

## After the Rain

Gilbert struggled through restless dreams and woke, sweating and fevered.

His room is dark. The only light is the tiny light in the face of his clock, turned away from him on the stand beside his bed. He always turns the clock away from him. He used to turn it around and check the time once or twice a night, but he doesn't look at it at all anymore. He doesn't care, and it wouldn't make any difference. His dreams always tell him the world is ill and dying, of neglect, of greed, of violence; all the people he loves are ill and dying, or violently destroyed.

When he wakes and thinks about his dreams, they bore him in their sameness, but while he dreams, they terrify him, because he lives the dreams, and in the dreams, all existence, all life, the world ends.

Awake in the darkness, he thinks of the Bible story of Job, "When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro until the dawning of the day.

"My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken and become loathsome.

"My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and are spent without hope.

"Oh remember that my life is wind: mine eye shall no more see good."

The eastern sky lightened above the mountains.

More than a year ago, he and Mary decided to sleep in separate rooms. There was no point in her being caught up in his restlessness, wakened every time he woke thrashing, fighting his way up from nightmares.

She had hesitated. She didn't want to abandon him; if she could help, she wanted to help; if being there helped, she would be there.

Gilbert said, "No, let's set up separate rooms. It doesn't help to have you beside me. If anything, it makes it worse, because you're there to focus on, and in the totally irrational time night and dreaming becomes, my focus on you isn't rational. I'd rather see you in the daytime, when I'm awake, and I've regained some sense of rational order. I'll get this settled, and then we can sleep together again."

He took the room that had been Doug's, before he left for

college. He wanted the big east window looking out to the mountains, that showed the earliest dawn of any room in the house.

The eastern sky showed nacreous grey above the white snow on the black stone mountains. He didn't try to go back to sleep. He watched the world come into day's light. When the sun rose above the mountain, Gilbert got up and dressed.

He fixed breakfast. Mary came into the kitchen, and they ate. Mary read from the Bible, and they prayed together. When she had first suggested reading and praying together, years ago, he had only tolerated it, as something meaningful to her. Over the years, he had come to like it and to depend on it.

Gilbert. When he was twenty-nine, he stopped saying, "Call me Gil" when he was introduced to someone. Almost no one calls him Gil anymore. So many friends who did are gone, out of contact, or killed in car wrecks, killed in war, died climbing a mountain, died young of heart attacks.

He wondered if many men began to study their own mortality as intensely as he did when he passed fifty. It was young, perhaps, to be lost in this dark study, but he hadn't yet found his way out of it.

Mary asked, "Will you go to church with me this morning?"

"No. I'm going to work in the garden. I'll meet you for lunch."

"I read an interesting definition of church, Gilbert. It said church is the laboratory where people working together shape their religion into practical applications for their daily lives. This material life we lead is a laboratory for working out the truths that transcend our material forms."

Gilbert said, "Church removes religion from the individual's life, where there is flux and growth, and vests it in a rigid, symbolic edifice."

"Only if the people allow that to happen, Gilbert. I like the other definition well enough to work to make it accurate."

Gilbert thought, women are more prone to religion. It is more natural to them. Especially organized religion, churches, fellowship, studying together, praying for each other.

Men get involved in religion more when they get older. They start wondering if life does go beyond this physical form. Maybe you can hook up with immortality by turning your thoughts toward more spiritual matters. That's easier to do when your physical abilities are leaving you anyway.

If Gilbert would become more deeply religious and more involved in religious community, his sense of logic, his sense of the truth undergirding all life will have to lead him into it. He can only go as he understands.

He can't separate the mortality of the world from his own mortality. He wonders if he is so painfully conscious of the deterioration of the earth, he begins to mirror it in his own physical condition.

Illness tries to drag him down, unexplained soreness and pains and intestinal problems, and intense pains in his chest sometimes, that he doesn't think are from his heart. He doesn't talk to anyone about it, not even Mary.

Some years ago, Mary quit going to doctors. She said, "God heals. As Jesus Christ healed, so can we. We can heal illness in ourselves and in others through prayer and study, through understanding God created man in his perfect image and likeness. We can heal discord in ourselves and around us through prayer and understanding. Jesus Christ said we would do even greater works than he did."

Gilbert believed that. He believed it was possible. Mary prayed her way out of illness and physical problems anyone else would have needed a doctor for. She prayed for him sometimes, when he was ill, and sometimes the illness dropped away from him.

Sometimes it didn't. He knew that could be because of him, rather than because of any deficiency in Mary's prayer.

She hadn't prayed for him for some time now. He didn't ask anymore, because it was something he should be able to work out himself. If she asked him if he wanted her to pray for him, he said, "No." To be effective, first he had to be able to pray for himself and to understand what that prayer meant.

On the other hand, he didn't go to doctors anymore. They diagnosed symptoms and gave him drugs, and he had negative reactions to the drugs and was sicker than when they started. After all these years, they might tell him something he doesn't want to hear.

If a good force rules the universe and brings harmony and healing, does it matter if that force is the God in the Bible, Elohim or Jehovah or Emmanuel, or a more general good force? Wakan Tanka, Allah, Woten, The Great Spirit? Gilbert thought every religion sees something as the creative, driving force of the universe and symbolizes it with a name and with concepts that define the name. Gilbert knows every symbol is imperfect. The symbol is not that which is symbolized, but only something pointing toward it.

Gilbert's own mortality is bearable. The earth's is not. His own mortality isn't that important. People die. Life goes on. The life force without end made sensible all the difficulties, illnesses, and mortal limitations of every individual. But when he began to believe the entire earth is dying and all the life on it

is dying, he found it difficult to see meaning in any individual life.

He carried on. He worked. He saw nothing to be gained by radical change in his own life, but he knew he would retire soon, when he knew what he would do with his days. He wasn't much for hobbies, and gardening didn't take much time.

He practiced appreciating sunshine, green leaves, clean breeze, positive communication, emotional and spiritual growth.

Some of their children came for a visit, and some of their grandchildren stayed until the end of the summer. Gilbert retired from his job so he could spend all his time with them. Mary wasn't ready to retire. She liked her work, and she knew it helped people, but she did take a long vacation. They all went swimming together, fishing together, hiking in the mountains east of the house.

Mary and Gilbert said, "Remember when" a lot. This time was a lot like when their children were young, except now they were free of work, free to be with the children all day every day. "Remember when David fell into the river and was swept under the logs?"

That got wide-eyed attention from everyone within earshot. "What happened?"

"Here he is, twenty-five years later, life guard for all the children in and near the river, so you know he didn't drown. There was a fisherman standing on the logs, and he reached under and grabbed David by the hair and pulled him out."

"By the hair?"

"By the hair."

"Didn't that hurt?"

"That's better than drowning, don't you think?"

Jefferey tugged hard on a fistful of his own hair.

The crowded house made it necessary for Gilbert and Mary to sleep in the same room again. He didn't wake her much. For the most part, he slept well. He was tired from the long, active days and happy because the children were with them. He woke one night, not disturbed, just woke to look around. He looked at Mary, sleeping peacefully beside him.

When he courted Mary, he thought one day he would understand her; he would know the way her mind worked, the way he knew an often-read and much-loved book.

Their time now of saying, "Do you remember?" called up more and more memories. One story told stimulated other memories, and, in the children, a desire for more. Youngest Mary and her brother, Jefferey, were particularly persistent. "Then what happened?" "Then what did you do?" "Grandma,

did he really say that?" It was history of the family and therefore youngest Mary's own history and Jefferey's own history. They never tired of hearing it.

Gilbert told about the tarot card reading several times, by request. Youngest Mary wanted to own that story totally, so he dug deep into his memory, and he tried to tell it the way it happened.

"This was," he paused to think about it. "It had to be more than thirty years ago, because David, your father, was very young, I think about three. I remember he was very interested in the pictures on the cards. A friend of ours came to visit. He was mostly a friend of mine. I knew him before I met your grandmother, and your grandmother only met him that evening.

"He brought tarot cards with him. He had studied them for some time, and he considered himself an expert in their use and properly sensitive, so the predictions the cards made would be accurate, since they're used primarily to forecast the future."

Mary touched his arm and said, "I think also to make a character sketch. They are said to define the person the reading is for."

"Yes, you're right. I remember there was something about the past and about the present. He put them in a particular order in the deck. Then he shuffled in a particular order, a certain number of times. Or maybe he had me shuffle them. I can't remember, but I remember it seemed a very serious process, really a religious ritual, for Carl, the man conducting the reading. I thought of it as fun, interesting for the insights and coincidences it might turn up, though I knew your grandmother didn't approve of such stuff.

"He laid out several cards on the table and explained what the positions he put them in meant and named the cards. They each have a name. The joker. The knight. I can't remember most of the names, can you, Mary? Well, several of the cards were upside down. This is the way it is done. They're shuffled so the cards might either be right side up or upside down. If they're right side up, they describe a positive characteristic, or tell about a positive force in a person's life, or they make a positive prediction about the future. If they're upside down, then it's that same characteristic or force, or prediction, only in its negative form. I don't know what that would be. I think something like, the sun shining warms us and causes plants to grow, but if it becomes too hot, it scorches the garden."

Youngest Mary said, "And too much sun burns us and makes our eyes hurt."

"Exactly. And in the forecasting cards, upside down is a bad forecast, something negative in the future. When he had a

number of the cards in place and was going to tell us what each card meant and what the entire pattern meant about me and my future, Mary reached out and started uprighting all the upside-down cards.

"Carl didn't reach out to stay her hand, but he said, 'No. Don't do that.'

"She asked him why not, and he said that was the way the cards were supposed to be. He thought she didn't understand the rules. He thought she thought he'd made a mistake in placing some cards upside down, and he thought if he explained the rules again, she'd back up and return the cards to their original positions. But she didn't even slow down. She said, 'That may be the rule for this card game, but neither chance nor fate has any place in our lives, even for the sake of entertainment.'"

"Was he mad at Grandma?"

"No. He was upset that everything he'd put so much study into was going topsy-turvy on him, but he soon understood Mary is Mary, and he put the cards away."

Mary said, "God rules our lives. Lives ruled by God aren't subject to chance or to fate. The Bible says don't consult oracles or wizards or spirits that peep. Dabbling in the occult for entertainment is disobedient and damages our faith."

Gilbert remembered realizing, many years ago, when their children were small, he never would fully understand Mary. Gradually, he realized the assumption that he could totally understand her assumed she was smaller than his mind, so his mind could encompass her, when the years showed him she is larger than he is, stronger than he is, a more powerful force in the world and in their lives together. It startled him when he realized it, but he didn't fight it. Love means more than understanding does, and they loved each other without doubt or reservation.

September started changing colors of deciduous leaves. Gilbert took all the grandchildren home. They had to go to school. Mary went back to work.

After he left the children, he took the mountain route home. Autumn changes ran wild at higher elevation. He had the camera with him, but he took only one picture, a dogwood tree, with the leaves turned bright red. If Mary got out to see the dogwoods before they dropped their leaves, he probably wouldn't bother to develop the photograph.

His nights aren't as restless now, even with all the grandchildren gone. He walks a lot, some days. Other days, he drives to town and does volunteer work, trying to help people without enough food, without shelter, without people to care for them. He's helping put together publications for an

environmentally-concerned organization.

He still wakes several times most nights, but usually without the sweating panic driving him up from unbearable dreams. His dreams are quieter. They seem to tell him in calmer terms now there really is something wrong in his body, and he needs to do something about it. Though he feels so much better now, so much more whole and at peace, his dreams seem to say the problems that used to oppress him so are still unsolved. Nothing has changed, except his attitude.

He has thought himself into a corner. He can't come to spiritual understanding and healing if his only goal is physical health. It seems to him to be shoddy bargaining: make me healthy, God, and I will worship You.

He has reservations about becoming more deeply religious. Blind faith has no place in his make-up.

Mary said, "Blind faith isn't called for. Study for deeper understanding and deeper commitment is called for. It isn't anything anyone can talk you into. It's something you must come to by your own desire."

He studies. Some of what he reads confuses him. God in the Hebrew scriptures is such a violent God. If it doesn't make perfect sense to Gilbert, then it can't be perfect religion, and he can't come to perfect commitment.

Mary says, "Read the New Testament. The Old Testament is there for a reason, but don't get lost in it. Jesus Christ came to change our concept of God."

Gilbert goes to church with Mary most Sundays now, and some Wednesday evenings. At first, there is such a fuss. All the people welcome him to church. He almost doesn't go back. He wants to say, "You're making too much of my attendance here. It isn't a large difference, to you or to me or to God, if I come to church or walk in the hills, though the hills are more restful, because they don't make me self-conscious through over-welcoming."

It was easier when the people began to accept him as a quiet man.

He saw no one there was really perfect, in form, in commitment, faith, or understanding. He remembered what Mary had said about church being a workshop. They would not need this workshop if they had already attained perfection.

Friday and Saturday, his dreams headed back into violent disorder and eroded his rest.

Sunday morning, rain poured down from a close, grey sky. Mary asked, "Are you going to church with me this morning?"

"I think I want to see what God is doing up the mountain, where rain changes to snow. I'm closer to God when I'm

walking on the side of the mountain, among the trees, looking at the clouds."

"Then you should walk the mountain and see what you see. God isn't exclusive about it. He's there with us in church, but He's everywhere, with everyone."

When he thought about it more, he realized he didn't want to be that far away from Mary. When she came in for breakfast, he said, "I've changed my mind. I will go to church with you." She smiled at him, and they sat down and ate breakfast.

Rain poured down the day all the way to church. The windshield wipers labored to keep the windshield clear. Gilbert spread the black umbrella above them as they walked across the wet, black parking area into the church building where people greeted each other and stood wet umbrellas in round containers to wait out the service.

In church, he felt very strange. He wondered if the pains, aches, and imbalances he had felt had added together into something so serious it now began to overwhelm him. In the time for silent prayer, when all bowed their heads, he did something he hadn't been able to do before. He thought, "God, please help me. I'm not ready yet. I need to make more of a difference than I have made, and I need to understand more than I do."

He began to lose his sense of his own body. He didn't feel himself sitting on the hard wood of the pew anymore. He didn't feel his feet on the floor. He was afraid to look at his hands, because it didn't feel like he had hands anymore. Sounds and smells slipped away from him, until he could only hear and see Ella, standing at the podium, reading from the Bible. She said, "The old lion perishes for lack of prey, and the stout lion's whelps are scattered abroad."

It was as if he moved up, above the pews, and looked down on them. He saw himself clearly, sitting beside Mary. He heard Ella's voice, as if from a great distance. "Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters cover thee?"

A rainbow penetrated the building, shone down through the ceiling where his consciousness and his sense of vision and of hearing hovered. The brilliant light of sunlight refracted into its individual colors centered on his physical self, sitting in the pew.

He moved into the varied colors. Distinct bands of rainbow light penetrated him. The light filled the church and bathed everyone there in prised light. Mary glowed as rainbow light beside him. Even separated from his body, he felt the light pressure of her arm against his arm.

He became the beautiful, brilliant colors visiting the stone and wooden building of the church.

He chose. He moved. He kept every memory, every sensation of existing as rainbow light, but he began to separate himself from the colors of rainbow light. Very slowly, he slid down the rainbow colors, back into his body, until his consciousness as observer and his physical self blended to one.

Then the organist began to play. Rainbow colors exploded from the instrument and resolved into complex musical tones. All rose and sang. Always before, he had joined in the singing, but kept his voice soft because he wasn't sure of the melody or of the timing.

This time, light filled him with the musical tones emerging from the organ. He sang full voice, and his voice knit through all the other voices of all the people singing together in the church on the corner, in the city of the world that had been shot through with all the vibrant colors of the rainbow.