

Matthew

by A.C. Wise

"Do you remember being dead?" Rana crouched, and pressed coffee into Matthew's hands. The fingers that brushed hers as she pulled away were cold.

"No," Matthew's voice was quiet, even. "I remember before, and I remember after, but nothing in between. I remember you, but I don't remember why I came here."

He turned his head towards her, owl-like, and if he saw the hurt flicker in her eyes, he gave no sign. His eyes reminded her of gas flames burning low - blue ringing orange and gold. Rana rose, and crossed her arms.

She was conscious of the weight of her gaze on his cold flesh, even if he wasn't. She thought of Matthew's funeral, and the days before and after; a blur of time bleeding together, like the rain-shadows running over her dark skin as she watched him.

First had come the call, after midnight, with Jena's broken sobbing on the other end; then the funeral in the rain, cold mourners filing past the casket; a flicker-frame reel of a car crash playing out in Rana's dreams, and last - Jena running away

as though she could outrun the pain. And Rana, left behind to pick up the pieces and try to explain.

Now there was this - Matthew dead, but at her door. She had let him in, and in the moment she couldn't have said why. Perhaps it was something in the cold rain dripping from colder skin, something in his smile, in his strange burning eyes, something in the way he had pronounced her name, softly.

"Rana."

Just that. Just her name, and his flame-strange eyes watching her from behind drops of water gathering in his hair, making it into points before falling away.

"Rana."

Out of everyone he could have gone to, he had chosen her. And she couldn't say no.

Watching him, Rana frowned and chewed her lower lip - despite all the years he had been with Jena, Rana had never really known him. She was tangential to their relationship, her orbit brushing theirs occasionally at social functions. She was Jena's friend, but as a couple they belong to another world. Rana hadn't really thought of Matthew as a separate entity until he was dead. Now he was sitting on her couch, staring out her window, and watching the rain.

"Jena's gone," she spoke to break the silence. "I don't know where, I'm sorry. She took off after... Is there anyone else you want me to call?"

Matthew shrugged - a horse flicking a fly off its skin. Rana's words barely seemed to reach him. She knew he had friends and family, but none of that seemed to matter to him now.

"You can stay here tonight if you want. I'll make up the couch."

Rana moved, grateful for something to do. Even so she was acutely aware of Matthew's eyes on her back, watching her every motion as if he was trying to remember the concept of movement itself. When the bed was made she turned out the light hastily, and retreated to the safety of her room. But she was still acutely aware of his presence.

She lay on her back with her arms still and straight at her sides. Rana breathed and listened for the simulacrum of breath echoing from the other room. She watched blue shadows shift overhead, and thought of the rain tattooing Matthew's cold skin. Did his chest move in and out? Did he close his eyes? Did he sleep? Did he dream?

She thought of his face at her door, asking to come in. She thought of his eyes behind a beaded curtain of rain. Rana caught her breath sharply. She hadn't thought of him until he died. She hadn't loved him until he had returned.

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The next day they discovered Matthew wasn't the only one. The news was crowded with grainy images, stolen covertly through windows, interviews with friends and loved ones, and hands blocking cameras as others refused the attention.

The dead on TV looked like Matthew; slightly pale, but otherwise unchanged. They were quiet, and vague, and had no more answers than Matthew. Like his, their eyes were disconcerting and strange.

As of yet nobody had come knocking at her door, and Rana was grateful. Matthew had come to her, but she had no claim to him, no right of ownership. Though she might wish it otherwise, he was neither her secret to protect, nor give away.

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On the third night of Matthew's return, Rana woke to the sound of rain. It was a steady rhythm of tap and fall, hitting the windows and the roof and soaking into the ground. Inside the rain was a silence - a sound of listening, of not-breathing, of waiting in the dark. Rana pushed the sheets back and rose.

Her long hair, still kinked from its accustomed braid, fell loose to the middle of her back. Her feet, unshod, were also a lack of sound as she moved towards the kitchen. Matthew was a scrap of shadow; a denser piece of darkness against the blue-black night.

His back was to her, and he stared fixedly at the stove. A faint glow around his edges told Rana that one of the burners had been lit, and he was watching the flame. As Rana's eyes adjusted she could see faint flickers, slight movements beneath Matthew's skin, of muscles tensing and relaxing.

He stretched out his hand - rain-shadows running on his skin - and gathered the flame into his hand. It played between his fingers, and the blue-gold light matched his eyes as he turned.

"You're crying."

His voice was gentle as ever, and he registered no surprise to find her watching him. Rana touched her fingers to her cheek, and they came away wet, mimicking the rain, but gleaming silver in the light.

"Why?" Matthew's eyes betrayed the faintest hint of curiosity - the first human emotion she had seen since he returned.

Rana laughed, tasting the tears that came harder with his question. They were both bitter and sweet. How could she even

begin to explain? He was so strange, so other. And he had chosen her.

Matthew let his hand fall, and the flames spilled like the rain from his hair on the first night, burning out before they could reach the floor. He crossed the space between them, touching Rana's cheek lightly where the tears still glittered. He looked at them the same way he looked at the flames - a disconnected curiosity, with a hint of memory struggling to come through. The response that came to him seemed text-book, drawn from the memories lurking in his mind. Because he should, and not because he wanted to, he pulled her into his arms.

For a moment Rana resisted, wanting to be stronger than this, and then she let herself fold against him. She was at least a head shorter than him, and her face was level with his chest, pressed into it. He smelled cold - not of earth or rot, but lonely somehow, like shadows and rain.

"I want to cook you dinner."

At first she thought she must have misheard him, his words muffled by his arms holding her against him. It was so absurd, so incongruous that she had to laugh again as she pulled away.

"Why is that funny?"

Rana thought he was frowning slightly as he looked down at her, but it might have been a trick of shadow strayed from the window. Was it possible, she wondered, to offend him?

"Well," she smiled. "When was the last time a dead man offered to cook you dinner?"

On Matthew's lips, the shadow of a frown turned into the ghost of a smile.

* * *

They went grocery shopping. All hint of last night's rain was gone, and the sun was bright. The gold dazzle of its light was almost enough to hide the pallor of Matthew's skin. Rana wore a floppy hat and dark glasses, over-large on her petite face. At first she thought they might go unnoticed, but as they crossed the parking lot, she felt eyes following them.

"Freak!"

Rana refused to look around. She looped her arm through Matthew's and kept walking, trying to hold her head high. On TV speculation ran wild - was it Armageddon, the Apocalypse, was the end at hand? Had the dead come back to warn the living? Was this a blessing or a curse; a miracle or a plague? Rana felt all the same questions pent in the stares that followed them as they moved into the store and through the aisles.

The same questions rattled in her head, but she had not yet found the courage to voice a single one of them.

"My husband! Please, tell me about my husband!"

The hoarse cry startled Rana, and made her turn. An elderly woman, one of her neighbors whose name she had never bothered to learn, was approaching them. She leaned heavily on a walker, and her hands trembled where they clutched its bars. But her eyes were bright and for Matthew alone, and when she reached them she seized his cold hand.

"Is he alright? My husband? Does he remember me? My name is Ida, Ida Simmons. He's Harold. Did he give you a message for me?"

"I don't know him." Matthew pulled his hand away, shaking his head, and looking faintly troubled. "I'm sorry."

"He must have said something! Why didn't he come too?"

"I don't know." Matthew shook his head again, and took a step away from the woman. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

"It isn't fair." She pointed an accusing finger at Matthew's chest. "He was a good man."

"I'm sorry," Matthew repeated.

"Let's go."

Rana tugged Matthew's arm, pulling him away. He glanced over his shoulder; his eyes lingered on Ida Simmons as Rana led him towards the cash. Only when they were outside did Rana let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding, but the tension didn't leave her body.

People were still watching them - some curious, some longing, and some openly hostile. It would only get worse, Rana realized, and her throat tightened. A thousand questions fluttered, trapped behind her teeth. They were the same questions that burned in the eyes watching them, and blared from the TV. And she knew Matthew had answers for none of them, not even the one that burned brightest in her mind, and the one she most feared the answer to. How much time did Matthew have here, and why had he chosen to spend it with her?

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As offered, Matthew cooked her dinner. The circle of candlelight surrounding them was a haven. For a moment Rana let herself forget her fears. What if Jena returned? What if she woke up tomorrow and Matthew was gone? She pushed them deep, burying them under the taste of garlic and red wine.

She noticed Matthew had picked strong flavors, as though trying to bully his lost senses back by force. His eyes were drawn repeatedly to the flames between them, and Rana thought of his fingers as candles again - his skin melting wax dripping onto the floor.

"Tell me something," his words dropped into the silence.

"Like what?"

Rana lifted her head, realizing she had been drifting. Matthew looked at her with the same intensity he had turned on the flame, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Anything. Tell me about you, about your family. I never got to know you that well when I was with Jena."

Jena's name sent Rana's heart from her throat into her stomach to rest like a stone, hard and cold. She swallowed, and forced herself to smile.

"Well, my parents were born in Goa. They immigrated here shortly after they got married, and two years later I was born. I'm an only child. There was some complication during pregnancy so my mother couldn't have any more children. I was American educated, and my parents refused to speak anything but English to me, even at home..."

Rana let her voice fade. She was suddenly aware of Matthew's intense gaze again, as if she was the very memory of life itself, personified. The image of a man warming himself in front of a fire rose in her mind, and she fought the urge to wrap her arms around herself against the imaginary chill.

"Thank you for dinner."

Rana pushed her plate away. She was self-conscious again. Questions tapped at her teeth, and she clenched them so as not to shout the words aloud. _Why did you come back? Why here?

Why me?_ Without realizing it, she was flexing her hands under the table; making fists and letting them go.

She forced herself to take a sip of wine. Heady spice slipped over her tongue and down her throat. She wondered if Matthew could taste it.

"I've upset you?" It was half a question, half a statement.

"No." Rana shook her head, the denial coming too quickly. Her hand was trembling when she set her glass down.

She wanted him to take her in his arms again. She wanted to kiss his lips, cold though they were. And she hated herself for wanting these things. It was a longing she couldn't explain. There was only a vague sense of something special, something sacred hanging between them. He had chosen _her_...

"I should..."

She rose clumsily and almost upset her wine glass. A few drops spilled on her fingers as she caught it and kept it from falling. Matthew was on his feet too, and he took her hand, which drifted towards him of its own accord. He put her fingers in his mouth, licking the spilled wine from their tips. His eyes on her face were strange flame, hungry and questioning. Frozen, Rana did not pull away.

Next to her dark skin, his fingers were almost blue; the same color as twilight. His eyes were bruised stars, and his lips tasted of the moon. His expression did not change. The

same cold distance stretched between them, and Rana found herself watching him with the same fascination, the same intensity with which he had watched her moments before.

She watched for any flicker, any betrayal of emotion that might bridge the gap between them. She hoped desperately for some key to the secret locked behind his eyes. But they did not change. He was strange, he was cold. He was other. Rana caught her breath. He had come to her. She let herself go.

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The first pilgrim came to their door the next morning. Rana blinked through the sunlight at the man, stooped and clutching his hat in trembling hands.

"Please."

It was one word, and his eyes were full of need as he spoke it, reminding her of Matthew standing at her door and asking to come in. Before Rana could turn the man away, silent as a walking shadow, Matthew drifted up behind her. Rana stepped aside, feeling suddenly superfluous to the unspoken conversation. Matthew's flame-strange eyes were unreadable, but he stretched out his hand and laid it upon the man's bowed head nonetheless.

By noon the line stretched to the sidewalk, and snaked around the corner. From behind half-drawn curtains Rana watched them, their careless feet tamping down her lawn and crushing the flowers in her garden. Was that what had drawn Matthew to her - need as desperate and stark as the need in these people's faces? When he touched her, was it the same as when he touched them - a disconnected motion of a hand seeming almost to move outside of his will?

Part of her ached with jealousy. She wanted to send them away - all of them - slam the door and lock it in their faces. Matthew had come to her. But she had admitted to herself from the beginning that he wasn't her secret to keep or give away, and nothing had changed.

Matthew had no answers, and he was just as unknowable as unknowing, Rana realized. He was like smoke; holding him was an illusion. There was no love in his eyes when they lay together, and she had no more claim to him now than when he had arrived at her door three months after his funeral.

Part of her wanted to scream at him, slap him, and accuse him of lying to her, though he never had. He should have been a comfort to her, not the other way around.

* * *

Pilgrims continued to arrive, and protesters as well. The media circus ebbed and swelled again, like a tide crashing at their shore. Rana lived in constant dread of the day Jena would return, after catching Matthew's image on TV.

And then, two months after Matthew had arrived at her doorstep, Rana discovered she was pregnant. Rationally, she knew it was impossible, but a doctor's visit confirmed what the home kit had shown.

Should she tell him? Was this real enough to anchor him here, to stake her claim and dispel her fears? Did she even want him here, chained to her - unknowable eyes always watching her in a slide of shadow and flame? Cold skin next to hers every night, and no breathing beside her on the pillow?

Did she even want the child? What if it was born a monster? But if she destroyed it, would it come back to her - cold and still - with fire-shaded eyes, haunting her house with its stillness and the sound of no breath in the nursery?

Rana curled into herself, wrapping her arms around her legs, listening to the sound of her breath and her heart. In the sun, facing the line of waiting pilgrims, Matthew seemed more solid than she was. She was becoming a ghost in her own house, and would only become more so as time went by. Whatever she wanted of Matthew, he couldn't give it to her, but she couldn't give him what he needed either.

* * *

"I think you should go."

It was hard, biting back the tears that prickled in her eyes. Rana bit her lip too, holding it in teeth that stopped just short of breaking the skin, tasting the blood pulsing just beneath the surface. Her arms were crossed over her body, holding herself together, holding her secret in.

Matthew's eyes were at once unchanging, and filled with flickering shadows. Could he see beneath her flesh and guess the things she didn't say? She half expected him to speak, but he only nodded.

He didn't beg Rana to let him stay, though she wanted him to as he reached for the door. She didn't call him back, though every part of her ached to scream, "I love you!"

But the words were too strange, too fraught and too bitter - too true. She knew it as he walked out the door, glancing back at her once with inscrutable eyes.

"I'm sorry."

Rana wasn't sure whether she breathed the words, or whether it was Matthew, or whether they both spoke together. She watched him from the door, disappearing into the dimming gray twilight. Pale stars appeared overhead, and she thought of

Matthew's funeral - the casket being lowered into the ground,
erased by the rain.

When Matthew was only a smudge of gray against the night,
Rana closed the door. The house felt cold and empty - a strange
lack of sound where it seemed silence had always been. She
wrapped her arms around her body, and held her breath, waiting
for a heartbeat, a sign, an echo of the life growing within.
When her baby was born, Rana wondered, what kind of lullaby
would she sing?