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How The Winds Are Laughing

a short story by MICHELE HERMAN

“Is everything going to be all right?”

my husband, Paul, asks as we climb into bed and turn out the light. This is an old bedtime ritual of ours, and it used to be I had all the answers. I used to say: “Everything *is* all right. Everything’s fine.” And if he was particularly anxious (who wouldn’t be anxious, bearing responsibility for all the monuments in all the parks in New York City?) I was always ready with more: “We have two wonderful, funny boys, and we live in a good building in the West Village, the best neighbor-

hood in the world. We can afford to go to the movies as often as we like. We love our work, even if some days the bastards get you down."

But tonight, in late September 2001, Paul's question hangs heavy in the air. So many things hang in this acrid, dust-filled air that seeps in around our locked windows. I don't know what to tell him. I wish he would yank the covers off my side of the bed so I could yank them back until we've untucked the whole bed and can bicker about whose turn it is to get up and tuck it all back in. Then we could trade playful insults the way we usually do. Afterward, I'd find that bone I like on the side of his naked hip, that lean, planed spot so unlike any part of me, and I'd run my fingers along it saying, "Hmm, I like this part here."

"Is everything going to be all right?" he asks again, but with a panicky edge this time, because I have failed to chase away his demons. I haven't even tried.

We lie for a moment on the lavender sheets, on our separate sides of the bed, and I realize that he's crying. He cries silently, shaking, the same way he laughs.

"Sweetie," I say, "calm down." I lay a hand on his forehead the way my father used to do to me every night, tiptoeing up to my room after he thought I was asleep. But my husband pushes my hand away, as if it were just one more weight pressing down on him.

I turn on the light, one of a pair of Noguchi lamps that were a present from his parents on our first anniversary, the paper anniversary. Now we've passed pottery and tin and steel — durable goods befitting a solid marriage — and are coming up on our ivory anniversary: a marriage like elephant tusks.

When I don't say anything, Paul props himself on his elbow and turns to me, his dark eyes expectant and ridiculously wide.

"I can see what you looked like when you were a little boy," I tell him, because this is what I do see, suddenly. "In your little red jacket."

"With the baseball thingies on the sleeves," he says in a boy's voice, willing to play along for the moment.

"Appliqués." I tell him about his knobby knees and his marble machines, but he's gone rigid. I've lost him.

"What if it had happened on Monday instead of Tuesday?" he asks. On Monday morning he was inspecting monuments in Battery Park. At 8:45 he rode his bike up lower West Street. Later that day he called me from the office, all excited because they'd just finished the bike path linking the Village to downtown.

I sigh, knowing I will have to remind him of the long odds, a job he usually does for me, because statistics and probabilities are not my forte. But before I can speak, he's off and running again:

"What if you and the boys were having your teeth cleaned?"

Our dentist's office is a block from the site, right next to the crowds keeping vigil at Saint Paul's Chapel. We'd been there the previous week. They called the following Thursday to say they were closed indefinitely.

"What if you were shopping for shoes at Century 21?" he

says, referring to the discount department store across the street from the site. "You're always shopping for shoes at Century 21."

This one stops me. "I'm flattered. I didn't think you'd noticed."

"It's not funny," he says. He's quiet for a minute, but I can feel more questions forming in him. "Any day now the proposals are going to start flooding in," he says. "And what am I supposed to tell the families, Brooke? That it's too soon to think about memorials, because who knows what might happen next?"

"Look," I say. I sit up and take his head in my hands and look into his giant eyes: all that exposed worry. "Glen and Danny are fast asleep in the loft. Wolfie and all the Beanies are standing guard, same as always." I grab his hand and plunk it on my shoulder. "This shoulder is not going anywhere." I put his hand on my rounded hip. "This hip is not going anywhere." As I make him pat our flat old futon that's not going anywhere, I picture our familiar stains under the sheet: a spot of faded menstrual blood, a border of old semen that might have contained the seeds of the girls we never had, the amniotic fluid that protected our baby boys in my womb. I understand suddenly what people mean when they say, "Water is life."

A phrase bubbles up inside me. I don't know where it's come from, but it sounds strong and repeatable, and true enough for me tonight, a new bedtime ritual for a new world. "We will prevail," I say.

He is still shaking, and every few breaths a noisy sob escapes, like an infant's. I try to wrap myself around him, to protect him, but I'm not nearly big enough. I nest my bent legs with his. I snake an arm under him so I can get around both his broad shoulders at the same time. He makes himself smaller. He's warm and very heavy.

"How do you know these things?" he asks.

"Go to sleep. Just go to sleep." Holding him, I call upon the sturdy peasant and merchant stock of my forebears, in their muddy shtetls and dark tenements. Like them, I can make do with little, and if a little is too much, I can pare down further. I don't require foreign oil. I have some rudimentary medical knowledge. I have dry beans and kasha in the pantry, and fabric scraps and clever hands for patching holes. I can do a hundred sit-ups. I can take care of us.

Paul and I grope for sleep, but can't find it. We roll in unison onto our left sides, and when that doesn't help, we roll onto our right. Eventually Paul's breathing relaxes. I have chased away his demons for the night, and he has fallen asleep, leaving me alone with mine. My demons are a little like the eggs remaining in my ovaries: the same old batch I started out with, growing old and rigid and stale in a place I can't get at, deep inside me. I wish I could tear away the tissue and wring the demons' necks. I wish that someone would put a cool hand on my forehead and silence their torments.

(end of excerpt)