

RAIN and THE FIRST 1000 KISSES

By Allison Whittenberg

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We imagine these two stories if shopped around would feel the brunt of many a slammed door. Punctuation is eccentric, words shapeshift without warning (be welder for bewilder, office for off his, through or for threw her) and require some deciphering and run on sentences trample grammar underfoot like stampeding soccer fans. Every rule is broken and every time we witness a dirty phoenix rising from the ashes. The struggle to express is everywhere present and the challenge, heroically met, is to cram all that pain and anger inside the words so they won't fall out. The author's voice is harrowing in its authenticity and screams like a clubfoot. So, yeah, when these stories pounded on our door, we took them. This, ladies, gentlemen and pronouns, is Outsider writing, 100% pure and guaranteed for the life of the reader.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

Michelle hounded me, tenderly, rustling her long dark lashes against my cheek. "Johnny, what's the matter, Johnny?"

There was a voice trapped inside my throat. I never answered.

Dana was sitting on my father's lap, resting her head on his once solid chest. She was showing him pictures she had drawn in her coloring book and Dana had small eyeballs and whenever she was amused, her eyes would disappear in the fold and she was laughing and her eyes had disappeared and I was like now wait one Goddamn minute.

Putzi's lips would crinkle into a smile as his dark gray eyes looked out beyond a lusterless guy to a hacienda : rain beautiful rain on a lemony afternoon.

Rain

My father was always angry with me angry -- violent. He used to shove my face in dirt out back of our house. His large hands on the back of my neck. I remember that. And I did struggle, while he gritted my nose into the rough rocks, the multicolored pebbles, the slugs, the dogshit.

I still have scars. I have three other brothers, but I was always the one who got it the worst. I got call the worst names and got held under the water the longest. I was the oldest in my family, I guess he wanted me to be a man.

I am a man... more or less.

We all got beat, including Ma until I was 14. I was lucky to get big so early I had farm muscles. My father went to swing at me one Sunday and I like and went crazy on you. He's like a visitation. I kicked my father's miserable ass like I was some kind of psycho. When it was all through my father was bruised up, bleeding on the floor. Blood just milking out of him..

He knew better than to mess with me again and I told him never to scrap the rest of the family, ever.

Well, it was about then that he started drinking, deteriorating. Roaming about the house, pissing on himself with his mouth poked out cuz he'd been dethroned. I didn't feel bad about beating him, shit happens. I dropped out of school the following year, lied about my age to get a garage job and move on my own.

I don't really think about the past anymore. The past is the passed, that's what I say. But the reason for all of this reckoning is that it's my turn.

It's my turn to watch my father.

See, my brother, Tony had him for the last eight months, and Ron can't have him because he's in jail on drug-related charges and Bill can't do it because he's over in Korea in the full-time Army and Ma died last year

So Dad is alone.

So I'm left.

I'm close. I live a whole six miles away from where I grew up. I don't want him, though.

I can't tell that to my wife because she's the girl from good beginnings. She had a finishing school accent and together

parents, she'd never understand how I grew up, how the other half lives.

My wife's name is Denise. She's a nursery school teacher. She's pretty but just to me. She's too plain and wholesome to be a real turn on. She always wears knee-length A-line skirts. On a brief snit of trying to better myself, I'd meet her at a GED program. She was my tutor. She's always been kind to me and never called me stupid.

When Denise first met my father, she commented "Oh, what a cute little man."

Granted, he had shrunk.

And our little 5 year old Dana, she took a likening to my father. Letting my father pinch her on the cheek and pat her head without her screaming. Dana usually ran from strangers. This was very strange.

As for my reaction, I showed my father to the smallest room in the house and told him to only come out for food and water.

He didn't have the balls to defy me so I was fortunate enough not to have to endure his ruddy mug all through supper. Still, I grew sullen just knowing that he was in the same house,

fixing himself a little snack plate from my fridge. Using my toilet sleeping in the bed and bedding I provided. What did he think this is some fucking fairytale?

I stopped messing around with my wife.

I started waking up at four in the morning, tapped out only to spend the remainder of the day yawning.

Nothing meant shit to me.

My father had been in country for a month; an enemy with the same facial features and the same last name as myself.

Michelle hounded me, tenderly, rustling her long dark lashes against my cheek. "Johnny, what's the matter, Johnny?"

There was a voice trapped inside my throat. I never answered.

One evening, I knocked off work early. It was about 6:30 p.m. when I came in. Dana was sitting on my father's lap, resting her head on his once solid chest. She was showing him pictures she had drawn in her coloring book and Dana had small eyeballs and whenever she was amused, her eyes would disappear in the fold and she was laughing and her eyes had disappeared and I was like now wait one Goddamn minute.

Did I tell you to stay in your room ice cream that my father daddy you didn't tell me that Dana spoke up mistakenly thinking that I was angry with her.

Michelle came from the kitchen looking be welder

You better step off Grandpa I told him then never the coloring book from their hands and threw it against the wall.

"I knew I should have left you fucking and out in the cold," I told him.

"Johnny," Michelle cried "What's come over you?"

"Shut up, woman," I told her. I went up closer to my father. "All you need is a fucking rocking chair and a porch and some freakin' frakin' Country Time lemonade and you'd be grandfather of the year." I yelled and yanked Dana office lap and through or on the floor.

Dana began to cry so I bare knuckle hit her across the mouth.

"Johnny, why are you acting like this?" Michelle ran over to Dana.

You lousy son-of-a-bitch, I want you out of this house," I said to my father.

Dana's started crying louder so I hit her again. I grabbed her up by the collar answers shaking her like crazy saying, "You want to live with him or you want to live with me. You want to live with him you want to live with him. Hell, you don't even know him. He's the mean one. How could you go on trusting him? How could you go on believing him. He's nothing to you."

Michelle was struggling with me pleading with me to please, please leave Dana now alone.

I wasn't listening. I didn't stop beating my child till I got tired and by that time dang it was bruised black and blue.

My father rose's feet. He began to speak. His voice sounded almost soothing and warm though worn as a well-trampled carpet. All those boozefull years it really gravel his voice. "You act like it was all yesterday. It wasn't.

"Get out of my Goddamned house."

"I left you standing I left you with something boy you don't want me to have nothing."

"Get the Hell out of my house."

"Your blood is my blood. Everything you have comes from me." He walked over to the staircase and began the path to his

room. He stopped on the fourth step and repeated "I left you standing." He shook his head and walked on.

Michelle took Dana to the bathroom to get her wounds cleaned up and I heard my father moving around in the room I had set up for him. It sounded as if he was packing.

As I sat alone in the room hearing voices of my daughters and wife's cries, not wanting to console or help: I thought, why should I feel sorry for them? I don't even feel sorry for myself. I saw it but could give no larger emotion. It was the first time I had hit my daughter or my wife. It was just the worst. So far.

I sighed and sighed again. I sighed the night away and popped open some liquor cans and smoked Marlboros, two at a time. All I did is wonder, does it fall from the sky like rain, this anger?

The First of 1000 Kisses

Every time it rained, his mother did her best to keep him dry. Of course, she couldn't be sensible about it. They were too poor for the extravagances of an umbrella. Instead, not use her palms. She placed them above his towhead as they made their way through the soggy streets. And she hung some silly

little song for him to keep his mind off his water-logged socks. Every time he looked up at her, she was smiling down at him. And, he would swear he was under the sun.

When they got close to the grocer's or the baker's or the fruit stand or wherever their destination was, she would grab hold of his hand lightly and they would sprint down the road the rest of the way.

But Johanna had a poor gait, like a wounded rhino. She used to splash Putzi at every puddle.

By the time they arrived at their destination, Putzi was more soaked than his mom was. Wet, but he knew she loved him.

His father passed on a few months before Putzi was born. He was a soldier. Very tall. Very handsome. Picture a man 6'2" , straight jawed, commanding presence.

Johanna used to tell Putzi, "you only have one love in your life. Everyone else is just company." Though she never wed her tall, gallant soldier; he was the one.

Everyone else in her life was just parsley. Useless. Needless. Asides.

Another thing, it took Putzi a while to figure out that his mother was a thief. Up until then Putzi didn't know that people

were supposed to come to stores with money and actually purchase things. Oh, once in a while he'd gander some old, crooked over biddies doling out change from their purses but ftse just figured his mom was special. His mom was too pretty to pay in money that is. She was special, special to him.

And then it hit him that it was just too peculiar, that his Mom was the only person he'd ever seen shove edibles down her blouse and maybe that wasn't necessarily so special.

Once he did realize that it was of no consequence. He was six and nonetheless felt safe under her palm.

Johanna would go into the store and steal bread and cheese and grapes and bottles of wine for their picnics. She wore baggy clothes for concealment. She had silky, buttery hair so really so rarely did the owners notice what she was doing with her hands.

That day she was wearing a blue dress and Putzi knew they'd have staked that night.

Mother was very good at this game. Nevertheless , every once in a while she got nipped, a spy. When caught she broke into Tears On Cue. Putzi knew it by heart. Her delicate lady tight hands would start to tremble covering her lipstick up lips and cry out in an undulating voice : this I don't have to eat

for me this food is not for me just like that she do itsy sewing words and swaying her head I don't have to eat

Right there is where she just you're madly to Putzi. All he had to do is give the world that day one expression, and Johanna would take it from there.

"My Putzi. My only son. My only child. Oh, have mercy kind sir have mercy. Putzi is on the brink of starvation. Oh, blessed kind sir have mercy. Mercy! Show Mercy sir blessed blessed sir I beseech you were the name of God," she took a gulp of breath and continued, "Forgive me. I was hunger driven. Exhausted. sick sick of being worried about my boy. I was in fear for him because you see it's okay that I only eat once every other week, but my son.

Meanwhile, Putzi was about as bacon faced as a kid could come yet Johanna overcame this bathroom sheer acting.

"I can't allow my son to waste away." She wept maudlinly.

They bought the illusion by this time usually but on the rare occasion when she needed just a bit extra she fainted from the passion of her please. Signed, sealed, delivered. Not a dry eye in the crowd.

The store owner would rush and get the lady some cold water. Not tap: cold water. And the store owner would feel so

sorry for her and Putzi away with all the groceries they could carry and a gift certificate on top of that on top of it.

This is what motherhood was about. Womanhood to Putzi was a beautiful abberation that lied. Johanna had a laughing, a beautiful face -- especially when she was lying. Living on the border city, she knew both languages and how to lie in each one of them. But this was a living -- it was a picnic, spread out with stolen food.

For Putzi, these were things to live for: to rest his chowder head on the apex of his mother's massive breast. They both figured that nothing could touch them. They could continue forever like this or at least until they grow so fast that their clothing pinch them. Oh, he'd have to go to school one day and perhaps she might Mary there were all those shopkeepers offered up with the cold water and gift certificate yet there could be no real interference, just company.

The following week after we broke out. Johanna explained to see that he need not worry even during your time there will always be somewhere to get it easy.

He nodded his head was not so much listening as he was swallowing. Eating stolen rolls with stolen chocolate sprinkles... sipping the sweetness of underage wine.

How happy she was to have him. He didn't mind it when she saw him like a rubber toy. The war didn't seem to scare him.

They moved to the capital city where things were still largely untouched. Things were still plentiful and available for nabbing.

It was business as usual until once when Johanna was slipping cold cuts into the fixed lining of her willing coat and the rebels came in anticipatory: dressed in black. Dutifully, orderly and straightforwardly, they shot everything tall.

Along with the others, Johanna drops to the floor, not breathing, bleeding.

A single bullet had efficiently penetrated her skull killing her. Yet ... Was it possible?

Impossible.

His mother's breast still carries milk. Remember all those screenplays she wrote. All the acting she did. Those lines she recited for their picnic food.

Every trick, and Reaper version. It all worked before and even if it didn't send then since when was shoplifting a capital crime. In Islamic countries, they cut off your hand for

stealing. Putzi wished they had taken pity on his mother and just stumped her. He still has her, then.

The people who weren't supposed to matter had changed it all.

Parsley had put Putzi in an orphanage and he was understandably difficult. Bitter. Violent to the other children. Even worse he remained mute for days on end. The only time he was human was when it rained. A raindrop was like the first of a thousand kisses. Strange dance steps measured on the muddy road.

His mother's sloppy walk... Four weeks, then two months now two years dead.

Putzi's lips would crinkle into a smile as his dark gray eyes looked out beyond a lusterless guy to a hacienda : rain beautiful rain on a lemony afternoon.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"Rain" was written as an experiment. It is much too short to properly tell the story of the erupting violence (but I have the feeling no amount of words could truly capture what needs to be said). "The First of 1000 Kisses" is also a summary of sorts; I think these characters also deserve more time but both stories benefit deeply from their snapshot-like presentation. Both stories leave you wanting, no, needing more.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: A Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her other novels include *Sweet Thang, Hollywood and Maine, Life is Fine, Tutored* and *The Sane Asylum*.

