

Rain

Joaquin Fernandez

There were a thousand mornings just like this. Nudged awake, my tiny feet on the floor, blinking, hazy, driven to dress in the dark by some phantom force, then shuffling towards my father's beat up car in the forgiving chill of the Florida night air.

"Aqui, Papi!"

I remember he used a key to unlock his passenger side door. I remember my father's toothy grin, bright with apology under the weight of his ever-present mustache. I remember my sister was always there first, the sleep long gone from her eyes. I yawned past her, waiting for the backseat while my father held the passenger door open for me. Because boys sat in the front. Boys sat in the front and girls had to strain their eyes, squinting fiercely into books between fleeting streetlights while they jostled and bumped in the back. Ours wasn't the kind of father to check seatbelts.

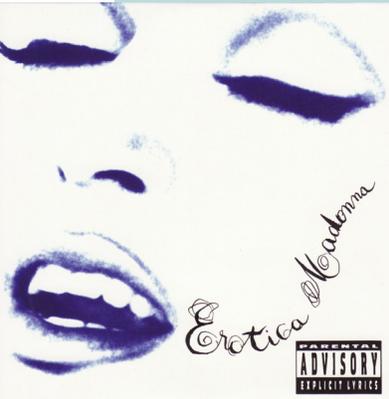
I slept until Madonna woke me.

I always did this. I dozed in the front seat while my sister and father talked about things I would never remember. Mysteries from that occult encyclopedia he gave us for Christmas? Why that Robert Silverberg book she carried with her wasn't really literature? Why the music she liked wasn't really music? In 1992, they played that Madonna song "Rain" almost hourly, the way they used to when people still listened to the radio. When the DJ talked about it, you could hear them blush and smirk whenever they mentioned the album. The title felt foreign to my young mind: *Erotica*. The word itself felt like it could only be pronounced as a whisper, like it was only spelled properly in italics. When my father heard it, as we pushed into the night, he laughed. He knew my sister loved that song and he would always turn it up, picking apart the lyrics as she tried to sing along. In a different life, he had been a college professor and there he was, loud and happy defending his thesis against the critical mind of his nine-year old daughter. And laughing. There was something mean about that laugh, something that would never be joy in that pack-a-day growl he woke me up with.

Before dawn, the beach doesn't look like anything. The parking lot is empty when we get there, and in that hour between night and day it felt like we owned all the Florida nothingness, as far as our eyes could see. Our father always wore business trousers and polo shirts, even here on the sand, rigidly formal, eighteen months into this current bout of unemployment. My sister and I slipped socks into shoes and shoes into sand, wincing our way through shell and gravel, ankle deep in the chilly, ebbing tide. We would stand there, quietly waiting for an absent sun until the cold surf defeated one of us. It was a contest, sure, but one I always lost. Numb and shivering, I turned to the wall of endless sand and night, looking for the firefly of my father's cigarette.

"Aqui, Papi!"

He waved his free hand, a broad anxious flail that I never realized was nervousness. When I sat, I stifled a cough. When I sat, I could hear my mother's voice yelling at him about my asthma. When I sat, I could hear the rise in his voice when he told her it was nothing. And it was. I was his son and I was strong and a little smoke wasn't going to hurt me. Still, after a few stifled coughs, he flicked his smoke into the sand and I allowed myself a smile when he disappeared into the dark. He asked me about books and school and politics, just



Madonna

"Rain"

Erotica

10/1992

Maverick · Sire

like he always did, and I didn't have a lot to say, just like I always didn't. It wasn't disappointment in his voice, exactly, more like impatience. Those mornings with him, waiting for the sun to come up, I could feel him grow tired of waiting for me to become interesting enough to really talk to. When he talked to me, I missed my sister. How could he not see that she was the smart one?

"Papi?"

We could hear her. My sister's thin child's voice, shouting, brave and all but vanished against the wind and surf. She wandered, yelling for us in the wrong direction, lost without the light of my father's bad habits.

The rain in South Florida was always a welcome disaster. The sun peeked out just enough to let us know we weren't going to see it. An electric breeze, prickly with static, swept the humidity off me with a sudden, welcome rush. I could see my sister, a tiny searching silhouette, far away, but wandering towards us. We could see bright spots and pink smudges under a churning veil of thunderclouds and we smiled. As my sister got closer the sky behind her grew terrible with beauty. The clouds began to splinter with neon cracks. Distant explosions rumbled in the sky behind her as she quickened her pace, big steps for little legs on shifting sands. A single perfect lightning bolt carved the world in half silently behind her. Followed by another. She was close enough to see the shock on my face when the thunder finally struck, deafening and inevitable.

"Aqui, Papi!"

My father was already on his feet when the rain started. He was already pulling me up by the time I felt it, cool and urgent on my skin. I can still see the look on my sister's face when he put her book over my head, shielding me as he turned to run. Before I turned to join him, pulled by the vice of his hand on mine, propelled by the scramble of his panic, I saw her. There was no surprise when her father turned to leave her. There was nothing but determination. There was nothing but the scowl of her effort as she ran, small and beautiful as the thunder chased her, impervious to the rain.