

Rain

by Brett Garcia Rose

Nicholas walked slowly along the faint deer trail that stretched out for miles behind the graying house. Leaves and patches of pine needles yielded smoothly under his small feet, softened by three days of constant rain. He took careful, deliberate steps, placing each foot exactly the same distance from the last, all his concentration focused on the green, cushiony floor.

It would be their last day in the great house. Brightly colored moving trucks stood idling in the drive above; parents anxiously awaiting their return. Nicholas walked further than usual, faster, away from the trucks.

His sister Dylan ran next to him, taking loud, stomping steps, forward and sideways, backwards and leaping forward again, all the while talking to the trees and plants, to the little frogs she formally greeted and carefully avoided, to the large, hairy, fearsome monsters of her imagination. She was nearly six, with a round face and wide, sandy curls that defied gravity.

"So Papa says I will be exactly half your age tomorrow, and then I can start catching up," she chirped, out of breath from circling him nine times each minute.

Nicholas smiled one of his rare, unrestrained smiles. She was the only one who could seem to get him out of himself, get him to look like a child. She infected him with her happiness.

She began another bouncing circle around him, her big head flopping sideways, sticking her tongue out as if it were dragging her whole head down.

"You'll never really catch up, you know," Nicholas answered in his usual flat monotone. "And you'll never be as tall as me."

"But I'll always be more beautiful," she chirped, still bouncing.

She turned abruptly in front of him and stopped, frowning, nearly causing him to stumble over her. They stood there for a minute, her eyes staring, level with his chest. It was her way of punishing him, and he tried to take it seriously. She pushed slightly with her hand to

maintain the proper distance, holding him still. He knew from experience to take shallow breaths; any movement in his stomach would escalate his punishment.

Without warning she rushed and hugged him, mashing her head into his belly and squeezing as hard as her arms would allow. He held her big blonde head with one arm, staying absolutely still the way she liked, so she could push off like a rocket when she needed to bounce again.

Only this time she didn't push off. Instead, she lightly took hold of his hand and pulled him down towards a grand oak tree, tugging at him until he sat facing her. The ground instantly soaked his pants. She folded her arms tightly, creasing her fuzzy parka into pink wormlike segments, and lowered her head so the hood slid down her forehead. The tree behind her made her seem even smaller than usual.

"It is all arranged, Nicholas," she said, still holding his finger in her little hand, pulsing rhythmically to accentuate the random syllables she deemed important. With her other hand, she reached into her jacket pocket and removed two folded papers covered in blocky crayon markings. She studied the pink one for a long minute, then silently folded it and replaced it inside her pocket. The blue one she handed to Nicholas, sweeping her arm in a wide flourish and bowing as it reached his hand.

"This is your passport, Nicholas", she said in a ghostly, trembling voice. "Do not lose it, otherwise you cannot return."

He accepted the document, noting the child's lettering on the outside, then the intricate map crossing the inner fold tracing their journey from Reading, Pennsylvania to her imaginary castle in France where they would have his birthday party and celebrate her new beginning in the older half of their lives. She outlined supply stops in Mexico, Australia, Miami, Antartica, Hollywood, Rome.

To a six year old, an ocean is nothing.

She towered above him, smiling her big smile. Little raindrops dribbled from the hood of her parka onto her freckled nose, into her mouth, but she kept still, staring at him sternly. He knew she was

holding back the laughter as long as she possible could; that at any moment she would collapse onto him and they would both roll to the ground thrashing in uncontrollable giggles, laughing until their lungs hurt, until their eyes stung from crying and she peed her pants and then they would both lift their faces to the sky and let the rain wash into them, cooling their hot cheeks and making their teeth chatter.

She reached out to grab for his hand, impatient to begin their journey. Nicholas stretched up towards her, climbing out of the wet mud. Just as the tips of her fingers touched his her head slammed backwards against the tree with such force that she seemed to flatten into the bark. She stayed there for a moment, as if glued to the tree, the same stern smile frozen on her big face. A small red splotch formed on her cheek, swelling rapidly. Her face seemed to sag slightly on one side, like a balloon losing air.

She was still standing when he heard the sound, a tree branch cracking in the distance. He rushed and caught her as she began to slide to the ground, thinking something from the tree had fallen and hit her on the face. She stared at him as he lowered her slowly to the base of the tree, taking short, panicked breaths, all the previous happiness gone from her face. She was still crying, but nothing else seemed to work. Warm wetness seeped out of her parka, covering his hands and legs, spreading downward and mixing with the rain and mud.

When he pulled back her hood to make a pillow out of it, she arched her back far into the air, nearly folding her little body in half, and her eyes snapped open wider than he'd ever seen them. He put his cheek against hers, crying softly as she stopped breathing. He held one hand, then the other, nuzzling her head, not noticing the blood and gore.

He was going into shock when someone grabbed him up with one hand and threw him off to the side and into the brush.

One of the men threw down his rifle and ran, either going for help or running away. Nicholas watched in horror as the other one took out a long knife and sliced into his sister's parka and the soft

shirts underneath, pressing his big hands on her chest and kissing her. Her lifeless eyes stared into Nicholas as her body bucked up and down under the pressure of the man's hands. The tears and blood were already starting to dry when the man sat back and finally looked at Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders.

Nicholas surged forward and plowed into the man with all his strength, scratching and biting anywhere he could, kicking, pulling out hair by the roots, jamming his fingers in eye sockets, ears, nostrils, impossibly brutal for a boy his age. The man covered his head and waited it out. He would carry child-sized scars for the rest of his life.

Nicholas was still screaming when the paramedics came to take away his sister. His mother and father tried everything but could find no way to quiet him. He screamed for nearly three hours, finally passing out in his own hospital bed.

The hunters have long since gone, chased away by money, forced from their dwindling habitat as the animals before them were forced from theirs. After a few years the memory faded, overgrown by a new town, new families. The grand oak tree still stands as it always has, oblivious, the bullet hole knotted over. There is no sign, no story, but some of the new children swear they hear a little boy screaming every time it rains.

