

## Water Fountain

The day was crisply hot. Crunchy leaves, crunchy hair, a crunchy salamander frying on the sidewalk. One hundred and eighteen degrees. One hundred and eighteen degrees. Caiman turned the word around and around in her mouth, savoring the crispy crunch of one hundred and eighteen degrees. The phrase was not as pleasant as “psychedelic” or as calming as “Shylot,” but still, it contained a certain perfection.

“Shut up.” Dixie glared up at Caiman. “I know it’s a hundred degrees out. You don’t need to keep repeating it.”

Caiman considered her twin brother, a teenager with curly, light brown hair and freckles, opposite of her own straight hair and plain face. He sat in the shade of the fountain in the piazza center, hoping to get some respite from the heat. Caiman tilted her head, closed her eyes, and sighed in frustration. Dixie could have such an unpleasant attitude sometimes. She scraped her fingers against the concrete rim of the fountain. She sat on the rim, Dixie sat in the shade, dirt sat in the fountain, and water sat in the clouds far away that refused to drift over to their town. If only it would rain. If only the drops would come licking out of the sky to comfort the thirsting town. Only a few people were out running errands at the shops surrounding the piazza. Only those who had to be outside were outside. Except for the kids of course. Sitting in a house all day was boring, so here they were, she and Dixie, sitting by the empty water fountain. One hundred and eighteen degrees. One hundred and eight–

A crack resounded through the town. Caiman’s whole world went still. Two more. *Crack. Crack. Crack crack crack cra–*

“*Shut up!*” The world tilted and darkened as Dixie yanked Caiman down behind the fountain. She heard shouts coming from one of the nearby shops. She struggled to stand up, but Dixie kept her pinned against him, one hand over her mouth. “Shhh. You have to be quiet. Calm down. Calm down.” Caiman relented and lay limply in Dixie’s clutches, her head in her brother’s lap. He was kneeling on the ground, head bent low. After a moment, he raised it and peeked over the fountain, made a face, and ducked down again.

“Okay, Caiman, we’ve gotta get out of here. We’re going home now. Okay?” Caiman frowned underneath her brother’s hand, her eyes narrowing. Dixie had promised they could sit at the fountain today. Maybe they couldn’t watch the water, but Caiman could at least pretend it was there, imagine it flitting through the air and colliding with the fountain’s concrete walls. *Dixie Dixie Dixie*. A breaker of promises. A yeller of mean words like “shut up.” His hand was still clasped over her mouth to keep her from speaking.

Dixie sighed. “I know. I know I promised. But we’ll come back soon. Probably tomorrow. How ‘bout this. If I help you build a mini fountain at home, will you come home with me?” Caiman considered the offer. It was a good deal. At home there was a little water that their

mother had set aside from the water rations for Caiman to use however she wanted. They could make a fountain with real water. She nodded her head, sealing the deal. Dixie sighed, relieved.

More shouting split the still air. Someone shrieked, a bone-chilling, blood-curdling sound. Caiman shivered. Dixie peaked over the water fountain again as more cracks split the air. There was a thump as something fell not far from the fountain. Dixie ducked back out of sight.

“So listen,” He whispered, giving Caiman a hard look. “Over there,” he gestured toward the shop, leaving Caiman free to speak, although she was careful to hold her tongue. “There’s some people lying on the ground and there’s a lot of blood. They’re probably dead. Do not, do not look at them. Okay?” Caiman was about to nod when she noticed the sound of footsteps nearing them. “Okay?” Dixie asked again, more desperately this time. Caiman shoved her own hand over his mouth. Dixie’s eyes widened and his body went rigid. Caiman heard a low, rumbling voice murmur something.

“My water now. My water now.” There was a scraping of jeans against stone, a strapping of metal against metal, a scrapping of water down a parched throat. *One hundred and eighteen degrees. One hundred and eighteen degrees.* The repetition was calming. Caiman turned the word over and over in her head instead of in her mouth. Silence was safer. The man that voice belonged to had killed for water. *Water, water, one hundred and eighteen degrees.* Caiman sighed as a slight wind twirled against her body, giving the slightest of respites from the heat. She dropped her hand from Dixie’s mouth, trusting him to stay quiet. He let go of her as well, and she sat up ever so slowly, careful not to make a sound. Eventually the sound of gulping water stopped, and Caiman winced at the sharp *ting* of a canteen hitting the ground. Feet shuffled closer to the fountain.

“My. Water. Now.” Once again, Caiman heard a scraping of jeans against stone, metal against metal, water against parched throat. He was much closer now. She looked over at Dixie, who shook his head. They couldn’t leave now. They couldn’t leave now now n–

Caiman clasped her own hands over her traitorous mouth. Dixie was in a panic once again, but this time he just seemed frozen. The man stopped his gulping and froze. Caiman froze. The world froze. The only thing that moved was the dry, dry wind and the clouds high in the sky. *Clouds*, Caiman thought frantically, holding onto the word, trying to stay calm as the man began to walk towards the fountain. *Clouds clouds clouds clouds clouds clouds clouds clouds clou–*

Caiman saw the man’s shadow dance across the stones toward their hiding place. She heard the click of a safety catch. A gun. A man. A brother. A sister. And no water anywhere. The world grew dark. Caiman tensed. The man rounded the side of the fountain.

Caiman exploded. With a shriek she threw herself at the man. Dixie cried out behind her. The gun fired once, twice, *crack, crack*. Caiman gasped. The ground approached at an alarming speed. *Slow down!* She thought at the world, but it did not. The man thumped to the ground. Caiman grabbed at his arm, at the gun in his hand. Another crack. She screamed and yanked the

gun from him. Screamed again and threw it as hard as she could. It clacked against the side of the water fountain and ricocheted away across the road, spinning. Dixie was yelling. Caiman heard the impact of flesh against flesh as her brother hit the man in the head. The man promptly went limp. There was blood on his face, on her brother's hand, on her brother's chest, on her arm, blood everywhere everywhere everywhere everywhere—

“Shhh. It's okay now. It's okay.” Caiman opened her eyes. Once again her head was on her brother's lap, but now they weren't hiding. Blood was smeared across Dixie's forehead and his shirt was stained, but he was smiling. Smiling somehow. “Hey. I'm not hurt, and you're not shot, and the man is unconscious now, okay? He can't hurt us anymore.” Caiman turned towards the fountain, tears welling in her eyes. People bustled about the piazza, scrubbing the blood-speckled stones with dusty rags and talking in hushed voices. A lady dressed in a crisp black and white uniform watched her and her brother closely, but didn't interfere. Caiman didn't see the man who she'd attacked.

“Hey! Look at me,” Dixie murmured, stroking her hair. “He's going to be okay. Don't worry about him.” He smiled sadly. “You are so empathetic. And brave. Oh Caiman. You saved my life.”

Tears were dripping out of Caiman's eyes now, and she licked at them as they slid down her cheeks because their mother wouldn't want her to waste water. Water water water. Dixie Dixie Dixie. Her brother could be frustrating sometimes, but really, Caiman loved him. She was never going to let anyone hurt him. Hurt hurt love love water water water. Dixie laughed. Why was he laughing? The world was still dark and hot and there was no water anywhere anywhere anywhere except...

There were the sounds.

Pat and splash and plop. Caiman felt the drops hit her skin. One last crack resounded through the sky, but this time it made her smile.

Thunder.

Caiman sighed and closed her eyes as rain finally began to splash down around them.