has been blessed with rain to green her special day."

Two nights before her should-be wedding, the robbed bride tossed on a raft of rumpled sheets. Rain flung against the window and pounded on the roof, deluging her in blessings. A volley of lightning strobed the silver-framed photo of her intended. He smiled briefly and vanished, omen of her wedding sluiced into "another day". "Stop!" her anguish screamed into the black but the rain did not hear, for its joyous outpouring.

Dawn, insipid and watery, crept through the lace curtains. Denied bride buried disappointment and disgust under the debris of bed clothes. Withdrawal offered no reprieve from the torrent of blessings and the mother's voice, bellowing into the receiver, on the other side of her door. "Yes, yes. Fifteen inches ... Say again? ... River

up? How high? ... Postponed unfortunately. Too wet. No chance of getting through. ... Yes, we'll set a new date when the weather clears. ... Oh lovely rain. Just what we needed."

The morning of her "off" wedding, the rain was a misty white veil, marrying land and sky. Delicate threads wove their magic on the raw earth below, showering her with diamonds, dressing her in emerald. But the not-bride stood lonesome, heart crying because her eyes refused. Sighting the thunder in her face, the rain paused and retreated, feet pattering across tin. The sun tried to cheer her with vague imitation of a wedding ring. "Too late," her anger roared against her hard locked jaw.

Beside her on the veranda, the father traded elastic sides for gumboots. The mother, in her finery, hugged a postage box to her chest. "Let's go, daughter. We're meeting the mail truck at the flooded crossing. Supplies are coming over by flying fox."

"You go. I'm bad company, today." Words snagged on her bitter heart.

"Family outing. Will make you feel better, my love."

The cruiser packed the family close. White knuckled, the mother clutched her box, the dashboard, the daughter's knee as the father spun the steering wheel. Sullen bride ducked his flying elbow. On the road, off the road, on, off. Table drains sucked like a Hoover. Mud clods cannon-balled the floorboards and flicked shrapnel against half closed windows. The mother impersonated a little mouse. Not-bride did not smile.

The river was a brown snake surging past, tearing off chunks of bank, wrestling submerged saplings, twirling logs like victory batons, hauling captured trees to its lair.

Across the rampage, a neighbour waved from his perch up the flying fox pole.

Unlocked, the metal basket jerked its way down the cable to waiting hands at water's edge. Waiting for the mail truck ... waiting to load supplies.

The river's roar swallowed the engine noise. Suddenly, the mud splattered truck crested the bank in a flash of sunlight-bounced-off-windscreen. Three figures morphed from the vehicle but in the maybe-bride's eye, one stood out like a beacon. Heart staggered, legs tried to tumble her into the gulch between them. Like a Greek god he glowed, perfectly sculptured, and the rest of the world faded into grey background. He raised an arm to her. It should have held a burning torch or bolt of lightning, for the radiance it fired inside her.

He, her god, her beloved cupped hands to his mouth and yelled inaudible words. The river determined to divide, howled louder but he was writing the words on her heart with his lips. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes, a hundred times, yes. But how?"

Her beloved was showing her ... the other passenger?

The mother's beam replaced the hiding sun. "Marriage celebrant. The mailman will wait and take her back to town after the vows. It's your husband who wouldn't wait. Quick now, the river's rising. It's almost up to the flying fox. We don't want to drown our passengers."

The mother lifted the wedding dress out of her box, the groom had one foot in the flying fox basket and tears of happiness spangled the definite-bride's lashes.