

*Ron Rindo*

**The Mystery in Summer Rain**

**M**y fourteenth summer, southern Wisconsin went without rain for forty-one straight days. Grass bleached into coarse, dry straw, and our front yard opened into a jigsaw puzzle of interlocking fissures. Clouds of yellowjackets vibrated desperately around the dripping hose spigot, while inside our house, a plague of black ants swarmed the toilet and patrolled the kitchen sink.

Though I'd learned in freshman psychology class that correlation is not causation, by the time school let out in June, I also felt desiccated. The despair had come on slowly, like a fever, a reckoning I couldn't understand or articulate. It felt as if my heart were pumping sand and as if both light and darkness carried tactile, insupportable weight. The narcissism of adolescence had turned inside out, and I found myself increasingly haunted by the suffering of others and the seeming disintegration of my own family.

That summer Thomas, my older brother, had befriended a neighborhood bully named Landon Baker. They played Grand Theft Auto all day in the cool dampness of Landon's basement, and sometimes I sat and pretended to watch. I wasn't interested in video games, but Landon's house cat, a tabby named Bella, had given birth to five kittens, and I loved to play with them. The runt of the litter, a calico female, liked to scale the curtains to the top and sit up there proudly, as if she'd summited Everest.

Landon had long hair and a thick, ugly tongue he couldn't keep inside his mouth, and he had trouble holding the video controller because of the plaster casts on both of his hands. My psychology teacher told us the prefrontal cortexes of teen-aged boys are not yet wired to the rest of their brains, so they make stupid decisions. As if to prove this, in late May, Landon had ridden his bicycle off the roof of his parent's house. He thought he'd drop into their swimming pool, but the angle was wrong and the pool was too far away, and Landon broke both of his wrists and drove the stem of his bicycle seat two inches up his own ass.

Each morning I watched my father slog off to work through the heat like a man headed to the gallows, and every weekend he drank a case of Budweiser and fell asleep in his recliner with a fan blowing on him. He'd stopped speaking some time before that, and even though I knew logically it had nothing to do with me, I still felt his silence like a reproach.

Mother, meanwhile, had abandoned us for the greater glory of God, driving alone to mass at St. Benedict's every morning, her head covered with a black scarf. Dad didn't love her anymore, that seemed obvious to me, and none of her kids was turning out so well. I started stealing that summer, candy and gum in the beginning, then sunglasses from Walgreens for Mother's birthday, random larger items. The rush of anxiety and fear seemed the closest I'd ever come to happiness.

Our little sister Ruth held more promise than Thomas and me, but then one day Ruthie decided to text a picture of her breasts—such as they were—to Landon. I said, "Ruthie, what the heck? I do not need Landon showing me a picture of your boobs, which are practically invisible, anyway. Yes,

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Landon's Thomas's friend, but you're eleven, he's sixteen, and he's an asshole." WTF, Ruthie said, and stuck out her tongue, which—thank God—was not yet pierced. She often spoke in text abbreviations because she thought it made her sophisticated. Ruthie had also started smoking. She kept her bedroom window open and exhaled through the screen, and then she filled the air with Hawaiian Breeze. Everyone knew she was smoking and trying to hide it, but nobody said anything, though sometimes Dad yelled when he took a dump in the bathroom and couldn't find the air freshener.

A lot of life goes by this way. Too much. Terrible things happen all over and people ignore them. Whole families dying in Africa. Chinese and Cambodian children sold into sexual slavery by their parents. And in Bangladesh, a fourteen-year-old Muslim girl named Hena Ackter raped by her uncle. Found guilty under sharia law of letting herself be raped by a man twenty-eight years older and a hundred fifty pounds heavier, Hena's punishment was public flogging, 101 lashes. She collapsed after 70, and died of internal injuries.

How do people live, I thought, knowing this?

Every night that terrible summer Mother knelt beside the bed she shared with Dad and prayed to the crucifix hanging on the wall over their headboard. I don't know what she prayed for. Rain, maybe. Dad's love. A nicotine-free daughter. A son who might miraculously veer from the path of juvenile delinquency into unlikely realms of goodness and glory.

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In late July, we were in Landon's basement when I noticed only four of the kittens were left. When I asked Landon what happened to the fifth one, he looked at Thomas and they laughed. Then they started talking about what might happen to the others. Microwave, Landon said. Or gasoline! Thomas snickered. I said, "Thomas what the heck? You want to become a serial killer when you grow up? Seriously." They claimed to be joking. Eventually, Landon's ADHD kicked in and they lost interest.

But I wasted no time. I made preparations, and the following day, when Thomas and Landon were in their video trance, I tucked my t-shirt really tightly into my blue jeans, stuck all four of Landon's kittens down my shirt, snuck out of the house, and took off on my bike. I looked like I had a roll of fat moving around and around above my waistline. Sometimes they would climb up my shirt, and hang swinging by their front paws, but then they figured out they could also climb me, too, and I could feel their claws making little, bloody dots in sets of five on my skin, sort of like kitten acupuncture.

Up against my chest, all four of those kittens started purring. I could feel that wondrous rumbling against my skin. I took them to the spot I'd prepared, a hedgerow along a cornfield about two miles from our house. I had dug a large, dusty hole, two feet across and two feet deep, with fairly steep sides, and I found a bunch of old boards to cover it. I had food and water waiting for them at the bottom of the hole. My favorite was the calico, the climber, white and spotted in orange and black.

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Every day I brought those kittens fresh food and a little container of milk. I stretched out in the sun and let them crawl all over my stomach, mewling and purring, licking my chin and lips with their little, sandpapery tongues. After an hour or two, I'd put them back into the hole and cover it again, leaving an inch or two between each board, for air. The kittens cried when I covered them, and I didn't like that, but I didn't yet know what else to do with them.

Landon started coming to our house more often, reportedly to play Modern Warfare with Thomas. Ruthie hung out behind them on the sofa, lounging seductively like Cleopatra in pink jeggings and her favorite Hello Kitty t-shirt. Eight feet apart, she and Landon would send texts back and forth. Landon excused himself to go to the bathroom, and a minute later Ruthie's phone binged. She looked at it, then quickly flipped her phone over, and I knew he'd sent her a dick shot. I glared at her. She mouthed M-Y-O-B, then got off the sofa and ran up to her room, probably for a cigarette.

That night, blackened by worry and fear, the arteries in my brain swarmed with an army of ants. I could not still them. Sleep would not save me. I felt the house shaking, and I heard the echo of loud, judgment day explosions. Thunderstorms. When the first one rolled through, I wrapped my pillow around my head like a fat wonton. One storm front followed another, lighting tearing at the sky, water pouring over the gutters. In the grey light of early morning I looked out the window as a car passed, lights on, wipers flapping like black wings, the tires cutting through two or three inches of flood water washing up against the curbs.

When I thought of the kittens in the hole, I was already too late. I threw back the covers and pulled on my clothes, biked through the rain, slogged through mud along the hedgerow, but even before I reached the kittens, Ebola gnawing at my stomach, I knew my neglect had killed them. The hole had overflowed with water the color of weak coffee, and through the cracks in the boards where the overflow drained, I could see gray and orange fur, the bodies swollen and waterlogged, streaked with mud. I threw the boards aside and cried as I lifted each of the dead kittens from the water, first the gray tabby, then the orange twins. I reached deeper into the hole and felt around in the mud for the calico. But I couldn't find her. I heard weak mewling through the din of the rain. I turned my head and listened, heard it again. Looking up, I spotted a speck of dirty, white fur against the pastel gray of the sky. Calico had escaped and climbed ten feet up a box elder tree and now clung to a branch like a fat, wet noodle.

I could not take that kitten home with me. Landon was practically living in our basement, and he would immediately recognize it. But I could not leave her there in the hedgerow, because she would die. I tucked the shivering calico inside my shirt and rode my bicycle back toward home and then three more miles into town, to Walgreens.

It is difficult to steal something when you are leaving a trail of mud and rainwater through the white tile aisles of a brightly lit retail store, particularly when you have a hungry, squirming kitten mewling loudly beneath your shirt. For this reason, I could not be selective. I had to go with the first box I pulled from the display and tucked down my shorts. Then

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I found the men's room and locked myself and the calico kitten inside. I turned on the hot air hand drier for noise and warmth.

The messy process took over an hour, but when we emerged, clean and mostly dry, the calico kitten had been transformed. No longer calico, she was now Preference by L'Oreal number 9.34, Blonde Temptress.

Outside the rain had finally stopped. Sunshine glittered in the standing water, which slowly drained into the parched earth. I rode home. Quietly, I removed the window screen and snuck into Ruthie's bedroom. I pulled the kitten out from under my shirt and gave it to my sister, who screamed with such unrestrained joy that Mother came running, fearing some calamity. Mom said it was the most beautiful and unusual kitten she'd ever seen. She stared at me as she raved about the lovely and unusual color.

Strange things happened after that. It felt as if we were living one of those irresolvable questions sometimes posed by teachers at school: Can a positive outcome ever result from an immoral act? Or, even more complicated, are human lives governed by fate, chance, free will, or divine providence? Discuss in small groups, and report back to the class.

A few days after Ruthie began caring for Blondie, Landon started whining about being rejected. We were at his house playing Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol, and he kept dying. Frustrated, he threw his controller across the room. He pulled his phone from his back pocket, sighed loudly, and asked, "Why isn't Ruth answering my fucking texts?"

Thomas, who had probably said the right thing only once or twice in the fifteen years he'd been alive, said, "Why the fuck you texting Ruthie? She's just a little kid. Pick up the controller ass-wipe, let's do another mission." It would be one of our final interactions with Landon. In a few days, he would tell us his father had been transferred, and before the end of the summer Landon moved east with his family, to Newark, New Jersey.

The can of Hawaiian Breeze reappeared in the bathroom, and every evening after supper, following his twenty-minute constitutional, Dad emerged smiling happily, trailing tropical fumes. Ruthie's bedroom smelled like Meow Mix and kitty litter. When I mentioned this to Thomas, he said, "Guess she quit smoking. Maybe she's snorting coke now, instead." But she wasn't. The only thing under Ruthie's nose was Blondie. Ruthie carried her everywhere, brushed her with her own hairbrush, put sequined barrettes in her fur, read aloud to her at night.

And then a week after Blondie arrived at our house, Mom came home from the salon on a sunny, Saturday afternoon looking like someone new. She had cut and dyed her hair. You can guess what color. A few days after that, Mom and Dad went out on a date. A date! I don't know where they went, but they came home late, and in the morning their bedroom door was closed.

I don't know what happened, or why, but the rain had changed everything. Weeks later, I passed Mother's bedroom doorway one evening and found her praying. Blondie—spotted again, since her hair had been growing out—purred softly on the bed near Mother's shoulder, kneading the blanket with her claws.

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Mother stood and sat on the bed as I entered the room. I ran my fingers softly over Blondie, and she arched her back into my hand and purred more loudly.

Mother said, "When God brought that little kitten into our lives, it reminded us of something, didn't it? How to live again with joy?"

"God didn't bring that kitten here," I confessed. "I did. I stole her from Landon's house."

Mother took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She allowed our disagreement about the kitten's origins to fall away. Mother said, "I'm fairly certain Mrs. Baker would have given that kitten to you if you'd asked her. She would have given you all four of those kittens, James. The Bakers were getting ready to move east, after all."

"Wait," I said. "She saw me?"

Mother didn't answer. I filled the void with another confession.

"I stole the sunglasses I gave you for your birthday," I said.

Mother nodded. "I know. I had to return them, honey," she said, softly. "It was a wonderful gift. But—"

At that point, Ruthie came into the bedroom and plucked her cat from Mom and Dad's bed. "Come on," Ruthie said, as she disappeared down the hall, "it's time for your bedtime story."

Dad came into the room, freshly showered, smelling like Old Spice, a wet towel snuggled around his waist. His junk looked like a little cluster of grapes pressed against the inside of the towel. "Hey James," he said to me, and ran a hand over my back. "Everything okay?"

I shrugged.

He smiled and winked. "Okay. If you ever need to talk about anything, you know. I'm here. Just let me know." I looked at Mom, and she smiled at me and nodded.

"Close that door on your way out, if you would please," Dad said. I left their room and did as he asked.

I went outside and sat down in the yard. The grass had turned a soft, vibrant green, and I could hear the hum of bees as they probed the white clover flowers. Along the sidewalk cracks, black ants had once again left little sand-volcano tailings from their subterranean tunnels. I closed my eyes. Inside my chest I felt a shudder, the flutter of something coming undone; it was as if my ribs held the tight bud of a crimson flower, freshly watered, the petals now softening, just beginning to splay open around the stigma of my aching heart.