

Names in Rain

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[EXCERPTED]

1. THE GIRL WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO PICK UP A TOOTHBRUSH

One morning, after a night so long that its beginning was ages forgotten, a little girl spat into a sink, and found herself standing alone in a bathroom.

The first thing that occurred to her, as she stood there spitting, was that she truly, deeply *hated* the taste of mint.

The only other thing she knew with such clarity was that somebody needed her to pick up a toothbrush.

The toothbrush had fallen into a sink, but, oddly enough, not the sink in front of her. The toothbrush lay in a disgusting, caramel-crème marble basin caked in Colgate residue and amber formed of ancient liquid soap. She didn't want to think too hard about it. Unfortunately, she found she didn't have much *else* to think about. Her purpose, it seemed, was immediate, and singular:

PICK UP THE TOOTHBRUSH, PLEASE, said the voice inside her little head.

It was an odd request, certainly, but it should have been easy. *Should have*, but the sink in front of her was white, and porcelain, and empty, and *wrong*.

She could recall the head of the toothbrush bristling against the rusted stopper as scalding water rushed over it. The water swirled downward through a drain strangled by an ever-growing creature of brown hair. She remembered watching, aghast, as the putrid hair-beast reached up from the drain to wrap its tendrils around the brush, staking its claim..

In the streaky bathroom mirror above the disgusting sink, she could just make out the curve of a bare back: a man bent over the sink, spitting curses through toothpaste. This was the man who had dropped the toothbrush, and wanted *her* to pick it up for him.

Beyond that, she didn't know him at all, though she wasn't sure if it were possible to recognize someone just from a sliver of their back in a mirror.

It was then that she realized she couldn't see *herself* in the mirror—even though she was standing right behind the man.

She blinked.

The man and his sink and his mirror vanished, and she was back in the *wrong* bathroom, with the wrong sink and the wrong mirror. And now she saw herself.

She wore a uniform: a pleated skirt and jacket in the deep blue of the early morning sky outside. The window on the far end of the bathroom had been left open, and a breeze tried to chase the long ends of her ashy brown hair out of the current mirror and into the one beside it.

There were five mirrors in all, lined up along the bathroom wall above five sinks. None of the sinks were made of marble, and none held a toothbrush.

This made matters extremely difficult.

She scowled, kicking at the tiled floor. She wore vinyl rain boots over her stockings, weed green and dotted with tiny cartoon frogs. Their blushing cheeks and flippant outstuck tongues were the only thing about her outfit that possessed the slightest personality, and she knew from the moment she'd looked down and saw them that those boots had been with her through many an adventure. Her scowl turned to

a smile, and she stuck her tongue out right back at them.

Here we go again, guys, she thought to herself, but she wasn't sure why.

The door opened and she looked up, and then gasped as she saw a boy in his pajamas standing mortified in the threshold.

"Sorry!" he breathed, yanking the door shut again.

But a moment later, he was back.

"No, I think I'm right," he said, "I'm not *usually* right, but this time I think I'm right, and this is the boys' bathroom..."

She felt her face heat up.

"Oh! I-I'm so sorry!" she stammered, "I—" She paused. *I have no idea how I got here.* That was the sentence that had nearly slipped out of her mouth, but she stopped it, because it seemed silly, and she already felt silly enough.

"It's okay. I won't tell anyone. I do that all the time. It's kinda difficult to figure out, because they hung up the signs between the doors, one on top of the other. I don't really understand why they did that."

He had a long face covered in faint freckles, as though somebody had tried to scrub them off, only to fail and leave his cheeks a warm pink. He watched her with eyes the solemn color of the granite tile, and a strangely sympathetic smile.

"Are you new here?" he asked, when she'd failed to respond.

She nodded, slowly—she supposed she was—and the boy smiled.

"That's fun. There aren't new kids very often. What's your name? I promise I'll do my best to remember it. I'm really bad at names."

"Sometimes I don't even remember my own name...!" she admitted, only realizing the truth of the statement as she spoke it. At that moment, her name lingered on the tip of her tongue, tingling painfully like mouthwash swishing around in her mind. She wanted to spit it out—she hated mint—but she couldn't.

"Isn't it weird when that happens?" asked the boy, happy to have found another person who shared this peculiar tendency with him, and not caring that she hadn't answered his question. "It's only happened

to me once or twice, but boy does it feel strange. I'm Scott, by the way. I don't usually get up this early but right now I'm awake because I had a nightmare," he confessed. "Not that I'm *usually* scared of nightmares, but this one was extra scary..." He seemed to realize he may have shared too much information a moment too late. "You won't tell anyone... will you?"

She shook her head.

"Good, then we're even—or is it odd? I can never remember. Ms. Coddle would be so upset with me! But there are two of us, so I think that means we're even," he continued. She thought to herself that perhaps they both were a little odd as well, though she couldn't figure out why she felt that way. "Ms. Coddle teaches math, by the way—you'll meet her soon. If you give me a moment to go put my uniform on I can show you the way to breakfast..."

"Sure." She was suddenly terribly worried that the toothbrush had already been removed from the sink, and that she was too late. "I'm going to use the girls' bathroom," she said. Maybe the toothbrush was in there.

"Oh, good idea! It's right next door."

She and Scott switched places and she shut the door behind her. The hallway was very dark, and moulded with dark oak. She pushed her way inside the girl's bathroom and looked around.

All of these sinks—another five—were also white porcelain, and there wasn't a toothbrush to be found. It seemed like such a trivial task to be such a burden on her shoulders. Maybe the person didn't have any fingers. Or maybe they were afraid of the hair monster in the drain. She couldn't blame them for that.

She stopped at the middle sink and inspected the drain. It wasn't as hairy as the one she remembered. She gingerly took the steel stopper between her thumb and forefinger, pulling it up and then pushing it down, several times. There was a slight gurgling noise and she recoiled—the monster, perhaps? Had it already eaten the toothbrush?

She did the same thing to the stoppers on all the rest of the

sinks. Perhaps she'd have to lure the beast back up from the drain. She poked her pinkie beneath the stopper and waited, thinking maybe it liked fingers as well as toothbrushes. Fingers were vaguely toothbrush shaped, and didn't taste like mint.

She wondered if the drain monster liked mint.

She waited for a very long time.

"What are you ... *doing?*" came the voice, after an age of silence, and she looked around to find two other girls standing in the bathroom door in their pajamas. One was tall and had a tight brown ponytail, crooked only because she'd just slept in it. The other girl was much shorter, and very, very blonde. The tall one also had eyes the color of the floor, but the blonde one's gaze was blue like mouthwash, and twinkled.

"I think she's testing the water before she jumps in," said the tall one.

"Why wouldn't she use a shower?" asked the blonde one.

"I don't think those boots will keep her dry in a shower."

Both of the girls broke into giggles and went to adjacent sinks. Realizing herself, she removed her finger from the sink basin and slowly backed toward the door.

"Scott is waiting for you. I think he likes you already," said the tall one. The blonde one giggled uproariously through her toothpaste. She left quickly.

Scott was indeed waiting right outside the door for her, hugging his knees on the floor of the hallway.

"There you are," he said. "You took a long time. I was starting to think that maybe you'd left already, but that didn't seem right." He stood up.

"I was looking for a toothbrush..." she explained.

"A toothbrush! Oh. You could've asked. Did you find one? The Nurse keeps a bunch of extras. We can get you one," he said. She didn't bother to explain to him that she didn't think the toothbrush she was looking for was her own. "Let's go get some food, if you're ready? I really like your boots," he continued, before she could

decide if she were ready or not. "I didn't know it was supposed to rain today..."

She flushed. She wasn't sure it was supposed to rain either.

"Well it's good to have them just in case."

"Of course it is!" he agreed.

Scott continued to chatter at her as they made their way down the steps. He had a nervous voice that faltered in and out of spectacular clarity. She found as it waxed and waned that it brought her in and out of her own thoughts. She didn't recognize the place where she was—not the art on the walls, nor the furniture, nor the layout of rooms, but that didn't bother her much. It seemed like the appropriate place for the appropriate time. The only thing bothered her was the feeling that this place did not contain the toothbrush, nor the person who had dropped it.

By the time they entered the cafeteria, morning had begun in earnest, and through the windows she could see endless green meadows stretching far into the distance, and beyond them, forest. As pretty as the meadows were, they meant that if the man and the toothbrush weren't here, they were probably a long, *long* way away.

She followed Scott to the counter where the cook gave each of them a slice of pie and an oblong fruit. On their way to find seats they ran into a girl with dark pigtails who was still in her pajamas, and huge bunny slippers.

"Yikes! We have a new girl!" said Scott, even though she didn't think being new merited such an exclamation.

"That's great, Scott," yawned the girl with the bunny slippers, wandering past them to get her own plate of food. A second later she looked back at the rain boots and raised her eyebrows—as though a girl with bunny slippers could say *anything* about a girl with frog rain-boots.

They sat at a table that was unoccupied but for a tiny boy who looked as though the cook had cut his hair by placing a mixing bowl over his head.

"Hi there!" she said. The little boy said nothing. He wasn't paying any attention to his food either. He had a large stack of plastic bricks—all of them bright red—and he was deeply preoccupied with building an immense castle.

"That's Sam," hushed Scott, not greeting the boy himself. "He never talks."

"Oh..." she said, noticing all the little plastic people next to Sam's plate.

They all had their heads on backwards.

She cut into her pie. A coagulated, brownish goo seeped onto her plate.

"What is it?" she asked, dropping her fork and putting her finger in it, then licking it. It was sweet, but oddly spiced.

"Mince pie. They have it almost every morning. You get used to it," said Scott. She stuck out her tongue. "Sometimes if we're lucky we get flapjacks. But that's only if we have the ingredients, *and* if the Nurse goes out to fetch milk from the cows in the morning. She usually only does that in the afternoon, and only if we actually *have* cows—" Scott was rambling again, but she found herself distracted by Sam. He'd begun to remove the plastic people's heads altogether, placing them one by one in the brownish goo from his own pie.

Scott followed her gaze.

"Yeah, he's a little creepy, but at least he doesn't make fun of anyone. The other kids are all kinda mean. I don't really blame him for not talking. You don't talk much either, do you?" he asked, then.

"I... usually talk more," she said, but she couldn't recall a time that would prove or disprove her claim. "It's all just so new!"

"It all gets old really fast," said Scott. She wanted to believe him, but as she looked away from Sam and back at him she realized his eyes were the color of the weird fruit on her plate—a dull purple. She could have sworn that they'd been granite-colored in the bathroom.

"What's the fruit?" she asked.

"It's a fig. They have lots of seeds, but they taste pretty good."

"Well, well, well! Looks like the only open seats are next to chatterbox and his new girlfriend!"

The tall girl was back, this time with a straightened ponytail. The blonde girl stood at her side again, this time with a blonde boy who looked just like her. "I guess we shouldn't have taken so long in the bathroom this morning. But it takes so long for the water to get warm in those sinks!" she lamented. "How am I to take a bath?"

The blonde squealed in laughter again and the boy joined in, though his laugh was not a squeal.

"*Malarkey*," muttered Scott at his plate.

"So do you have a name?" asked the blonde boy, "I've heard so much about you from my sister."

She was sure that she must have a name, but as the question came up again she found she still couldn't provide an answer—or at least not one that made sense. She kicked her feet beneath the table. She'd just made up her mind to throw the question back at him when the tall girl spoke again.

"Look! She's playing footsie with Scott under the table! That's *adorable*."

"If you don't shut up, I'ma tell Mr. Whittaker," said Scott.

"Oooh. Mr. Whittaker!" laughed the blonde boy. "So terrifying!"

"I *meant*: I'll tell Mr. *Willikers*."

This made the three of them pause, but only for a moment.

"I'd like to see you try, scaredypants," said the tall girl. "He'd probably eat you."

The blonde twins simultaneously made menacing, roaring monster faces at Scott, then looked at each other, and snorted.

"My Mr. Willikers face was so much better than your Mr. Willikers face," said the boy.

"Was not!"

The boy yanked on his sister's hair—"OW!"—and they began to fight. She watched for a moment and then glanced at Scott, who looked miserable. She wondered who Mr. Willikers was.

Before she could ask, an earthquake shook the entire table. She

and Scott and the tall girl all nearly jumped from their seats, and the twins abruptly stopped arguing.

Sam had climbed upon his chair while nobody was looking, and hurled his fig into the red-brick tower he'd been so meticulously constructing. It exploded into a juicy, seedy bomb, splattering her and Scott, who sat closest, and leaving the tower in shambles all over the tabletop.

The odd little boy let out a piercing, ecstatic cackle, and for a second his eyes were the same color as the bricks, ever so pleased with the mess. Then he climbed off his seat and wandered out of the room, leaving the rest of the cafeteria staring at the table in shock.

"He does that," muttered Scott, wiping the seeds off his uniform. They finished eating in silence. The tall girl and the twins talked amongst themselves and paid them no mind. It left her with plenty of time to think about the sink, the man, and the toothbrush. The mince-pie-goop looked like something the disgusting hair monster might leave behind in its wake as it devoured the brush, bristle by bristle.

She moved on to the fig, tasting it tentatively. It was good, better than she'd expected, but she still would have been happier with a pear. She remembered liking pears.

"Let's head to class," said Scott, after she'd picked at the thing for a while. He'd left half of his own fig uneaten on the plate, but finished his pie. The blonde boy stuck out his shoe and tried to trip her as she passed, but she stepped over it and stuck her tongue out at him.

In the hallway, Scott was busy telling her all about what they'd been learning recently in class. The sun was up all the way now. It was about the time that most of the adults she'd known got up and went to work.

Had the man who'd dropped his toothbrush gone to work? Had she failed to get him there on time? Could people go to work without brushing their teeth? She anxiously fought with a fig seed in her own tooth with the tip of her tongue.

"Annd Ms. Trewth teaches us science!" Scott was saying,

pitifully unaware that she'd not been listening. She found herself glad that he was unaware. "And right now we're learning about fizzy-ology. I'm not sure what's fizzy about it," he admitted. "We *did* learn about the digestive system yesterday though, so maybe it has something to do with what happens when your stomach has soda-pop in it!"

She tried to smile. If the man couldn't go to work because of his unbrushed teeth, how could she go to class that morning with equally unbrushed teeth? It seemed like a horribly insensitive thing to do. She was sure there were monsters who ate children who did things like that—monsters that were worse than the hairy drain beast with its mince pie ooze.

"And then there's Mr. Willikers..." said Scott, shuddering a bit, "He—"

"I—I'm really not sure I should go to class," she blurted suddenly, overcome with panic. "Someone needs me and I really ought to go back to—"

To where?

"Wait...!"

Scott reached out and closed his hand around her wrist. She swallowed and glanced at his hand, and then at his face. "It's okay! I felt that way too at first—like I should be helping. But after awhile it goes away."

"It goes away?" she asked, "What do you mean?" Scott swallowed, flushing and clueless. "Are you saying there's somebody out there who needs your help, but then you just don't think about it anymore?"

"I didn't actually *remember* needing to help anyone until you just mentioned it. But now that you *said* it, I'm pretty sure I did, once. It's like..." he paused, searching for a likeness. "Oh! It's kinda like that nightmare I just woke up from—the one I said scared me? It's been a few hours now, and it's really not so scary. You know what I mean?"

She didn't think the person who'd dropped their toothbrush had been a nightmare, but from the way he looked at her, she could tell that Scott had been proud of his explanation until she hadn't replied. Now his face had again lost all of its confidence.

"That doesn't make a lot of sense, I guess, but you get used to it, I promise!"

She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to the idea of letting monsters eat innocent people's toothbrushes for breakfast.

"Now they're holding hands!"

The tall girl slid past them into the classroom. They both looked down to see that Scott was still holding on to her wrist. He instantly let go.

"Class is fun, you'll like it. Come on, please?" he begged.

She swallowed her doubts and followed Scott into the room.