



It's a mouse-gray morning in December. Rain has not arrived but threatens—pulsing at the edges of pregnant clouds. The wind carries a whisp of wet at its center. I stand inside the doorway of my house, ready for work, glancing at the umbrella stand: should I or shouldn't I? In the crawl space under my heart I feel the gray equivalent of rain clouds pressing down. I sigh deeply and try not to fixate on my current daydream of getting in my Subaru and driving south on I-5 instead of north to work. "Honey, I won't be home for dinner, I'm heading to Death Valley, or Costa Rica, or Hawaii or even Florida."

"Oh, shut the eff up," Esmeralda, my self-named, inside-head, better-knower-half yells in my ear, "You should be used to this by now. Get yer ass out there."

On my way to work the clouds' water breaks and pelts my windshield until the wipers are frantic. "I hate this," I think, making a sour face and feeling a helpless anger well up inside. I wonder if there's anybody on the planet who can honestly say they love rain.

"What a preposterous idea," I snort, laughing to myself. Is it even possible? Rain is for repelling. That's what umbrellas, Gore-Tex and rubber boots are for. Rain is something you dread; it ruins hair, vacations, bike rides, down sleeping bags and raw silk Eileen Fisher dresses. It makes you cold and sick and gets your car dirty. They say the reason the Pacific Northwest is so green is because of all the rain—as if that were a reason to love it. I grip the steering wheel with both hands, hold the car steady and pray as a wall of water from the wheels of the rig passing on my right splashes over the windshield, completely obliterating my view of the road. What could it mean to love rain?

**Accept**

Table Mountain is a 3,417-foot Columbia River Gorge highpoint on the Washington side. There are five of us climbing it in April, on Easter Sunday. Forecast: 40 degrees, wind, rain, clouds. During the entire one-hour drive to the trailhead, rain sheets across the windshield and the Columbia River tosses angry spray off blowing whitecaps. Not one single osprey shows itself from inside the many nests dotting the tops of riverside pylons along the way—I imagine the birds are snuggled down with their kids, reading the *Sunday Times*. The thrum on the roof of the car is so loud I can't hear Scott Simon on NPR. My stomach clenches. I wish we could turn around. I don't want to hike in the rain. I have too many things on my To-Do list. My brother, David, died unexpectedly last month and I feel like the world should stop to honor him. I should stop. At the very least, I should be cleaning out his house to get it ready for sale. For a few minutes I consider feigning a sudden headache or awful indigestion. But, it's too late.

We pull up to the trailhead behind the Bonneville Resort. The mountain seems to shudder in the wind, slipping in and out of fog-like consciousness. The summit is a distant, chaotic mess of scrambled scree, coated with icy snow.

The car engine idles. No one moves. I stare at a sludge of windblown debris in the parking lot. Across the way there's a long row of steamy windows behind which resort guests swim in their heated, indoor pool.

"Yep," Monty says, looking around at all of us. He bails out of the car and starts pulling on a yellow slicker. And then we all tumble out, tugging on rain gear and packs, squeeging glasses. Jon pops open a giant red-and-white umbrella. Walter fiddles with his pack.

"We are Mazamas," Walter chants, "we function wet or dry." Everyone laughs, but no one says what we're all thinking—about how soon we can call it good and turn back for beer.



And then we're off. Up a muddied trail, switch-backed into the mountain's hide, taking ginger steps over slick stones and orange-bellied salamanders. The forest clicks and snaps under the weight of so much water. My feet get soaked within a mile. Gore-Tex, schmore-Tex, I think, as rain drips down my sleeve from the inside of my parka. We lean into the pitch, soldier up into the wind zone, beyond the tree line, our boots kicking steps in the hard crust of lingering snow. The wind snatches at my hood like a pesky child until I crank the tension cords so tight I can barely see anything out of my peephole. Margaret's backpack cover billows, and she looks like she's about to take off parachuting down the mountain.

We trudge on. No one says what we are all thinking.

Esmeralda issues drill sergeant jingles in my ear, "I just know yer not that old, so step on up and you won't feel cold. One, two, three, four ..."

Near the summit, we stop to catch our breath, to drink, suck down packs of GU and nibble gorp. Our efforts go unrewarded. Fog obliterates any view we might have had from so far up. Everything is wet and cold: toes, legs, fingers, nose. My jaw is clenched. In true Esmeralda fashion, I'm enduring. Eventually this day will be over. Eventually I will get home. Eventually it will be dark and late and I will get to go to bed.

"Pretty durn icy from here on," Jon says, "anybody got crampons?" Shivering, sleet pummeled, our backs to the wind, we stand in a circle and eyeball each other.

"OK then," Monty says nodding. And all together we turn—descending in a river of mud, falling, slipping, sliding, cursing—and laughing. Margaret's face is smeared. Monty's glasses fogged beyond redemption. Water streams down the bill of my baseball cap and into my mouth.

"Personal comfort is highly overrated," Jon says, pulling off his jacket and tying it around his waist—the umbrella long ago secured to the side of his pack.



The trees nod as we stumble by. And then I figure it out—before we reach the parking lot, a few miles away from dry clothes and beer, just as the clouds let loose another wicked torrent—why am I bothering to keep my thoroughly soaked, heavy jacket on anyway? I unzip the jacket and take off my hat. Immediately, I feel free. It doesn't even seem that cold. I tip my wet face to the sky and let the rain run into my open mouth. And suddenly I'm happy to be here. It tickles me that the slick, damp trail we hiked up is now a stream of rushing water. I look around the forest as we descend. It's shiny and lush. The rich musk of leaf and soil and rain, of life and growth and decomposition, is powerful. I feel a gleeful little tick in my belly at having spent Easter Sunday outside in the cold and the pouring rain. I'm glad to be wearing God's country on my face; reassured that this is exactly the kind of thing my brother would do. I'm grateful, even, for the opportunity to be fully, physically participating—not like those others at the resort below, swimming indoors or sequestered in their rooms, waiting for a break in the weather.

Release

The day my brother died there was no rain. Instead the March sky was a suffocating alabaster, a thin skin stretched so tight there were no cracks for clouds to seep through let alone a drop of rain.

Outside my bedroom window in early May the rain pounds down, turning to hail, turning back to rain. I open one eye and see that the sky is a riot of black thunderclouds scudding into the side of a double rainbow. Even though it is 8 a.m.; my body wants to curl away from the darkening sky, stay in bed, wrap up in the blanket I made David years ago, the one I rescued recently from his home in the woods, the one he kept on his bed, close to his skin. But the blanket is losing David's smell and I am running out of time. I need to get up, get coffee, get in the car and drive to his house to continue packing him up.



“Cowgirl-up there, webfoot,” Esmeralda hisses in my ear as I stand outside in the downpour fumbling with the car keys. I hate it when she's right. Whatever the rain wants it shouldn't stop me from anything: walking the dog (Esmeralda advises, *Pick the route with the thickest tree canopy*); working (*Duh, you're inside a building so what's the big deal?*); hiking (*You live in the Pacific Northwest, you're granola, you're a geoduck, where's your Gore-Tex?*); packing up David's books, clothes, guitar, maple syrup, drums, kayak (*He's dead, he's not worried about boxes of his stuff getting wet in the back of your truck*).

I run a line of duct tape over the top of a box containing Dave's three pots and one ancient frying pan. I guess when you live with Crohn's disease—a chronic, debilitating, intestinal bowel syndrome, cooking isn't at the top of your mind. Outside the small, square living room window in his single-wide trailer, a circle of fir, cedar and alder trees bend and bow in the wind of the coming storm.

I will get his naturalist books boxed and labeled for donation to the Gorge Ecology Center. I will get the kitchen cleaned out. I will pack up everything my parents, sister and I have decided we need to keep him close: a rusted, yellow Tonka truck weathering out in the yard, the poster with Woody Guthrie's songs, his guitar and marimba. And I'm taking the six-pack of Black Butte Porter from the fridge.

The front door slams against the wall, forced back by a sudden gust of wind. I carry a box to the car, feeling the first fat drops of wet on my cheeks. Immediately my frustration builds. Inside my head, the list grows: box up ranger uniforms, files and folders, towels, teaching supplies; dump out the plastic bin of soil from the back of his Prius that was used for some class at a Columbia Gorge elementary school in Lyle or Dufur or The Dalles. It's four in the afternoon, but feels like nine at night—it's so dark now. Clouds clutter the bruised sky. The trees wave their branches like desperate arms. I don't want to be alone out



here in the woods, in the rain. Shit. The impending storm, the fury the wind is whipping up in the trees; the gunmetal gray clouds stacking in the eastern sky add to my utter disbelief and despair at David's permanent absence. This rain was not predicted.

The rest of the boxes are packed and waiting inside David's front door. Rain now pelts down, beating up the duff of the forest floor between his house and my car. I look at my watch. I should leave soon. But, if I continue schlepping boxes I will be drenched.

"Quit dawdling," Esmeralda pokes at me, sounding anxious—not her usual bossy imperative.

I'm paralyzed. My throat is tight and dry. My legs want to crumple. A shiver runs through my body. The heat was turned off too soon, and now it feels colder inside than out. I collapse onto the couch and pull a stuffed Smokey the Bear under my head for a pillow, cover up with my coat and close my eyes. I'm not sure what I'm waiting for. For a while bleak tears squeeze out the corners of my eyes, slip down my cheeks, into my ears. Slowly my body relaxes. My heart releases its grip on sadness. I forget about the boxes and the To-Do list.

And then I hear the music—raindrops tapping on the hard, flat roof of Dave's trailer. The sound is orchestral. It fills the house and my head completely. I lie on the couch listening to the crash of cymbals, a piccolo of rain patter. I feel Dave here too—picture him cozying up under the weather, the rain beating his day's rhythm, accompanying him as he sits in front of the wood stove playing guitar or reading or just lying on the couch like me. There's the two of us on a couch, in a trailer in the woods, listening, being and breathing.



Play

Oh my God.

I stare out my window at work overlooking the Columbia River and see thick, nasty rain clouds looming in the northern sky. It's June, for God's sake, but these clouds mean business. At 4 p.m., a strong wind is blowing them firmly in my direction: Vancouver, Washington. I rode my bike to work today. I have to ride home. Twelve miles. I didn't bring Gore-Tex anything with me this morning because the clouds then were so friendly: chubby white baby cumulus lolling around forming creamsicles and elephants with dreadlocks in the sky. This morning the weatherman said: chance of showers—slim. I should know better than to listen to the forecast. Except of course, I was running late, and unbridled optimism at the weather prediction meant I didn't have to pack my stuff in a plastic bag and find my rain gear and gloves and goggles, etc.

What to do?

Call my husband for a ride home?

Leave my bike and catch a ride with a co-worker?

Ride across the bridge, catch the MAX train and then call my husband?

Call my mom?

Esmeralda is strangely silent on the question.

"What would you do?" I ask the picture of David that sits on my desk. "Never mind—I know what you'd do." David was famous for taking off for a hike on a rainy day without rain gear, risking the "shortcut" that got him home at midnight or fearlessly careening down a rutted road, alone, on his mountain bike, headed for a broken collar bone.

Okay. I'm riding. Those storm clouds were calling my bluff anyway. They were putting my character on the line.

I change into my dampish bike shorts and shirt still soggy from the morning



ride and drag my bike from the bike room. It is raining with a vengeance. I stand under cover of the doorway, watching water sheeting down the asphalt, thinking about the fact that every single thing in my not-even-remotely-rainproofed pack will be soaked by the time I get home. I am about to get sloshed, splashed and soused from stem to stern.

And there it comes—a slight smile on my lips, and suddenly David’s soft whisper “Go on, do it.” And I know, from all his years tramping through the forest, that he’d think: this is kid stuff. This is playing in the mud. I shrug on my pack, swing my leg over the seat and push off.

The rain drips off the edge of my helmet so incessantly that I can’t seem to blink fast enough to get the water out of my eyes. I develop a kind of blink-squint routine that lets me make sure the coast is clear before I have to close my eyes completely for a few seconds. I pedal furiously down the road, heading for the Bike Superhighway that will take me across the Columbia River, over the Oregon-Washington Interstate Bridge toward home.

When rain catches people by surprise they dart toward a covered doorway or dash to their car or whatever dry place they can find. Their shoulders hunch up, chins tuck, sometimes a newspaper, magazine or purse is held above their heads as they scurry—as if any of that helps. But, having done some “research” now about moving through rain, I’m pretty sure dashing between the drops doesn’t work unless the sky is just teasing with the occasional warning drip. I think about this as I race toward the bridge. And then I slow down. Way down. I mean, I’ve already established that I’m going to be soaked. So why hurry? And as soon as I give in to a meandering pace, I can see better. My shoulders relax out of their hunch. I sit up and start looking around.

The trucks barrel across the bridge, splashing waves of water up over the sides of the cement barrier that separates motor vehicles from bikes and pedestrians. I mentally prepare to be tsunamied as I ride across the bridge. By the time I get



to the Oregon side I feel grit on my face and there’s an unpleasant taste of metal in my mouth. A cold steady drip of water runs down my back under my arms and out the bottoms of my sleeves. My nose is freezing. My feet squish. My yellow jacket is polka-dotted in mud and road gradoo.

On a whim I turn off the bike path and decide to take the long way home. I start winding through Portland’s north and northeast neighborhood streets. For 5:30 on a Wednesday it’s surprisingly quiet. No one is outside. There is almost no traffic on these leafy, neighborhood side streets with their gracious old houses. I plow through the puddles—deliberately. Chuckling on the inside, half delighted with how thoroughly wet and muddy I am. I feel cocooned from the day, from the evening ahead. Enveloped in rain, sequestered from all the lives in all the houses I pass. I wonder why I cared about getting wet in the first place. In another twenty minutes I will shed my wet biking skin in the garage and get just as wet in a hot shower. I’ll put on warm clothes and transform back into a dry Oregonian. I’ll toast my brother with a Black Butte Porter from the comfort of my covered front porch and watch the rain. Listening as it pings the roof and taps away at the leaves of the elm trees. The air smelling sharp and sweet at the same time: cut grass, warm, musky and fresh around the edges with just a dash of pepper in the middle. I’ll be satisfied—that I didn’t give in to easy comfort, that I found some fun inside myself as I rode the storm.

I understand now that loving rain is a little like loving a partner, a parent, a child, a best friend—a brother. It’s not the simple, uncomplicated relationship of warm, sunny days. Rain requires attention and adjustment. It asks for flexibility. Rain forces you to be present in the sensory world at least long enough to decide to take an umbrella or not ... to slow down, watch for puddles, see the road ahead and notice the sky. Rain asks that you get familiar with the uncomfortable.