

First Chapter of Rain (novel)

by Brett Garcia Rose

I leave bloody handprints on the doorframe, banging solidly, rhythmically, whispering to Sara to let me in. My neighbors, rustling inside their apartment next to mine, listening, their feet casting long shadows under the door. The box of half-dead pigeons jumps and rattles along the cracked parquet floor, jerking and cooing as I lean against the wall, waiting.

I'm tired, tired.

Sara opens the door in frayed white silk pajamas, her eyes red from crying, or red from drinking, I don't know anymore. Her gaze falls lazily down the length of my body, her eyes getting smaller and smaller until they reach the box next to my feet. She shakes her head and walks away slowly, cautiously. Halfway down a narrow hallway that ends at our bedroom door she stops and leans backwards against a wall, releasing a long breath. I close the door and enter our apartment clumsily, off balance from the shifting box. The shadows of my neighbor's feet retreat back into the shadows as they reluctantly move away from the doorway, shaking their collective head and settling back to their insomniac trance and an endless parade of late-night infomercials.

"You promised you wouldn't do this Nicholas," Sara whispers. "You promised."

I look up at her slowly, meeting her gaze and hurting all the more for it. Beneath the steel of her tired voice I try to follow the mean, beautiful melody around her anger and past it, but the sound itself is sharp enough to cut furniture.

"I have somewhere to bring them tomorrow at nine," I say, my voice hoarse and cracking.

"You should have stayed out. It's almost six. I have to get up for work in an hour." She glares at me, her eyes in their little corners.

“Yes, I know.” Sara looks at me sadly and I can see her letting me go, softening against my own weakness and exhaustion. She does not want to know, certainly not the details, of the last two days I spent in the woods, hiding from the brutality of the hunt even as I forced myself to watch, alert for any opportunity to run and grab a mangled bird.

It's not that I love pigeons. It's that I hate hunters.

I reach out my hand towards Sara, to steady her somehow, or maybe just to lose myself in the clean smell of her hair, in the safety of her sleep. She winces and closes her eyes tightly. I look down at my arm, layered in dried, cracked blood, some pigeon, some my own. It all looks the same now. Sara's face is crunched up, wrinkled in disgust.

I set the box down on an old coffin we'd bought at a garage sale and were now using as a coffee table. It is a child's coffin, about four feet long, pale, worn walnut wood with darker mahogany inlays near the borders. Behind the box the early morning sun peeks out over the horizon of flat, bare roofs, reflecting off of the dirty glass of an office building into our one window, painting orange squares the wide, cracked floorboards.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I didn't want to leave them there. I stand motionless for a long moment, staring at Sara in the reflection of our window, her faded image transposed against the lined orange glass of the office building. As my eyes trace the soft planes and creases of her vintage pajamas I realize there isn't a single thing about her that I don't love.

She walks over to the carton and lifts one flap, leaning softly against my arm and peering inside with an odd, beautiful mixture of sadness and horror etched on her face. The feeling of her skin against mine comforts me as I remember all the animals I brought home and forced upon her, more often than not just to watch them die slowly.

She always says that fighting against the scientists and the hunters and carnivores has diminished me. She says this 50 different ways and still I cannot hear. Every day she loves me a little

less, and justifies it by saying that there is less of me to love.

At some crucial, overlooked space in our life together, I used up my compassion and started to spend hers.

“What happened to your arm?” She asks, not looking up from the birds.

“Fell out of a tree,” I answer flatly.

In the beginning I'd come home weary and damaged and just the sight of her would bring me back to life. Our life was romantic, immediate. We'd drink cheap wine and laugh for hours, falling onto the couch or floor as she tried to dab my cuts with makeup pads soaked in alcohol. I'd let out mock shrieks, whooping and grabbing for her wrists. Then we'd fall silent and she'd kiss my sadness back down deep to where she could no longer see it, and it was enough.

No longer.

“I can't do this anymore, Nicholas,” she whispers, touching my face with her long, slender fingers. I close my eyes whispers again, more softly. “I can't.”

