

The Cistern

Cat Esposito

There were stories and accounts from many, still lingering on about the Bayou. Some who witnessed hearing voices echoing, bouncing off the walls from the underground chambers at night. Others heard sounds of rapid water rushing and rising, drowning out the muffled cries below the muddy grounds of the park. Some might say it was a haunted city buried while still alive. But that was the Bayou in the city. It couldn't happen in the country where the Bayou waters ran free.

Something did feel haunted to her that summer, in the murky waters of the bayou outstretched between the open country and the over-populated city. She felt it bubbling beneath the surface, daring not to touch her toes into the mud nearby. She shuttered to herself, stepping back abruptly from the stream's edge. Even her horse, Chestnut would not take a drink of *that* water, shaking his head in protest and wandering back up the steep bank.

She remembered the stories her own grandparents told her about the bayou, running for miles in the east and wrapping around the city before it dumped into the Gulf of Mexico. Anyone who tried to swim in it, would surely be carried all the way out to the gulf and never be seen again. Her grandfather's words in her head reminded her to never drink from that water, it might pull you straight in. Most of the country folks including her grandfather, believed the city had polluted and poisoned the Bayou with their over developments of buildings and housing. *They were killing the natural country one acre at a time, he said, leaving no room left for farming and wild horses to run.* It used to be nothing but a span of country roads and small farms before you reached the bright lights of Houston, now the greater city limits and its eight lane interstate extended and almost touched their small town and dirt roads. *Stay away from the city.*

She tied the black leather straps of her horse securely around the trunk of an old Cypress tree, making sure there was plenty of shade for him to rest and feel the warm breeze to endure the sweltering heat

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she had grown accustomed to her whole life. She wanted so desperately to follow where the Bayou ended up, and see it flowing past Buffalo Bayou Park in the city. She noticed several kids floating down the Bayou in old inflated tires. They laughed and splashed muddy water at her, as they didn't seem afraid at all. She wondered if they would be carried out into the gulf and never be seen? Envisioning their muffled voices beneath the muddy water and unable to see their faces any longer, she shuddered to herself once more.

To understand Houston, one must first understand Buffalo Bayou. This muddy waterway flows through the heart of the city and once drove Houston's economy. Starting as a small stream just west of Houston, Buffalo Bayou winds around and travels 30 miles east along the open prairies and unofficial trails through lovely woods, up and down ravines and dangerous high banks to meet White Oak Bayou on the northern edge of downtown Houston. This confluence of waterways carries out to meet the swallowing mouth of the Gulf of Mexico. Many do not realize how close Houston is to the opening gulf of the ocean. One hurricane alone could wipe it off the map.

It is from the pastoral beauty of Buffalo Bayou Park, one can see the city of Houston, rising upward to the blue and cloudless sky in an impressive landscape of high-rise buildings. The park offers pristine meadows and a tidy ribbon of water, including several ponds and one small lake. There are areas dedicated to art for the locals, and sandy beaches for boat launching while providing look out points for lovers, native gardens, benches, and water fountains. It's an iconic picture in her mind: a modern metropolis city and mother nature in perfect harmony. Or are they?

She had managed to stay away from the city all of her young 25 years of life until recently. Her parents had both died before her first birthday from a car accident driving into the city one summer night. She knew that's why her grandparents detested the city and traffic. She was content and happy to grow up in the country as she had learned to ride horses without a saddle and spending her days gardening with her grandmother, and helping her grandfather with all the animals on the farm. She adored being raised by her grandparents who taught her how to be a country girl. She also enjoyed being homeschooled growing up, all of her studies occurring on their weather-beaten, wrap-around porch and hanging wooden swing. Which left plenty of time for horseback riding in the grassy hills and reading

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her novels under the large bent over Cypress tree, every afternoon until sunset.

As a young woman, she enjoyed driving down the endless dirt roads in her old beat up Chevy with the windows rolled all the way down. The wind blew up a brown smoke storm behind her and tousled her long hair wildly about in the truck. As she sang away to the radio in those days, she'd chain smoke her cigarettes recklessly. No place to be.

This summer was different. She needed the work in the city to survive and try to maintain her grandparents farm. After both passing away a month apart from one another, her grandparents had been gone for three years. There was no one left to help her. Unable to afford the family's hired ranch hand any longer, the farm seemed sad and overgrown.

She had taken a job in downtown Houston, giving horse-drawn carriage rides with her two last horses she owned. This meant she could earn enough money over the summer to last the entire year. Newlyweds and tourists loved that sort of thing in the city, riding along in a carriage as horses pull their heavy weight for hours, although she could never understand putting a horse through such torture. The bit in the mouth of a horse, gagging and choking him, he never complained, just continued lugging along on the concrete streets of downtown. Black patches were placed and covered the horses' eyes to protect their peripheral vision, so they wouldn't become distracted from busy traffic and noise a city brings. She had yet to visit Buffalo Bayou Park once, since working in the city.

After work and once settled back in the country, she usually landed at the only local bar that existed. When the evenings finally cooled off, she was able to enjoy a few beers, only a few miles from her grandparents' place. You could hear the music playing down the dirt road and inviting one to come in before you even parked.

She was often asked why her name Jesse was spelled with an e, as if her parents had really wanted a boy. Asked this question from a stranger once again this evening, she pretended to laugh, continuing to crack open the shells of her peanuts with no interest in answering the guy sitting in a stool next to her at the bar. He didn't look like a local or even someone who knew what country was. As he freely stared away at her outlined breasts in her thin shirt, she took a big swallow of beer from the bottle and suddenly felt conscious of herself wearing

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blue jeans, a white T-shirt and her cowboy boots. She excused herself to go outside and smoke.

He followed her outside and stood next to her silently, enjoying watching the sun melt behind the hills. She watched him kicking his Nikes around in the dirt as he turned his attention right into her eyes, *“Ya know, smoking isn’t so good for your health, Jesse with an e. I mean, I suppose there are all kinds of things that aren’t good for you, like this beer I’m drinking, here. I have to say, I’m really enjoying all this ice cold beer you have here in Texas, I don’t normally drink beer, I’m a wine kind of guy. Actually, I’m a bit of a wine snob.”* He was inspecting his beer bottle as Jesse decided not to answer him. Instead she hopped up on the tailgate of her Chevy, swinging her legs back and forth and blew a huge cloud of smoke in his direction. He smiled and held his hands up in defeat. *“Alright already, geez..can I bum one off of you? Jesus, I haven’t smoked since my dad died years ago. And why are you all by yourself out here, I would think your parents would be worried about you, or someone.. uhh boyfriend, oh surely you aren’t old enough to be married ?”*

Jesse decided to give in, hearing about his father passing away and handed him over her own cigarette. *“Here. Smoke away for Christ’s sake. And welcome to Texas, city man. I am really sorry about your dad, how about your mom, is she still alive? Both of my parents passed away when I was a baby and to answer your question, I was named after my dad, Jesse. Something incredibly special to me, that I don’t normally reveal to strangers.”* She watched how he handled this new information, noticing how his lips pressed against her cigarette, inhaling it for a moment and blowing out smoke through his parted mouth. Running his hands through his hair and smoking like it was a natural thing he always had done, it was so intoxicating watching him smoke her cigarette. Something so intimate that had touched her own lips. He continued his fast city talking, *“You mean you’re all alone? You live on a farm and take care of everything and there’s no one else here in Texas with you? Don’t you ever get lonely out here in the country? Damn, I’d love to show you the world. You need to get outta here! There’s so much to see beyond the country. Think I might just have to kidnap you and take you with me, even if I have to throw your stubborn self and cowboy boots kicking, right over my shoulders.”*

That thought made Jesse giggle, or maybe it was the beer. It had

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never occurred to her that she was lonely or even felt alone any time up to this point in her life. She felt wild and free most days, like her horse Chestnut. Seeing something beyond the country is exactly what she had wanted to do. He had peaked her interest with that statement. But did she need any man to show her the world? Naw, she told herself.

They talked for hours on the back of her pick-up truck, drinking far too much beer and finishing the whole pack of smokes between them. She had learned about his entire life story that evening. He was from the east coast, New York City. He had finished college with two Master's degrees dissatisfied, and classified himself as a wandering, exploring man now. He had never been to Houston once. He wanted to see the world, something he had never done after twelve years of schooling and pressure from his parents to take over the family Psychology counseling practice. His father had passed away suddenly from lung cancer and his mother urged him to take some time away for just himself, and go chase his dreams. He had been backpacking all over Europe that summer until he decided to travel to Egypt and Turkey. He had just returned from his travel to Istanbul, Turkey, to see *The Basilica Cistern*, the largest of several hundred ancient cisterns that lie beneath the city of Istanbul, Turkey. His eyes lit up and spoke quickly about this secret underground world he had just discovered, like a small boy opening a present on Christmas morning, his first train set. His eyes never left Jesse's own eyes, explaining that he needed to see the only other Cistern existing in the United States. Located right there in Texas. He revealed there was an abandoned Cistern below Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston, and he was planning on seeing it the next day. She could barely let him finish his sentence from that point on.

Built in 1926, the Buffalo Bayou Cistern was an underground water system used for decades to hold a large portion of Houston's public drinking water. After it sprang an irreparable leak, the 85,000 square-foot public reservoir was drained and sat unused. Practically forgotten about.

At ground level, the only evidence of the Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern was an unremarkable door set into a small hill overgrown with long stems of marshy grass hiding its entrance. That's why it went virtually unnoticed for almost eight decades now. And it was also the reason that Jesse missed the entrance three times when she

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first tried to visit the park. As soon as she stepped through the door and descended into the mysterious sunken world, Jesse knew she was standing somewhere special, in one of only two underground cisterns in the world open for anyone to see. It was a damp underground labyrinth of marble columns rising out of still water, the scene before her unworldly. She felt dwarfed by the massive room, which measured approximately 1 1/2 football fields. The cistern's 221 concrete columns, each 25 feet tall, gave her the sense that she was standing in an underground Greek temple or even a subterranean Lincoln Memorial.

She had stepped into a different dimension it seemed, a world kept secret and buried from the city. Dropping her flashlight on the cement causing utter blackness, she swore out loud and listened to the echo of *'damn'* for a full 17 seconds in the chambers. Shining her flashlight across the waters, it revealed a full reflection of the stone columns, their pillars displaying an image of a lost Roman Empire. A shallow layer of water remained standing on the floor to play with the shafts of sunlight barely admitted by the ceiling hatches above. What a hidden treasure laying there in silence, until she heard the sounds of water suddenly rushing in. And *voices*.

It took her a moment to fully understand, rubbing her eyes, she scanned the chambers with her flashlight in every direction, causing a magical dance of lights bouncing off all angles of stone walls. The still water began to rise quickly around her legs as she looked behind her for the door she had entered, now gone. The voices were echoing loudly and lingering into a vacuumed tunnel of long screams. Above her she saw a ceiling hatch and a small metal ladder hanging into the air. Quickly she climbed without thinking and panicked, dropping her flashlight into the water, which had almost reached the top of the stone columns. Closing the hatch under her, she stood on top of the grassy lawns of Buffalo Bayou park.

There was no view of the skyline. Houston appeared to vanish. There were no tall skyscrapers outlining the sky, and the interstate seemed to be missing too. There were no people or cars left in sight all the way out to the mouth of the gulf. There only laid a vast span of country, rolling grassy hills and Cypress trees lining the bayou, following its trail.

And then she heard it. The roar and thunder beyond the hills before it arrived. Wild horses galloping freely and grouped together by

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the dozens, they ran voraciously up the hill and past her. The running force of the wild horses made the wind open a path in the grass as they left. She spotted Chestnut among them, running away with the herd. He was free.

When she turned around behind her, almost wanting to chase after Chestnut, she saw a brown dust of smoke storming up behind her Chevy truck driving wildly up the grassy hill, aiming right at her. What the HELL? He was wearing blue jeans, a white shirt and a cowboy hat, driving her old beat up Chevy with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He stopped the truck abruptly, just short of where she was standing. The smile on his face was a wide foolish grin, *"I told you to wait for me to see the Cistern, how about you hop in? It's time I show you the world, Jesse with an e."* Under the sun and on top of the grassy hill, she smiled to herself and shook her head, yelling back at him, *"Hey that's my Chevy! Scoot the hell over! I'm driving."*