

Radioactive Rain

by Epiphany Ferrell

He's glib as a rattlesnake oil salesman. He can get more words into one breath than most men in this sooty mining town can in a month. He talks so fast, he scorches the air. I think he sounds like a barker on the midway. He's funny, he makes me laugh.

The police think he's drunk. They say he reeks of alcohol. I can't smell anything on his breath except peppermint. Mostly they don't want us loitering here in front of the store with the broken window. We've been sailing the plastic caps from milk gallons on the flow of water that runs down the sewer drain. The water itself is milky right there in front of the store, and smells sour. He takes the ring off the top of a discarded bleach bottle and slides it over my ring finger on my left hand.

We walk along in the rain, hand in hand, kicking at the puddles on the waterlogged street. The rain is warm. We are soaked to the skin — I never understood what that meant until today. We are the only ones on this section of the street. Everyone with sense is already under awnings, or inside, or they never came out today at all. It's an almost mystical experience, walking in the warm, radioactive rain. It's a rare moment of peace, a gathering of breath before the next storm, before the next wave of panic, before those frozen in shock come to themselves and rush through the streets, some like it's a celebration, some in rage, some just mindless.

We don't see him until he is on us. He's a man with ragged hair and ragged teeth and ragged breath, a ragged man. He knocks me down, and I fall on my butt in a puddle. I'm not hurt, just startled. He's saying something to me, but I can't understand him at all, I'm too fascinated by the bloody spittle running down his chin. My lover pulls him off me, helps me to my feet. We decide I'm ok, it's ok, let's just walk. But we aren't kicking at puddles anymore, we are walking now quickly but without real purpose, our hands in our pockets, our laughter silenced. Behind us, unnoticed, the plastic ring bobs in the gutter before sailing bravely into the sewer drain.

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