

City of the Drowned [2,922 words]

In the city of the drowned the water rose until it lapped the window sills, cracking them, bleeding red or blue paint into the swirling toxic water. That last day in October, in the lower reaches of the town, Camille and her tabby cat, Washington, sat perched upon the inner sill of Camille's bedroom window contemplating the scene before them.

It had rained all winter and into the spring. The previous summer the reservoirs had been desolate dry earth bowls. This year the water had risen steadily, licking up the edges until the basins filled with a muddy soup. The river that ran through the city began to spill its sides like an over-filled bath, gently enveloping and carrying off the ice-cream wrappers, the cigarette butts, and the plastic bags from the joggers' paths. But it didn't stop there. The river kept clawing until even trees along its edge were uprooted and they too were cradled to the inevitable sea.

Throughout spring Camille had noticed that each time she worked in her compact urban garden she had needed to wear gumboots as the grass was like a sponge. Worms burst to the surface engorged. Snails slugged around even more arduously. Weeds could be pulled up like easy whores, saturated, in Camille's hands. Every tree dripped, dripped, their branches snapping with fatigue.

'Never seen a year like it for rain' was the constant refrain of the weather experts, the newspapers, and the supermarket checkout operators. Some scientists blamed the melting of the polar ice-caps, and others, La Nina. People hardly bothered to take off their raincoats. A new fashion had arisen in umbrellas as accessories, where each of the chain stores offered a new design to match the day's outfit of choice. Camille had a collection propped up by the door: a classic black umbrella for moody days, a purple and blue striped one to go with jeans,

a yellow umbrella scored with pink slashes for brighter attire on days when the timid sun dared to sneak through the dense clouds.

Citizens reckoned that they had not seen the sun in its entirety for more than two whole days over the course of winter. Snow had fallen in the hills where none had ever been known. Lichen had carpeted the footpaths. The bitter elderly had constantly written letters to the editors of local newspapers complaining of the dangers of such incessant damp. It was in the bones, it caused people to slip over. It created a stench that nothing but ammonia could lift, and even then, even then, most went to bed inhaling perilous mildew.

In September when it seemed the rain clouds would never lift, the mayor of the city introduced an urgent happiness campaign for her citizens. Over the television and internet smiley faces the shape and colour of the sun popped up religiously to remind everyone to be optimistic. Productivity had fallen. Too many sick days were being taken. Influenza was rife. Road rage was on the increase. Indeed, Camille herself had witnessed such an incident on the way to work.

Camille worked in a skyscraper in the centre of the city not far from the river. She worked for the Department of National Identity stamping documents relating to the whereabouts of citizens deemed a danger to the state. These were men and women who were being recorded for un-patriotic behaviour. Men who did not attend the football finals or speculate on the stock market. Women whose aim in life was not a fast husband, a car in the right suburbs, a driven house. People who did not have the requisite number of children. People who worried about more than the banks' interest rates. As she opened each file, casting a cursory glance at the name and the photo, she stamped each face with 'Recalcitrant Citizen Located' and highlighted the person's address as verified. Then her job was to make sure everything was filed alphabetically. The filing cabinets in Camille's office stretched

from the blue felt floor to the dimpled cork of the ceiling. These paper records were kept by the Department, just in case IT systems went down.

Camille had worked for DNI for nearly twelve years taking the train from her unit at the beach up to the city. The Minister for Transport proudly boasted that in spite of all the flooding, his trains were running on time at a ratio of 70% and could still be relied upon. Extra workers had been taken on to dig trenches and to drain away water from the tracks. On Camille's usual journey she listened to classical music on her phone whilst scrolling through the news bites. She hated the sounds of other people breathing. If the music stopped or she took off her headphones all she could hear were the incessant coughs from people with chest conditions that had become endemic. Every day she caught the 6.45 reaching the central station at 7.30am, followed by a short stroll along the river, reaching her desk and clocking in at 7.50am. In the evening, her path was reversed.

In the past three years the files that passed across her desk seemed to be fewer in number, but not nearly so much that she had been worried for her job. Inquisitive in any case, she approached her boss about the noticeable drop off in cases of recalcitrance. Mr Williams, a man with tufts of hair that escaped his straining shirt collar, replied enigmatically that trends were changing.

This year the route to her office along the river had become impassable. The river had widened itself, gleefully consuming sections of the parklands, and this meant Camille had to walk along the main road that smouldered with diesel fumes and train exhaust. On the day of the road rage incident she had been carrying her yellow umbrella with the pink slashes. She'd had a false moment of hope that morning as she looked out of her bedroom window over the grey sea and fancied she saw a scarlet burst that was the sun rising. Now the rain had begun again in earnest, and her umbrella was falsely cheery.

Her shoes soaked up the petrol puddles, and her legs grew heavier the closer the DNI building loomed. She kept her headphones on, blocking out the traffic noise. Looking up, the missile shape of the DNI building was now regularly ensconced in clouds. She felt fortunate that she worked only on the tenth floor. Two months before, one of the top executives whose office was on the fiftieth floor had committed suicide, found slumped in his overstuffed leather desk chair, blood trickling down his temple. The rank and file of DNI speculated that he had seen nothing but cloud for so many months that he'd had no choice but to blow out his fogged brain. In reality, Charlie Lee had been compelled to self-annihilation because of the *speed* of the broiling clouds around him. Incessantly they crossed his field of view from left to right until he was certain that there was absolutely nothing he could ever stop or even slow. His despair was impotence.

Glancing down at the footpath again Camille noticed cracks in the concrete that had not been there until recently. Channels of water ran along the deepening crevices, and Camille felt like an air-born geographer watching the creation and diversion of waterways. All at once a wave of water from the road splashed up her legs soaking her red tartan skirt, making it cling to her. She looked up to see what had caused the disturbance. To the crescendo of an Elgar cello concerto she was just in time to see a semi-trailer still aquaplaning across the intersection, unable to stop at a red light. The shipping container on its trailer came loose from its mooring and crashed to the road, rolling over once before crushing the side of a halted yellow taxi. The truck shuddered to a stop against the front entrance and wall of the Treasury Building, the cabin crumpling like an antique bank note.

But this was not in itself remarkable. The city was full of such mishaps on a daily basis, especially with the hazardous driving conditions. It was what happened next that disturbed Camille, who now had to cross the road and divert down a side street to reach the DNI. It was the young woman standing staring through the smashed window of the Treasury

Building. Perhaps she had been checking her lipstick in the reflection waiting to go upstairs for a job interview; perhaps she had simply been gazing at the ebb and flow of the morning city awakening. Whatever the case, the truck had only just missed her. She shook shards of glass and dust from her hair. Rain began to drive in through the aperture, spitting at her. This woman, in black slacks and a jacket, stepped through the hole in the wall and with mouth wide open strode out into the middle of the road, her fist raised. What was she saying? Camille saw her mouth gigantic, moving with anguish. The woman ran back to the truck with its cabin door ajar from the impact, and she dragged the unconscious driver out off his high bench seat, letting him drop to the tar head first. The girl kicked him, kicked him hard in the groin, still mouthing and screaming. Then she crossed to the decommissioned taxi on the other side of the road putting her hand out to halt the cars that were still trying to get around the carnage. She went to the side of the taxi that was undamaged and opened the door pulling out the broken driver, again letting him sink to the sodden road. So much strength and adrenalin for a small woman, Camille remembered thinking. Camille removed her headphones to hear the woman at the end of a cry, "...what for?"

That day at work Camille found it hard to concentrate. She was distracted by the accident and weary; burdened by bricks of boredom. Work trickled continually across her desk. She never had to pay much attention to the faces and names that passed by. After all, the locating and verification was done by staff on upper floors. Yet today she decided to look more closely at the files that came her way. One file in particular caught her interest. A man with a dark complexion, not handsome by any means, slightly chubby... His black unsmiling eyes stared out directly at her. Camille could not, with any certainty, say what it was about him that attracted her. He was a man foreign born, whose parents had been refugees from one of those unfortunately passionate far-off wars. His file was filled with typed comments such as "*Sanchez never fitted in at school...has a tendency to be outspoken...has joined the*

Sunshine branch of the Workers' Party...has had few if any stable relationships...Sanchez deliberately avoided voting at the last election...Sanchez has renounced his citizenship..."

Impulsively, she searched for an email address and finding none wrote down his home address on a scrap piece of paper and slipped it into her bag. He lived somewhere in the West of the city in a suburb with the now ironic name of 'Sunshine.'

At the station waiting for her regular train home she fiddled with the piece of paper, not knowing what to do. Two platforms down was the train line to Sunshine. Should she? *Life is so short*, was the mantra stuck in her thoughts. Before she made a decision her train arrived right on time and she boarded, taking the same carriage she always did.

The next day, Camille did what she had never done in twelve years. She took a sick day. But she left home at her usual time, carrying her yellow umbrella. An hour and a half later she was standing at the letterbox in front of Sanchez's house. She did not expect him to be there; he would most likely be at work. The house was tan brick, with a few straggly drowned pot plants on the front porch. A black cat sat in the window, playing with the dangling string on the blind. In her hand was a piece of paper with her own scribbled, hesitant words: *"You haven't met me. I don't know where to begin. I feel I know so much about you, but I cannot tell you how I know what I do. I believe there is some sort of connection between us. Here is my email address, if you would like to correspond..."* She was paralysed by the absurdity of what she was asking.

A van with a 'Pacific Plumbers' logo pulled up into the driveway spraying her as it passed. Sanchez climbed out of the van. He was shorter than she was, and he was evidently surprised to see a woman at his letterbox.

"Can I help you?" His accent was completely local. He stood without a coat in the rain, his blue overalls beginning to darken to navy.

She fumbled. “Ah, I was after a plumber. I’ve seen your van parked here before. I was going to leave you this note.” She held up the soggy piece of paper and realised that the ink had run.

“We’re in the phone book, love. Anyway you’re going to be out of luck. We’ve got work on the books for months. Sewerage systems all backed up with this rain, nothing’s flushing, everything’s coming back up.”

There was little she could say in response to that. “Oh, that’s too bad,” she nodded.

He walked off quickly jangling the keys to his front door. Sanchez had left for work that morning forgetting to feed his cat.

Later that night Camille dreamed of Sanchez. She was sunbathing at the community pool, lying on a striped beach towel in her yellow one-piece. How good the sun felt on her skin. He emerged from the changing rooms and ran around to the diving board. His chest was covered in thick dark hair. He climbed up the ladder, laughed, and then bounced on the board. He leapt, and belly flopped, splashing her with a wall of water. Angry at being drenched, she ran to the edge of the pool and yelled at him. In the dream her words were silent. Still laughing he grabbed her arm and pulled her into the water with him. She somersaulted. He would not let go her hand. He submerged and they faced each other beneath the water, their hair entangling. They swam together, she alongside him. But suddenly the water began to suck at them, towing them towards an enormous plughole. Camille tried to cling to the pool ledge, but the force was so great that her hands slipped across the smooth tiles. Sanchez had lost his grip on her hand. He tumbled and rolled. She could see him being dragged into the chamber. In the end she witnessed his body bobbing out to sea, strung with seaweed garlands.

She awoke realising the insane weather had permeated her dreams. It was foolish to imagine the possibility of something between herself and someone like Sanchez. She did not try to contact him again.

A month later in October all workers were ordered by Mayor Davis to stay home. The river had broken its banks completely and the inner city was inundated. Rats and refuse floated through the business district. Ground floors were flooded and, like straws, walls sucked up the water as it crept higher and higher. Cars bobbed as light as children's toys. A State of Emergency was acknowledged when the historic sandstone civic library collapsed like a sandcastle, and the corner of Merchant and Explorer streets was faced with a tidal wave of hard-covered classics, their hefty spines smashing windows.

Camille and her tabby cat, Washington, sat perched upon the inner sill of her bedroom window contemplating the scene before them. Her second storey bedroom window overlooked the beachfront and the esplanade. Yet now there was no difference between shore and water. The river had swept across the city plain and had joined the sea, melding into an inky greyness that besmirched the white walls of the seaside houses. The rain continued; earth and air completely saturated.

Electricity had failed and, aside from the insistent static of rain, the city was eerily quiet. Camille could see that her neighbours were busy moving their more important belongings to their roof. They tried to protect everything with a blue tarpaulin but the wind caught it, leaving their rooftop living room exposed. The neighbours' two young boys sat out of the way of their flustered parents swinging their legs over the gutters, chatting as if this experience was no more than a miserable school camp.

Camille didn't think she would be able to get onto her roof. She could no longer leave by her front door as the water was now waist high. It had clawed under the door and flooded her lounge and was halfway up the staircase. It was an unwanted guest creeping up to her bedroom. She took Washington in her lap and patted him for comfort. Out the window she could see an oil slick on the surface of the water and trapped in it was, oddly, a white cotton sun hat, as if the storm had caught a sunbather unawares.

In the bleak sky helicopters swung their way across the drowning city, buzzing dragonflies above the damned.