

THE COLOUR OF RAIN

By Terri-Anne Green (Australia)

“What colour is rain?” Maddie asks. She is four years old and at that age where everything is a question.

“It doesn’t have a colour. It’s just water, clear and see-through, like glass.”

“What colour should I paint it?”

“Any colour you like.”

She chooses pink, drenching the bristles with water colour and flicking it over the page.

“Do you like my painting Mummy? It’s our house and I’m making it rain.”

The house is a rough square with a triangle on top. There are brightly coloured dots along the front. Flowers. It feels foolish but the flowers make me want to cry.

“Do you like my grass?”

I can’t see any grass. Maddie points to a broad sweep of yellow.

“I was looking for green,” I confess. She gives a quick snort.

“Grass isn’t green. That’s only in books. Real grass is yellow.” She keeps painting and chatting and asking questions. What shape is rain? When will it come? How does it feel? I try to explain. It feels wet, soft, like mist from the hairdresser’s spray bottle. Sometimes it can sting; sometimes you can hardly feel it at all.

I remember the last time it rained, a ferocious summer thunderstorm. A rogue bolt of lightning split the redgum in our front yard. It was the night that Maddie was born.

We go to the swimming pool before playgroup for one last swim. Tomorrow the pool is closing. There’s not enough water to keep topping it up. This pool is the hub of the town in summer. It is where I swam my first lap, where I kissed my first boy, a shy farm boy destined for sheep and potatoes. I hold a handful of water above Maddie’s head. “Close your eyes,” I say, letting it trickle over her. “This is what rain feels like.” She squeals and opens her mouth to catch the drops. The pool is open to the sky, to the suck and pull of evaporation, to the constant unrelenting ferocious sun. Today, of all days, a stack of puffy clouds hovers mockingly overhead.

Playgroup is quiet. Our numbers have dwindled. Water. Petrol. Fodder. Distance. Everything has a cost. I drive home with the guilt of good fortune, the words of a friend ringing in my water-logged ears.

“You’re lucky your husband has a drought-proof job.” It is said, not with envy, but with resignation as we look up at the building clouds. They are thickening and growing but they do not build hope. We have seen too many clouds that build and disappear.

Steve is late coming home. He carries his black bag like a pallbearer with a too-heavy coffin. He sits and sighs, hands propping up his head, balanced on the hard bony rim around his eyes.

“We had another one today,” he says. A sickness fills my throat. Who? Where? How? I want to ask. Why... I already know. He tells me in one sentence snatches, can only bear one line at a time. “Don... Mate of mine. A patient... Sold the last of his breeding stock. Shot the dog then shot himself... Got tired of waiting for the rain.”

The silence almost drowns us.

That night the clouds keep building and finally release. The ground drinks the rain so quickly not a single puddle forms. Maddie squeals at the drumming on the hard metal roof; does a joyful pyjama dance in the driving rain. She catches it with her tongue. It beats on her reaching hands.

“How does it feel?”

“Warm and wet,” she says, “but it stings.”