

## Humid Days

By: Zerrin Varnadore

As I walk through the school, voices reverberate across cinder-block halls, complaining about the rain and the humidity. I never do, though. In fact, it's when the air is thicker than the clouds that I feel less of a stranger in a foreign land. We called it a hurricane party. On the Eastern Florida Coast, tropical storms were more common than flip-flops or mosquitos. My house was unseen from the unglued rubber cemented road, hidden by overgrown trees and vines. In fact, the driveway was barely perceptible, marked only by a tattered mailbox and a sand-dirt opening. Once past the foliage barrier, the lot was open, shrouded by great branches overhead, encircling the yard like a basket top. Spanish moss hung limply. During hurricane season, storms blew in week after week. In my elementary school class, we would track each of the storms until they would hit our land and we could watch our palm trees wave their fronds as if the wind was saying hello. For days at a time, the rain would come off and on like a switch, but the clouds always hung thick and dark at mid-day and the air tasted and the air tasted like honeysuckle and dew. Our house was built on stilts, whose chipped red paint matched the rickety boards that enclosed the front porch. Our Christmas lights were kept on year-round, which added to the festivities once the rain began to billow. We would invite the neighbors to come and sit around the house and watch the days pass by, then leave once the storm ended as the dirty puddles gathered around the driveway.

We were poor, and I didn't understand it then. In our area of the neighborhood, poverty was just as common as immorality, if those two weren't already viewed as synonymous. But, for God, money doesn't buy weather, and during these parties all of the neighborhood kids, rich or poor, would come and play. I had bunk beds in my room, and my friends and I would spend hours in competition. We would jump off of the top, and see how many fleas could jump from the carpet onto our skinny legs before we retreated to the bottom bunk. Banana spiders were another form of entertainment. They were bigger than our hands and would form webs the span of a front porch entrance from the time we went to school to when we hopped up the wet wooden stairs, with backpacks bouncing against our backs. My brother and I were dubbed "Beer Fetchers," because we were small enough to skirt around adults and reach the bottom shelf of the once-white refrigerator. Once, I was on the receiving end of beer and cheese-puff throw up. The kids and I would twist the cans and see who could stomp on them and make them the flattest.

We all looked alike. We were underfed and barefoot, with ribs that nearly poked out of our skin. Our scalps carried more lice than hair. In fact, it was impossible to distinguish between the boys because their heads were all shaved under order of the school district, as to not spread bugs to the other students. We were permanently dark, but whether it was from dirt or from the Florida sun, we never knew. The eye of the storm may have lasted one hour or one day, but the creek bed always rose, during this time. The adults made beer runs while we squatted in the mud and caught minnows in our hands. These seasons were almost magical. We would race the clouds to each other's houses on rusted bikes. It never occurred to me that our standard of living was low until one mother made a snide remark when

I invited her to the party. It was only two streets down that the world changed from half-built houses to cookie-cutter homes.

As friendship ensued over bonfires and the stink of smoke creeping underneath the door of the room where the adults congregated, my friends' moms would lean nervously over their half-rolled down tinted windows and from their shiny cars, called their children home. They all looked the same, with pastel colored button down shirts, blonde hair pulled back into a low ponytail, pink or green eyeshadow and powder to defy the inevitable age wrinkles. I could see the worry in their eyes and on their lips as they twisted in attempt to retrieve their sons and daughters before the rain came, before they could catch lice or poverty or some other life ending disease. When I went to their houses for sleepovers, they would eat pre-packaged frozen dinners and I would curl my lips in disgust, because at my house that evening we were roasting oysters under a wet, moth-bitten comforter over a fire.

As the rain went on The voices in the house would rise and fall with the drops on the roof, and occasionally one leaked through to fall on the unfinished wooden floor. I now talk to maybe two or three out of the ten kids who we ran wild and rampant with as the lightning flashed above the safe hollow of my yard. When I left the microcosm that would be the ones that smelled like laundry soap while I smelled like damp cigarette smoke, who will turn into the mothers that looked down their noses at the holes in my one pair of shoes I owned, and they ask me to go to the movies with them this weekend. The same people who called us trash now deem us worthy because we scraped up the change to buy shampoo. I guess that's why I see the transparency of the dollar bill, the veil of money, and I know deep down I belong to the heavy-hanging wetness of hurricane parties.