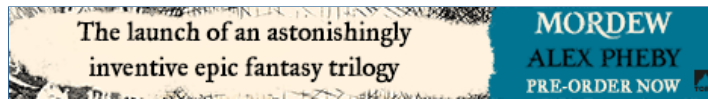




A MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY



([HTTPS://BIT.LY/3KZLT1X](https://bit.ly/3KZLT1X))

ADVERTISEMENT

Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters

BY N. K. JEMISIN ([HTTPS://UNCANNYMAGAZINE.COM/AUTHORS/N-K-JEMISIN/](https://uncannymagazine.com/authors/n-k-jemisin/)) IN UNCANNY MAGAZINE ISSUE SIX ([HTTPS://UNCANNYMAGAZINE.COM/ISSUES/UNCANNY-MAGAZINE-ISSUE-SIX/](https://uncannymagazine.com/issues/uncanny-magazine-issue-six/)) | 9193 WORDS

The days which bracketed hurricanes were painful in their clarity. Sharp-edged clouds, blue sky hard as a cop's eyes, air so clear that every sound ground at the ear. If a person held still enough he would feel the slow, unreal descent as all the air for miles around scrape-slip-slid downhill into the whirlpool maw of the approaching storm. If the streets were silent enough he would hear his own heartbeat, and the crunch of rocks beneath his feet, and the utter stillness of the earth as it held its breath for the dunking to come.

Tookie listened for awhile longer, then hefted the plastic bag a little higher on his shoulder and resumed walking home. A ways behind him, a hulking shadow stayed put.

Tookie sat on the porch of his shotgun house, watching the rain fall sideways. A lizard strolled by on the worn dirt-strip that passed for a sidewalk, easy as you please, as if there wasn't an inch of water already collected around its paws. It noticed him and stopped.

"Hey," it said, inclining its head to him in a neighborly fashion.

"Sup," Tookie replied, jerking his chin up in return.

"You gon' stay put?" it asked. "Storm comin'."

"Yeah," said Tookie. "I got food from the grocery."

"Ain' gon' need no food if you drown, man."

Tookie shrugged.

The lizard sat down on the sidewalk, oblivious to the driving wind, and joined Tookie in watching the rain fall. Tookie idly reflected that the lizard might be an alligator, in which case he should maybe go get his gun. He decided against it, though, because the creature had wide batlike wings and he was fairly certain gators didn't have those. These wings were the color of rusty, jaundiced clouds, like those he'd seen approaching from the southeast just before the rain began.

"Levee gon' break," said the lizard after awhile. "You shoulda got out, man."

"No car, man." It occurred to Tookie only after this that "man" was inappropriate.

The lizard snorted. "Big strong buck like you oughtta get off your ass, buy a hooptie."

"The fuck I need a car for? The bus and streetcar go everywhere I want to go."

"Except out of the city, with a hurricane on your ass."

Tookie shrugged again. “My mama had a car. She and my sister and her kids was all that could fit.” He had sent them along with the last of his cash, though he had not told them this. “We called the rental folks too, but they was out of cars. They want a credit card, anyway. Don’t nobody give you a card without a job, unless you a college student, and I ain’ even got a GED.”

“Why not?” asked the lizard. “You don’ look stupid.”

“Teachers thought I did.” Stupid and good for nothing, waste of time to educate, waste of space on this earth. Maybe, Tookie thought, the hurricane would take care of that. “I got tired of hearin’ that shit after awhile.”

The lizard considered this. Then it came over to the steps of Tookie’s house and climbed up on the first step, its tail—as long as its body—dangling into the water.

“How you get a house, then, with no job?”

Tookie couldn’t help smiling. “You the nosiest damn lizard I ever saw.”

The creature grinned at him, flashing tiny needlelike teeth. “Ain’ I? They don’ let me out much.”

“So I see.” Perhaps Tookie was feeling lonely; he decided to answer. “I sell a little weed,” he said. “Get some Adam from over the bridge, sell it to the white kids over by Tulane. Don’t take much to make the rent.”

“Adam?”

“Ex. MDMA. Little pills, make you happy.”

“Oh.” The lizard settled itself more comfortably on the doorstep, then abruptly raised itself again. “Hey, you ain’t got no pit bulls, do you? I been smellin’ somethin’ big and mean now and again. I hate dogs.”

Tookie chuckled. “Nah. I’m just a foot soldier, man.”

The lizard relaxed. “Me, too.”

“You ain’t a foot soldier, you a fuckin’ lizard.”

“Shut the fuck up, man.” The lizard followed this amused statement with a yawn. “Mind if I crash here for a minute? I’m tired as hell.”

“Come up on the porch,” Tookie said. The polite thing would’ve been to invite the creature inside, but he’d never been one for letting animals in the house. “I got some vienna sausages.”

“I ain’ hungry, and the step is fine, thank you.” The lizard rolled onto its side like a cat sunning itself, except it wasn’t a cat and the pelting rain wasn’t sun.

“Suit yourself.” Tookie got to his feet, mopping warm rain from his own face; the porch overhang wasn’t stopping it at all now. The wind had gotten bad enough that the stop sign on the corner was bent at a sharp angle, its four letters so blurred with driving water that they seemed ready to wash off. Across the street, three shingles blew off Miss Mary’s roof in rapid succession, the sound of destruction muted by the rising freight-train wind.

The lizard turned to follow Tookie’s gaze. “She shoulda got out, too.”

“Yeah,” Tookie said. He sighed. “She should’ve.”

He went inside, and the lizard went to sleep on his porch steps.

The next day, watching through the attic door as his secondhand furniture floated, Tookie wondered about the lizard. His food-bags were secure between two half-rotted wooden slats—his gun was in one of them—and the water didn’t look too bad, so carefully he lowered himself through the attic door into the drink.

On the porch, he paused for a moment to marvel at the sight of Dourgenois Street transformed into a river. Driven by the still-powerful wind, the water was up to his waist; down on the street it would probably be chest-deep. Only the topmost edge of the bent-over stop sign was visible. All the houses had been strangely truncated, like mushrooms only half-emerged from rippling gray soil.

“Hey,” said a voice, and Tookie looked up to see the lizard clinging to his porch ceiling, upside down. It yawned, blinking sleepily. “I tol’ you the levee’d go.”

“I guess you did,” Tookie said, a note of grudging wonder entering his voice. Most of the other denizens of his street had gone to the convention center if they couldn’t get out of town. There was only him and Miss Mary—

And Miss Mary’s door was stove in, a little rapids frothing on her porch as water flowed in.

“Damn shame,” said the lizard.

Tookie stepped off the porch. For an instant his feet floated, and a fleeting panic set in. The voice of a long-dead uncle barked in his head: *niggas don't float, fool, sank like stones inna water, waste of money teachin' you how to swim*. But then his feet touched solid ground and he found that when he stood, the current wasn't as swift or strong as it appeared. Simple enough to walk perpendicular to it. So he did, navigating around a neighbor's derelict car (now submerged) and pausing as a shapeless spiderwebbed lump (basketball net?) floated past.

The top of Miss Mary's hollow door had broken in, but the bottom was still in place and locked. Tookie pulled himself over it and looked around the old lady's living room. “Miss Mary?” he called. “It's Tookie from 'cross the street. Where you at?”

“In here 'bout to drown, goddamn, what you think?” returned the old woman's voice, and he followed it into her kitchen, where she sat on a chair that was probably resting atop her dining table. He couldn't tell for sure because the table was under water. He pushed his way through floating jars of spices and wooden spoons.

“Come on here, Miss Mary,” he said. “Ain' no point in you stayin'.”

“It's my house,” she said. “It's all I got.” She had said the same thing a few days before when he'd invited her to pass the storm with him, in his house which was higher off the ground and newer, or at least not as old.

“I ain' gon' let you stay up in here.” In a flash of inspiration, he added, “Lord don't mean for nobody to just sit and wait to die.”

Miss Mary, eighty-four years old and about as many pounds, threw him a glare from her waterlogged throne. “Lord don't like bullshit, neither.”

He grinned. “No, I guess He don't. So come on, then, 'fore I drown in your kitchen and stank up the place.”

So she gingerly eased herself off the chair and Tookie helped her into the water. He had her wrap her skinny arms around his neck. Then with her on his back, he waded out of her house and back across the street to his own personal bayou. There, with much huffing and cursing, he managed to hoist her up into the attic without breaking any of her old bones.

Once that was done, he headed out onto the porch again to see to the lizard. But it was gone.

After a sigh, Tookie went back inside and climbed to the attic himself.

Outside, unseen, something large and dark moved under the water. It did not surface—though for an instant it came near to doing so, and the water rose in a swell half-obscured by surging wavelets from the broken levee two blocks away. But then it moved away from Tookie's steps, and the water flowed free again.

The water kept rising even after the wind fell, all through the skin-stingingly beautiful day that arrived in the storm's wake. Helicopters began thwapping past, lots of them, but none of them ever slowed over or landed in the Ninth Ward, so Tookie paid them no attention. He made sure Miss Mary ate some vienna sausages and drank half a Sunny Delight, then he went out again in search of something that would float.

A few feet beyond his door he encountered a family of nutrias, the giant-rat denizens of the city's boggiest places. The first three nutrias, two dog-sized adults and a smaller one, dogpaddled past with a quick by-your-leave glance in Tookie's direction. The fourth came along some ways later, swimming slowly, its eyes dull, mouth open and panting. As its right foreleg came near the surface, Tookie saw that it had a bad break, white bone flashing under the brown water. Flies already crawled around its sleek wet back.

Tookie reached out and caught the creature, lifting it and giving its neck a quick wring. It went limp in his hands without a squeak. As Tookie tossed the small body up onto a nearby rooftop—the water was already foul, but he couldn't abide adding to the mess—he noticed that the two adult nutrias had stopped. They did not look angry, though they watched him for a long moment. Then they resumed their trek, and Tookie did too.

Two streets over he ran into Dre Amistad, who was pushing an inflatable kiddie pool that contained a scrawny teenaged girl and a naked baby nearly as thin. The girl threw Tookie a hostile, defensive look as he approached, but Dre seemed relieved. “I'm so glad to see you, man. Can you push for awhile?” He looked exhausted.

“I can't,” Tookie said, nodding apologetically to the girl. “I got to find something to carry this old lady who's stayin' at my house. My neighbor.”

Dre frowned. “Old lady?” He glanced up at the young girl and baby, pointedly. But the girl frowned at Tookie, some of her hostility fading.

Heartened by this, Tookie added, “She ain't got nobody, man. Her daughter over in Texas—” Tookie cut himself off then, annoyed at his urge to justify his actions. Above their heads, another helicopter flitted past, going to rescue someone else. “Look, where you headed?”

Dre shook his head. “We was gonna go to Chalmette, but we heard the cops was shootin' people there. They even shootin' white folks—anybody comin' out of New Orleans. Guess they think the flood's catchin', like the flu or somethin'.”

"*Gretna*, not Chalmette," said the girl, in a tone that suggested she had said it before. Dre shrugged. He looked too tired to care.

"Where you goin' *now*?" Tookie asked, trying to restrain his impatience.

"We heard people was goin' to the navy base," said the girl. "The government was gon' close it 'cause all the soldiers is off in Iraq. Maybe they got beds and medicine." She looked down at her child, her small face tightening.

Tookie frowned but decided not to say anything. If they wanted to trust a bunch of soldiers, that was their business.

"See if you can get everybody up on a roof, rest for a bit," Tookie said to Dre, turning to splash away from them. "I got food and stuff. Let me fetch the old lady and then I can help you push."

"I ain' waitin, Tookie."

Tookie stopped and turned back to him, incredulous. Any fool could see they had a better chance together than alone.

"I just got to get somewhere dry," Dre said softly, a plea. "Tookie, man. I just..." Dre faltered silent, then looked away. After a moment, during which Tookie just stared at him, Dre blinked quickly and then resumed his dogged pushing of the kiddie pool. The girl watched Tookie until they were out of sight.

Turning away, Tookie stopped as he saw the lizard, this time crouched atop a crazily leaning traffic light-pole. It was looking in the direction Dre had gone.

"Them soldiers ain' gon' let nobody in," it said scornfully. "Buncha poor-ass folks like that? Soldiers gon' shoot 'em and get a medal for it. Mus' be out they damn minds."

"You ain't dead," Tookie said, surprised at how glad he felt.

"Nope. Hey. It's a little rowboat 'round back of that house." It nodded toward a house on the corner that had been washed off its foundations. It leaned at a drunken angle, surrounded by its own vomited debris. "And it's a barge a couple of streets over, all dry and high."

"A *barge*?"

The lizard shrugged. "I ain' lyin'. Big as three or four houses, sittin' in the middle of the street. Guess they didn't tie it up, put down anchor, whatever. You can hole up there for a little while. Safer than these houses." It tilted its head up to peer at another passing helicopter. "They gon' have to start actually helpin' people soon."

Tookie nodded slowly, too polite to say he'd believe it when he saw it. "It's a dead nutria over on Reynes," he said. "On a rooftop, maybe three houses from the neutral ground." Which was underwater. Tookie grimaced. "The corner, I mean. Its leg is broke, but the rest is all right. I just killed it."

The lizard grinned its needle-grin again. "What, I look skinny?"

Tookie shrugged, smiling in spite of himself. "Yeah, you right, you the most fucked-up lookin' lizard I ever saw. Skinny ain't half."

The lizard laughed. Its laugh was a strange, high-pitched trilling sound, and with each exhalation, the water around Tookie reacted, tiny pointillations dancing on the murky surface. When it stopped laughing, the water became still once more.

"Nutria's good eating," it said thoughtfully, and bobbed its head at him in a gesture that might've been thanks. "Might call some folks to come share."

Tookie stepped quickly aside as a ball of fire-ants floated past. "What, it's more of you?"

"Mmm-hmm. My whole family all over town right now."

"That right?"

"Yeah right." It drew itself up proudly. "My people been here generations. New Orleans born an' bred."

Tookie nodded. His people were the same.

"Hey," said the lizard, its grin fading. "Listen. You be careful. It's some kind of big thing around here. A *mean* thing."

"Like what?"

The lizard shook its head. This movement was not remotely humanlike; its neck wove like a snake's. "I ain' seen it, but I *smelled* it. Saw a dead dog over by the playground, looked like somethin' had been at it."

"Nother dog, maybe." Tookie had seen several in the past few hours, roaming or swimming, looking lean and forlorn.

"Musta been hungry. Dog was bit in half." The lizard shuddered, wings making a papery rattle. It looked away down the long street of listing houses, car-roof islands, and still dark water.

"Might be anything," Tookie said, though he was aware that this was not reassuring. "That storm was bad. Worst I ever saw, even if the levees hadn't broke. Feel like it ain' done yet, somehow."

Another helicopter passed, this one low enough that Tookie could see a person inside with a big TV camera aimed at him. He put his hands on his hips and regarded the helicopter coldly. If it wasn't going to help, he wished it would just go away.

"It ain't," the lizard said softly, its eyes distant and burnished with worry. "Done, I mean. Somethin' ain' right. Somethin' keepin' this storm goin'."

They both watched as the helicopter circled once, filming the whole area, and then flew on. Gradually the silence returned, peaceful and liquid, and Tookie relaxed, absorbing it.

"I got to go get that rowboat," he said at last. "Thanks."

The lizard made a dismissive sound. "I'm'a go eat my thanks right now." Turning, the lizard spread its rustcloud wings and flicked its tail at him. Tookie waved farewell as it took off and flew away.

Tookie fetched the rowboat, used it to collect the old lady and what remained of the food from his attic, then headed over to the big barge on Jourdan Avenue.

The barge was jammed on a schoolbus and a couple of houses, causing it to list at a nearly 45-degree angle. Because of this, most of the deck was dry, the rainwater having pooled on the downside. The pilot house or bridge or whatever it was called—where they drove the barge—was even better, dry and enclosed with only one broken glass window. Tookie used his T-shirt to stuff the hole so they could sleep the night without feeding a million mosquitoes.

Then, as dusk fell, they ate the last of Tookie's food. He hadn't gotten much from the store to begin with, since he'd had to wait until it was closed; by the time he'd arrived with his crowbar, others had already pried the door open and gotten the best goods. He had collected enough to see himself through three or four days without electricity, since that was the worst any storm had done in his lifetime. Standing at the pilot's window, gazing out at the ocean that had been his neighborhood, Tookie reflected that he had, perhaps, underplanned.

"We got to put somethin' on the roof," said Miss Mary. She was half asleep already, curled up with her head pillowed on an overturned leatherbacked chair. "Tell the rescue people to come get us."

Tookie nodded, chewing absently on an oily sardine. "I'll go out tomorrow, find some paint."

"You be careful," the old woman said. Tookie turned to her, surprised to hear this echo of his lizard-friend. Miss Mary yawned. "Haints be out, after a storm like this."

At first Tookie heard *bates*, not haints. Then he realized what she was saying. "Ain' no haints, Miss Mary."

"How the hell you know? This the first *real* hurricane you been through." She waved a hand contemptuously. "I was aroun' for Camille. Lived in Mississippi then. Me an' my man come here after, 'cause when that storm was through, we ain' had nothin' left. No house, no town, no people. All my family died." She lifted her head to glare at him. The fading light fell along the smooth planes of her face just so; he saw that she must have been beautiful in those days. "Even after that storm, the killin' kept on. It was somethin' else around, *keepin'* it goin'. Turnin' people ugly."

"My mama said haints was just ghosts," Tookie said. "Scare you, but can't kill nobody."

"Demons, then. Spirits, monsters, don't matter what you call 'em. They come with the storm, some bringin' it, some seein' it through, some sendin' it on. And some keepin' it on, so it can kill some more. So you watch yo' ass." She spoke the last three words leaning forward, precisely enunciating her vehemence.

"A'ight, a'ight, Miss Mary." Tookie came over and sat down beside her, making himself comfortable as best he could against the hard metal of a bulkhead. "You get some sleep now. I'll keep a eye out."

She sighed, weary, and lay down again. A long silence fell.

"I'm too old to start over again," she said softly.

He fanned himself with one hand; it was stuffy in the little chamber with the windows closed. "We gon' both do what we got to do, Miss Mary." She said nothing in reply, so he added, "Good night."

After awhile, she slept. And despite his intention to keep watch, Tookie did too.

Deep in the night, when the city was still but for frogs and drifting water, they were jolted awake by the low groan of metal crunching and grinding against itself. Something made the barge jump, rocking alarmingly towards wobbly straightness before it settled back into its leaning stability.

Years of nights spent crouched low in his house, wondering whether the people outside his window were assassins or just ordinary robbers, kept Tookie silent beyond an initial startled curse. Years of whatever life Miss Mary had lived kept her silent as well. She stayed put while he crept to the window and peered out.

With no streetlights, the dark was all-encompassing. A sliver of moon was up, illuminating the water and fog curling off its surface, but everything else was just shapes.

The water was rippling, though, in the wake of some movement. Something *big*, to judge by the ripples.

Tookie waited. When the water was still again, he turned back to see that Miss Mary had pulled a crooked steak knife from one of her many pockets. His heart leapt in irrational alarm, though he should've laughed; the little knife would be no use against whatever had jolted the barge.

"What you see?" she stage-whispered.

"Nothin'" he replied. "Just water."

She scowled. "You lyin'."

Anger blazed away days of waterlogged weariness in Tookie. She sounded like those old teachers of his, years gone, and for a moment he hated her as he'd hated them. "How you gon' say I'm lyin'? You can't half see, crazy ol' biddy."

"I can see *you* just fine." There was no mistaking the menace in the old woman's tone. Belatedly two things occurred to Tookie: first, that her knife wasn't too small to hurt *him*, and second, that his gun was tucked away safe and useless inside the bag that had held their food.

Don' need no damn gun, he thought, his hands clenching into fists—They both froze as, somewhere on the next street over, a house collapsed. They had heard this happen several times over the past few days, cheap wood splintering and plaster crumbling like so much sand, but never had the sound been so violent or sudden. It was as if something had *knocked* the house down, or perhaps stomped on it. Either way, the demolition hadn't taken much effort.

Tookie met Miss Mary's eye, and she gave him an I-told-you-so nod. She had put the knife away, he saw, so he decided to say nothing more about it. His own anger was gone, shattered like a ruined house's walls, leaving him feeling foolish and ashamed. What the hell was he doing, getting so worked up over a little old lady anyhow? They had bigger problems.

In the morning they rose and went out on deck.

By the clear light of dawn, the city's devastation somehow seemed more stark: the reeking water, the melting houses, the silence. Tookie stood transfixed by it, for the first time realizing that the city would never be the same no matter how well they fixed it. Yet he could not bring himself to mourn, because despite the evidence of his eyes, he could feel that nothing was dead. The city had withstood storms before, been destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed again. Indeed, as he stood there he could almost feel the land somewhere below, still holding its breath, waiting and untroubled. Calm, like the eye of a storm.

Miss Mary was the first to spot something odd: a long flap of something that looked like stiff cloth near the barge's prow. It had not been there the day before.

Tookie poked at the cloth with his toe, trying to figure out what it was and troubled by a nagging sense of familiarity, as Miss Mary muttered about haints and a plague of devilry. Finally Tookie picked up the thing to toss it overboard. As he did, he noticed blood on one corner of it. Only then did he realize that the stiff thing was not cloth. It felt of leather and thin bone under his fingers, and the underside was patterned with clouds, the deep gray color of when they were right overhead and about to drop a bucket.

He caught himself before he gasped, which would've gotten the sharp-eared Miss Mary's attention. Instead he simply went to the deck wall and peered overboard, dreading what he might see.

There was no lizard corpse, but he noticed something else: the schoolbus that had been lodged under the barge's stern? keel? The front underside. The bus had been almost comically jammed in place the day before, its hood invisible beneath the water and its rear end jutting undignified into the air. Now the bus' butt was crumpled as if something huge had stepped on it in an effort to climb aboard the barge. The weight of whatever it was had pushed the bus down, and levered the barge upright; that was what had caused the shift the night before.

"What you see?" Miss Mary asked, not as belligerently as the night before.

"Nothin' but water," Tookie said again, and he dropped the wing back onto the deck bloody-side down, so it looked like a rag again.

When the waters receded, he vowed privately, he would find a place to bury it proper.

The water seemed lower when Tookie dropped into it from the ladder. It had been up to his neck the day before; now it was only up to his chest. Progress. There was no current, so the rowboat hadn't drifted far. Tookie climbed into it and, using the nail-studded plank of wood that he'd appropriated for an oar, set off.

After an hour of fruitlessly searching the handful of corner stores dotting the neighborhood, he began searching houses instead. This went better, though on several occasions there were unpleasant surprises. In one house he found a bloated old man still seated in an armchair, with the TV remote in his floating gray hand. The water hadn't risen *that* fast. Tookie figured the old fellow had just wanted to go his own way.

He was coming out of that house with his hands full of white paint cans, when movement in the rowboat made him start and drop the cans and grab for a gun he did not possess. He cursed himself for forgetting it again.

"Hey," said the lizard, lifting its head over the boat's rim. "Thought I smelled you 'roun' here."

Tookie stared at it. "You all right?"

The lizard looked puzzled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Somethin' came after the barge last night. I found—" He hesitated, suddenly recalling what the lizard had said about its family. "A wing. Like yours, but gray."

The lizard stiffened, then closed its eyes. "My cousin," it said finally. "We was lookin' for him."

Tookie lowered his head respectfully. "I still got the wing, you want it."

"Yeah. Later."

"It's that thing, ain' it?" Tookie asked. "The ugly thing you been smellin'." Miss Mary's words came back to him. "The Hate."

The lizard nodded grimly. "I aksed my daddy about it. Come around sometimes, this thing, after a real big storm. Killin' is what draws it. Like *mean* got a shape and gone walkin' around, spreadin' more mean everywhere it go."

Tookie frowned, recalling their near-brush with the thing the night before. *It was somethin' else around*, Miss Mary had said, of the time after Hurricane Camille. *Turnin' people ugly*. Was this the same kind of thing? If it had gotten onto the barge, would it have eaten them as it had the lizard's cousin? Or— He shivered as he remembered Miss Mary looking so mean with that knife. He probably hadn't looked all that friendly himself, with the urge to beat the old woman to death running hot in his blood.

"Last time it come 'roun'," said the lizard, "it kill a whole lot of us 'fore we finally got it. It like us even more'n you folks."

Tookie scowled. "Then you oughtta be inside somewhere, not out here talkin' shit with me."

The lizard scowled back and slapped a paw on the boat's metal rim. "Ain' gon' let no damn monster run me out of town. They killed it before, my daddy said. Took a lot, but they did, so we gon' have to do it again."

Tookie nodded, then picked up the paint cans and began to load them onto the boat. "Come on back to the barge," he said. "Let me get my gun."

But the lizard came up to him and put its paw on his hand. Its skin was cool despite the heat, dry despite the humidity, and up close it smelled of ozone and soupy dawn fog. "Ain' your fight," it said.

"I still be up in my attic but for you. Maybe dead."

"Might'a been rescued by now but for me," it said stubbornly. "This thing make people so ugly they don't even want to help each other. You know they ain't give no food or water to all those people at the Superdome? Just lef' 'em there." It shook its head, as Tookie gaped at it in disbelief. "This storm three days gone and still killin' people. That ain't right."

Tookie set his mouth in a grim line. "Man, people don't need no monster to make 'em do evilhearted shit. All it take is a brown face, or somebody wearin' old tore-up clothes."

"This thing make it *worse*." The lizard hopped out of Tookie's boat, dogpaddling easily in the water. "I told you, man, I'm a foot soldier. Y'know—" It hesitated. "Y'know, right? I brought the storm? Me and mine."

Tookie nodded slowly. He had suspected that from their first meeting. "Storms gotta come," he said. "Everybody in this city know that."

The lizard looked relieved. "Yeah, but storms gotta go, too. That's my job, and I been fuckin' around." It nodded to him, then turned and began to paddle away. Abruptly it stopped and turned, glancing back at him over its wing. It gazed at him for a long while. "I'll holla at you later, man," it said at last.

Tookie nodded, raising a hand to wave. The lizard flickered up out of the water and away.

Tookie lowered his hand. He knew that when the waters receded, even if the lizard survived its battle, he would never see it again.

The day grew hot. With water everywhere, evaporating as best it could into the already-saturated air, the city became a place of sunshine and steam. It took the rest of the afternoon to get back on the barge (Tookie had to climb up by way of the schoolbus, standing in the footsteps of the Hate, which gave him the heebie-jeebies) and paint the word “HELP” in five-foot letters on the barge’s long flat roof.

The heat and humidity devoured Tookie’s strength. He fell asleep on a pile of dry sheets he’d salvaged from a two-story house whose upstairs hadn’t been damaged at all. There had been three other survivors inhabiting that house, he’d found; children, the oldest barely twelve. It wasn’t their house either, so they hadn’t protested his scavenging. He’d given them some of his food and invited them back to the barge, but leery of strangers, they’d politely declined.

Miss Mary called herself keeping watch, walking around on deck. Tookie suspected she just didn’t want to smell him, after four days of funky water and no showers. (To his annoyance, she smelled the same as usual—like old lady.)

He was deep in a dream of being at a house party over on Elysian Fields, with a pretty redboned girl checking him out across papers full of crawfish and corn and potatoes, when Miss Mary shook him awake. He sat up, snarfling drool, and looked around. Sundown; long golden colors arced over the sky.

“I hear somethin’,” Miss Mary said. Her steak knife was out again, and he felt a sleepy species of worry.

“Hear what?” he asked, but on the heels of the question he heard it too. A sharp, echoing cough, loud and deep, like from the chest of some beast. A big beast, the size of an elephant maybe, somewhere on one of the streets toward the river. And then, before the echoes faded, he heard a harmony of other sounds: high-pitched trills. Over where he heard it, a small cloud hovered in the otherwise clear sky, growing thicker.

Tookie scrambled to his feet, searching among the plastic bags. “Miss Mary, you stay in here,” he said as he rummaged. “Don’ go out less you hear a helicopter, or people in a boat. I got to go.”

She did not ask where. “You got any people you want me to find, once I get out the city?”

“My mama’ll be in Baton Rouge, with my sister.” There, it was there. Tookie pulled the gun out and checked it. It was fully loaded, but it needed cleaning. He had never liked handling the thing. Maybe it would jam. Maybe it would backfire, leave him blind and handless at the feet of the Hate. He thrust the gun into the waist of his pants.

“That ain’ no haint,” Miss Mary said. “You was right. It’s somethin’ else.”

“I hope so,” Tookie said. “Can’t kill no haint. Bye, Miss Mary.”

“Bye, fool.” But she stayed on deck, watching him, as he swung himself over the ladder and climbed down.

The noise had gotten worse by the time Tookie paddled near, keeping low in the rowboat and moving the nail-plank as little as possible to avoid telegraphing his approach. It wouldn’t’ve mattered if he’d showed up with a secondline band, though; between the roars of the thing, the trills of the lizards, splashing water, and the crash of cars or houses being destroyed, Tookie didn’t have to worry about being heard. And as he paddled, a deeper sound made him look up. The cloud that had gathered overhead was turning darker, thicker. He thought he saw flickers of lightning in its depths.

When he saw that the porches of the houses nearby were above-water—they had chosen high ground for their battle—Tookie parked the boat, jumped onto a dry porch, and began running. His gun was in his hand. He ran low and leapt almost soundlessly across the gaps between houses. One porch. Another half-buckled by water damage. Another that overlapped the third because its house had collapsed sideways...and here Tookie stopped, because the thing was there, it was *there* and it was huge, its smell was like sulfured asphalt or the thick fermented funk of an algae-bog, and instead of coughing this time it roared like a barge-horn gone mad with rage. It was hard to see in the fading light, and for that blessing Tookie thanked a god that he suddenly believed in, because what little of it he could see came near to shattering his mind. Or perhaps that was his own fault, because the thoughts that flowed into his head were so swift and twisted, so *wrong* yet powerful, that they had to come from somewhere inside him, didn’t they? Some festering boil deep within, tucked under years of apathy, bursting now and spreading poison all through. *Got to go kill me some niggers* was one of the thoughts, even though he had never thought that way in his life and the cadence of the thought was all wrong; New Orleanians spoke with more rhythm. He tried to think his own thought: *Soun’ like some ‘Bama mothafucka in my head, what the* but before he could complete it there was an oily flipover, and then he thought *all these people in my city, ain’ done shit to save it*, and also *gon’ find me some bitches and fuck ‘em* and then *shoot up them white mothafucks over in Chalmette—maybe—Gretna give ‘em somethin’ to be scared of and of course that ol’ lady slowin’ me down, get rid of her*. And more, more, so much more. So much that Tookie cried out and fell to his knees on the crumbling porch, the gun clattering on the old wood as he clutched his head and wondered if one could die of pure evil.

But then a sharp squeal penetrated the hate, and Tookie looked up. The monster had paid him no heed despite his shout, preoccupied as it was with the enemy before it: a sextet of tiny creatures that dipped and wheeled in aerobatic circles around its misshapen head as it turned to follow them. In profile it was even uglier, lumpen and raw, its lower jaw trailing spittle as it worked around a mouthful of something that wriggled and shrieked and beat at it with wings like rusted, ocher clouds—“*No goddamn it!*” Tookie shouted. Suddenly his head was clear, the hate shattered by horror. He raised the gun, and something else rose in him: a great, huge feeling, as big as the monster and just as overwhelming, but cleaner. Familiar. It was the city beneath his feet, below the water, still patiently holding its breath. He felt the tension in his own lungs. He had played no music, faked no voodoo, paid no taxes and no court to the chattering

throng who came and spent themselves and left the city bruised and weary in their wake. But the city was *his*, low creature that he was, and it was his duty to defend it. It had spent years training him, honing him, making him ready to serve for its hour of need. He was a foot soldier too, and in that breath of forever he heard the battle-call of his home.

So Tookie planted his feet on the rotting wood, and aimed for one bulbous eye with his dirty gun, and screamed with the pent breath of ten thousand waterlogged streets as he blew it away.

The creature shrieked, whipping about in agony as its eye dissolved into a bloody mist. As it cried out, something mangled and small fell from its teeth, landing in the water with a near-silent plop.

"Now!" cried a trilling voice, and the darting batwinged shadows arranged themselves into a strange configuration, and the cloud overhead erupted with light. The thunderbolt caught the beast square in its thrashing head; when Tookie blinked, its body just stood there, headless.

But then the body lurched forward, lifting a far too human hand out of the water to reach for the hovering lizards. Tookie fired again. He saw the doorway of a sagging house through the hole his bullet opened in the thing's hand. It flinched, probably nerves since it no longer had a brain, and that gave the lizards another opening. Overhead, the cloud rumbled once more, and this time three lightning bolts came, *sizzle sizzle sizzle* on Tookie's vision, the air smelled of burning dog and seared rage, and by the time the afterimages faded and his eyes stopped watering, it was all over.

Still half-blind, Tookie stumbled off the porch and through the water, groping with hands and gun toward the place where his friend had fallen. The other lizards converged around it, some hovering and some dropping into the water themselves to support a small, bloody body. Tookie reached them—the hovering ones parted to let him through, though they looked at him suspiciously—and then stopped, knowing at a glance there was nothing he could do.

"Hey," croaked his lizard. Two of its companions held it up in the water. It tilted its head to peer at him with its one remaining eye, and sighed. "Get that damn look off your face. I ain' dead."

"You look like you halfway," said Tookie.

It laughed softly, then grimaced as that caused it pain. "Maybe three-quarters, but I still ain' there." It looked past Tookie at the spot where the great hulking thing had been. There was nothing left; the lightning had evaporated it into mist. "That was the way to do it, but goddamn, I hurt."

Tookie reached for the lizard, then drew his hand back as one of its companions—another cousin, maybe—hissed at him. He contented himself with a smile instead, though he hardly felt it past the surface of his face. "Hurts worse if you complain." He had been shot once.

"Shut the fuck up." The lizard laid its head across the back of the one who had hissed at Tookie. "That shit ain' in your head, is it?"

Tookie knew what the lizard meant. And the truth was, the Hate *was* still in his head, its ugly thoughts gabbling amid Tookie's own, maybe because they'd been all his own thoughts to begin with. He'd had plenty of practice with hating himself and others. But the city was in his head too, all that strength and breath and patience, and it occurred to Tookie that this would not have happened if he had not shaken off the Hate on his own. So he smiled again. "Just three-quarters," he said, "but it ain't got me."

The lizard narrowed its eye at him, but finally nodded. "You gon' leave, when they rescue you? Run off to Texas or somewhere, settle down there?"

"I'll go, but I'm comin' back." Tookie lifted his arms, encompassing the foul water, the ruined houses, the stars on the horizon. "This is me."

The lizard flashed its toothy grin, though its eye began to drift shut. "Yeah you right." It sighed heavily. "Got to go."

Tookie nodded. "I'll listen for you in the next big storm." He took a step back, giving the lizards room. They lifted off, two of them carefully holding their injured companion between them. Tookie kept his gaze on his friend's eye, and not the ravaged wings or mangled limbs. Perhaps the lizard would live, but like the city, and like Tookie, it would never be the same. The thought filled him with a defiant ferocity. "An' that son of a bitch come back, you just holla."

It grinned. "I will. Next time, man."

In a soft thunder of wings, the lizards flew away, leaving Tookie alone in the wet dark.

The waters receded.

There was rescue then, and travel to Houston, and a long lonely time of shelters and strangers' homes. Miss Mary found her daughter, and they brought Tookie to live with them. He made contact with his mother and sister, and let them know he was all right. He did odd jobs, under-the-table construction work and the like, and made enough money to get by. His FEMA check took a whole year to come, but it wasn't completely useless. With it, he had enough.

So one evening, when the air was hazy and the sky soft, and something about the arc of sunset reminded him of long days and thick, humid nights, Tookie packed his bags. The next morning he caught a ride to the depot and bought a ticket on the early bus. He let out a long-held, heavy breath as the bus hit the interstate east, toward home.

© 2010 by N.K. Jemisin. Originally published in *The Company He Keeps: Postscripts* 22/23. Reprinted by permission of the author.

(https://www.addtoany.com/add_to/facebook?linkurl=https%3A%2F%2FUncannymagazine.com%2Farticle%2Fsinner-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters%2F&linkname=Sinner%2C%20Saint%2C%20Dragons%2C%20and%20Haint%2C%20in%20the%20City%20Beneath%20the%20Still%20Waters)
 (https://www.addtoany.com/add_to/tumblr?linkurl=https%3A%2F%2FUncannymagazine.com%2Farticle%2Fsinner-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters%2F&linkname=Sinner%2C%20Saint%2C%20Dragons%2C%20and%20Haint%2C%20in%20the%20City%20Beneath%20the%20Still%20Waters)
 (https://www.addtoany.com/add_to/reddit?linkurl=https%3A%2F%2FUncannymagazine.com%2Farticle%2Fsinner-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters%2F&linkname=Sinner%2C%20Saint%2C%20Dragons%2C%20and%20Haint%2C%20in%20the%20City%20Beneath%20the%20Still%20Waters)
 (https://www.addtoany.com/add_to/pinterest?linkurl=https%3A%2F%2FUncannymagazine.com%2Farticle%2Fsinner-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters%2F&linkname=Sinner%2C%20Saint%2C%20Dragons%2C%20and%20Haint%2C%20in%20the%20City%20Beneath%20the%20Still%20Waters)



([HTTPS://BIT.LY/3L1UAIZ](https://bit.ly/3L1UAIZ))

ADVERTISEMENT



[nkjemisin.com](https://www.nkjemisin.com) twitter.com/nkjemisin

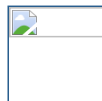
N. K. Jemisin (<https://uncannymagazine.com/authors/n-k-jemisin/>)

N(ora). K. Jemisin is an author of speculative fiction short stories and novels who lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been multiply nominated for the Hugo, the Nebula, and the World Fantasy Award; shortlisted for the Crawford, the Gemmell Morningstar, and the Tiptree; and she has won a Locus Award for Best First Novel as well as several Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice Awards. In 2016, she became the first black person to win the Best Novel Hugo for *The Fifth Season*.

Her short fiction has been published in pro markets such as *Clarkesworld*, *Postscripts*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Baen's Universe*; semipro markets such as *Ideomancer* and *Abyss & Apex*; and podcast markets (mostly *Escape Artists*) and print anthologies.

Laura Hanifin, copyright 2015

One Response to "Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters"



SaareMartha

 09-09-2015 1:11 PM (<https://uncannymagazine.com/article/sinners-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters/#comment-2356>)

That is totally, stupendously wonderful. It's almost like an old-fashioned fairy-tale with a happy – or at least positive ending.

Log in to Reply (https://uncannymagazine.com/wp-login.php?redirect_to=https%3A%2F%2FUncannymagazine.com%2Farticle%2Fsinner-saints-dragons-and-haints-in-the-city-beneath-the-still-waters%2F)