

MINDY FRIDDLE

Weather Girl

Gunner was a decent plumber, but slow as hell. It took him two days to install the Jenkins' farmhouse sink, and that put me behind. Toy Jenkins had started to complain about how long their kitchen renovation was taking—so, yeah, I was irritated and distracted that morning when Brynn called me. Maybe that's why I missed the first sign of trouble ahead.

"Hey," she said. "You busy?"

I cradled the phone, wiping away the grit on my hands. "I'm starting on a splashboard and it's—"

"Meet me for dinner?"

"Tonight? I was hoping to finish up here."

"It's been a rough day, Jake. We need to talk." Did I hear the distress punching through her trained broadcast voice? I hear it now.

She took my silence as a yes. "See you then."

I shoved the phone in my pocket and ran my finger around the sink, checking the seal. I was proud of the marble counters I'd installed—but I hoped the tile splashboard would be my tour de force. That was my favorite part—gutting places—even more than the results. The possibilities. No matter how well the renovations turned out, the ideal still beckoned, out of reach. All my refurbished kitchens were Platonic cave shadows.

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That night, I waited at our favorite restaurant near the station at eight, Brynn's dinner hour. I sat in a booth by a window. The traffic had slowed to a crawl. It was raining buckets. The spring had been unusually dreary and wet, the kind of weather people complained about. But I was secretly pleased. I felt a kinship with the rising doom of water. The anniversary of my son's death fell in April, amid the splendor of azaleas, dogwoods, and daffodils. The cruelest month? No kidding. The world screamed rebirth when there was only death on my mind. For once, this spring seemed to grieve along with me. When I confessed this to Brynn over breakfast, she'd hugged me and said that made sense. "You'll be pleased to know another low-pressure front is on the way. We're going to have periods of heavy rain all week."

I didn't want flash floods or suffering. I just wanted the fog and rain to cloak the terrible, bright beauty of spring a little longer.

“You have to admit,” Brynn had pointed out, “all this rain is good for your business.”

Yes, there was that, too. Leaky roofs and flooded basements had become a regular epidemic in Euphoria. My voicemail overflowed like the gutters—which is what you get when you add “no job too small” to your business cards.

Still, it was selfish of me to enjoy such freaky weather patterns because Brynn bore the brunt of it. She couldn’t walk the dogs without a passerby accosting her, demanding to know when the rain would stop. She was chief meteorologist for the local news—many a Euphorian believed her job description included not only predicting the weather but controlling it.

“You’re the weather girl, ain’t you?” someone would ask her in the hardware store or dry cleaners. “I’m the meteorologist,” Brynn insisted. Being referred to as a “weather girl,” usually from old men who still used words like stewardess and housewife and gal, no longer amused her. “When’s this mess going to stop?” someone would demand with the kind of entitled irritation you might see at a customer service desk.

Brynn suggested rain barrels. Or she talked about climate change, because she did not often bypass an opportunity to educate our populace on the issue, which did not go over well. Global warming? Caused by humans?

I spotted Brynn’s silver Prius now, turning into the parking lot just as the rain let up. The sight of her determined stride across the pavement in her sleeveless, dandelion-yellow dress, gracefully dodging puddles in her heels, filled me with pleasure. She slid across from me in the booth, her neat ponytail gleaming like a shiny penny, her hazel eyes wide and thoughtful, easily hurt. My love was verklempt. I signaled to Tru we were ready for our usual.

“So,” she said, “Phil called me in for a little talk today.”

“Huh. This about the climate change stuff?”

She nodded. “He admonished me for—let me see if I get this right—expressing my own views about air quality standards and not those of the station.”

“Seems pretty objective. Either the air is polluted or it’s not, right?”

“He told me, ‘You’re not expressing the opinions of Brynn Dupree. You’re representing the station.’ I asked him how I know what the views of the station are. He says, ‘simple.’ And he hands me this Chamber of Commerce brochure, all about attracting business to South Carolina. No more talk about the EPA, he says.”

I pictured blustering Phil, trying to ruffle Brynn’s silky expertise. I smiled.

"I'm glad you find this amusing," she said with a sigh.

"Well, it's ludicrous, right? You're the best meteorologist that place has ever had. They're lucky to have you."

"Phil said there's a consultant coming to work with us on 'optics and appearance.' God, I miss Newton."

Newton, the former station manager who'd hired Brynn, had retired six months before, replaced by Phil—a middle-aged, ex-college football player who brought his combative tendencies and voracious ambition from the locker room to the newsroom.

"And the whole time Phil is talking to me, he has his arms crossed. Bad body language. You'd think they teach that in Management 101."

"I'm sure he flunked out of that one."

"Or maybe he was just trying to show off his cufflinks. He wears a different pair every day. He's making Ted do traffic reports in a suit and tie now."

Our order arrived. Steam curls rose from the rice. The aroma of lemon grass and cilantro drifted up.

"Jake, this isn't good."

"Your dinner?"

"My career." Her eyes filled. She pushed away her plate. "I can't eat. I'm too...angry."

I reached over, put my hand on hers.

"My contract is up for renewal in August, you know."

"Whoa. That's maybe overreacting, don't you think?"

"We don't have enough equity in our house to sell yet. If I lose my job—"

"Hold up. You're panicking. You had one bad day—"

"Being at Phil's mercy is so...frustrating. And scary." A zigzag of worry crossed her face. "I just...I don't want to be caught unprepared."

Brynn saw trouble on the horizon, a storm named Phil. She was a forecaster, after all, schooled in anticipating. She was a planner, a strategist, while I remained blinkered as a plough horse, taking one day at a time. Myopia kept me sober and sane, shielded from the poisonous past—my sixteen-year-old boy dying alone in the twisted wreckage of my Cherokee five years before—and the perilous future. Without Brynn's income, yes, we were sunk. We'd taken a second mortgage to finance my business, which had yet to turn a profit. I refused to acknowledge the brewing storm. I assumed it would blow over. I was wrong.

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A month later, the rains stopped, a brutal heat wave set in. June mornings, Brynn and I began rising before dawn—Brynn for her daily runs, me for my slow morning jogs. I was nowhere near Brynn's level of fitness, nor nearly as dedicated, but I'd grown fond of a pedestrian's attentive view. Brynn's three-mile runs were meticulously planned, along the spine of Main Street. I meandered through our neighborhood, then strolled around town, basking in the luminous patina of history. Downtown Euphoria straddled the grade of a railroad track, a humped seam, a scar bisecting its heart. Storefronts and houses built more than a century ago hugged the train track, where a handful of inhabitants were lonely enough to welcome the sound of civilization—a chugging locomotive that shook rafters. It was a different story today, of course. The closer the tracks, the cheaper the rent. Now you paid for the privilege of distance.

In rosy sunrises, I'd pass Euphoria mill, its spindles and looms clapped into silence since its closure in 1989. It was a dystopian landscape, all broken glass, collapsed roof, graffiti; a palimpsest of the boom and bust in my hometown.

My paths were sneakily efficient, like a gerrymandered voting district, avoiding two sites that triggered painful memories: the Euphoria College campus and Stagecoach Road. The campus was a knife at my throat on bad days, reminding me this had to work, this business of mine, that no one left a tenured academic job these days, especially a promising young history scholar who, fifteen years later, was none of those things anymore. I always stopped short of Stagecoach Road and doubled back toward home, clobbered by such loss, it took effort not to howl. My son had died on Stagecoach Road. I never took it.

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The next distress call from Brynn came one afternoon in July. The meeting with the consultant had been a disaster, she said. I met her for dinner.

"So, tell me about this consultant," I said. "This minion from the fiery depths of hell."

She laughed, but in a wet, shaky way, close to a sob. "She said I need to be 'softened.' Oh, and I'm an outsider. I scare people."

"That's nuts. She wasn't serious, right?"

"She told me, 'I believe the problem can be corrected with a few changes. The viewers' perceptions can always be adjusted.' I must have looked as freaked out as you are now because she told me, 'Oh dear. Phil hasn't had a chat with you?' I mean, Jake. *Had a chat?* God help me."

"Soften? I don't get it. How?"

“Voice and wardrobe. She said my Midwestern accent is ‘rather clipped.’”

“You don’t have an accent.”

“She told me to veil my hard Rs.”

“Veil?”

“She gave me a list of words to ‘soften.’ Like Doppler. She said my Rs are too sharp and it’s ‘unsettling.’ Dopplerrrr. North. Thunder. Oh, and lightning. ‘Around here, dear, it’s pronounced LITEning.’”

“Did she happen to mention the accuracy of your forecasts?”

“Yes! My forecasts are ‘wonderfully’ accurate. But no one likes a Chicken Little in this business, she tells me. They want a *cheerful* forecaster. So, I got pissed off. She says, ‘Oh, dear. I can see you’re upset. I haven’t done my job properly.’ And I said, ‘yeah, what *is* your job?’ That got her powdered nose out of joint. ‘My job is to improve yours,’ she says. And then she hits me with wardrobe changes. She pulls out fabric swatches, peaches, and pinks. Unlike the red dress I’m wearing now, which is apparently off-putting and overbearing.”

“Man, I love that red dress.”

“I need to take it down to rose. Especially with my ‘lovely coppery tresses.’ Three quarter sleeves with a pale pink shell blouse. So that means a whole new wardrobe for me. Thrills, huh? Strings of pearls, here I come. Nice classic lines, she said, but take the edge off with a ruffle, a hint of lace.”

“So, what, she wants to turn you into a big phony Scarlett O’Hara announcing dew point temperatures in a hoop skirt?”

“Yeah, right? And three deep smiles every forecast. That’s what she suggested.”

“I’ll count them for you.”

“And there’s something else. Even worse.”

Our food arrived. I dipped a spring roll in mustard. Brynn pushed aside her plate.

“Today, Phil demanded I redo the tease. I said something like, ‘heat and humidity brings poor air quality to the Upstate. Can we expect clearer skies ahead? Stay tuned to Weather Team 7 to find out.’ Then Johnny—the camera guy—calls me. Says Phil wants a do over. And the poor guy says the boss wants me to take out the part about air quality. Keep it light. I said, ‘Keep poor air quality light? Like I’m supposed to gloss over the fact we have particles in the air from Atlanta’s cars and our smokestacks that we are all just sucking in our lungs?’ Anyway.” She heaved a big sigh. “I did it over. Through gritted teeth.”

“Jesus, what an asshole. I’m sorry you have to put up with Phil.”

“Then he drops this bomb. He wants to see my forecast *before* I go on the air. To *approve* it. Like I’m an intern! So, he comes to my desk—and looks over my shoulder and scrutinizes my five-day forecast. The air quality reports are tipping over one hundred and fifty—red. Phil is scowling and shaking his head. ‘No need to harp on that,’ he says. ‘Do it over. People want to know about the heat. When it’s going to let up. No thermometers with code red—hell, they’ll think we’re under a terrorist alert. Our viewers don’t want to see a bunch of doom and gloom. I thought I’d made that clear.’”

“You’re *kidding*.”

“I kid you not. It took every shred of my patience to tell him that sure, I’ll redo my forecast. I showed him these goofy, buck-toothed sunshines—I couldn’t resist a little sarcasm—and you know what he said? ‘I like those.’”

“So you did revise the forecast?”

“Of course. It’s not like I have a choice. But first I had some fun with my original forecast. Amped it up big time, added a smokestack, put in some gas masks, some skull and cross bones, had a ball making it real. You know, like writing a letter to your enemy and then never sending it? It’s supposed to be therapeutic.”

* * *

Weeknights, I’d watch the eleven o’clock news and Brynn’s forecast, then I’d tackle the crossword puzzle, until she arrived. Our dogs would leap to their feet whimpering with excitement, and we’d greet her at the door. But that night, after gutting the Connors’ bathroom, I was so tired, I nearly fell asleep to a reporter giving a live remote about a trailer fire. I roused myself when Brynn’s forecast came on. Which was a good thing. Something was wrong.

She started out a little shaky—mumbling about the heat wave and three-digit temps. Not her usual smooth intro. I detected a wisp of nervousness, her lips parting, closing, it was all in her mouth. Nothing anyone would notice, maybe, but me.

The temperatures on the map came up, along with graphics of agonized, sweating sunshines. And gas masks.

“This static high-pressure system is holding down the heat and humidity like a...a foot grinding a cigarette.” She pointed to a garish, weeping thermometer bleeding red behind her, festooned with skulls and crossbones.

“The air quality reports are tipping over one hundred and fifty.”

Was this my Brynn, giving Phil the finger? She wasn’t toning anything down, that was for sure.

“The air quality index is based on sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, ozone, and lead particles.” She clicked through

photographs of smokestacks and traffic jams. "Tomorrow, no jogging or exercising outside if you value your lungs. Because the air quality will—"

"So, wow. The heat wave continues?" Bob McCobb, the anchor, boomed in his big baritone. Interrupted her, for God's sake.

"What?" This caught her by surprise. It was apparently time to banter pleasantly with the anchors.

"Yes. More heat," she said. "Smog and oppressive heat."

"Sounds like we should all stay inside tomorrow," Cathy the co-anchor said, making a pouty face.

"That's not a bad idea," Brynn said. "Stay inside."

* * *

When she came home that night, I met her at the door with open arms. She began to tear up.

"Hey, hey. Come here." I embraced her.

"I screwed up." My neck grew warm and wet from her tears.

"Brynn, sweetie, it's okay."

"No, it's not. It's not."

She pulled away. Her eyes were smudged with mascara. "I loaded the wrong graphics. I mean, the intern did, but I didn't check behind her before I went live."

She threw her purse and blazer in a chair, stepped out of her heels.

"Mistakes like that happen sometimes. You told me—"

"No, *this*? *This* was a disaster. The station was flooded with calls about people scared to death about the air quality. Like it's Armageddon. Can you imagine?"

Unfortunately, yes.

"It wasn't until we were on the air that I realized what happened, but there was nothing to do but proceed. I looked into the camera, and I...I carried on."

"That should count for something. Carrying on."

"The toss. Oh, the toss was a nightmare."

"The...toss?"

"When you're supposed to cut back to the anchors with some pithy, clever comment? You should have seen their faces." She chuckled bitterly.

"Cathy and Bob looked at me like I was holding a gun."

"Did you meet with Phil and explain—"

"After we went to break—Phil—his face was code-red. I got the hell out of there."

"Meet with him tomorrow. Explain it was a screw-up, the intern loading the wrong stuff—tell him about that."

"I'm not going to throw some poor college kid under the bus."

"I didn't say blame her. I said explain. Surely it adds context."

She sighed. "I need to get out of these clothes."

I followed her into our bedroom. "I've got projects lined up for weeks," I said. "And more coming in. I'll have my contractor's license soon. So, there's that." She gave me a look full of tenderness. My naïveté withered under the spotlight of her pragmatism.

"Next week my tapes will be circulated and viewed by station managers from Portland, Maine to Flagstaff, Arizona. I already set that in motion, Jake. Plan B."

My stomach clenched. "Maybe you can find something near—like Charlotte? You could commute...maybe?"

"I'll do my best," she said with a sad smile, "but it doesn't look good." She shed her clothes, left them in a heap on the floor, then wiped off her make up. Her bare face emerged, tired and vulnerable. "I've got a shot to make it in a top twenty market, but in another three years? Who knows? I'm not getting any younger."

"You're thirty-seven!"

"Exactly."

She ran a bath. "I'm going to call in sick. I'm taking tomorrow off."

"Good plan."

She stepped into our clawfoot tub, lowered herself into the steaming water. "Oh my God, I just want to wash away this day." She lay back, submerged under water, her coiffed hair liberated, floating like burgundy kelp. Then she sat up, glistening and flushed, and looked at me. "Jake. You will come with me, right?"

I felt as if something was tearing apart in my chest.

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Not long after Phil fired her, Brynn landed a job. She moved to Seattle. I stayed behind, to sell the house. My business had picked up—a kitchen and two bathrooms to renovate. Word of mouth—the best advertising in Euphoria. After our house sold, I leased a garage apartment before I joined her. I had to finish my projects, didn't I?

That was not part of the plan.

A year passed, then another. Every day, I allow myself a luxury. I pull up Brynn's weather report on her new station's website. I watch her forecast. Just five minutes. Anymore and it would undo me.

She's enjoying herself at her new job. She wears brazen yellow, funky purple, electric blue. She no longer shirks from air quality reports.

BROAD RIVER REVIEW

Her morning forecasts are merry affairs—she banters with the morning news crew. Flirts with the sports guy.

As for me, I have my work. I have this day, another morning walk through the streets shot with memories. I didn't see it, how I couldn't leave, how tethered I am, how this place has its hooks in me. I didn't plan it, I didn't decide to stay, but here I am. In Euphoria.