

Judy Strick...Living on the Fault Line...Tales from L. A.



SHORT STORY # 10

FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS

Sometime in the near future...

Midway up Benedict Canyon, on the east side of the road half way up the hillside, a large sturdy ranch style house perches on a jutting lip of land.

Sycamores surround the house. The street below follows the curves of the canyon like a dry riverbed; usually dry that is.

Inside the house, playing in counterpoint against the sound of endless rain, we hear the white noise of TV: round the clock CNN coverage of the catastrophic events occurring 'Live' from the West Coast.

“Seems it never rains in Southern California,” Paco sings, snapping his fingers wiggling his ass, as winds rattle windows and black clouds hurl sharp jagged rain helter-skelter. “...and girl didn’t they warn ya’, it it pours, man, it pours.”

“Could you please stop that,” says Sonya. His singing gets on her nerves. Paco had left L.A. twelve years ago, and returned only once for their father’s funeral eight years ago, when the West Coast had entered the latest period of drought.

He had been half expecting to come back this time to relentless heat, dusty palms, withering lawns and un-flushed toilets.

Sonya, too, had come back home then for their father’s funeral. That was the last time the siblings had seen each other, until of course now. Kind of like a bad joke- ‘Why do we only see each other at funerals? Because that’s the only time we *have* to;’ bada bing.

It had been awkward and somewhat strained between them that last time; a lot of small talk, without eye contact.

She, though, had not been a stranger to her parents. She had kept in touch, even during the worst of it. And after the SOB was out of the picture she had reconciled with her mother. Not that it was a big mother-child reunion kind of thing- it was more of a healed wound that had turned into a scar.

Her mother had turned out to be better at grand-mothering than she was at mothering. Sonya didn't blame her now for what had happened years ago. Nor had she absolved her .

"It's the El Nino you know;" she says to her somewhat subdued brother.

"It's kind of crazy weather even for me." Sonya now lives in Washington State where it rains all the time. "Anyway you should be used to rain."

"Monsoons are different than this," he answers carefully, watching for a trap.

Rain pounds against the French doors at the back of the house. Beyond the rattling windows, trees bend and leaves blow around in crazy little vortexes.

"This kind of rain is biblical," he says, knowing it will irritate her.

She snickers slightly, non-aggressively.

He continues, slyly. "God, I hate humanity. We've finally done it. We've managed to destroy this impossible beautiful planet. It's a good thing your husband is a boat builder. I hope he's building an ark. You'll be set when the Polar Cap has finished melting and the next great flood comes. If it's not here already.

She rolls her eyes; "Still a nervous Nellie? Coming-out and moving eighth-thousand miles away didn't calm you down?"

Sonya is not, by nature, a worrier. She has always been the more practical of the two. Paco has always been more given to flights of imagination. He refrains from telling her to go fuck herself. Instead he says, "You're in denial '*Sunny*'. This is not normal weather. It was six inches yesterday- in one day. That's never happened here. This is fucking apocalyptic. And it's happening all over the world. Did you know that nearly every culture has an apocalyptic flood myth- the Ancient Greeks, the Sumerians, Yoruba and Maasai Tribes, The Finns, the Babylonians, ancient China, everybody has a flood myth; not just the Christians and Jews.

She rolls her eyes again.

They are both in L.A., waiting out the storm, because their mother had died nine days ago; which, coincidentally of course, was when the rain had first begun. Sonya and Paco had once again come home for a funeral. If their mother had died a week earlier, they'd both be in their respective homes now, snugly back with their loved ones instead of trapped here with each other.

Typical of the woman, to make everything difficult .

She'd had a stroke. Linda, her name was Linda, which means beautiful in Español. She looked good at the end. She had died in her sleep. She had not been ravaged by disease.

Their father had prearranged for their mutual deaths many years earlier.

There was nothing for the siblings to do but return to L.A. and close up shop- so to speak.

“Didn’t Thomas Wolfe say it?” Sonya mutters. ””You can’t go home again.””

It had already been raining for four days by the time of the funeral at Forest Lawn, which took place on Thursday, on a green hillside overlooking Burbank. But there had been no complaining about the weather from the invited guests, who held umbrellas and stood under a canvas canopy that dripped great gobbets of rain tears.

The past three days had been gentle. Everyone had been happy to see the rain at first, lulled into complacency- at last the goddamn drought was ending. Angelenos could start flushing their toilets again. They could have their lawns back. Life would return to normal. “Boy, has this been overdue,” was a phrase commonly heard- in the beginning.

By the fifth day of rain, the schools were all closed. Which made people a little less sanguine, especially those with small children and jobs. Beach communities were all but deserted, due to the huge storm swells. Canyons were evacuated.

On the sixth day, storm drains were flooding and homeless were dying in the streets or under freeway overpasses, or in the swollen L.A. river. Cars

were conking out in flooded intersections all over the city, traffic lights were down, and driving was a nightmare. It was then that the tenor of talk about the weather had changed. The deluge of water was no longer seen as an agent of salvation. It was getting scary. A tornado had been sighted in Lawndale. There were never tornadoes in Southern California. Especially Lawndale.

On the eighth day, businesses had closed. Los Angeles had been declared a Disaster Zone. National Guard troops were brought in. Sandbags had been handed out by the hundreds of thousands. Trees had been felled by great wind gusts, cutting off power, mauling cars and roofs, blocking off whole neighborhoods. Laurel Canyon was now closed by a huge landslide that had wiped out two houses, killing three people on its way down to the street. And, irony of ironies, once again nobody could flush their toilets because the storm drains were all backed up. In some low-lying areas the toilets and bathtub drains had already started overflowing with city sewage.

So now, on this ninth day, Paco who has stopped singing, and Sonya who has stopped sniping at him, find themselves trapped in their past, in this house, like lightning bugs in a jar, with the TV droning on in the background. They had both been planning to stay around L.A. for a few days after the funeral, get the estate settled and put the house on the market.

And then they both intended to get the hell out of the land of the lotus-eaters once and for all; kiss Southern California goodbye.

They were of a mind on that subject .

But Los Angeles apparently is not done with them yet .

Paco was supposed to have left two days ago. Unfortunately the airlines have been grounded for the last three days. The low-lying parts of the city are already flooded and there's been talk of mass evacuations. The airports have been turned into shelters for stranded passengers. The good citizens displaced by the floods are sheltering in the Staples Center downtown, which is now inaccessible, as is the L.A public Library, and City Hall.

Sonya too has been similarly stranded. She'd been planning on taking the train to Seattle, where Noah and Idea would meet her; and they'd all drive back to Bellingham together. But she can't even get out of the driveway much less to Union Station, which has been turned into a shelter. Anyway the trains aren't going anywhere; railroad tracks have been washed out all over the place.

So here they sit, with the white noise in the background, across from each other, in the den of the house they had grown up in, at the desk of the man who had been their father. The man they both thought of as the SOB. His desk is big, an aggressive rosewood slab, heavy, with, thick bellowed legs

and clawed feet; from nineteenth century France. A formidable stack of documents squats reprovingly on the desktop between them, waiting to be dealt with- and the rain pounds relentlessly on the shingled roof, as if to underscore the bleakness of the job ahead.

The lights flicker and dim.

They look at each other. Somebody says, "Uh oh."

After a few moments of darkness and held breath the lights are on again.

The TV flashes to life in time for them to hear an announcement: the crime rate in the city has dropped considerably because to no-one can get out to perpetrate mischief or mayhem. The only recorded crime is in the shelters where people are getting on each other's nerves.

"I hope her casket doesn't float away in all this damn rain," Paco says. "It happens you know, earthquakes, floods- all those dead bodies popping out of the ground.

"Biblical no doubt," Sonya says.

"Fuck you," he answers cheerfully.

They'd always liked to needle each other. It was usually good-natured. His free-floating anxiety has always been a good target.

Sonya and Paco are twins. They were born eight hours apart. Sonya is the older.

Paco- who was born Paul, is 'the baby'. He insists upon being called Paco. He got the idea in his head when he was six, and would not answer to any other name. He had his name legally changed when he was twenty-one. He is tall, thin, blond, blue eyed- nobody's idea of a Paco. He is very handsome.

Sonya is not; she has dark hair and eyes and is a bit sturdy. When she was a child she was of a cheerful nature and the family called her Sunny; it stopped being an acceptable nickname after she hit puberty and was no longer cheerful. Now Paco is the only living person who calls her Sunny; every now and then it still slips out, usually if he's being sarcastic.

Neither of them are anything like each other. You'd never even know they were related, just by looking at them. They seem not to have come from the same nest.

Their lives have lives have gone in very different directions too.

Sonya lives in Bellingham Washington. She raises goats and makes artisanal cheeses. She has a degree in Animal husbandry. It drove her parents nuts. She is married to a craftsman boat builder and poet whose name is Noah. That drove then nuts, too. She was supposed to become a professional and marry a professional man; not someone who worked with his hands.

Sonya thinks that Noah unconsciously became a boat builder because of his name; he denies it. They have a running joke about the ark he'll build some day and who they'll let aboard. He often reminds her that Buddhists do not believe in Apocalypse; it is not part of their mythology. He is a devoted and dour Buddhist. She is not. They have one child- a girl. Her name is Idea. Sonya would never have given her such a goofy name. Idea is Noah's daughter from a first marriage to a drug addict who abandoned them both. Sonya has raised Idea since she was two and adores her as if they were blood. The girl is now thirteen and very blond, and lean, like her father. She hates her name.

It has occurred to Sonya, that her husband and her daughter look more like her brother than she does.

Paco has run even further from their roots than his sister. He lives in District One, in Ho Chi Min City, in a rented high rise on the twenty-second floor. He shares the de-lux condo with his boyfriend who is Japanese and whose name is Hajimi. Hajimi is a lawyer who specializes in international Real Estate. They had both gone to Harvard Law, where they met. Paco had gotten his degree and passed the boards, but when he left home the 'prodigal son' abandoned law, and now trades in Southeast Asian art. They

are both rich and live well. They have been together since their last year in Harvard. They meditate every day.

Their father had cut 'Paul' off when he announced that he was gay, three days before Sonya's wedding.

It had happened thusly: both siblings, done with colleges and dorm life and roommates, had returned home for the wedding, and were staying in their old bedrooms. Paco had been planning to move to Vietnam a week after the big event. Instead, he felt compelled to bare his soul to his father, after which the SOB had called him a 'sick boy'. He ordered him to leave the family home, until he 'got himself some help'. "I'm not supporting you in a degenerate lifestyle," he had shouted as Paco stormed out of the house, and Sonya tried to intervene, running out after her brother, who was already in his car.

She came had come back in and stood defiantly in front of her father.

"You're a monster, you know. What you did to me wasn't enough?"

She locked herself in her bedroom and cried the rest of the day.

The next day- the day of the wedding, was the day that Paco took off for Ho Chi Minh City. His plane had reached cruising altitude just as Sonya and Noah were taking their vows.

He was supposed to have walked down the aisle with her; twin brother and

father, both handing her off. The wedding went on, and the bride wore sunglasses because her eyes were red from crying

And the father of the bride was shit-faced from an early start on the wedding champagne.

Sonya is still nursing a grudge against her brother for outing himself when he did. The wedding was ruined. The old man, who had started sipping bourbon instead of champagne by the time dinner was served, was ranting and raving and had fallen completely apart because his only son was "a lousy faggot". Their mother tried to placate everyone, and the wedding was almost lost in the shuffle. The old man, drunk as a lord, made a scary fool of himself. That had ended her big evening. She never even had a chance to throw her bouquet to the bridesmaids.

Paco on the other hand, had been nursing his own grudge against her for letting the old bastard get away with it; although she insists that until the day she moved to Washington she had tried to convince the SOB that he was being a bigoted asshole, who should beg for his son's forgiveness. And after she left town, for a honeymoon in Carmel By The Sea, she too had stopped speaking to her father who was intransigent. Their mother was supposed to try and intercede, but it had never happened. She was too intimidated by her husband. Or maybe she lived vicariously through his

meanness. Paco and Sonya used to talk about things like that all the time; before the wedding- before he moved to Vietnam and they'd stopped talking altogether.

Paco had written a letter to his family, Sonya included, five days after arriving in Vietnam, informing them that they were all toxic to his growth as the proud gay man he was meant to be.

When their father died, he had left his son one-dollar. He had left the rest to his daughter and his wife- their mother, the once beautiful Linda, who had rectified the injustice in her own will. That's how bad it was.

The twins have been estranged for years. They had been very close when they were little, then somewhat adversarial as they grew older; fanatically competitive in their mid teens. They used to joke that their parents had wanted them fight; that they were afraid of the twins banding together against them. And now- well, they both agree that their alienation is a shame. There's supposed to be a special bond between twins. But some things, well, you never get over. Especially when you're not quite sure of what they are.

So now here are brother and sister, sitting in the den where they used to watch TV when their father wasn't working at his big ugly desk. The real estate agent was supposed to have come three days ago to give them an

estimate on the house. She never showed up- no big surprise, given the weather. They have yet to divide up the rest of the estate, the furniture, clothes, memorabilia, make a claim on whatever they choose to keep. They have yet to sign all the papers. What's the point of hurrying when there are no notaries-public working now anyway.

Neither of them feels in the least bit sentimental about getting rid of everything, from the house to their mother's good pearls to their father's damn desk. They are not attached to memories, either of them. One would think- after all those years, that there'd something to quibble over, to want for old times sake. It's not that they aren't sentimental types. They're just neither of them sentimental about their youth .

They had grown up in this house on top of a hill in Benedict Canyon. They had played together in the back yard that was now inundated. Their sandbox had been under the old sycamore tree at the back. She had been married to Noah in the very backyard that is now being tossed and churned about by the elements, just as her wedding day had been tossed about by emotions, which are sometimes only slightly less difficult to control than the weather.

The Canyon had flooded two days ago, and a pile of debris is still in the middle of the road, all the way down at the Beverly Hills end. The DWP has

been overwhelmed with swamped streets and blocked main line sewers. Yesterday there had a landslide at the bottom of their hill; the driveway is now impassable. Boulders have fallen from the hillside across the road, with great thuds, hitting the street below.

The rain is relentless. There's been nothing like this in the recorded history of California weather. CNN has been broadcasting the statistics, every hour on the hour. Paco hears them this time and says. "It's a good thing the house is halfway up the canyon, not at the foot. We'll be able to outlast the damn rain."

"I hope so."

"Let's get down to work," one of them says, gesturing to the desktop.

"Let's not," says the other.

And so they have decided to stop trying to make sense of the endless pile of documents, and have started to pay attention to the TV. They sit back and zone out to the reports of disaster and devastation.

Sonya pulls out a joint, lights it and passes it to Paco. And they watch as the Big Tujunga Wash rains rocks and boulders down the main street of the small town of Tujunga. Before their very eyes a Prius floats down the middle of Foothill Blvd. Outside, the winds are picking, up and rain hammers the concrete decking in the back yard.

They pass the joint, and watch, silently for a while. A man in a rowboat is being interviewed in Compton.

“We’re orphans now. ”Sonya says. “Shouldn’t we be grieving for our parents? It doesn’t feel right.”

“Paco says steadily, without anger or regret, ”We’ve already grieved for them while we were growing up.” .

Sonya nods. They’re both silent as they stare outside, at the rain.

“I want the big Navaho basket,” she says out of nowhere. Paco shrugs. ”Go for it.”

She’s surprised. She thought he would want the basket. That makes it somehow less valuable for her.

Their parents had traveled. They bought the basket in New Mexico. They’d had enough money to travel all the time. Their father had been a surgeon; well known and respected in the community; much beloved. There had been contingents of grateful patients at his funeral. Little did they suspect that their much-adored Dr. Thoreau, at home, was called the SOB- sometimes even by their mother (of course behind his back).

”Ever think of moving back to L.A. where the sun always shines- Usually;” Paco laughs as the rain lashes at the windows. “I’ll sell you my half of the house at market value.”

“Are you nuts?” she asks, “Live here? In this house? With all its ‘happy’ memories?”

“Oh get over it,” Paco says. “Time to move on. What was, was; what is, is.”

He passes the joint.

She puffs on it. “You’re right, the past is passed”.

She’s pleased with her rejoinder. “So what’s Hajimi like?” She had never met her twin brother’s partner; Paco had never met her family, although they each know the basics of each other’s lives. They have communicated by e-mail on birthdays and holidays. They know where to reach each other in case of Earthquakes or terrorist attacks.

Paco is pleased to be asked about Hajimi whom he loves and therefore likes to talk about; “Hajimi means first born son. I call him Haji.” There’s a light in his eyes that she recognizes. When he was young he would get the same light in his eye when opening a birthday gift. “I love him. He makes me laugh. He doesn’t take me nearly as seriously as I take myself.”

She feels a pang of jealousy.

He takes out his cellphone and shows her a picture. There Paco is, all gangly and tall, standing in front of a huge bird of paradise plant; next him is a wiry Asian man with good hair and stylish glasses. They are cradling a pinkish French Bulldog between them, like a fat little baby. The man was

not the way Sonya had pictured Paco's lover. She was expecting a willowy handsome boy, not someone who looks like a banker.

"The Dog's name is Pankhurst," he says proudly. "After Emmaline."

"He looks interesting, your partner,.. your lover... What do you call him?"

"My husband."

"And the dog is cute."

"He's a neutered male, but the name works."

She nods and pulls out her phone and calls up a picture of Noah and Idea, taken last summer, the two of them standing on a dock squinting into the sun, a big sailboat is in the background.

"My family," she says proudly. "Idea was ten then; she looks like you. So does Noah." "He built that Sailboat for a wealthy eighteen year old Saudi Prince."

"A prince- Very impressive," Paco says "Where did the kid get the weird name?"

"She came with it."

He nods, then looks at his sister and smiles and she smiles, and something very nice passes between them for just a fluttery moment.

"Were you surprised when I came out?" Paco asks casually.

She shrugs and takes another hit.

“Let’s just say, that I wasn’t caught unawares.”

She passes the joint to him.

As a child she had always known, in her heart of hearts, that Paco was different from most of the boys his age; He was not into sports or superheroes. He had loved reading about King Arthur and the Knights of the roundtable when all the other kids were obsessed with Star Wars and baseball. When he was eleven, had been in love with Elsa Lancaster as Bride of Dracula. And he used to like playing with girls more than he liked playing with boys in school. And by middle school, he’d had intense friendships with other gangly pimply boys, almost puppy-dog crushes, mostly unrequited.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” she asks him with an old familiar forgotten pang of sadness.

“Why didn’t you ever ask me?” he answers.

It’s uncomfortable between them for a moment. And then he smiles. “Too many secrets I guess. Imagine you’ve kept some secrets too.”

And she shrugs, and looks away from him and shrugs again. “So what’s your biggest secret?” he says to her.

“Maybe it’s a secret from me.” And she frowns and leans back and spaces out.

And they listen to the rain for a while.

“Okay,” she says, as if plucking the thought from the sky, “This is not a secret, but it’s something that’s been bothering me all these years.”

He nods and waits for her

“Why did you choose to come out then? Why right before my wedding.” she says, and her voice quivers a little- “I just can’t figure out why you didn’t wait a week or two to make your announcement and let me have my damn wedding in peace; then you could’ve been there for me. I wanted you there. You were the only one in the family I really gave a damn about.

Furthermore, you managed to upstage the whole goddamn thing. Did you know that the old man, drunk as a skunk by end of the evening, and came out with a pistol that nobody even dreamed he had; he ordered everybody off the property by firing a few shots into the air. After everyone was gone, he stood there staring at the ground, muttering, “get out of here, get the hell out of here”, over and over. End of story! The big event became all about you. And I can’t help thinking that you were just pulling more competitive bullshit.”

“Of course you would think that,” says Paco, with a frown. “It’s not always about you.”

“No it’s not,” she snaps back quickly. “When you’re raising a child, you learn that. There’s no way it can be all about you; it’s all about them.”

For a moment they lapse into a long silence. No sound but the rain, which has let up a bit, and is now soothing instead of scary.

Paco breaks the silence. “You know I was planning on being there. I had the tux and I had written little speech for the rehearsal dinner. I had every intention of walking down the aisle with you. The night that I told him, we were alone he and I, tossing back a couple of manly Brandies in the den, while the rest of you were out doing wedding things. And conversation was awkward, until he got that look on his face- you know, that phony look like he really is concerned about you; and he looked hard at me, and said, ‘I’ve invested a lot of money in your education and you’re a good catch. When are you going to find yourself a lovely young woman to settle down with and give me some heirs!’ He was like a bullfighter, jabbing the pick between the bull’s shoulder blades. And something snapped and I... I couldn’t keep up the pretense any longer. I was just so sick of lying, sick of feeling like a goddamn fraud, and I blurted it out impulsively. So, perhaps aided by a little too much brandy that night, I told him who I am. And that’s why I was unable to stand up for you at your wedding.” And he takes a deep breath.

And a loud clap of thunder rumbles through the night followed by a streak of lightning. They look at each other.

“That was close,” Paco says, as the sky is turning white. Sonya reaches out and takes his hand. And they both close their eyes and touch foreheads, the way they used to do when they were very young. And they stay like Siamese twins connected by the brain. And tears run down Sonya’s cheeks. Nobody talks for a while and they’re still holding hands, and the rain outside is steady but light.

Then Sonya breaks the connection, and nervously looks around the room.

“I want that Navaho Basket. It has fond memories for me.”

”Bullshit. It’s worth a fortune.”

They’re both relieved. The mood has lightened.

“I’ll arm wrestle you for it,” she says, knowing that the outcome is a given.

His arms are longer but hers are sturdier. She’s always won the arm wrestling bouts.

He thinks for a minute...”Okay. If you get the Navajo basket, I want that little Persian carpet that used to be in the living room.”

“That’s not little. It’s worth way more than the basket.”

“Do you really want the rug?” he asks in a most reasonable tone.

“No,” she says quickly and laughs.

“Busted.” And then he laughs, and then they laugh together and before they know it, it’s like the old days, when some oblique trigger would send them off on a laughing fit that could last for hours, sometimes days; and even better, it drove their parents crazy. It was as if they had a shared language that no one else understood. Strange people, to be jealous of their children’s closeness.

“I’ve missed that,” she says, finally winding down.

“Me too,” he replies with a flare of the nostril, that always made her laugh; and they’re off and running again.

“Nobody’s ever made me laugh the way that you do,” she finally says.

She’s fishing; she wants him to respond in kind. She wants him to think she’s funnier than Hajimi. And he knows that. And she knows that he knows.

And then The TV flickers on and off, and the lights go out. The room is black. The wind howls like the Steppes of Russia. It’s a little scary and a little thrilling. Sonya passes the joint to Paco. He sucks at it slowly, eyes closed. The end of the joint glows, like a little tiny burning sun in the vast darkness.

“Don’t slobber it up; like you always used to do,” she says.

They had both started smoking pot when they were sixteen. Before the twins had become low-level potheads, the family dinners had been miserable tense nightly affairs.

It made dinnertime a lot easier, when at least two people at the table were laughing and talking.

Paco sucks at the damp joint and hands it back to his sister.

And the lights come back on; and the wind sounds like a thousand wolves howling.

For a while they become engrossed in the old movie on AMC, “The Thief of Baghdad”.

“The good old days,” Paco says predictably, as the titles flash across the screen. “When Baghdad was exotic and mysterious and glamorous, not a war zone. When there were no drone airstrikes and no boots on the ground, and the weapons of choice were scimitars and daggers, and Sheiks were handsome and daring and villains were Grand Viziers, not terrorists.”

“Oh, shut up,” Sonya says, good-naturedly.

So they settle back on the couch and Paco puts his feet up on the coffee table; something they were not allowed to do as children; or even as adults.

She smiles wickedly. “As mother would have said, ‘we don’t live in a barnyard’.” She puts her feet up beside him, and they both grin at each

other. Paco crows like a cock, at the exact same moment that Sonya says “MOOO”.

They look at each other and break up laughing again as they pass the joint. “What the fuck,” says Paco, jumping up as if struck by inspiration. “It’s our coffee table now!” And he picks up a heavy glass paperweight, lifts it over his head giddily and throws it down on the tabletop. The paperweight crashes heavily on the glass, which breaks into a million pieces.

“I always hated that fucking paperweight,” says Paco.

“I always hated keeping my feet off that damn glass tabletop,” says Sonya.

The twins look at each other, for a moment horrified. And then, laughing like stoned ten year olds, they start to run around the room picking up vases, heavy knickknacks, trashing them on top of the wrecked coffee-table. “Always hated this ugly fucker,” says Paco, tossing a ceramic pig. “And what about this monstrosity,” says Sonya smashing an ornate cut glass vase into smithereens. And all the time they’re laughing, like a couple of inmates who’ve just been let out of the asylum. Finally exhausted, and perhaps purged they plop down on the couch, ignoring the mess inside, and the endless rains outside, and watch TV for a while, and try to focus. Half an hour into the movie, the TV screen goes black and lights go out-everywhere this time. No more glowing little lights on the hillside across

the road. And inside the house it's as dark and quiet as death, except for the howling on the other side of the walls. "Fuck," Paco says as they wait for the power to return.

But it doesn't.

So they light the joint again.

"Do you remember where she kept the candles?" he finally asks Sonya, as a clap of thunder rocks the room.

"Listen to that. Maybe the terrorists finally got a bomb into Long Beach Harbor," she says, poking fun at him.

"That's so not funny asshole."

Another burst of thunder. The lightening comes sooner this time- doubled forked. Again the sky turns white. The rain sounds like bullets on the high roof, sounds like marbles falling onto the cement patio. In the next lighting flash they see large hailstones crashing down, covering the deck and the lawn with a blanket like snow. A large black shape flies through the air and the wind howls.

Sonya finally says. "She always kept the candles in the cabinet next to the fridge. Remember all those big Christmas candles that used to smell like bathroom deodorizer?"

Paco grouses loudly, “it’s too fucking dark to find the kitchen.” As he speaks his voice is drowned out by a fearsome cracking sound as a lightning bolt hits the sycamore tree at the back of the lawn and a large severed branch falls on the very spot where their sandbox used to be. The brief fire is put out by the torrents of rain.

”Holy shit!” somebody says. They both grab their cellphones and beam their way down the black hall to the kitchen, fumbling around, like blind people, feeling their way around, one hand on the wall to keep their bearings, the other hand clutching a cellphone, the tiny beams of light guiding them to the refrigerator. Sonya opens the nearby cabinet door, feels around until her fingers brush across the cylindrical waxy shapes she was hoping to find. She feels around a little more and finds a box of matches. This was all part of her mother’s earthquake preparedness.

“If we’re stuck here for weeks or something, at least there’ll be plenty to eat. She always kept plenty of canned food around, and water purifiers; she has drawers full of survivalist bars. She was a worrier; like you,” Sonya can not resist adding.

“Thanks ‘Sunny’”, he says wryly .

She strikes the match; the flare of the flame as the wick catches fire looks like a torch in the gloom. She holds the candle up as firelight dances on dark walls, as if the room is a primeval cave dwelling.

“It’s kind of homey, don’tcha” Sonya says. The candles smell like acidic pine and cloying clove; indeed like a public bathroom in a cheap restaurant.

She hands him a wide squat candle, one that’s easy to hold and is long lasting. The rat-a-tat-tat of rain on shingles is gone. It’s like a normal winter rain now. The house is still dark. So is the hillside across the road.

“It sounds like it’s letting up a bit out there,” Paco says. “Do we need to check the fuse-box?” she asks him. “It’s on the side of the house.”

“I guess” he replies, reluctant.

So they open the front door and stick their heads outside. The eaves and trees are still dripping but the hard rain has stopped, and the air is motionless. They step out on the front porch, and look across the road, down the canyon, then back at the hillsides. Not a light anywhere. The rain is gentle now; a light spring rain. Walking now to the edge of the property, the rushing sound down below is like a river running swiftly downhill.

“Is that Benedict Canyon?” He says. “It sounds like the Colorado river.”

The rush of water is both frightening and exhilarating.

They check the fuse-box. The circuit breakers are fine.

“I wonder if the whole city is blacked out, or it’s just around here,” Sonya says as she checks on her cell phone... “Uh oh, it’s the Hollywood hills from Sepulveda to Barham; and part of Beverly Hills. And also Inglewood, and the Valley- Studio City to Encino.”

“Shit!” one of them says into the darkness. “No electricity, it could be days and days.”

“No TV?!” says the other. “How will we know what’s going on?”

“We’ll be totally cut off from the world. WE WON’T BE ABLE TO CHARGE OUR DAMN PHONES!”

And the river rushes by.

Then they look up. Even the fine mist has stopped. The night air smells deliriously clean. The clouds have parted to reveal a brief window of night sky; and a full moon is laser white in the star-studded blackness. Raindrops dangle from trees and sparkle in the moonlight. “Ah, that’s much better,” Paco says, as they both breathe in the bracing night air.

“Maybe it’s letting up, finally,” she says.

He checks it out on his cell phone, then shakes his head. “99% chance of rain for the next three days.”

They go inside and light more candles.

“Should we shut off the gas?” Paco says.

“I don’t know.” Sonya replies. “I think you only have to worry about shutting off the gas in an earthquake. I don’t think it matters in a flood.”

“Are we in a flood up here?” he asks.

“Not yet- at least not technically,” she replies. “I think we will be when the water starts to come up the driveway. Let’s light a few more candles, and a new joint,” She says. “Let’s hope we don’t blow up the house,” he says.

So they sit down across from each other at the desk, and watch the moon as it disappears behind a new onslaught of black clouds, blacker than the night sky, and the temperature inside drops as a cold wind blows outside.

“Good luck that the heater is gas.” Says Paco as he gets up and sets the thermostat higher. Nothing happens.

Sonya, always the more practical of the two, reminds him that the gas won’t go on unless the electrical startup switch tells it to.

“We’ll freeze upstairs,” he says. “I hope we can find extra blankets.”

“Isn’t it weird sleeping in our old bedrooms, in our old beds, and our old bedspreads and our old posters on the wall, and our old clothes in the closet,” She murmurs after dragging deeply on the joint.

“Like a time warp in some apocalyptic fairy tale.” He replies.”

She inhales deeply. “Unhappy vibes”, then, as if having made a discovery, “thank god neither of us turned out like him.”

“Or her,” Paco says.”

They both lean back and listen to rain, starting to fall again on the roof. And the wind picks up again, and there’s the cracking sound of a branch that has given up the ghost. And they pass the joint again and lean back against the couch.

“So why do you hate him so much?” Paco asks, taking Sonya by surprise.

“You were always his favorite.”

And she closes her eyes and leans back. The wind rattles the windowpanes.

Her voice is cold when she speaks. “Did you know that he had made me abort a baby I was carrying, when I was seventeen years old?”

Paco says nothing. He blinks and stares at her.

She continues, “It was the stupid Homecoming dance. I drank margaritas in a can for the first time in my life. And I had sex for the first time too. Out under the bleachers. I thought you couldn’t get pregnant the first time you screwed. That’s how much I knew. I never told you, I never told the SOB. Instead I did what every girl is supposed to do. I went to Mother. I told her everything. I told her I wanted to keep the baby. Of course it was idiotic, but that’s not the point. That’s what I wanted. It was my choice and my body.

She swore she'd keep my secret. But of course she told dear old Dad, who aborted me. Mother denied that she told him, but I know she did."

"He gave you an abortion?!" He shudders ostentatiously." That's perverse."

She smiles dryly. "Not with a surgical knife; with medicine. He tricked me.

You probably don't remember, but there were a couple of days when I kept running away from the breakfast table holding back a barf, telling everyone

that I had the stomach flu. He agreed with my conclusion; he said an

intestinal bug was going around. He told me he'd bring me some

medications to get rid of it. The next morning he handed me two pink pills

one for morning, one for night. Now I was still thinking he knew nothing

about my delicate condition, and believe it or not, I trusted him. I needed to

trust him. I followed his advice and I woke up that night with terrible cramps,

and found myself gushing blood between my legs, soaking the bed sheet. I

ran to the toilet, had another bout of cramps; and there went my baby down

the drain. The great irony is that I've been unable to conceive again. That

was my one shot at a baby. I don't know if it's because of that shit he gave

me, or what; but my tubes are scarred. So that's my big secret and that's

why I'll hate the son-of-a-bitch until the day I die."

They both sleep in the living room that night, Sonya on the couch with a

thick layer of blankets, Paco on the floor in a sleeping bag with a shell of

pillows around him. They both felt creepy about sleeping in their old bedrooms.

The next day, when they wake up it's pouring rain again; harder than ever. Sonya stands at the window, looking out hugging herself. "Will it ever stop?" she says, a rhetorical question. Paco stands beside her looking out." He says nothing, just shrugs. Then he says, "Forty days and Forty nights. Old Noah better finish that ark; he may have to come and rescue us."

"We may never get out of this house. Wouldn't it be ironic," she says
And the rain comes down in sheets and the water in the canyon rises, and Sonya puts her arm around her brother and they stand watching the rain, and listening to the thunder as the water races by in Benedict Canyon...less than a half-mile downslope.

Behind them the water in the kitchen drain, and in the guest bathroom toilet gurgles loudly.

"Shit!" someone says.

THE END