

Rainy Thoughts

In Israel, there is no summer rain, barely even a hint of a cloud. However, the other evening it was so hot and humid, the skies could not avoid clouding up. I stood staring out toward the horizon and suddenly felt a drop of moisture splatter ever so softly on my hair. I looked up instinctively, expecting that slow progression of pitter pattering rain when it first starts, looking forward to the mild relief it would bring from the 35 degree, sticky heat. But it did not come. The clouds stayed up high in the sky, taunting me with the slight breeze that accompanied them. A mosquito buzzed around my ears, reminding me that I was not in the lush Catskills in New York, when even on a summer's morning the air is chilly and moist, but rather in a semi-arid clime that was almost as bone dry and dusty as the Arizonan desert. Images of Rip Van Winkle turned to Clint Eastwood slowly dragging his horse past the tumbleweed and cactus. I turned up to the sky again to perhaps affect a few more imaginary raindrops, closing my eyes and concentrating.

The rain started dropping in small splotches on the windshield. The clouds had been slowly gathering around us as we were travelling south down the Interstate, having just a few hours earlier crossed over and through the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay from the tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, through the peat country of Virginia and along the coast of North Carolina. It was hot and humid, as was expected in August in the Southeast of the US, and the moist air evaporated and formed clouds, and before long we were greeted with this refreshing summer rain starting to clean the dust off our car. The small drops quickly got heavier, and the windshield wipers started their monotonous flip flop side to side, and then went double-time as the rain quickly began pelting us in small bucketsful. Tires splashed through puddles that began forming on the highway, and the dull red glow of brake lights shone in front of us, behind us, and in all directions, reflecting against wet windows. Traffic started slowing down, and it became increasingly difficult to even see the cars directly ahead of us. It was feeling less and less safe, and my parents argued about whether we should find the next rest stop and just wait the storm out. Thunder rumbled in all directions, and we braced ourselves for the inevitable flash of lightning. What just an hour ago was a hot, sweltering, laconic day was now a chilly, stormy affair.

As the rain pelted the roof and started to drip down the sides of the cabin to the porch, we got up quickly from the rocking chairs and one by one opened and closed the squeaky front door, each time it pounding against the door frame and shaking violently, ready to break off its hinges. The air had been cool and clean where we sat outside, and now it already felt dusty and stale. The ceiling fans were still rotating, and despite it being mid-August, some of us went to find sweaters, and one person started heating up the tea kettle. So much for that late afternoon hike up the mountain we had been pondering about all day. As the rain got heavier and the thunder started to roll in, checkerboards and chess sets were pulled out from backpacks and closets, and before long we started an impromptu games tournament, with hot chocolate and cookies on the way.

I reached down to my backpack that I had placed on the park bench and pulled out the small bottle of water from one of the side pockets. I clumsily opened the main compartment

and fumbled through children's clothing, face wipes, and plastic bags until I found the cookies I had brought. My kids were playing noisily with their friends in the playground, and hadn't come over yet to ask for a swig of water or something to eat. There were five cookies altogether, and I took one of them, guessing that the kids would only want two each. The clouds still were covering the skies, and I felt a slight breeze pass through the back of my tee-shirt. The shirt was already damp from being out in the heat and humidity for almost an hour, damp as if indeed it had just rained on me.

The rain now was coming down in torrents, and we had nothing to cover us up save baseball caps and light jackets. After finally finding a place to park, my mother told us to run out quickly and get under the awning of the porch that we had parked up against, adding "Don't forget to lock the doors." My brother, Dad and I did as we were told, everyone cursing the doors that needed to be closed, and cursing the rain that was now soaking us. We finally made it to the storefront porch, and we all stood there against the railing with dozens of other stranded travelers, mostly dry except for our socks, which we all managed to get wet running in and out of puddles. People were debating with one another as to how long they thought the rain would continue, pondering their next steps. Mom surmised that the store we had by chance stopped at was a souvenir shop, and suggested that we go inside and take a look while we waited out the rain. The double-wood doors swung out and in, and the springs squeaked as we and the other travelers went in and out, and my mind turned to hot chocolate.

The tournament was getting serious, especially as it became clear that there was a champion among us who did not lose often and did not like to lose. As he began to dominate his opponents, a few of us started to lose interest and instead sat by the windows in another part of the living room, watching the rain fall. Small drops bounced inside from under the slightly ajar window panes, gently striking our arms. A fresh whiff of air pushed its way in with the raindrops, and romantic thoughts began to overtake me. While we were a bunch of erstwhile platonic male and female friends out on a three-day hiking trip over summer vacation, nature more or less assured us that in some cases this situation might change. I was usually quite coy with my friends, acting the gentleman with the females, but suddenly some of them were looking more attractive than I had usually cared to acknowledge. To hopefully not balk when the opportunity would strike, I nonchalantly took another sip of hot chocolate and a bite of my cookie, and listened intently to the joke she was telling.

My daughter laughed and laughed and laughed, and I laughed, too, even though I wasn't quite sure what the punch line had been. She had recounted how she and her friends were on the carousel, and they had all fallen off and bopped themselves on the head, and had determined that this must have been the funniest thing that had ever happened. I told her that I also thought it was very funny, but perhaps a little foolhardy and it's a good thing everything turned out alright in the end. I offered her a cookie and some water, which she happily took, and asked if there were any more. I gave her the second cookie I had saved for her, and when she was done with that she asked for yet another. I told her that she had to save some for her sister, but she then started to whine. I rummaged through the backpack, seeing if perhaps I had inadvertently left other cookies or candy from another

day, and lo and behold found a slice of an apple that had started to brown slightly, not looking all that appetizing. When she whined some more, I realized that I had eaten the cookie that could have saved this mess. Just then, the clouds started to move past, and in an instant the sweltering heat beat down on me and my sweating back. I wiped the beads of sweat dripping from my hair, and pondered pilfering the cookies I had saved for my other daughter.

Water was now dripping down the sides of my head as it slowly made its way from the soaking cap, and I brushed it away before it started to seep into my eyes. I aimlessly wandered the aisles, looking at all of the tacky souvenirs. My eyes were suddenly drawn to a wooden chess set that had Confederate flags painted around its sides, and thought that this would be an interesting keepsake for a parochial Yankee like myself. I pushed the set a little to the side, careful not to knock the pieces over, and searched for the price tag. 20 dollars felt like thousands to me, and I quickly pushed the set back in place, hoping no one caught me wishing beyond my means. I still wanted hot chocolate, but I could see that the lines at the front register had already started to get long, and knew my parents would have no patience waiting to buy anything. My mother looked around, commented on many of the items and half tempted my father to buy something, but he gave her that “okay, let’s get out of here already” look. Out of the corner of our eyes and in the backs of our minds, we could sense the rain was starting to wind down, the light from outside becoming a little brighter, the sound of the cars plowing through the puddles becoming a little less dense, and my father gave us a quick nod indicating we should get a move on.

The rain was letting up, and the loud banging on the roof was giving way to a quieter pitter patter. The girl to my left was in the middle of another joke, and I obligingly laughed at the punch line even though I wasn’t really listening. This was all without the benefit of alcohol or an aphrodisiac, or perhaps the hot chocolate and the cookies and the rain were providing the same effect, I was entranced by her every move, her smile, and the shape of the sweater that she hastily had put on. But as the sound of the rain slowly became the sound of drops plopping off the roof and onto the porch, the entrancing fog of the hot chocolate became clearer and the room became brighter. And, having not said a meaningful word to her until now, the moment was quickly vanishing, and all thoughts were now moving back to our original plans for a hike. She turned her head to another guy who had come over and had started to chat with her. He was the brilliant tournament champion, and she moved toward him and away from me. I sat there mildly deflated, but in the sunshine she now wasn’t quite as interesting as I first thought. I stared out the window, absent-mindedly sipping at my hot chocolate, and suddenly I heard a voice say to me “Do you think it will dry up enough for us to take that hike after all?” I turned my head quickly and saw that it was the other girl that had been sitting with us, faintly smiling at me. I bit into the cookie again.

Our daughter stood in front of me waiting for the next cookie. At the risk of angering the other, I gave this one a third cookie. Surely, something would now come to me to save the day.