

The Girl in the Rain

He stood under a tree in the rain and was too shy to talk to the girl. She was also under a tree, maybe 10 feet away, waiting for the pouring rain to stop. She had her bicycle nearby. She was 16, and so was he. Months later she would date one of his friends, and months after that she would become his older brother's girlfriend for two years. Years after that, when she was 29, she would move to the quad cities and marry an accountant. But of course neither of them could have guessed any of this as they stood in the rain.

Either she was shy, too, or else she had nothing to say. She was a quiet girl in general, he knew. She was also very pretty, one of the prettiest girls in school. Some would say she was the prettiest of all. Standing in the rain under the tree, he felt any chances he would ever have with her slipping away forever. From this point on, he would always be the ridiculous boy who stood under the dripping leaves of the tree and could think of nothing to say.

They had been playing tennis on courts next to each other, she with her friends and he with his, and when the storm blew in suddenly, everyone else had scattered, running for their cars, or simply escaping into their houses in the neighborhood. For some reason she had not boarded her bike and pedaled off. Maybe she knew she would not beat the rain. And for some reason he had not left with his friends who had been on the court with him. They were a year or two older, and one of them had a car. They had not waited for him to pack up his gear, run across the street, and hop in, though they would have waited had he yelled for them to wait. They had honked as they drove away, arms waving out the windows.

Surely she wondered why he had not left with them, but of course she didn't ask. As pretty as she was, she might have suspected that he liked her and wanted time alone with her, even if it meant standing in the rain. But if she suspected this, she was not going to help him out by speaking first, beginning a conversation that would likely go something like this:

"We should have left a little earlier!"

"Yeah . . . looks like it."

"Maybe it will stop soon."

"Hope so!"

Surely she wondered why he did not speak. Being shy herself, did she understand that since minutes had passed with no words between them, that any words from him now were all the more difficult? Did she understand that he couldn't say now what he should have said minutes earlier, when the situation was fresh? As each second passed he felt it becoming impossible for him to say anything to her that would not sound forced, unnatural, or just plain stupid. This did not keep him from trying. He was wracking his brain for the right thing to say. Should he say,

"I can't believe I can't think of anything to say!"

or

"I think I still have one dry spot under my arm!"

or

"This must happen to you all the time!"

If he said anything, he would have to say it loudly, over the pouring rain. He would have to almost yell. If she didn't hear him right, which was likely since by now she was surely deep

into her thoughts and not prepared for a sudden burst of words from him, he would have to repeat the yell.

“I said, I can’t believe I can’t think of anything to say!”

How could she respond to this? Maybe, “Oh! Me either!” Or, “That’s okay!” Or maybe she would say nothing at all, just look at him blankly, in wonder at the ridiculous boy shouting in the rain. But he knew better; she wasn’t like that. She was a nice girl, and everyone knew it. Not stuck up, just quiet. Chances were she was struggling as much as he was in this situation. He guessed probably not, but maybe. Meanwhile, even though they were under large trees with many branches and leaves, they were both becoming drenched. The wind blew the rain in on them in cold bursts and, gusting, blew the smaller limbs above them apart so that the rain came pouring directly down on them. She had the head of her tennis racket up under her warm-up jacket to keep the strings dry, but her jacket was surely drenched, as his was. His racket was in a case and leaning on the tree next to him. The case was soaked and dripping, but he knew the racket itself was dry. He had thought at first that he should ask her for her racket, to see if it would fit in his case alongside his, but it was too late for that now.

They had played tennis together more than once, though always doubles. She played barefoot. When she had first started playing about two years earlier, just for fun, she always played barefoot, and as she improved her game, enough that she now played in the 3 spot on the varsity team, she still played barefoot except in competitive matches and team practice. The courts became extremely hot in the summer, so her feet must have blistered, calloused, toughened over time. He liked watching her play, the grace of her forehands, the turns and stretches of her gangly torso, the bob of her small breasts as she ran, the composure of her

features as she rallied back and forth. Generally, she hit with topspin from the backcourt, rarely coming to the net. She was very fast as she covered the court, side-stepping, backtracking, her racket always back, ready for the next stroke. She far preferred to hit forehands, but her backhand was surprisingly strong considering how awkward it could look.

She was still coming into her beauty, though he would not have put it that way. She looked and moved like a girl who had grown six inches in six months. She wore her long, brown hair straight down her back. She was not one to play with her looks; she didn't need to. No makeup, no perms, no pushup bras. She could have almost been a tomboy, but she was so naturally pretty no one could see that. If you thought *tomboy*, it was the fifth or sixth thought you had about her. A year or two later, he would see her hair curled and her face made up for her prom photos, next to his brother, but he never saw her that way before or after. Right now her hair was dripping wet. Her face looked serene, or maybe just a little sad. Her dark eyebrows looked even darker in the rain. She was neither facing him nor looking away. With a small turn of her head she would be looking directly at him. But she kept her eyes averted, maybe watching the raindrops bounce off the courts or the puddles accumulate around her toes. And all the while he stood 10 feet away from her remaining absolutely silent.

It could be she thought him a snob. But given the circumstances, this was not likely. Although he was her age, her year in school, he was developmentally many months behind her. Developmentally, he had not made much progress since puberty and might be called scrawny. Developmentally, he was at a time when girls made him more nervous than they ever would again, though he would always, even in middle age, be nervous around pretty women. Developmentally, he was shorter than she was, just slightly, but definitely. Plus, he was on the

boys' tennis team number 7, to her girls' team number 3. This meant that she played in every varsity meet, and he in very few—only when one of the top six players was ailing. Outside of tennis, he was in all other respects about a 5, and she in all other respects was surely a 9, no matter who you asked. So it was very unlikely that she thought him a snob. More likely she was reading him perfectly. He had had his chance to disarm her, to disarm the awkward situation, and he had not taken advantage. She would not say he had blown it—she was too nice for that—but she couldn't give him much credit, either.

If outward he was a coward, inward he was a jumbled mess. To the point that after several minutes of standing in the rain he began to question if she knew he was there. It was a crazy thought, but he did think it. She had not smiled at him; she had not looked his way and then shyly dropped her eyes. She had done nothing to acknowledge that he was there, so close by and basically sharing her experience. On the other hand, she had also done nothing to indicate he was *not* there. She had not, for instance, blown her nose, tossed her head vigorously to shake off the rain, or jumped up and down to stay warm. What else had she not done? She had not left. By now, her whole body soaked and undoubtedly cold, she could have hopped on her bike and pedaled away, knowing that she would get even wetter during the ride but that home was not far off. Was she staying because she wanted to give him a chance to say something? Finally?

The rain let up a little but then picked up even harder. Or maybe just the wind let up for a moment. The raindrops bounced off the tennis courts in acute angles; they looked like thousands of checkmarks bouncing at once. He moved his head in a way that allowed him to see her directly but as if he were looking beyond her. She stood there under the dripping

leaves, barefoot, the head of her racket in her jacket. Nothing in her posture or attitude suggested that she had any intention of suddenly leaving, or even that she particularly minded standing in the rain. In her tennis skirt, with nothing to cover her legs, she was surely colder than he was in his warm-up pants. But she was not bouncing to stay warm; she was not hunched against the wind. Her face was placid, unreadable, but he thought her eyes darted his way, just once. He could not look away from her. They were now so thoroughly soaked through with the same rain that he had begun to love her.

He no longer felt ridiculous. He was no longer trying to think of words to say. The silence that had first felt so awkward now felt like a pact between them. The situation was wholly upon them; they had participated in it long enough that it felt purposeful, if not meant to be. He was loving her willingness, her insistence, to stay with him. He knew he would not leave her, either, not even if his friends suddenly pulled up and called him over. He would wave them away and stay with her. He felt his feelings for her were tangible in the space between them. Surely she felt them there.

At 16, he had not made love to any girls yet, but he felt as if he might be doing that now. How else could he describe the intimacy occurring between them? It didn't matter that she was too shy to meet his eyes. He loved her shyness. He loved everything about her. He was elated. The next day in school they would walk the halls side by side and let everyone see they were together.

They were making love in the pouring rain. He was not sure if he had ever felt as close to anyone as he felt to her now. His throat was constricted, and he felt he might cry. He felt her hand on his face. He held her hand there. He looked into her eyes and saw them filled with

tears and rain. He did not whisper these words into her ear: "To you I will never say an untrue word. I will always speak my heart to you, and I will listen to yours speak to me, and I will cherish the sound. No matter whatever happens between us, or whatever does not, I will always be standing as close to you as I am allowed and wanting to be closer. No matter how close I am--this close, close enough to feel your breath on my lips--I will want to be closer. There's so much I can't do. I can only do what I can do. I can love you from head to toe; I can love your heart and soul. I can listen, and I can learn, and I can come to understand you--all of you, the whole you that you are. Please understand me now. I am overcome by the powerlessness of words to express the way I feel for you. I might not be able to get it right, but I will never deceive you, and if I can help it I will never let a misunderstanding remain misunderstood. I will keep trying for an understanding between us that can fill silence, quiet noise, and bring a peace upon the earth like a heavy rain on a night that's absolutely still, and we wake to it together, and from then on everything we see, we see together."

He did not say these words to her. Years later, he said them to another woman, a woman who was not standing in the rain. She was happy to hear them.

But she never fully understood what it was with him and the rain.