

A Sip of Sunshine

Merritt Ruffner



The first sign is the news report. *Tropical storms sweeping the Florida coast. Remain indoors and be prepared for severe conditions.* I am struck by the violent rush of wind whipping through the palm trees and the rain pelting against the side of the house. I peek out the glass patio door and see large puddle already forming on the walkway, like the sea is desperate to overtake me. When I finally make my way to the kitchen, I notice all of the boys are sitting at the table, confirming the fact that there will be no beach today. They are supposed to be setting up tents on the sand and putting out chairs, while the girls overtake the house, eating pancakes and watching TV. But today, the ocean is angry.

When my Grandaday told my family we were coming to the beach for a month, I trusted nothing would go wrong. After all, I grew up believing that the ocean was magic. Every wave pulsed with the energy of an ancient power. The wind whispered enchantments conceived from salt and desire. Sand dollars were little offerings from the depths that stained my hands, as spells seeped out of them. I believed the saltwater transformed me, worked its way into my bones and infused my love with a special kind of sorcery. I thought I could make anything I wanted a reality, but I guess I had already spent all of the ocean's wishes.

I think back to just twenty-four hours ago, when I was in paradise. I felt the comfort of reclining on the soft sand of Sanibel Island, sweat tracing a constant line from my forehead to the corner of my mouth, bringing me the salty tang of unbothered relaxation. I glistened, shimmered, shone. I was the object of all of the sun's strongest desires and best intentions. The small grains of sand took up residence in my hair, and my dad admonished me once again for the bright red splotches that keep peeling and reappearing on the bridge of my nose and the tips of my cheeks. I am only fourteen and I have not been persuaded of the importance of sunscreen yet. In my head, red cheeks are a mark of beauty—a reminder that the sun chose me to kiss, a memory that the day was once filled with light.

R u f f n e r

The second sign is the power failure. The house is plunged into sudden darkness as the lights are overpowered by the weighty blackness of the storm. It is apparent that the weather does not understand that today is a big deal. My sister Mercer is turning twelve. I think she is so lucky because she gets to celebrate her birthday at the beach, where she is tan, the food is delicious, and she never has to worry about school. She says that it is fair that her birthday is at the beach because she is the youngest and should be treated like a princess. Plus, she never gets to have friends celebrate with her. This is the kind of logic that only makes sense to youngest siblings or people with summer birthdays, but I don't tell her this.

The adults scramble for candles and matches, while the kids huddle together on the couch in the living room. I can taste the darkness. It is thick and slightly sweet, but there is so much of it—too much. It is completely off-putting—an intruder on my island of sunshine. I focus on steadying my breathing, attempting to calm the heartbeat that drums in my head, my ears, my throat. I am still slightly scared of the dark, but I tell no one. My family would sooner tease me than try to provide comfort. With no guarantee that the lights will be back anytime soon, we tell stories and try to laugh, but the darkness has seeped into our moods and hushed our hopes for the day.

The third sign is the silence. My parents and I are heading to Jerry's, the local grocery store, where customers and unsuspecting tourists are usually welcomed with the cacophony of tropical bird song as they enter. I volunteered to help my parents get the birthday cake because I like looking out the car window when it rains. When we reach the entrance, the bird cages that line the walkway are all empty. The absence of their sound leaves me feeling disoriented and disconnected from my surroundings. There is nothing to distract me now. I consciously fill my empty spaces with worried thoughts instead of songs made by creatures in blissfully unaffected ignorance.

Inside, the woman working at the bakery asks for my mom's name a second, then a third time, running to the back in between each inquiry. Somehow, the cake we ordered and paid for is gone. I think back to a week ago when Mercer's eyes shone with wonder while flipping through the cake catalogue, searching for the perfect creation to hold her birthday wish. At the time she picked out one with a beautiful sunflower, but somehow the cake has gone missing. I can picture the way my sister's face will crumble and wilt—the corners of her mouth gradually sloping downward as her eyebrows pinch together and the stars in her eyes dim—all of her sunshine drained in an instant. I don't know if the order was misplaced, the cake was taken, or it just never got made. I do know that we are not leaving here without one. Struck with a sense of pity, I offer the worker a small smile. She does not stand a chance.

When we get home, surprise cake in tow, the power is back on, and the energy in the room has risen with it. Everyone is in the kitchen. Although none of the appliances match and the drawers don't fully close and the faucet at the sink never fully stops, this is where my family chooses to spend their time. By the sink, there is a little table that promises shared seats, knocked knees, and bumped elbows, but we cram anyway. Everything about this house feels too small, but I cannot tell if this is actually true, or if having all of my family together just makes everything else seem little. I think the parents like squishing us together—especially the moms. They coo and croon about how sweet and adorable we all are.

The rain is still falling, but it seems to have lessened slightly. It is even time for presents: small victories in the cumulative disaster of a day. We tell Mercer that the cake she ordered was taken, but we got the best alternative that they had. With my sister at the head, we gather around the table. My mom places the cake—a rose-colored ball gown with a plastic Barbie doll encased in the middle—in front of her and inserts twelve individual candles throughout the gown. My dad grabs the lighter as we start snapping photos and preparing for the delicious future that awaits us.

Then, the final sign comes—dripping in fire, smelling like singed dreams. An unexpected heat (and smell) start creeping into the room as we are singing “Happy Birthday.” The air seems to shrink and constrict, holding its breath in anticipation of what is about to occur. In an instant, so quickly everyone is powerless to stop it, Barbie’s hair catches on fire and the cake looks more like a giant sparkler than a delicate princess. Mercer almost falls out of her chair. My mom and dad collide as they try to snatch the cake away from her. Somehow my brothers and cousins are still singing “Happy Birthday.” Smoke is steadily rising, and the plastic Barbie skin is dripping, dripping, coating the top part of the cake with a layer of her previously perfect skin. Finally, my aunt manages to snatch the cake and dump it into the sink. Everyone holds their breath as she douses Barbie.

My eyes dart across the other faces in the room—faces that mirror my own. I am trying to interpret the subtle hints and whispers of emotion that play over their features, searching for a sign of levity and desperately hoping for an indication that it will be okay. I want to hide, but this house, stuffed with thirteen other people, cannot provide me with isolation. I cannot separate myself from reality. I made the mistake of thinking I could wish perfection into existence here.

I hear a distinct, high-pitched, angry hiss. I can only assume this is the newest sign that disaster is approaching. I chance a look, only to realize that this sound is coming from an old-fashioned tea kettle. The color, although worn and chipped in a few places, instantly transports me to sunny days spent greedily gazing at the appealing aquamarine of a playful ocean. As I watch my dad remove mismatched mugs from various cabinets and fetch tea bags from different drawers—English Breakfast for me and Honey Mint for Mercer—I know I have misjudged this.

A few minutes later, my dad places a mug in front of me, taking care not to touch the sides. I am surrounded by a sweet, earthy scent mixed with the rich weight of a generous pour of half-and-half. (My dad always adds a little extra for me because he knows I like it sweet). The mug is tall with a wide base, much too large for me to grasp with only one of my hands. It is the kind of pink that makes me think of baby showers and gumballs and piggy banks designed for small weekend allowances. I do not have to pick it up to know that it is heavy. The sides are marked by soft ridges, like the ripples left in the sand once low tide comes. I trace these pathways, wondering where they would take me if they had a choice...if I could follow them.

Specks of honey seem to dance in the air as I get close to the side, nose almost submerged in the liquid. There is slight layer of foam that skims the top, rapidly dissolving from the heat of what lies underneath. I blow on it, finding a faint, milky brown that differs from the darker color of the tea my dad has prepared for himself. His intentional softness in this simple act warms me more than the tea itself. I place my hands on the side of the mug, grateful for the gentle warmth emanating from it. I wait to take the first sip, willing myself to remain in this moment.

This tea, lovingly made in a dilapidated, nearly nonfunctional kitchen, is sunshine on a day marked by darkness and storms. It is love unmediated, a reassurance that life is still going. That wrecked plans do not have to produce irreversible damage.

A spell has come over the house, born of tea leaves and redefined dreams. I start to think the magic is not in being able to control everything, it is in finding ways to enjoy the things I cannot. I look around and everyone is laughing.

We still eat the cake, picking around the unintentional plastic coating, giggling exaggeratedly if we happen to catch a piece in a bite. It tastes awful, but the laughter coats my mouth with enough sweetness to compensate. Objectively, this day was horrible. If we were to slice it up and serve it to a crowd, every single piece would get returned. But when I look at the whole picture of the day, I am mesmerized by the unexpected beauty in it.

Maybe chaos and contentment are not as separate as I want to believe. I try to categorize moments that fit with my expectations as good and ones that do not as bad, but life is not as simple as this. The weather was horrible, but I got to spend time with my family. The cake caught on fire, but it brought unexpected joy. The chaos prompted change, but it did not destroy everything. It did not rob me of the chance to respond and adapt, to come out stronger. Maybe chaos only has as much power as I am willing to surrender.

Header art by Mercer Ruffner
