

## Rain

On Thursday night, in the middle of decaying Spanish Harlem, it began to rain. It was not an average downpour, which usually subsided after an hour or two, but a torrential rainstorm that beat down on the city below. It started at half past eleven, when most of the children had gone to sleep, and the majority of adults were settling down for the night. The rain fell with vehemence, pounding on the blocks of vacant brick tenements that were deteriorating with each hour of lifelessness. Grossly large raindrops battered steel fire escapes, which once had been shiny black, but were now flaked and chipping away. Stray dogs and homeless bums huddled in alleyways and boarded up doorways seeking sanctuary from the offensive elements. A lone fire sizzled and sparked in a rusted oil drum down the street, ultimately losing battle to the heavy down pour. The soft blue glow of television sets had extinguished around midnight. Even the steel aerials couldn't compete with this rain.

Job, a black man the color of deep sleep, stood against a pane of rain-splattered glass, and sighed. His breath fanned out over the surface of the window, obscuring his vision of the filth-lined alleyway below. He reached for his cigarette and drew a deep drag. Exhaling, he amused himself by blowing on the cold glass, creating patterns resembling Rorschach tests. They were like clouds, he thought, remaining only for a brief moment in one silhouette before transforming into something else. At first, he felt sad to see them go, but then he realized that nothing remained forever. He could accept this, for it was the simple truth.

Job was from the islands. Which one, few knew, but then, only a handful really knew the man who lived on the eighth floor and stayed to himself most of the time. He labored in the city, that was for sure, working around the piers, gutting fish or something like that. He left for work at five, six days a week, always dressed in the same dull red windbreaker with a hood that flapped around his closely cropped black hair. Job was a good man, in

that he did what he was told and minded his own business. He didn't mess with drugs or steal from those more fortunate than him. He led a simple life, and seemed content to everyone who came in contact with him.

The building in which he lived, and those for blocks around him, contained mostly Puerto Ricans with little education and less English speaking ability. They never bothered with him, but that was okay. Job understood them to be good people, who made the best of their environment and the resources available to them. He became accustomed to the sounds of salsa music and rapid exchanges of ghetto Spanish that emanated from the hallways and open windows. Even tonight, with the storm beating down on them, Job could hear the faint melodic rhythm of Tito Puente coming from the adjacent apartment. Perhaps, it was strange. He would of thought everyone would be asleep by now.

Job looked out over the darken face of a brick apartment building that stood defiant to the night time attack. All windows were dark, the occupants fast asleep. His gaze swept down to the cobblestone floor of the alleyway. It was littered with water-logged garbage and overturned trashcans, their contents swept along a meandering streamlet, at the edge of the building, toward the street. The alleyway itself was narrow and dark, basically a dead end spot between two tall structures. From the street, one could look up into a maze of rusting fire escapes that clung to the faces of the crumbling buildings. At the far end of the alleyway was a wall, which was painted in various colors and slogans, proclaiming this turf as property of the "Warriors", "Black Spades", and other local street gangs. Job watched as the rain fell through the metal grates of the fire escapes in perfect columns. No wind dared interrupt this storm's fury.

Job suddenly thought of his maternal grandmother, Nanny. Was it because of the rain, or just a sharp loneliness that crept into him without warning? It had been because of her that Job left the destitution of the islands and ventured to America. Even though he had only traded one

poverty for another, he had always been grateful to her for giving him the strength to pack up and leave his home for a new life, and a brighter future.

He had not seen his grandmother lately. He felt guilty, because he used to visit her like clockwork every Sunday night. Lately, he had been so busy, working as many hours as he could, trying to get ahead. She would understand, he knew, but he needed to go and see her soon. She wasn't getting any younger.

At midnight Job realized he was exhausted and ready for bed. He wanted desperately to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep tonight, but the command of the rainstorm held his attention for a moment longer. As he crushed his cigarette against a cheap ashtray, Job noticed a movement at the edge of the alleyway. His attention focused on the street side of the alley, which was bathed in white light from a tall street lamp. A young woman stood still in the pouring rain, staring into the alley. She was wearing a beige colored trench coat, held tightly closed at the waist by a belt. The coat didn't appear to be of much use, for she was totally drenched. Her long, dark hair was soaked to the skin, yet she made no move to take cover. She just stood there, at the edge, peering into the alley, as if scouting for danger. Job stood motionless also, not wishing to give himself away, although his room was dark, and the young woman could not possibly see him from where she stood. Job recognized the girl at once. Her name was Maria, and she lived with her large family in the building across from his. She was a beautiful girl, about twenty-two; tall, with a firm body that made the boys run wild. She was quiet thought, at least Job believed she was, for he had never heard her utter a word to anyone. He knew that her parents were very strict. All of her eight brothers and sisters were not allowed out after dark. The father was kind of eccentric, from what tiny bits of conversation Job had heard. He didn't let those kids do anything. It was strange for Maria to have to conform to those strict rules, but then again, she was living in her father's house, and there were harsh penalties for disobeying her father's rules.

Maria began to cautiously creep into the alley, constantly looking back to see if she was being followed. Once she was half way down the cobblestone, she appeared to relax, for she knew no one in the street could spot her now. The light from the street lamp did not reach this far into the alley. Also, the rain-laden clouds were directly overhead, eclipsing a normally bright moon. When she reached the three quarter mark, she stopped beneath a rack of fire escapes and shook her hair wildly, evidently enjoying the midnight shower. Suddenly, she pulled her trench coat open, revealing nothing more than a white laced bra and matching panties. Hastily, Job strained against the windowpane as she let the trench coat fall to the dirty ground, and began to dance in the open rain.

Job, clad in a terry cloth robe and sandals, raced to the elevator and pounded the down button. A few seconds passed before he heard the familiar rumble of the motors, so he opted for the stairs instead. He took them two at a time, slipping twice, almost injuring his ankle. When he reached the lobby, he bolted out of the glass door and into the driving rain. Wasting no time, he headed for the alleyway around the corner.

The rain was coming down in sheets now, and Job found his athletic body fighting him to slow down. He reached the alleyway in a minute, after sprinting around the corner, and cutting down a side street. He knew he looked foolish in his drenched robe, and his face, arms, and legs doused with water, yet he didn't care. He wanted to find Maria before any one else spotted her.

She was there when he arrived panting and bent over like a marathon runner after a race. She was oblivious to him at first; her hands were on her head, while she moved her hips to a sensuous beat. Maria smiled when she finally spotted him in the shadows not far from her, but she continued her rhythmic dance in her soaked bra and panties as if he didn't matter. Job stared at her body, mesmerized by her incredible good looks and the powerful sexual messages she was transmitting. Maria had strong calves that were muscular, yet sexy. On her feet were a pair of black high heels,

which shined even in dull light created by this rain. Job's gaze swept upward, admiring her tight stomach and firm breasts. Her bra and panties were completely see through by this time, and Job homed in on the thin, dark patch of hair that clung to her drenched panties. He found himself growing hard when he spotted her dark nipples poking out from round breasts, held snug against her bra.

Maria closed her eyes and danced, lifting her face to the sky, soaking up the rain like it was energy. Job was afraid to interrupt the dance, for she looked so serene and beautiful, but finally, he could not stand it any more. He went to her, wrapping his powerful dark arms around her body, and pulling her to him, shielding her partly from the rain, and grateful for her warmth.

"You're beautiful," he said softly, caressing her long hair with his hand.

"It's a beautiful night," she replied, pulling him closer to her, and placing her head against the curve in his neck. He held her silently for a while, not wanting to break the silence, nor spoil the moment. He didn't understand what was happening, but he did not dare concentrate too hard on the event, for if this was a dream, he didn't want to shatter it. Maria mumbled in Spanish, breaking the spell, and Job looked down into her rich brown eyes, searching for meaning. She spotted his incomprehension, and smiled, kissing him lightly on the lips. Job pressed his body tight against hers, feeling the wetness of their bodies mingle and become one. Maria disengaged herself from him and picked up her soaked trench coat that lay in a heap by the side of her building. She shook it fiercely, laughing as droplets of water erupted from the shiny material. Satisfied, she pulled Job to the opposite side of the alley, underneath a column of black fire escaper. The rain fell as she lay the coat down on the ground, and beckoned Job there. She pulled his water-logged robe away from his body, and tucked it into a crevice in the brick. She lay down silently, pulling him atop of her, and driving her fingers underneath his underwear, feeling his muscular ass.

They undressed each other without a word, listening to the rain as it beat down upon them. When they were completely nude, Job rocked Maria gently in his arms, gaining satisfaction from the feeling of her warm, wet body touching his. He explored her body with his hands and tongue, licking her hard nipples where the rain had deposited clear drops of fresh precipitation. Maria lay down, taking his weight, and pulling him as close to her as physically possible. Job looked out at the alleyway, his head level with the cobblestones. Little fingers of green grass had sprouted between the stone, quivering in the midnight showers. He had never noticed the grass before; he thought of this alley as a desolate place like the rest of Harlem, devoid of anything good. Turning away, he explored Maria's mouth with his own, feeling her become aroused and wrap her arms and thighs around him. He took her face in his hands, brushing her long hair, and fingering the carpet of grass that had erupted underneath them. They made love peacefully in the rain, with an occasional moan of pleasure escaping from Maria's lips.

Surprisingly, the rain had stopped. The sound of the deluge was still in the background, yet it seemed displaced in the space of the alleyway. The scent of freshly cut grass hung in the air, and everything sparkled: the drops of dew on the blades of green, the crystal clear raindrops clinging to the rusty metal, and the swift stream across from their bodies, which ran clear, and smelled of a freshness unparalleled. Maria and Job turned toward the street, witnessing the heavy downpour that stopped dead in its tracks at the entrance to the alleyway, as if someone had sliced the air with a knife. Maria gasped, first at the shock of seeing the rain held back from their special place, and second to her orgasm, which burst forth from her sex like the grass from cobblestones, and caused her to squeal in delight. Maria's pleasure-filled screams saturated the night time air and mixed with Job's cry of release. While lying close in the aftermath of their lovemaking, the grass seemed to recede into the cracks of dark stone, and the rain began to fall.

Friday was like a picturesque day shot in Kodachrome: ultra-blue skies, crystal-clear air, and brilliant sunlight that bathed Harlem, softening

her harsh looks. A handful of aging black men played crap against a boarded up liquor store, while scraggly dogs lapped at shallow cesspools, formed during last night's rainstorm. For most folks, it was "business as usual," but at half speed, taking time out to enjoy the warmth of the day and the good feeling that permeated the air.

Job hurried home from the piers at five, the smell of fish ground into his skin and red windbreaker. He took a quick shower, washing away the remnants of the day. By six, he was standing in front of Maria's building, oblivious to the loitering teenagers who were selling handguns and vials of "crack." He waited patiently for her return, hoping that she didn't have any plans for the evening, so they could talk, and get acquainted. Everything had changed after last night. For the first time in his life, there was someone special whom he really cared for, and wanted to please. Sure, there was Nanny, but that was different. Perhaps, he was jumping the gun, but he felt something stir inside him like a storm. And, he felt sure that Maria was stirring too.

Job had only to wait a half hour before she arrived. When she turned the corner, his heart skipped a beat, and he stood up from the stoop with excitement in his eyes. Maria looked wonderful in a three-quarter length red skirt and matching blouse, which was partly unbuttoned, revealing a bit of cleavage. For the briefest of moments, Job's thoughts went back to the night before, and to the passionate love that they had made. Seeing Maria like that just confirmed what he felt inside. He desperately wanted that woman!

Maria reached the steps of the building and strode inside without a glance in Job's direction. At first, he thought she must not have seen him, but when he called her by name, she merely turned around and stared, trying to identify the dark man. A puzzled look came over her, and she went toward an open elevator, briskly stepping inside. The steel doors banged shut as Job stood alone in the lobby, trying to comprehend what went wrong.

For ten long hot nights, it refused to rain. And for ten even longer days, Maria paid no more attention to Job than she did to the habitual junkies, who stood on the corner and tantalized her day in and day out. She acted as if she had never met the man, shunning him whenever he approached her. Job was devastated. He arrived at work late, and left early, spending the majority of his time sitting in front of his window, staring down into the dark alleyway, drawing on cigarette after cigarette, and hoping she would show.

Monday night was no different than the rest. Job lay around, dressed in a pair of worn shorts and a tee shirt, occasionally glancing at the TV, but mostly keeping his eye on the alleyway below. He had lost track of the time long ago. It could have been eight o'clock, or maybe even twelve. Job didn't notice the clock on the wall anymore. He didn't even care what day it was. Then, at midnight, it began to rain.

Job suddenly jumped out of his recliner, racing for the window. He had fallen asleep hours ago, with nothing more than the hue of a dead TV channel as his companion, but when the rain began to fall, the pitter patter against his window brought him out of his dreamless state. He quickly scanned the alleyway for Maria, but she was nowhere in sight. Job felt revitalized, though. His pulse began to quicken, pushed faster by his expectations. It had been raining the last time they had spoken, and he hadn't been the same since then. Job decided to wait this rain out.

Fifteen minutes was all it took. A cigarette lay unattended in a black glass ashtray, its tendrils of wispy white smoke curling and twisting in the still air. A light sprinkle transformed into a heavy downpour as Maria appeared along the edge of cobblestones, her gaze unfaltering like a zombie. Was she waiting for him? Job, sprinting for the door, aimed to find out.

He arrived out of breath like the last time, but with his heart pounding so hard he thought it would burst. Maria paused in front of a black sewer grate, watching the rain water spiral down into a labyrinth of mammoth

pipes. Job cautiously stopped several yards away from her, waiting for her to speak. Maria's gaze lifted away from the grate and locked with Job's. Her stare warmed immediately, and she rushed to him, wrapping her arms around his large shoulders. She kissed him with eagerness that surprised even Job, but he returned the passion, more confused than before, yet delighted to be back in her arms again. They made love without words, their passion and obsessive need for each other rising to a sensuous peak of fulfillment. Afterward, Maria rested in his arms, as the alluring fragrance of invisible orange groves lay suspended above them. Job gently massaged beads of oily dew into her lovely breasts, wishing the rain would never end.

Job just knew that he was a cursed man. Nanny had said that it would happen sooner or later. Job guessed that she was right, after all. He had stopped believing long ago, when he made the move to the States. God hadn't been with him on the Islands, and he sure wasn't here with him now. He was cursed, that's all there was to it. God was messin' with Job, getting him back for all the faithless time that had passed. Nanny had said it would happen like that: one day, when he was feeling secure, and on top of the world. She had said it to him, so many times, until he grew tired of listening to her disturbing words. He would still visit her on Sundays, but when she started her little speech, Job would totally ignore her, looking out the stained glass window, counting the beveled edges and the kaleidoscope of colors that filtered through the glass.

Job and Maria had not spoken for twenty-two days. On the twenty third, it rained, and Maria embraced Job like he was her long lost lover. Then, silence for another long week and a half, until the rain came down once more. He tried to discuss the situation with her, but she denied any knowledge of what he was talking about. Job could not comprehend what was transpiring, and that added to his anxiety. Finally, when he felt he could not stand it any longer, Job decided to go visit Nanny. Perhaps she would have an answer.

Job's grandmother lived in a small flat on Lenox Avenue. It was a fairly nice place, decorated in a simple style, that was somewhat cluttered, but functional. Job despised the location, but then he only visited her occasionally, so it really didn't matter.

Nanny could sense something was wrong as soon as he walked in the door, so Job didn't waste anytime in filling her in. Of course, he left out the details of their sexual encounters, deciding it would only complicate matters. At once, Nanny went into her spiel, while Job fingered a golden brown chicken leg.

"Well, what do you expect? I mean, you haven't been to church in God knows how long. Really Job, it doesn't surprise me at all."

She gave Job a look of disgust and then paused to work on a chicken breast. Job was grateful for the silence, feeling foolish forever considering sharing his dilemma with Nanny.

"He's testing you," she said, pointing a greasy finger toward the ceiling, "seeing how you'll handle this. Will you shun Him, like you have done in the past, or will you finally go to Him, and let Him see you through this uncertainty." Again, she paused, waiting for his rebuttal, which she knew would eventually come, using the wait to gnaw on her chicken. Job let Nanny talk, resigning himself to the fact that he would get nowhere with her. He already knew what needed to be done. He had come to this conclusion an hour after he walked through Nanny's door. It had taken him the rest of the evening to get up enough courage to admit that it was the only solution. While Nanny preached her gospel, Job sighed silently, his mind shutting out the annoying noises around him, and focusing in on the task at hand.

Job sprang from the recessed doorway and into Maria's path, evoking a scream that saturated the empty hallways. He cut her off in mid-shriek with a silky necktie, plugging her mouth and choking off any further yells. He dragged her wide-eyed to the elevator and yanked loose the wooden broomstick, which was squeezed between the door, holding the elevator on the floor. The steel door dragged open, and he pushed Maria inside, quickly

shutting it behind them. Job pushed the button to the top floor, ignoring Maria's muzzled plea for release. He turned away from her, not wanting to see the dread in her eyes, knowing that to her he was just a common street thug, planning to rape and beat her. A minute later, the elevator lurched to a stop and the door rolled open. He grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her out, turning toward a narrow staircase that led to the roof. When Maria saw the dilapidated steps she began to shake uncontrollably, and Job had to use all of his strength to restrain her. He pleaded with Maria, trying to convince her that he was not a threat, and that he only wished to talk. She seemed untouched by his appeal for silence, for she began to thrash even more when they reached the top step. Her body crashed into the door, flinging it wide open. An expanse of cloudless blue interspersed with the spiny black of television aerials blazed their corneas.

Job led Maria over the tar-like surface, past waist high air ducts, toward a tall shed that loomed in the distance. Maria's moans subsided to a barely perceptible whimper while Job pressed onward to the shack. Through tear-filled eyes, Maria recognized three massive tarpaulins that were suspended twenty feet above the ground. The edges were drawn tight and held high, while the middle dragged several feet off the ground. A series of pipes led away from the center to the shed, disappearing among an array of valves and brass elbows. Each tarp resembled inverted tents, yet their purpose remained a mystery to Maria. She wondered if she would live long enough to find out.

They arrive at the shed after circumventing more antennas and roof structures. Job reached for a low, narrow door cut in the wood, and gently pushed Maria inside. He slammed the door shut and locked it, as Maria stood still in the center of a wood floor, taking in her surroundings. It was a large open air shed, its size deceiving from the outside. Three windows were covered with billowy white drapes that fluttered and snapped in the dusk breeze. High above their heads was the ceiling, which Maria observed was veiled with a network of pipes and nozzles. Job reached for her and undid the

necktie around her mouth. He stepped back, his hand resting on a single brass valve in the wall.

"I built this for you," he said, gesturing to the walls and ceiling above. "For us," he uttered softly, gripping the valve tightly and turning it with a quick snap of his wrist. At once, rain-fresh water burst forth from the pipes and sprinklers, cascading down upon them. Before Maria could pronounce a single word, she became drenched, her hair clinging to the back of her neck and shoulders. Job watched black mascara run down her cheeks, and she blinked in confusion. Her eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment and then she shook her head, closing her eyes in the process. When she reopened them, Job was standing in front of her, his hands at his side, and slick, wet drops of rain water, collected in large tarps and pumped into this shed, splattering against his forehead and cheeks.

"For us," he repeated when Maria's gaze met his, and she pulled him into her arms spontaneously, crushing her soft lips against his. Job's arms slid around Maria's waist and locked behind her as she kissed him ravenously. Without a sound, she led him to a low mattress by an open window, and undressed him quickly. There, they made love, over and over again, without intermission or recuperation: Job subsisting only on their enduring lovemaking, and Maria, on the endless rain...

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