

19. A Boy In The Rain

'Oh, think twice. 'Cause it's another day for you and me in paradise. Oh, think twice. 'Cause it's another day for you. You and me in paradise' Phil Collins [Wiseman MW, Vassar P 1989]

His mother's face twitched around her nose and the left side of her mouth and she groaned softly like a pining kitten. His father stood by the bed looking down at his wife motionless and emotionless. She moved the cold flannel on her forehead, her visage ashen and alabaster white. The room felt hot, with heat, but also with the sense of that drama when someone is sick. It was early evening, but the light in the bedroom was subdued.

The boy stood, transfixed, in the space between the doorway and the foot of the bed, just staring at this tableau of illness, rising trepidation and fear. He looked to his father, but as usual there was nothing there for him to help the boy understand, to lessen the fright he experienced. Was his mother dying? He had never seen her like this, although he had seen she had suffered with awful headaches in the past, but this was way worse. She beckoned to him, and he initially froze, before moving slowly to the opposite side of the bed to his father. He looked down on her, the flannel over her eyes and forehead, nightgown and thin blanket, and she gripped his hand. He did not know how to react to her touch, warm, but clammy, and then he bent down towards her. 'Migraine,' she whispered, her voice weak and sounding like it was coming from a distant land, a faraway place. *'Need my pills, you have to get them,'* she said, and then, *'at the pharmacy, down in the town. I need them, didn't have any.'*

He looked vexed, confused in response to her request. *'The doctor made a prescription, the pharmacy will have my tablets, just walk there and pick them up, I should have taken them already,'* she added. The boy looked from her to his father and back. He knew the pharmacy she was referring to. More than a five mile walk there, and the same, of course, back. His father just looked at him with some force in his expression, and his mother squeezed his hand and let go. Before he registered, he was downstairs and leaving through the porch door, wearing his school trousers, shirt, shoes, and a jumper. He felt he needed to keep a good pace up, even running a few steps down to the rows of garages and an alleyway to the main road through the housing estate.

He had forgotten to take a coat, and in the dusk of a cold winter night, the rain had started almost when he left the house, perhaps to ensure he kept walking fast. His father, he thought, well, he must have to stay with his mother as she was so sick. There were also very infrequent buses at this time of day. It was a long walk, and that was it. The road would take him downhill into a small valley and then uphill curving round to meet the next road he had to take, then a country lane, a road to a junction and the pharmacy opposite. It must be opening late. The rain was starting to increase, both in terms of volume and coldness. He shrugged his shoulders, putting his hands in his trouser pockets, his walk turning more into a forced march, like a marine crossing the land before an important battle.

Few cars passed, and those that did, their headlights brighter for the darkening dusk, windscreen wipers increasing in rapidity as the water pelted them, diminishing the drivers' visibility. He was already quite wet, and the beginnings of a chill was insinuating itself between skin and muscle, on its way to rent his bones for however long it could stay. His brown hair was slick, water running down his face and the back of his neck, clogging his ears, and drowning his vision. Step after step as he picked up his pace even more. He had already made impressive progress downhill, through the valley and was now making his way uphill to turn left at the next major road. By the time he reached the turn, he was mainly navigating by memory, his head down in the rain, clothes sodden, hair now just plastered to his head. Worse, his shoes were as waterproof as paper, and his socks and feet were already as wet as if they were in a ship holed and going down quickly into the inky depths. Down the residential street, and then a country lane. He had to stay close to the side of the tarmac, walking in mud and pools, scared of being hit by a car who couldn't see him in his grey clothes. As he left the confines of

the lane, he stepped into a puddle the size of a swimming pool, the splash soaking him even more than he thought possible. He stumbled as a consequence, not helped by the shivering that was a sign that the chill was now renting his bones. His nose dripped and his face looked like he had emerged from the sea. The rain would not stop its punishment of the earth and anyone who had to be out in it. He reached the junction, clearing his eyes as best as he could with his soaked sleeve, while he observed the road code and looked right and left for cars. A few passed, but within moments he was in the pharmacy with its incredibly bright fluorescent lighting. It was warm, but he was already too wet and cold to appreciate it.

The pharmacist raised an eyebrow at this drowned urchin in his shop. 'Hughes', was all the boy could muster through chattering teeth. The pharmacist proffered a small paper bag, across the counter, the contents being blue and yellow capsules. And then the boy was back out into the rain and now almost darkness. He could not recall the journey back (and he still doesn't), he was so cold, but he was suddenly, it seemed, in that bedroom, proffering the wet bag like the pharmacist did, but this was to his father.

He stripped off in his own bedroom, struggling with the wet clothes that behaved like scuba gear as he pulled each item off. There was then a drowned pile of his uniform and jumper on the floor, and he was towelling the worst of the water off his thin limbs and torso. He spent time trying to dry his hair. Then jumping into bed, curled up in a foetal position to encourage warmth, but also against the shivering that swept through him like seismic waves through the ground. His teeth eventually stopped their game of vibrating in his mouth. His stomach rumbled, no dinner tonight. The twin brothers, sleep and oblivion, visited eventually.

I think I was perhaps eleven years old then, but when it rains extremely hard, and worse I'm caught in it, the memory of being a drowned rat, stumbling in puddles and potholes can sometimes return. And the chill that comes over me is not cold, but fear.