

Spring Rain
by Bernard Malamund

George Fisher was still lying awake, thinking of the accident which he had seen on 121st Street. A young man had been struck by an automobile, and they had carried him to the drugstore on Broadway. The druggist couldn't do anything for him, so they waited for an ambulance. The man lay on the druggist's table in the back of the store looking at the ceiling. He knew he was going to die.

George felt deeply sorry for the man, who seemed to be in his late twenties. The stoical way in which he took the accident convinced George that he was a person of fine character. He knew that the man was not afraid of death, and he wanted to speak to him and tell him that he too was not afraid to die; but the words never formed themselves on his thin lips. George went home, choked with unspoken words.

Lying in bed in his dark room, George heard his daughter, Florence, put the key in the lock. He heard her whisper to Paul, "Do you want to come in for a minute?"

"No," said Paul after a while, "I've got a nine o'clock class tomorrow."

"Then good night," said Florence and she closed the door hard.

George thought, This is the first decent boy Florence has gone out with, and she can't get anywhere with him. She's like her mother. She doesn't know how to handle decent people. He raised his head and looked at Beatie, half expecting her to wake up because his thoughts sounded so loud to him, but she didn't move.

This was one of George's sleepless nights. They came just after he had finished reading an interesting novel, and he lay awake imagining that all those things were happening to him. In his sleepless nights George thought of the things that had happened to him during the day, and he said those words that people saw on his lips, but which they never heard him speak. He said to the dying young man, "I'm not afraid to die either." He said to the heroine in the novel, "You understand my loneliness. I can tell you these things." He told his wife and daughter what he thought of them.

"Beatie," he said, "you made me talk once, but it wasn't you. It was the sea and the darkness and the sound of the water sucking the beams of the pier. Those poetical things I said about how lonely men are—I said them because you were pretty, with dark red hair, and I was afraid because I was a small man with thin lips, and I was afraid that I could not have you. You didn't love me, but you said yes for Riverside Drive and your apartment and your two fur coats and the people who come here to play bridge and mah-jongg."

He said to Florence, "What a disappointment you are. I loved you when you were a child, but now you're selfish and small. I lost my last bit of feeling for you when you didn't want to go to college. The best thing you ever did was to bring an educated boy like Paul into the house, but you'll never keep him."

George spoke these thoughts to himself until the first gray of the April dawn drifted into the bedroom and made the silhouette of Beatie in the other bed clearer. Then George turned over and slept for a while. In the morning, at breakfast, he said to Florence, "Did you have a good time?"

"Oh, leave me alone," answered Florence.

"Leave her alone," said Beatie. "You know she's cranky in the morning."

"I'm not cranky," said Florence, almost crying. "It's Paul. He never takes me anywhere."

"What did you do last night?" asked Beatie.

"What we always do," answered Florence. "We went for a walk. I can't even get him into a movie."

"Does he have money?" asked Beatie. "Maybe he's working his way through college."

"No," said Florence, "he's got money. His father is a big buyer. Oh, what's the use? I'll never get him to take me out."

"Be patient," Beatie told her. "Next time, either I or your father will suggest it to him."

"I won't," said George.

"No, you won't," answered Beatie, "but I will." George drank his coffee and left.

When he came home for dinner, there was a note for George saying that Beatie and Florence had eaten early because Beatie was going to Forest Hills to play bridge and Florence had a date to go to the movies with her girl friend. The maid served George, and later he went into the living room to read the papers and listen to the war news.

The bell rang. George rose, calling out to the maid, who was coming from her room, that he would answer the bell. It was Paul, wearing an old hat and a raincoat, wet on the shoulders.

George was glad that Florence and Beatie were not there.

"Come in, Paul. Is it raining?"

"It's drizzling."

Paul entered without taking off his raincoat. "Where's Florence?" he asked. "She went to the pictures with a friend of hers. Her mother is playing bridge or mah-jongg. somewhere. Did Florence know you were coming?"

"No, she didn't know." Paul looked disappointed. He walked to the door.

"Well, I'm sorry," said George, hoping that the boy would stay. Paul turned at the door. "Mr. Fisher."

"Yes?" said George.

"Are you busy now?"

“No, I’m not.”

“How about going for a walk with me?”

“Didn’t you say it was raining?”

“It’s only spring rain,” said Paul. “Put on your raincoat and an old hat.”

“Yes,” said George, “a walk will do me good.” He went into his room for a pair of rubbers. As he was putting them on, he could feel a sensation of excitement, but he didn’t think of it. He put on his black raincoat and last year’s hat.

As soon as they came into the street and the cold mist fell on his face, George could feel the excitement flow through his body. They crossed the street, passed Grant’s Tomb, and walked toward the George Washington Bridge.

The sky was filled with a floating white mist which clung to the street lamps. A wet wind blew across the dark Hudson from New Jersey and carried within it the smell of spring. Sometimes the wind blew the cold mist into George’s eyes, and it shocked him as if it were electricity. He took long steps to keep up with Paul, and he secretly rejoiced in what they were doing. He felt a little like crying, but he did not let Paul guess.

Paul was talking. He told stories about his professors in Columbia at which George laughed. Then Paul surprised George by telling him that he was studying architecture. He pointed out the various details of the houses they were passing and told him what they were derived from. George was very much interested. He always liked to know where things came from.

They slowed down, waited for traffic to stop, crossed Riverside Drive again, and walked over to Broadway to a tavern. Paul ordered a sandwich and a bottle of beer, and George did the same. They talked about the war; then George ordered two more bottles of beer for Paul and him, and they began to talk about people. George told the boy the story of the young man who had died in the drugstore. He felt a strange happiness to see how the story affected Paul. Somebody put a nickel into the electric phonograph, and it played a tango. The tango added to George’s pleasure, and he sat there thinking how fluently he had talked.

Paul had grown quiet. He drank some beer, then he began to speak about Florence. George was uneasy and a little bit frightened. He was afraid that the boy was going to tell him something that he did not want to know and that his good time would be over.

“Florence is beautiful with that red hair,” said Paul, as if he were talking to himself. George said nothing. “Mr. Fisher,” said Paul, lowering his glass and looking up, “there’s something I want you to know.”

“Me?”

“Mr. Fisher,” Paul told him earnestly, “Florence is in love with me. She told me that. I want to love her because I’m lonely, but I don’t know—I can’t love her. I can’t reach her. She’s

not like you. We go for a walk along the Drive, and I can't reach her. Then she says I'm moody, and she wants to go to the movies."

George could feel his heart beating strongly. He felt that he was listening to secrets, yet they were not secrets because he had known them all his life. He wanted to talk—to tell Paul that he was like him. He wanted to tell him how lonely he had been all his life and how he lay awake at night, dreaming and thinking until the gray morning drifted into the room. But he didn't.

"I know what you mean, Paul," he said.

They walked home in the rain, which was coming down hard now. When he got in, George saw that both Beatie and Florence had gone to bed. He removed his rubbers and hung his wet hat and raincoat in the bathroom. He stepped into his slippers, but he decided not to undress because he did not feel like sleeping. He was aware of a fullness of emotion within him.

George went over to the radio and turned on some jazz softly. He lit a cigar and put out the lamps. For a while he stood in the dark, listening to the soft music. Then he went to the window and drew aside the curtain.

The spring rain was falling everywhere. On the dark mass of the Jersey shore. On the flowing river. Across the street the rain was droning on the leaves of the tall maples, wet in the lamplight, and swaying in the wind. The wind blew the rain hard and sharp across the window, and George felt tears on his cheeks.

A great hunger for words rose in him. He wanted to talk. He wanted to say things that he had never said before. He wanted to tell them that he had discovered himself and that never again would he be lost and silent. Once more he possessed the world and loved it. He loved Paul, and he loved Florence, and he loved the young man who had died.

I must tell her, he thought. He opened the door of Florence's room. She was sleeping. He could hear her quiet breathing.

"Florence," he called softly, "Florence."

She was instantly awake.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

The words rushed to his lips.

"Paul, Paul was here." She rose on her elbow, her long hair falling over her shoulder.

"Paul? What did he say?"

George tried to speak, but the words were suddenly immovable. He could never tell her what Paul had said. A feeling of sorrow for Florence stabbed him.

"He didn't say anything," he stammered. "We walked—went for a walk."

Florence sighed and lay down again. The wind blew the spring rain against the windows, and they listened to the sound it made falling in the street.

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