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The

Flood

SPARROW

Several months before Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans, spring storms caused major flooding throughout the Catskill Mountains in New York. The Esopus River Valley was among the hardest-hit areas, with bridges rendered impassable and parts of the town of Phoenicia left underwater.

— Ed.

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I am at my neighbor Rachel's house, because my own house is flooded — or, at least, I *think* it's flooded.

It's difficult to remember the sequence of events that led us here. Everything came so quickly. The first warning was when Perdita called, saying, "I hear they are evacuating people from Phoenicia." Heavy rains and spring thaw were causing the Esopus River to overflow its banks.

Almost every night this week I've been dreaming I'm home-

less, moving into a new apartment in a strange city. Perhaps my dreams were preparing me for this!

Next, Rachel phoned. She had called the police, who had advised her to "seek higher ground."

This is almost religious advice.

I began to hear, in my mind, Stevie Wonder sing: "Gonna keep on trying / Till I reach the highest ground."

Our thirteen-year-old daughter, Sylvia, was sleeping over at a friend's house. As my wife, Violet, and I decided whether to evacuate, I absurdly made dal, an Indian soup of red lentils. First I sautéed seeds of mustard, cumin, and fennel. Then I added chopped red cabbage. Finally I washed the red lentils and poured them in the pot, stirring everything with a wooden spoon.

While the soup cooked, I called the police. They offered to send a boat for us. I told them I had to discuss it with my wife.

My last glimpse of our home was like a scene from a horror

movie. Water poured into the garage — muddy brown water at least five inches deep. This vision was impossible, a violation of my ordinary domestic life, like the moment the first zombie smashes his hand through the wooden door in *Night of the Living Dead*.

Somehow I'd expected the river to stop before entering our house, simply out of riverine politeness. But the river can't even see our house. The river is blind, like an arm with no eyes.

Just before we left, Violet put Bananacake, our rabbit, in the bathtub.

Violet and I walked through the woods to Rachel's. Our next-door neighbors Buddy and Betty traveled with us, in the darkness and rain.

Betty offered to carry my bags for me. They were slowing me down quite a bit, so I agreed. Then, when we got to Rachel's, the police were parked in her driveway. Betty walked off, still carrying my bags. A police car drove her away.

Here is what I own for certain, right now:

one pair of black pants
two socks
one handkerchief
two pens
one undershirt
one long-sleeved blue shirt
my wallet
a pair of gloves
a scarf
a wool hat
a pair of fishing boots
a big umbrella

Here is what I possibly own (if Betty hasn't lost it):

one loaf of whole-wheat bread
several slices of pumpernickel bread
a bag of puffed rice
a few rye crackers
a container of tahini
A Passage to India, by E.M. Forster
The Dark Kingdom, by Kenneth Patchen
The Man without a Country and Other Tales, by
Edward Everett Hale
a container of toothpaste
dental floss
two toothbrushes
a dental stimulator
two plastic bags

I was famished earlier, but once I realized my food was gone, I was suddenly no longer hungry. Rachel kindly offered us walnut-and-broccoli polenta with tomato sauce, but I decided not to eat. If I have lost everything I own, I might as well lose some weight as well.

I am on the Flood Diet.

When we bought our house two years ago, we knew it

was on a "hundred-year flood plain." I guess we hoped a flood would wait a hundred years to come.

As Rachel was brushing her teeth just now, she exclaimed, "Oh, my God! I can see High Street from my window. High Street is a river."

I looked out the window. Faintly I could see water flowing, reflecting the streetlights.

Riddle: If a street is a river, what is a house?

Answer: A boat.

In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim see a house floating down the Mississippi River. The chapter is titled "The House of Death Floats By." Here is the moment that they find the house:

Another night when we was up at the head of the island, just before daylight, here comes a frame house down, on the west side. She was a two-story, and tilted over considerable. We paddled out and got aboard — clumb in an upstairs window. But it was too dark to see yet, so we made the canoe fast and set in her to wait for daylight.

I think of Bananacake, our rabbit. Certainly she is shitting in my bathtub. Or is she drowning by now? Or floating in the bathtub down the river?

We don't know if the water entered our house. When we left, it was up to the top step in front.

Soon after we arrived at Rachel's, Violet said, "I wish I had brought the crossword puzzle!" (Lately, we've been doing crossword puzzles together.)

I find myself worrying about particular papers we left behind. Are my passport and my wife's passport and our daughter's floating in the Esopus? What about the check Violet wrote to Doe to pay her back for the tickets to Universal Studios? Has that floated away?

At Universal Studios last week, my family went on the Twister ride. You stand in a small Midwestern town — or a mock-up thereof — and a tornado hits. Lightning shatters a tree in front of you. A sign from a gas station falls. The sewer system bursts into flame. Then a cow comes flying through the air, mooing boisterously. The ride is simultaneously silly and scary.

But you never consider, at any time, that actual people suffer in a disaster.

I will *not* make a bargain with God: "If you spare my daughter's room, I will volunteer at a home for the blind."

Why didn't I pick up the laptop from the floor and put it on a table? I ask myself this question forty times. That action would have taken four seconds and saved a thousand dollars.

A week ago we saw the stage version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in Orlando, Florida. Now we are living at a neighbor's house, just like Anne Frank. Anne was fleeing fascism; we are fleeing a flood. The two are similar: a swift, unexpected fury.

I hear the roar of the river outside. It sounds like a waterfall. But the water is not falling; it is rushing. It is a waterrush.

Most of this water is melted snow from the mountains,

I remind myself. I am hearing the sound of raging, roaring snow.

All sorts of theological thoughts enter my mind. For example: I am being punished for my lack of compassion for the victims of the tsunami.

I am fleeing a flood, I think. I am like the people one sees on TV, who all seem so interchangeable and predictable. "The water just kept rising, and suddenly we were under," they say, or some such obvious remark. What is the term for such people? "Flood victims." That is me: a "flood victim."

A flood should last one day, it seems to me. In my mind, a flood is a day's event. But what if the flood doesn't agree? What if the flood wants to last four days — or a month?

I imagine myself entering my house: It is filled with water, like an aquarium. I am swimming through my living room with big, funny strokes, like Jerry Lewis in some movie I saw as a kid.

There are four possible outcomes: (1) the house is unhurt; (2) the house is partly filled with water; (3) the house is completely filled with water; (4) the house is gone.

Wondering which is true keeps me awake.

Is there a chance we will get rich from all this — from the flood insurance? Or will we lose everything, so that I will need to get a regular job?

These two fates are dangled before me.

My entire literary output is on two black computer disks on the top shelf of the pink desk in our home office. If these two disks can be retrieved, I will have everything I have written since 1990 — except for a few files I have not yet backed up, which now torment me.

But will these disks function if they have been underwater? And if the house is gone, of course, they are gone, too.

The disks are like the black box one searches for after an airplane crash.

My father likes to tell a joke about three retired Jews sitting in Miami Beach. They are explaining why they moved to Florida. One says, "I had a small department store in Cincinnati, but unfortunately there was a fire. I collected the insurance money and moved to Florida."

The second one says, "I had a dry-goods store in Omaha. One night there was a terrible fire. I took the insurance money and moved to Florida."

The third one says, "I had a children's-clothing store in Wichita. One day we had a flood. After I got the insurance money, I moved to Florida."

The first two look at the third one for a long time. Finally, one asks, "How do you start a flood?"

APRIL 3

We are back in our house. The river stopped at our top step. Not one drop of water entered the house.

Bananacake is unharmed, though she did shit in the tub.

Our garage, of course, is flooded.

Betty and Buddy came by earlier with my bags and their apologies. She showed us photographs she had taken on her

digital camera: a caboose fallen over on the railroad tracks; Fox Hollow Road underwater.

They said that the river rose three feet in fifteen minutes. Betty's car, which was parked in the driveway we share with them, was destroyed.

People are walking by with their dogs, entertaining themselves by gawking at the devastation. Is this an American trait, or does every nationality have such cheerful curiosity?

We were so busy being flooded, we didn't hear that the pope had died.

APRIL 4

Now we are in the "after the flood" period. A pair of women's panties hangs from a fallen tree in our backyard. At least they *look* like women's panties. I must go out back and research.

The water that comes out of the faucet is brownish red. This makes me nervous. I've heard of people getting diseases (cholera?) after a flood, because the water is tainted. Although filtering the water makes it clear, I still believe we should boil it. At the moment I'm boiling a pot of water. But how long should one boil water? I forget.

I want to find in the Bible God's beautiful promise to Noah and his family after the Flood. It is summarized in the spiritual "Oh, Mary, Don't You Weep": "God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time."

Apparently God was lying, because there are still floods.

Also, we must begin to make progress drying out the garage. I am worried that diseases breed in standing water, but I can't act until we hear from the insurance gods — and my wife, whose job it is to call them, is currently across the street, staring at the wreckage.

I take a bath in the bathtub. The water is so brown, I feel like I'm back in India. In Calcutta I saw people bathing in muddy water. Somehow they emerged extremely clean.

(end of excerpt)