

The Chance of Rain

by Pia Ehrhardt

The Chance Of Rain: 2003?

For Ruth

Ann met her friend Leah on the green lattice bench at Woldenberg Park. She was already waiting. The morning was bright and cool. The Mississippi River had a blue cast, unusual, but salt-water intrusion did this. The promenade was crowded with tourists and school groups, admiring the water.

They shared a box of Mrs. Field's brownies from the mall in Ann's office building. "You're a mitzvah," Leah said. She was eighty-five and loved sweets. A toy schnauzer ran up and sniffed her sandals. She bent over to let him lick her palm.

Her son had committed suicide when he was 19, and she mentioned him every time they were together: David. Ann counted on this, admired that Leah's every day included a child who had been gone for thirty-five years. Ann's son was 14 and she didn't know what to do with the surges of worry, where to keep them so they didn't overshadow the normal. ??

The calliope on the Natchez chugged through Scott Joplin, happy in the missed pitches. Leah winced. "Notes made out of steam," Ann said. On top of the ship, a woman dressed in red stood playing an organ no bigger than a tray table.

She and Leah talked about the war in Iraq, the photos in the morning paper that showed proof of the atrocities committed by American soldiers, how patriotism imploded. ??

"We don't learn from our mistakes," Leah said.

The schnauzer's owner lay on the grass, chatting on the phone, while the dog waited forever for its walk.

Kids in school uniforms scattered, running toward the rail to see the river. Their teacher herded them back. They'd been to the aquarium and next they would picnic on the grass.

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/pia-ehrhadt/the-chance-of-rain>»

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"I can smell the Gulf in the water," Leah said. She put a brownie on a napkin beside her and picked out the walnuts. "During the Vietnam War, David was contacted by the draft board, but he was in St. Vincent De Paul." ??

De Paul's was a mental institution. Did people still call them that? In high school, Ann's mother threatened once a week to commit herself. "Compared to raising you," she'd say, her finger in Ann's face, "it'd be a vacation." But it was Ann who had checked in to De Paul's detox program when she was twenty-two. "I'm your mother, not your friend," her mother liked to say. She still didn't know.

When Ann hit bottom she needed fresh eyes, the stubborn belief of strangers.

"He'd tried suicide twice," Leah said. "I doubted he could live. He was so sad. We never gave up, but we knew. "

De Paul's and having sons were things they shared in common, and a love of chamber music. She and Ruth went to afternoon concerts together held in churches and at Loyola, because at night Ruth tired.

"My father fought," Ann said. "With the First Cav for eighteen months. People spit on him when he came back through the airport in San Francisco because he'd worn his surplus jacket. He says he and my mother were at their happiest then, living on the other side of the country from their families. When they got home it all went downhill."

Leah wooed the schnauzer over with brownie crumbs. "If David were going to die in a war, I wanted it to be with the Israeli Army fighting in the Six-Day War, over something justifiable," she said. ??

She put her hand on Ann's arm. "Do you know the answer to this? Why the Allies didn't blow up the train tracks so the Germans couldn't transport the Jews to the camps?" ??

Ann didn't. Why didn't she? "I can find out," she said, but the answer would be sixty years late. ??

Leah pulled a plastic Winn Dixie bag from her purse. It was filled with CDs. Her deceased husband had collected all of Kronos Quartet's recordings. "I want you to have them," she said. "The

music they play is too severe for me. You appreciate it more than I can." She took a small bite and covered her mouth shyly while she chewed. "You talk now so I can enjoy this brownie you brought me."??

Ann told her friend about her son, how last week walking home from school he'd seen two black kids in a fist fight on the neutral ground, how one of them had pulled a gun from his backpack and shot the other. ?

"Is he talking to you about it?" Leah asked. ??

"Not yet," Ann said. "He asked me to pick him up from school for the next few days. Blamed it on the chance of rain."

A Zoo Cruise floated by on ocean blue water and tourists waved at anyone who was looking. ?New Orleans hadn't seen rain in three months and the gulf was bleeding up into the river.

"That's telling you something," Leah said, pointing at the cloudless sky.

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