

REMEMBERING RAINEE

by W A Stewart

I smooth the hair back off her face, what's left of her hair, the way my mother used to smooth my hair when I was little. The smoothing was meant to ease bad thoughts from my mind or chase germs away, a magical gesture that healed almost everything when I was eight.

'Bad day?' I say looking into Rainee's face and letting her look directly back at me. I want to see her; I want her to feel me seeing her, seeing everything that is Rainee. We've looked into each other's faces since we were kids, colliding on the merry-go-round then flopping on the grass while our stomachs continued to twirl. I looked into her perfect face that summer afternoon when we were six, with her blonde curls hanging from a pony-tail and I knew she needed me, needed me to love her unconditionally. It was all there in her face. Sometimes we just know, without really understanding until much later.

Rainee nods. She doesn't talk much now. I used to come one afternoon during the week and all day Saturday to give James a break from watching his wife die, but now I come every day. He can't do it. He just cries. He wants to be stronger, thinks he should be, but in the end muscle isn't enough.

‘Sip this,’ I say, putting the glass of ice water closer. She draws on the straw, swallowing, her lips dry and swollen. We used to play hospital, taking turns being the nurse, sharing some preposterous notion we couldn’t be the doctor. Rainee was never good at being the patient, wasn’t good at lying still and feigning weakness. I painted red spots on her face and arms once with my mother’s lipstick and then Rainee got chickenpox two weeks later. I balanced on the small stool in her back flowerbed, except there weren’t any flowers, not in the back flowerbed or any flowerbed in Rainee’s yard. My mother forbid me to go into the house until Rainee was better. So I pushed my face through the bottom half of her window while I balanced.

‘Oh, I bought you a new hat,’ I say. The hat is rainbow coloured, the orange and yellow competing to be loudest. I hold it up, raise my eyebrows to ask if she likes it. Rainee’s eyes light up and she nods again. I pull the pale blue scarf from her head. Only wisps of feathery hair remain of her once yellow head. Rainee took her hair for granted, seldom brushed it, but still it was perfect. I was jealous of her hair when we were young, jealous of its natural wave. I teased her in the beginning, teased her about losing it.

‘That’s what you get for having hair that is too pretty.’ We cut it off in the bathroom one Sunday. Cut it short, then we howled when I put it under my hat and let it hang down my face, the curls clinging to my chin. I looked ridiculous as a blonde, Rainee’s buttery hair clashing with my olive skin. James knocked on the door to see if we had lost our minds. I handed him Rainee’s hair, he stared at it and I shut the door. I thought about Rainee’s hair, wondered about saving it so I could touch it when she was gone, thought of saving a piece of it that I could tuck in my sock drawer where no one might look and I

could pull it out and put it against my cheek the way her hair had tickled my face when we climbed into the swing together.

I pull the hat over Rainee's bald head. She lifts her head and then sighs when she feels the soft warmth against her skin. I fluff the pillows, let my lips linger on her cheek.

'You look divine, a bit like Diane Keaton, only better,' I think out loud. Rainee smiles.

'What are we reading today?' I ask, holding up three books: Marian Keyes because she's funny, Margaret Atwood because she's not and Carol Shields because she would understand.

'Funny,' Rainee whispers. The dimple in her left cheek is barely visible.

Rainee always liked laughter, as if it could keep her safe. She never expected anything, never seemed to hope for anything, as if disappointment was too risky an adversary. So we laughed, a lot, Rainee's blonde curls bouncing.

I crawl up beside Rainee, put my own pillow beside hers and pull the big duvet over to cover the two of us. I smell death in the room, lurking behind the curtains and under the bed.

We read and chuckle. I laugh right out loud once, slapping my thigh and then lifting my feet straight up over my head until I nearly roll off the bed. Rainee laughs in her whispery voice, her scrawny shoulders shaking.

Rainee and I talked. During the week we talked about the hard things, the bumps in the road, the bits of life that confused us. We talked about our periods, when we both hesitated to tell the other, awkward about this change. How it felt more like the sad

ending of something rather than a happy beginning. Maybe we felt the warning, wished we could be children longer. Mine came first as if I was meant to be the trail-blazer.

‘It’s happened,’ I said one afternoon while we hung limply in the hammock in my backyard.

‘What?’ Rainee asked, with a tone that didn’t seem to want to know.

‘The woman thing,’ I said, my arms sweeping up over my head in a grand arch. ‘That thing that Mrs. Skinner said in health class that we’d be so proud of, the right to claim we are women. What a load of crap,’ I said, settling back down.

‘Does it hurt?’ Rainee asked, rolling on to her side away from me and we nearly flopped out of the hammock.

‘Not really. I was shocked, that’s all. Thought for a moment I might be dying.’ We laughed. Dying.

I knew she wanted more details, but couldn’t bring herself to ask. Six months later she knew herself.

‘It does hurt,’ she said. ‘You lied.’

‘I didn’t lie. We’ve had bigger hurts.’

Rainee nodded. ‘I suppose.’

We talked about death. I swallowed hard and forced my voice to find a safe tone.

‘Are you afraid, Rainee?’

She looked at me, her eyes got soft as if she considered for a moment trying to protect me. ‘Yes,’ she eventually whispered and we kept looking at each other, our eyes focussed as if some invisible beam of light locked them in place. She said she felt as

though she were running on the spot, flapping her hands like a child might do if she banged her knee or was told she couldn't go out to play.

'I don't want to die,' she said, her voice raw and broken. My stomach knotted itself and wanted to bend me over, but I sat still, watching her, letting the fear pass from her to me in tiny bits, scraping away at the panic until it gave way. When fear ran out of steam, her concern was for James.

'He'll be lost,' Rainee said.

'He'll get through it,' I said.

'He'll remarry quickly. I told him to. But he would have anyway. Who'd pair his socks? He's colour blind.' She giggled and then was quiet. 'I hope she isn't anything like me.'

'There's only one you, Rainee,' I said and then I cried but only for a minute. Rainee let me cry, not bothering to console me.

We talked about babies. Rainee had an abortion in college. James said they weren't ready. She wondered in the beginning if leukemia was her punishment, a life for a life. She wanted to keep that baby.

'I wonder how it feels to be a mother. Maybe it's easier to die not knowing,' Rainee said. Rainee's mother vanished when Rainee was four or five. It was before the merry-go-round. Rainee's father never explained. He just said her mother left. Rainee was an only child, so there was no one else to ask such a difficult question.

'Do you suppose my mother left because she didn't want to be a mother?' Rainee asked during one of our serious talks.

‘I think she left because she was a bad mother,’ I said before thinking. ‘But maybe she left because she couldn’t help herself, sometimes people just can’t,’ I said, repeating my mother’s words. Rainee just nodded.

‘I wonder if I would have been a bad mother,’ Rainee asked.

‘Not possible,’ I said, shaking my head firmly.

‘She’d be ten now. She. I was sure it was a girl with James’s brown eyes, large saucers that trusted me to never leave her.’ She exhaled. ‘I suppose,’ but didn’t finish.

I didn’t tell her I was pregnant. If I couldn’t tell Rainee I couldn’t tell anyone. I never kept anything from Rainee, not since we were six. This was the first time. She probably knew. We knew everything about each other. I knew she was dying before she told me.

We were shopping. Neither of us liked shopping but we were pretending to shop. Rainee had been to the doctor many times. She was pale and bruised. She held a lime green hoody up to her throat. ‘What do you think?’ she asked. ‘A good colour to die in?’ I examined it as though I hadn’t heard the question. Rainee liked bright colours. So I looked at it closely, leaned my head to the side as if deliberating a very real consideration. Then I put my arm through hers and we walked. We walked and walked, around the mall without going into any shops.

‘It’s a good colour,’ I finally said.

On Saturdays we laughed; laughed and remembered. We remembered filling balloons with water when we were eleven and putting them under our shirts and riding our bikes down Maple Street past Bobby White’s house. He stood in the driveway with his basketball, his mouth gaping until my left balloon fell out and splashed on the pavement.

We rode home laughing our fool heads off. My mother told us to stop being so silly right after she took our picture. I enlarged that photograph to poster-size and placed it in the dining room where Rainee is now.

‘Do you think I’ll ever have real breasts,’ Rainee asked that day, pulling her t-shirt tight against her chest.

‘I think they come whether you want them or not,’ I said. ‘My cousin says they can be a nuisance and to enjoy not having any.’

‘That’s easy for her to say. She’s been wearing a bra since Grade Four.’

‘I think she was in Grade Three. She might be right,’ I said, tucking my undershirt firmly into my jeans.

We remembered riding ponies at my grandfather’s farm, ponies that were rude and wily, that galloped and bucked across the meadow until we tumbled off, our feet somewhere over our heads, moaning to recover our breaths after we hit the ground hard, lost in the tall grass until our giggling returned.

We remembered coming home from Martha Smither’s party when we both had been drinking. We were going to sleep in my tent but my mother informed us she wasn’t born yesterday. We came staggering through the backyard gate and then while we fumbled with the tent zipper my mother interrogated us by flashlight. She had us up cutting the lawn at eight the next morning.

Saturdays were best.

‘I wish every day was Saturday,’ Rainee said at first. Her eyes were dewy and her forehead wrinkled and her chin quivered.

‘They will be,’ I said, wanting to smash everything in the room, wanting to pull the floral paper from the walls and the curtains from their rods and fling the whole mess on the front lawn, wanting to throw my head back to scream until some divine force stepped in and changed things.

Rainee quit watching the news a few months ago. She found it hopeless. She said she wanted to die thinking the planet had a chance even if she didn’t. She made me tell her all the positive things I could think of.

‘China has been awarded the 2008 Olympics.’

‘Why?’ she asked. ‘I thought the host country was to be an example to the rest of the world. China’ She couldn’t finish.

‘I think China is trying. Perhaps this will make her try harder, while we are all watching.’

‘Maybe.’

Some days I couldn’t think of anything at all.

Last week, nurses started coming to the house around the clock in case James and I can’t manage. I haven’t seen my husband for ten days other than over Rainee’s bed. I won’t leave her. He doesn’t ask me to.

She is struggling to breathe now. The leukemia has filled her chest with fluid and she whispers about an elephant sitting on her. I say her pitiful breasts aren’t up to supporting any damn elephant and that she is exaggerating.

‘I’m thinking of taking up smoking,’ she says. We both laugh. Rainee knows the end is close; she seems ready. I’m not. She needs my permission, I can feel it in her hands, in

her cheek when she presses it against mine. I don't want to let go. I want to keep her here with me, no matter her suffering. I need to hear her breath move in and out no matter how faint.

'You're selfish for leaving me like this. I'm going to get saggy boobs and a ballooned abdomen and you're not,' I say. 'I'll forget where I left everything and you won't be there to help me look.'

'Don't forget me,' Rainee pleads.

'I won't, Rainee. I promise. I promise to remember every detail about you.'

I lay one hand on her forehead and hold her hand in my other. I remember that she collected snails and earthworms when she was little but shrieked at the sight of a spider. I recite her long jump record that still stands at our high school. I recite the topic of every speech she gave in school from Asthma to Walt Disney. I remember that she cheated in Chemistry in Grade Twelve to pass her exam and made me an accomplice. I remember that orange is her favourite colour and May is her favourite month. I remember that she wears size six shoes and her ring finger is a seven, which oddly is the same size as her hat. I remember that she tilts her head to the side just slightly when she is really listening. I remember her left foot is a half size bigger than her right.

She tilts her head now and listens as I share every detail that is Rainee and I keep talking after the nurse tells me to stop. I think maybe Rainee will linger and want to hear it all. I stroke Rainee's head, my fingers gently tracing back and forth, back and forth. There beneath the frail wisps is the golden glow of Rainee's hair, a new growth of hair, restoring itself as if a signal for me. I can hear James sobbing in the other room, hear his agony echo in to the dining room.

Her breath stops and her eyelids flutter. I know she has left this bed, this room, and the hand I cling to is empty. Death has come and taken her, without letting her look back, without letting me argue my case. She didn't give me a warning, a final farewell, a raise of her hand to say she'll see me later. I want to run around the room, looking under the chairs and behind the drapes, lifting up this empty shell that lies with her head slightly to the left. I want to shout her name, call it out the windows in case she is on the back deck or hanging from the swing, her head thrown back in laughter.

"I'll remember you, Rainee," I cry.