

(this short story is part of my second novel, in-progress)

**Practice Losing Faster**

*a short story*

by Kate Reed Petty

The first time I went to Los Angeles, I realized I'd been raised on a lie. I grew up believing there was virtue in our long rainy East Coast winters, our packed-together streets. When the oceans started rising fast, I was in my twenties and had never been west of the Mississippi; the reporters wearing thigh-high galoshes on the abandoned streets of Santa Monica confirmed what I had always been told. California was a stupid dream. Los Angeles was sinking into the sea because it was always made of foam.

But later in that first nervous year, I met a man who was born there. In an elevator, I charmed him with a joke about air conditioning. In the hotel bar, we discussed the new coast. He insisted there was nothing to worry about. "People have been predicting California's doom since my mother was born—she's lived there seventy years," he said, his thumb running casual circles inside my wrist.

My work was demanding, and I traveled often. I always imagined a life for myself alone, skimming across cities and lovers. Especially now that the water was rising, it made no sense to put down roots. But the next morning I discovered we both lived in Chicago, less than ten blocks apart. Soon I was sinking into his bed every night.

Later, when he flew to Los Angeles to salvage the heirlooms from his childhood home, I went with him. I only went to be supportive. I thought I was going to hate it.

We stepped off the plane at the edge of apocalypse, and I suddenly felt that the future was bright. The airport was clean and sunny, with no sign of the state of emergency, although it was a little empty. As we waited for our bags to appear, the belt on the empty carousel rumbled in infinite circles. A recorded voice over the loudspeaker repeated a warning about pickpockets. An elegant older woman searched for something endlessly in a crackled vinyl purse. It was my jet lag, or maybe a trick of the old time zone system, but somehow I felt that time had stopped. For the first time in years I felt no reason to rush. I reached over and took the man's hand and smiled at him, as he continued to brood, and as our bags still failed to appear.

In the rental car parking lot an old woman under a rainbow colored umbrella waved me over. "Hello!" I said, generous and curious. She handed me a plastic bag of lemonade, punctured with a straw. It was so crisp and delicious I gasped, thanked her, and walked away without paying. She leapt up and grabbed me by my backpack strap. She didn't stop cursing until the man gave her a ten-dollar tip. For months after it happened, he told this story to our friends, laughing over dinner or cocktails; at the time he only grumbled.

On that trip he grumbled about everything. He had lost his confidence in California's future. The sunny day, the crackling tarmac, the old beige Winnebago that was ours for the month—all of these things were nothing to him but reminders of what was lost.

But to me they still had magic. I couldn't see this crystalline city as a shadow of what it had been. As he drove our rented Winnebago out onto a highway that was as dry and bright as a road to the sun, I felt for the first time a feeling I'd always thought was just other people being dramatic: I felt that I had finally come home.

~~~~~

Ten months later, at our wedding, a cousin showed us a photograph taken from the bow of a rowboat, floating three feet deep over the front yard of my husband's childhood home. It didn't seem like the same house. It was like a picture on the news, another human-interest data point in the ongoing story of the city's loss.

When we arrived it was still a sweet little bungalow in a lemon grove, and it was early evening, and we were still not married, and three palm trees in the backyard still stretched their necks up into the sky.

The neighborhood was one of those whose HOA had built its own seawall, and the seawall had so far held. As we walked the perimeter with our tasers we found the empty pool in the backyard still smelled of bleach. Years of chlorination soaked into concrete.

The front door had warped stuck in its frame. It was thrilling to kick open the door of a strange house and pace the halls like a SWAT team, clearing all of the rooms. The man was not thrilled, of course, but he was relieved to find no evidence of squatters; towels still hung in the bathroom, a skyline of half-full bottles sat untouched on a low bar.

There were even dirty dishes in the sink, left behind when his mother finally fled. She had refused to leave, even when refugees started breaching the seawall and flooding her neighborhood streets, some just passing through, some fighting to stay. She kept telling her worried children that she didn't care, she intended to die in the house where she'd raised them. Then one day, washing a frying pan, she happened to look out the window and see her neighbor being marched out of his home by a thin woman carrying a machete. She watched as the

neighbor pretended to trip, then grabbed a rake and smashed the side of his abductor's head with two wild swings. It wasn't the blood, bright and viscous as an oil slick, that scared her so much as the look on her neighbor's face. She dried her hands and grabbed her car keys and left for Louisville, to her eldest daughter's guest room. If you wait too long to leave, you don't have time to pack.

The man was deeply irritated by his mother's emergency exit. He had been pleading with her to evacuate for months. If she had gone earlier, she might have remembered her social security card and her grandmother's wedding ring and saved him the trip. All week he grumbled to himself, upon finding yet another small thing that his mother should have thought to bring with her—her checkbook, his baby book—*she makes me so crazy*, he'd mumble, his irritation another heavy thing to carry home.

As if the memories weren't heavy enough. He had lost his virginity here, to a high school friend, during one of the golden afternoons before his parents got home from work. He had learned to swim in that pool, his father throwing him into the deep end, him running back for more, shouting *higher this time, Dad, even higher*. He had last seen his father here, on the lazy day after Thanksgiving, before his father died in December. There were memories in all the walls and floorboards, lit up by a patch of sunlight that moved across the room through the day like a clock; and, after each memory had evaporated in the light, left behind was another reminder of the coming water, the roots of the lemon trees lifting out of the soft ground.

Not that I felt sorry for him. I spent most of that week feeling annoyed. It seemed selfish to be so sad. It was just a house. I had lost my own childhood home to a bank and my father's ambitions. Ten years later another loved house burned to the ground when our neighbors tried to scam their insurance company. And that was all before the sea really rose. Think of the people

who had lost their families to the floods, who could have been saved if they'd left earlier. Think of his mother's neighbor, hitting a person's head with a rake. By now, we should all have mastered our grief.

It was also my only week of vacation that year. I felt it had been generous of me to spend it in the wastelands of sinking California, in a house without electricity or internet or emergency services. I felt that I deserved to relax. So while I tried to be somber and supportive, while I carried peanut-butter sandwiches at lunchtime into whatever room the man had burrowed that day, I also worked my way through the bottles on the abandoned bar, inventing new cocktails to drink in the sun by the empty pool.

At home I never had time to make cocktails. Now I had time, but little ice. The Winnebago came with a miniature fridge with a tiny ice tray, and if we turned the temperature down all the way, it was just cold enough on the top shelf to make twelve little ice cubes overnight. I assigned myself this small chore every evening so that I would have something to look forward to in the next afternoon. I drank slowly in the sun and the ice never lasted until the end. But I didn't miss it. I soaked up optimism on the chlorinated concrete and watched my legs bake to a tan that I'd been raised to believe my skin couldn't stand. I enjoyed myself, despite everything.

And ultimately I believe that was good for the man, too. He would come out to join me at the end of the evening, when the decisions had become too much. I always saved him three cubes of ice. He would let me fix him my latest cocktail invention, then we'd share a towel, lying in the empty deep-end in the dark, and he would tell me stories about his memories of that house.

All week we stayed up late, trying to see the old stars. All week, all we saw were helicopters' spotlights leaning out towards the ocean, on their way to retrieve the bodies of those who had waited too long.

~~~~~

On the morning we'd decided to leave California he woke up grumpy. I gave him space. I packed up my things and loaded them into the Winnebago, opening all the drawers and closets, looking for things he'd left. We had agreed to leave by eight, but I found him at eight-fifteen sitting down to comb through a box of already-rejected photographs.

Trying not to be angry—we had agreed to leave at eight—I mopped the kitchen floor. It made no sense to clean a house that would soon be submerged; I did it for him. I wanted him to see it, one last time, with the floors as clean and dry as they were in the photographs he was deciding to squeeze into the trailer after all.

I did not remind him when it was nine o'clock, and again, not when it was ten. I waited for him to notice what I had done.

Then, as I was standing in the front yard gathering the last of the lemons for the road, I heard the front door slam. I looked up and watched him cross the front yard. The paper bag was heavy in my arms but still there were so many more lemons in the tree. I couldn't believe how lush it grew, *we'll have to leave some behind*, I was thinking, as I watched him get into the cab, with the loaded trailer attached to the back, and drive off.

The Winnebago was not fast, and the roads in that neighborhood were very straight, so from where I stood I could see the trailer for a long time as it rolled away. Then it made a wide right turn and disappeared in the direction of the highway. For a few seconds I watched the empty road. Too late, I understood what was happening.

We had not seen anyone else in the neighborhood all week, which had lent our trip a romantic seclusion, like an apocalypse-themed hotel. As the sound of the engine faded around the corner I realized that I was completely alone. Panic tickled up my neck like a stranger's hand on a bus. There were no more phone lines in Los Angeles, and even if my cell phone hadn't been in the front seat of the Winnebago, there were no more neighbors to call for help.

I tracked mud from the front yard onto the clean kitchen floor and found the last of the liquor cabinet. There was only a little bit of rum left and so I poured it all into my glass, with half a squeezed lemon to make up for the lack of ice. I took a long drink.

I had known him for two years at that point. Long enough to know that he would never, ever leave me behind. But I was raised to believe that you can never really know what another person will do.

I went into the backyard and stretched out on the sunny concrete. When the rum was gone I looked at the empty pool, squinting, until my eyes were nearly closed and I could imagine it filled with water. I pictured the chemical crystal blue of the past, patting at the pool's rounded edges. Then I conjured up the image of the dark ocean, whitecaps and brown water, lapping up from below. Then I opened my eyes and just looked at what was in front of me: an empty basin in the eye of a flood.

I told myself that I would wait until the following morning, that there was still a little water in the bottle by the bed, that I could set out and find a solution the next day.

~~~~~

I didn't realize that I had fallen asleep until the sound of his footsteps woke me. It was hours later; the sun had almost reached its highest point of the morning, when the diving board

cast almost no shadow. I saw what he was carrying, but didn't recognize it at first. It was an object out of context, like your teacher at the grocery store. It turned out to be a sandbag.

He threw the sandbag onto the concrete, and then turned and left again. A minute later he came back with another one. I watched him, dumbstruck, as he unloaded bag after bag from the Winnebago onto the back yard. When I realized he was building a seawall, I sat down and put my head in my hands and wished I hadn't finished the rum.

He worked for an hour, with sandbags scavenged from neighbors' yards, although hadn't been able to find many. The small, uneven wall he built was only as high as his knees, and stretched only six feet—not even the width of the pool. Sweat soaked through his shirt. He panted, catching his breath. I went out to the Winnebago for two glasses of lukewarm water, and then we stood together, looking at his meager seawall. I refrained from pointing out that it was about the size and shape of a coffin.

"Do you think that will hold the water back for long?" I asked, touching his elbow to show I meant it gently.

He shrugged. "You gotta try," he said, "What would I be if I didn't try?"

My anger went away all at once. His stupid, simple optimism. He'd been raised on it; California sunshine had nourished him until he was as big and strong as a corn-fed Midwesterner. It radiated out of him, like heat reflections on concrete; it was what first drew me to him in that elevator.

He turned and sat down at the head of his seawall and I stood in front of him and put my hands on the sides of his face, and he looked back at me for the first time that day. "Can you be done grieving now?" I asked him, and he said again that he had to try. I threw my arms around

his shoulders and kissed him, even though I tasted of rum and tears, even though he tasted of sand and sweat.

And he was right. We had to try. We got engaged a day later, on the side of a road in Nevada with his great-grandmother's wedding ring. He said that the mourning process had clarified things for him; I said yes. Later we would agree that it had been too soon. We were both rushing, the optimism draining away between our fingers as we drove east.

We planned our wedding the whole way back, discussing dates and potential locations. I asked, somewhere in Arizona, if we shouldn't try to have the wedding in California. Surely we could plan in six months and find some part of the state still dry. "What would we be if we didn't try?" he said, and held my hand, as the sun sank behind us, and California slid under the sea.

~~~~~

Miami sank during our honeymoon. We watched it from a hotel room in Toronto, on the tiny screens of our two phones, held next to each other like hands. The screens blurred and my nose ran as they released millions of luminescent jellyfish into the waves. There was something tacky about the ceremony, but still, it made me cry. Who didn't cry for Miami? It was the first city we lost on video, and we had no practice for that kind of thing.

And anyway, I cry all the time. I cried for lower Manhattan, too, and that wasn't even the whole city. I was alone for that one—single again—at a conference in Cincinnati. I watched from a hotel bar with a few others, middle-aged men with Bluetooth chips in their ears and frown-lines around their tight smiles. Like me, they had ditched the sales conference early, but none of us spoke to each other. We held our drinks and bowed over our phones. We watched the orchestra standing on the edge of the seawall, heels to the brimming water, playing until the waves started lapping over in sheets, and then the musicians themselves, one or two at a time,

were washed away. The last man standing was a trumpeter. I wondered if they had planned it that way.

I closed my phone before the trumpeter fell, blew my nose, and looked up to get the bill. I saw the bartender was focused on his phone, too. I waved my arms to get his attention. I felt ridiculous for a second. Then I looked around and saw that nobody was watching, they were all bent over their screens.

We were all so ridiculous. Mourning like this, as if our losses were sudden visitations, and nobody's fault. It was like a funeral for a lifelong smoker, or for a murderer on death row. It was like a divorce. It was like that for the man and me. By the time he left me, we had both spent months grieving for a thing already gone. We were both still expecting the other to come back. Even in divorce we shared that old optimism. Or at least that was what I imagined. We hadn't actually spoken in months.

"Excuse me," I tried again, in a hotel bar in Cincinnati, alone; but the bartender just shook his head, waved me away without looking up. Drinks were on the house that day. He was crying too.

After that I was uninterested in sinkings. I missed the one for Washington, D.C. and skipped Seattle on purpose. Friends invited me to watch, but at the last minute I told them I was sick, and stayed in my apartment and organized my books instead. Three years passed this way, in a kind of murky light. My books were always organized and everything I drank was lukewarm. When friends wanted to talk about the latest plan for what might be done to reinforce Baltimore or Rhode Island, I told them I had left grief behind, and was not nostalgic for the feeling.

We all kept on, flying around to sales conferences and getting married on newly created romantic coastlines. We used to say that you don't know what you've got until it's gone. In those

years I felt that we were all running around and throwing things away just to count what we'd had. So I tried to want nothing.

Yet my body was storing up some of the old optimism, like vitamin D.

~~~~~

It was a Monday afternoon when he called. I recognized him by his breath, before he even said hello. He wanted to tell me his mother had died. "I want to see you because, I realize—we can't afford to lose people," he said. He had an extra ticket to the sinking of Los Angeles.

California was nothing like I remembered. We stepped off the plane into sunlight that was dull and flat. Nobody offered me lemonade. We climbed onto a shuttle and rode it for only a mile, then transferred to a ferry, which carried us to a barge, where we passed through security before boarding our ship. We did not have much to say to each other, falling quickly back into the silence that comes with marriage, or at least that came with ours. It took three hours, a slow numb trudge under sodium-vapor lights. The lines were shaped by soldiers with large guns, because the President was giving the sinking, because the former Governor was in jail. I recognized the recorded voice, warning now about not only pickpockets but terrorists, and crowd surges, and signs of human trafficking. We didn't get to our ship until it was too late for dinner, so we went down to the bar and drank on empty stomachs.

We talked, as everyone did those days, about things we'd lost. He told me, briefly and tightly, about the memorial for his mother. He asked how much I still traveled. I told him the road through Nevada was still dry.

"Have you been to any other sinkings in person?" he asked.

Suddenly I saw him again from that day, soaked in sweat, standing by his seawall. I had never told anyone that story. When people used to ask how we got engaged, I always skipped

straight from cocktails by the pool to the roadside in Nevada. When people asked me why we got divorced, I had a long list of little disturbances packed up and ready to explain. And so the memory of that last anxious day, gathering lemons in the front yard, arose as if out of tissue paper, carefully wrapped, a thing I hadn't touched in a while.

"No," I said to my ex-husband, "I've never been to a sinking."

He ordered another round without asking me, holding up two fingers and pointing to both of our glasses. "I was in New Orleans when it sank," he said.

"I didn't realize there was a sinking for New Orleans," I said. The city flooded so long ago, before anyone realized it was possible. There had been no time to plan a proper sinking.

"Nothing official," he said, straightening up, as if he'd been waiting all night to tell me this.

It had happened a year before he met me. He had come to New Orleans after the third storm, as a volunteer for the Red Cross, with the woman he lived with at the time. He had never told me about this woman. She was a slender intellectual and idealist; her face, when it rested, had a serious expression; she made him want to be a better person.

Together for a few months they took a boat through the picked-over neighborhoods and distributed packets of protein powder. The woman believed in the work. He admired her and wanted to believe, too. But he felt its futility. He knew people had been defying the rising water and public service announcements for a decade. He knew the protein powder was chalky and tasted like sour milk. He couldn't see the sense in helping people who didn't want to be helped.

Then there was a cholera outbreak. With no time to pack, he and the woman went straight north, and lined up for the barges that would carry them to the dry land in East Texas.

As he described the panic of that moment, the urgency of having to leave, I was reminded of how sheltered my experience of apocalypse had been; as I always did, I packed that thought away.

He described standing in the crowd. He was shocked by how angry they were. For months he had been thinking of nothing but leaving, and forgot how much everyone else wanted to stay. Currents of complaint ran along the evacuation lines; people who recognized him from the Red Cross wanted him to confirm rumors that the cholera was a lie, or that the government had set it loose on the city on purpose, to drive everyone out. *They don't want to save this city*, people said. He was sympathetic, but as he looked at the narrow roof of a church lifting above the floodwaters, he knew that they were wrong. There was no saving the city.

He clinked the ice in his glass, took a drink. "Then I had a funny feeling. I turned, at the same moment as everyone else. You know when everyone looks to see what everyone else is looking at?"

I nodded. It was difficult to speak; my throat was swelling, full of questions, about the woman he'd known before me. Instead I let him keep talking.

An old woman had broken out of line, and was running. The soldiers in charge of the evacuation had been trained to avoid conflict and so they followed her from a distance, calling out *stop* and *don't* without conviction. She ignored them. Running, she lifted her arms above her head and dusted herself in the white powder of a protein packet, and it stuck to her sweat, so that she looked like a plaster statue. She reached the edge of the wharf and then leapt, into the rising water, and the real or rumored cholera.

The crowd watched on an inhale. There was silence except for the gentle sound of lapping water. And then the woman surfaced, across the sunken street, and scrambled onto the church roof. She stood on the crumbling shingles and raised her arms to the sky, rinsed clean.

The crowd made a noise like a crowd ten times its size. And then people started running to the edge to jump.

"We hesitated," he told me, as the bartender brought us fresh drinks, "But she felt that we should be part of it. So we went to the edge, and coated ourselves in protein."

Chivalrously, he went first. He leapt off the barge and felt his stomach drop. The water slapped his thighs, and as it swallowed him, he felt a surge of joy. He realized that it was going to be a transcendent experience. One of those few times when reality would match the expectations he had for himself, that everyone else seemed to have for him, too.

Instead he felt something large and heavy on his shoulders. The woman had jumped too soon. She had landed on him and terrified herself, and was trying to climb over him and out of the water. He recognized her shape but not her panic. She had always been the calm one. She had brought them to this flood. Now she was holding him under it, and kicking him. There was a moment when he knew he was going to die.

"I always sort of thought I couldn't die," he said. "I knew I *could*, but I didn't think I actually would."

He felt a strong arm around his chest, and then the air on his face. Two swimmers dragged them back to the platform, where he was hauled up by a couple of soldiers, who were eager for something to do. "So I didn't actually get to stand on the roof of the old church with everyone else. I wasn't really part of the sinking."

"Because she didn't know when to jump," I said.

He didn't say anything. He finished his second drink. The old thought bobbed back up—we had all been sheltered, sitting here on our boats and making big events out of loss. For as often as we went through these performances, the thing we never practiced was grief.

I looked down at my second drink, untouched. There was a new wedge of lemon balanced on the edge. As I squeezed it, I discovered, with a sting, a tiny cut on my thumb. I wasn't jealous of the woman he had known before me. The world she belonged in had drowned.

Of course, the inevitable happened. We talked a bit more, drank a bit more, and then walked up the stairs together to the room we had already agreed to share. We were newly unfamiliar, washed clean; in that strange cruise ship floating over a lost city I felt more naked, more surprised by the feeling of his mouth on my belly, his hand in my hair. There were moments when I felt the worry lift, but I stayed firmly grounded in the sadness, his arms.

Because I was raised in the rain, I knew the next day was inevitable, too: We would oversleep and miss the ceremony. We would watch Los Angeles sink on our phones. The ceremony would still seem tacky to me, it would still make me cry. And there would be another one before long, and another one after that.

But for that night at least, we were in California. And because I was raised in the rain, I knew when to jump.

~~~~~