**Winning Story 2021 by Thomas Reilly, TCD**

*Little Raindrops*

Feedback from Roddy Doyle

“An outstanding, brilliant story. The decision to write in the present tense is the exact right decision; it adds urgency to the story, as if the reader is witnessing this moment. The writer very cleverly manages to incorporate the Pandemic but doesn’t allow it to distract the reader. It’s a simple idea but there’s so much in it; reading it was a hugely satisfying, yet disturbing and deeply moving experience. Thank you.”

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The wan light bleeds through the first-floor window of the orthopaedics ward to paint it a spectrum of blue-grey

hues. A skeletal shadow of a tree stretches far across the floor. Its angular limbs reach out to me. Reach out

towards the alien contours of my useless right leg. I hate being so vulnerable. Cheery COVID posters look down

at me as fluid drips sluggishly into my veins from a little plastic bag. The room stinks of hand gel. The muffled

silence is perforated only by the soles of shoes that squeak intermittently along the corridor. Every approaching

footstep gives me hope it’s Mum, back from breakfast. She’d spent the whole night at my bedside as I lay

unconscious. And she seemed quite proud of herself for it too. There are three other ward patients to keep me

company, sleeping away in beds hidden behind mesh curtains, all old enough to be my grandparents. It’s

awkward, always being the misfit.

How can such a drab place serve as the backdrop to so many of life’s most dramatic moments? It all seems so

underwhelming. I can’t resent it too much though. After all, I’m the one that put myself here. God, things used

to be so different. I miss my big plush bed, with its cotton sheets and heavy quilt. I used to toddle into the

kitchen each morning wrapped up with that heavy quilt trailing behind me like a gown, chasing the scent of

porridge in the pot and Tropicana with bits. Dad always sat with his juice, studying the paper, as Mum toiled at

the counter. But she would always have time to welcome me up with a great big hug as she was fixing my

breakfast, and Dad would always ruffle my hair and pass me the juice carton. I wish more than anything that

things could go back to the way they were. Now all I have is a plastic tube feeding fluids and antibiotics through

my veins. And the other ward patients, invisible behind their curtains, make for poor breakfast companions.

Why did I do this to myself?

For the love of God, think about anything else.

That stereotype about surgeons having terrible bedside manners doesn't quite ring true. At least, the one that

came to speak to me earlier seemed sound enough. Abrupt, but I don't mind. I hate small talk. I hate the walls it

creates between people. She took a brief history, examined me extensively, and showed me several CT scans of

my hip. In short, the car had totally banjaxed it. A displaced iliac blade she'd called it, forgetting I couldn’t

possibly know what that meant. She promised they’d operate very soon to ensure the best prognosis. I’m fit and

strong; complications are unlikely. She told me to be hopeful. But that’s easier said than done in the suffocating

silence of the ward. I just did what was expected of me and nodded along, resolving to google everything she

said once she left. She looked busy and tired. I didn’t want to waste her time with my stupid questions. Yet Mum

kept interjecting, asking every damn question under the sun. Each one made my stomach lurch. I can’t help but

wonder if she suspects. She can’t find out what I did. She can’t find out I threw myself in front of that car.

If I close my eyes, I can picture the moment perfectly. The rain lashes down in great sheets, and the sharp

December wind cuts through me like a knife. The damp straps of my bag dig into my aching shoulder, pulling

me down and back as I trudge home. The taste of my own wet hair is in my mouth, and my nostrils are clogged

with petrichor and diesel fumes. Even my shoes are waterlogged with tepid water that pools in the spaces

between my toes. Roaring cars splash past, soaking my pleated skirt. And I’m sick of it all, sick of being alone.

In school, in public, at home. I’m sick of living in a world indifferent to me. I might as well not exist. I don’t

want to go back to that house. I’m just so tired. And the impulse just takes me. I lift my squelching foot onto the

boggy verge. My other foot follows its momentum onto the oily road. I’m not quite sure what I’m doing, or why

I’m doing it, but it feels so right. There’s a euphoric rush as my outstretched leg tips my body forward under the

inexorable force of gravity. I wouldn’t be able to turn back now even if I wanted to. I twist my head and a pair of

harsh twin beams fill my vision, rushing to engulf me. *The rain was in my eyes, Mum. I never even saw the car*

*coming.* I can only picture the poor driver. Eyes wide and knuckles white on the steering wheel as they floor the

brakes desperately. And I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! What’s wrong with me? How could I do that to

someone? Thrust my life suddenly into their hands? There’s a sickening crunch. Then there’s nothing. I wonder

how far the car flung me. Five feet? Ten feet? Twenty?

However far I fell, I fell hard. The cuts on my hands are deep, but not as deep as I’d like. They don’t mask the

older indelible scars crisscrossing up my arms. At least the surgeon hadn’t commented on those. Mum just

pretended not to see them. I feel sick. I can’t do this to her anymore. When I was younger, the thought of

self-harm made me wince. I could never understand how someone could do something so unnatural to themself,

take pleasure in watching blood trickle down their wrists. How could anyone possibly want to feel pain for

pain’s sake? I began to understand the first time I punched my bedroom wall. I thought I was angry, angry at her,

angry at the world for taking Dad away. But really I just wanted to punish myself. It felt good, really good. But

the scratches on my knuckles were too noticeable. I was worried Mum would think I was getting into fights at

school, not that she took much notice of me. Instead I started hitting my legs, beating them until big bruises

blossomed. That worked for a while, but the pain was never sharp enough for my liking. I gasped the first time

the knife opened my arm. But the relief was sweet, a relief my body could no longer consciously provide. Now

the morphine has made my body all numb, yet the guilt still gnaws away, a little maggot wriggling between my

ears.

If only the damn driver had done their damn job.

The right thing to do is to come clean and admit what I did. Maybe then this guilt wouldn’t weigh like lead upon

my soul. I want to let go. What I want more than anything is for things to go back to the way they were -

porridge in the pot and Tropicana orange juice. Everything changed once Dad was gone. Day in, day out, Mum

would bring me home from school, cook dinner, order me to do my homework, and retreat to her room. The

television would keep me company as I ate and worked. Then she’d come down a few hours later, annoyed by

the crumbs in the sitting room and the illegible scribbles in my copybook. She’d tell me that I needed to focus,

that I was squandering my potential. Nothing I ever did was good enough. I’d spend long rainy afternoons

sitting by myself, watching cartoons, or head outside and play with the other children till their mothers called

them in for tea. Mum never called me, just left my dinner to cool on the counter. She wanted nothing to do with

me. She still doesn’t. I really do love her, but I’ve always found her difficult to like. And I know it’s terrible to

think that, and I know she doesn’t deserve what I’m putting her through. Why do I do this? What’s wrong with

me? Anger, frustration, tears. I blink it all back, wishing I’d told her to pull the curtain before she left. I can stem

the tears, but I’m powerless to stop the aching guilt, or the whispers promising they can quell the pain forever. I

just want to feel okay again. Part of me wants to tell her, but I don’t know even know what to say. Dad would if

he were here. I guess I’m still too scared to look my mother in the eye and tell her how much she’s hurt me.

In a few days, I’ll be back in my broken home with my broken hip. The surgeon insists it’s in my best interest.

She probably just wants the bed back. But I can’t stomach the thought of going back to that house, trapped with

nothing but my mind to wander, haunted by the memories of a better life. Grief illuminates and distorts our most

poignant memories, reducing them to little raindrops suspended in high-intensity beams. The priest at Dad’s

funeral told me I’d find peace in those memories; those memories that are nothing but pungent reminders of all

that I’ve lost. Try as I might, I can’t wrap my arms around a memory or bury my face in its warm shoulder. How

am I supposed to cherish his life when it’s his death that causes me such pain? The pandemic has brought

everything crashing down, shrank my world to a house that’s not a home. Months and months, labouring at that

kitchen table where he sat, learning from a screen. Some evenings I’d talk with my friends over Zoom, their

faces trapped in little squares, only half-listening to them as I scrolled on my phone. It’s not like anyone had any

news anyway. My favourite time of day was right before I went to sleep when I could sink into the sheets and

shut out the distant world. Getting up later and later every day, always after Mum left for work, feeling like the

only soul left in the world. Isolated for so long, trapped in my own twisted reality. Until, when the world finally

started opening up again, I barely recognised it.

There’s commotion in the hallway outside my ward. I hear the surgeon’s voice. They must be preparing the

trolley to take me to Theatre. My heart flutters. No, no, no, it’s too soon. Mum’s not back from breakfast yet; I

can’t leave without saying goodbye. I want to shout out to them, cry out and order them to wait. But I hold my

tongue. Better not to cause a fuss. They must be extremely busy people. Besides, the surgeon walked me

through the procedure. She explained how they’ll wheel me to Theatre and plug me into a high-tech monitor

that’ll inform them how I am. Then the anaesthetist will administer a potent concoction of drugs to send me

straight to sleep. After that, I’ll be caked with iodine before the surgeon slices me open. She’ll carefully draw

my displaced bone fragment back into position, reattach it with minute screws, staple my flesh back together

and bandage the whole thing up. It won’t even take two hours. In three months, I might be able to walk again,

provided I rest and do my exercises. Within a year, if all goes well, I’ll be fully healed. It’ll be like my hip never

broke in the first place. Good as new she promised. She told me I’ll be able to do everything I once did. The

thought should comfort me. But I know it’s a lie. Because I know I’ll never walk into that same kitchen again.