

## The Rains

Our calendar is a sulking sky. Clouds determine intervals in the dwindling cycle of life, time measured only by pauses in the rain. Evanescent light penetrates the shroud above us. If the leaching stops, what matters then is the duration of each dry spell. If we are lucky, there will be time to forage. Hope clings helplessly to a hiatus.

I observe the sleeping child splayed on a lumpy sofa. Hannah is sick, exhausted and famished. Her pale face beams in the dim light from a purple hood amid a bundle of rinsed clothes in which she is wrapped to excess. It is the only thing that radiates in this room. She wheezes. My stray has caught a chill and I am more worried than ever.

The village we find ourselves in was submerged on the approach and we entered it by scrambling along an embankment of restless shale. This settlement has become a promontory in an ocean of floodwater. Farther down the valley, islets dot infinite fens, relics of fields that once grew wheat and barley. We have searched the trashed shops for salvage. A pharmacy's shelves were picked clean long ago. There is nothing for the child. All I can offer her is more of the same, an unsatisfying tonic of faith. I am not her mother, but feel a mother's anguish.

I mine my memories for this place, lured here by an instinct to find familiar terrain, a terra firma from my childhood. I think I have seen the peaks that surround us, before their topsoil was scoured by the incessant rain, the grassy earth scarred brutally by mudslides. The cottage we rest in grips to the foothills for grim life.

I scan the room. It is bare apart from the armchair and sofa. Its windows rot in their frames, ready to fall at a raised voice. Even if it offers brief respite, everything is damp to the core. At the rear where the kitchen overlooks what was once a walled garden, the structure has subsided and toppled into the mud. The entire side of the mountain is sliding towards the valley. This tectonic surrender has exposed the building's innards, its fading, flowered wallpaper flapping limply in shreds from drooping walls like ancient webs.

The inner door is distended and will not shut, so I have jammed it with a rock, but a cruel wind slithers past the jamb along the hall to where I sit against a clammy cushion. I watch the child's chest rise and fall. The bitter breeze assaults my soaked clothes. I feel its cold kiss upon my cheek.

Logic would dictate that I light a fire, and I have flint, but it will be hopeless. I will be unable to find kindling dry enough to ignite. The floorboards are so saturated they are greasy. A forest of black mould colonises the ceiling.

I rummage in the rucksack, bringing out a tin without a label. I remind myself that this contains beef stew, although a seed of doubt has germinated. I am becoming confused. Perhaps it contains chickpeas, or peeled tomatoes. The can rusts at the edges, but all I feel on my creased fingertip are pins and needles. I pray the contents have not been corrupted, for it is all we have. I fumble at the bottom of the bag for the opener, then remember that I broke it prising open the front door.

*Damn!*

The rains are tightening their siege. The dry spells are contracting. It is hard to imagine where all this water comes from, and as I sit here, sullen, I picture a tidal wave, a grey juggernaut smashing over white cliffs, a heinous screech of falling rock crashing into churning swell. If only it were so simple, a biblical explanation with discernible lessons. But this complex calamity has taken a lifetime. Hannah's lifetime. All she has known is inundation. She was born into a sinking world, and is going under with it.

Our journey from the metropolis has been painfully slow and has sapped our strength. Every morning I question my motives, revisit the decision to flee the floundering capital. A sunken city is far more dangerous than open countryside. But was I wrong? Everything here has been erased. Deserted towns have succumbed to the deluge. Overwhelmed pasture has turned to slurry, trees and hedges uprooted by hidden currents and cast adrift. All food has

expired, nothing has time to grow, even the rats drown. The sun has been extinguished. Now time conspires against us. Without shelter and food, Hannah will not survive the winter.

For several years I indulged a suspicion that we were being punished in a form of retribution. It was an engine for my thoughts as I drifted alone, awaiting the inevitable, allowing me to ponder the prospect of an afterlife, a divine design, some reason for our downfall. But since encountering the child, I have had no energy for complex myths of my own making, recriminations, guilt. These thoughts are of no use to Hannah. My only purpose is to ensure her survival. She is my compass. When I found her, marooned in a crystal shopping centre, what remained of my life gained meaning.

I push myself up, my stiff joints screaming in the silence, and shuffle to the dank hallway. A mirror, creeping oxidisation pockmarking its reflective surface, cherishes a slither of red light from stained glass in the door. I push back my hood, squint.

What I confront shocks me. My hair is pasted to my scalp, once loose brown curls compressed by moisture mingled with sweat and dirt. My ashen skin has a sickly, waxen sheen, my lips the whitened blue of a lifeless fish. The rims of my eyes are red with abuse, heavy bags beneath them like the muddy berms we have clambered up from the swamp so often on our travels. My entire countenance cries out for help. I am not the invincible, determined woman of my former aspirations. I grunt with disgust.

I inspect my spattered boots. Unconsciously, I have undone the laces in the foolish hope that my socks might begin to dry, a habit that the humidity mocks. I trudge to the kitchen, drag my squelching feet, kick away the rock jamming the door, scan the broken heart of a home violated by the elements. The sink flounders in the mud below, sheared away when the wall tumbled, but cupboards still hang precariously from flaccid plaster. I search them for a utensil. There is nothing. I return to the front room and collapse in the chair.

Hannah stirs. Watching her face as she woke was once my only joy. A vestige of my humanity surged in my breast when the child greeted the day, and I nurtured myself on this sensation like breakfast. But now all I feel is desolation, a dark misgiving. Would it be a relief if her eyes stayed shut forever?

We stare at each other, neither of us bothering to move or speak. I break the impasse.

*Any better?*

She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly.

*I feel sick.*

I know this. She has not eaten for far too long. I have pushed her beyond limitations. I sense that we have run out of luck.

Hannah closes her eyes, resisting the prospect of waking into this itinerant reality of endless wandering in a featureless wilderness that is neither sea nor land but something unimaginable. I examine her face, and wonder whether we can see hope evaporate, an ether curling into waterlogged air. I notice that, with something like cruel irony, the child's lips are cracked, the skin peeling. She is parched. As millions of corpses rest in eternal putrefaction in the waters, the only resource we have in abundance is too dangerous to drink.

*I'll find something.*

Dreary light filters through the condensation from our breath that has frosted the windows, then abruptly darkens. An ominous cloud labours across the peak and bears down on our refuge, its black folds sweat spray. A thunderclap cracks. Hannah opens her eyes again, this time with a suddenness that takes me by surprise. She forms more words than she has for days.

*It's never going to end, is it Maddy?*

I rise, stand at the window and rub a circle on the pane, gently so as not to displace it. In the distant mist, beyond the remnants of the village, a streak of lightning irradiates the

heavy atmosphere with electric blue. It is a momentary spark of colour in the otherwise leaden firmament.

I try to recall when this all began, when the downpour started to cleanse the world of us. It seems so long ago that I have become inured to the transformation, our descent into a drenched chaos. I have to concentrate to remember how we lived, the offices and deadlines, the sharp suits and edges, stocked shelves and cappuccinos. It is lonely this new land, depopulated and empty. A void in which silence obtains a gravity. Announcements at train stations and the hum of traffic have been replaced by the torturous hiss of permanent rainfall, mizzling torment, the impatient growl of thunder.

I feel the onset of despair. Hannah is letting my lifeline of hope slip away. It is all I have to bind her.

*We're nearly there.*

I force the same grimace of reassurance that I have perfected on this interminable journey, but the child is not convinced. I see it in her turbid eyes. She sees through my superficial cheer. She senses that I no longer believe in my role. We have been travelling for months, castaways, astray. I am compelled to continue, although I lie awake at night asking myself why, but she has no reason to share my vision. I try to distract her.

*Shall I make fire?*

It is an absurd proposition, but it is all I have. I tear at the arm of the chair and rip at its innards. It yields in my hands, almost with anticipation that it might achieve a higher purpose than this relentless decomposition. I pull out horsehair and arrange it on the empty hearth where slushy ash has oozed from the chimney breast. I rummage in the bag for the flint to spark it with the broken can opener. Hannah watches, listless. Just as her body is diminishing, the puppy fat sliced like bacon from her by hunger, she has grown in cynical wisdom. She knows what I am doing is futile. She knows that I know this.

The tinder is soaking wet. When the ruse becomes counterproductive, I slump against the wall and exhale.

*There's a field up the slope. I'll go look. Might be a cabbage.*

Hannah closes her eyes without acknowledging me. This suggestion is equally ridiculous. She wheezes again. She has not moved this whole time. She knows I am trying, but that there will be no fire and no cabbage. She has no childish outrage left. Tantrums require vigour.

Shall I tell her again the story of the highest village in the hills, conjure a vision of milk from cows so creamy you can stand a spoon in it, evoke warm summers collecting honey from the hives?

When I was a child in my sleepy rustic haven, I used to study the clouds while dozing in the stubble. I imposed upon them form and meaning. In that existence, the rain represented hope, a medium of nurture. We took it for granted, this life-giving current that joined with the earth in a sequence of renewal. The farmers regarded it as the lubricant of a vast apparatus which, properly harnessed, provided outcomes that were predictable. I can still see the face of our neighbour as he stands at our gate, a stooping giant with venous cheeks and a prominent brow from which sprout hedgerow eyebrows. He takes his eyes off my father as he speaks to look at the bounteous sky, telling him in that western drawl I have not forgotten that all will be well for the county fair.

But this destination from my past, this fantasy, does not fill an empty belly. As Hannah has grown weaker, so has her faith in my promised land.

I tie my laces, tighten my hood and leave. The plot behind the cottage has turned into a bog. I pick my way through it, trying not to be sucked in, distracted for a cinematic instant by an image of a gentlewoman in lace kneeling beside a flowerbed beneath spring sunshine. Beyond the wall the ground becomes rockier as it rises. It is easier to negotiate now and I

head for a plateau below the ridge where a pathetic, crooked meadow is fenced with rusting wire. The black earth slowly digests the posts. I climb a slippery sty, seeking anything that can be eaten, then sit on a rock to survey the panorama.

To the north, modest mountains hem us in, to the east and south, the lakes that have swallowed once fertile farming land stretch as far as the eye can see, vast pools in a patchwork of brown and dun that fades in the foggy air. Half-submerged estates catch their final breath at the surface, slate farmhouse roofs blending with pewter reservoirs. To the west, bleached hummocks jut from a lagoon that disappears in a flat, colourless haze. I assume it is the sea.

When I was Hannah's age, we left our rural idyll for the city. That was in a parallel universe. We must be near the place that I remember. I have a blurred map in my mind that is traced in outline only by a divined sense of direction, magnetic reflex, a wild guess about distance travelled. But I cannot see anything that I recognise. Everything is transformed. Nothing is familiar. I concentrate as hard as I can, trying to recollect distinctive things, buildings, landmarks, signposts, anything to jog my memory.

There is nothing to be had on this barren bluff. Even the grass wilts, drunk to excess with water percolating down the incline under daylight too diffuse to stiffen its back. I look down the slope upon the sagging roof of the cottage, its mossy tiles sliding from rotten battens with a determination to reach the ground. I am frightened to descend empty-handed, mindful I have again failed the ailing child. Hannah will not want to leave. It has been hard enough to coax her this far. This is the end.

I push myself from the rock. The sty is a barrier that I am almost too weary to straddle, and I stand before it to catch my breath. I feel my knees in rebellion. Yet as I waiver, a glint catches my attention, the merest yellow flash.

To the west, inland of the coastline, the clouds have separated, cleaved by wind from the horizon. An amber ray illuminates a sodden landscape, enhancing what little green remains and reflecting silver from the lakes. I have not seen this for months.

I notice that the rain has stopped. I feel my heart beating, a reminder that I am alive.

It flashes again, a beacon, and I remember at last. I screw my eyes tight to focus, ignoring a sharp pain in my head, forcing myself to see. There, like a tiny jewel, is a golden dome. It is the clock tower above the village market that I marvelled at as I clutched my mother's hand.

Memories flood my mind like a sluice has been opened. Together we cascade down to the cottage in a torrent of promise.