

Dry Rain

by Grant Palmquist

Jason said there were no rules in the world, that it was all made up, invented to keep us from living in chaos. I sat in church, his words rolling through my head as the preacher spoke, hands folded, eyes raised, suit buttoned at the front. Later that afternoon Jason and I rode our bikes to the park together. We walked through the grass to the creek. We climbed upon the large white rocks that bordered the dark water. He squatted and held his bb gun over his thigh. A flock of pigeons pecked at the ground beneath an oak tree. He threw a rock in the middle of their circle. They scattered and flitted in the air and one by one he shot them down.

Shouldn't you bury them? I said.

No. Maggots and possums and stuff will eat them. Cycle of life. He handed me the gun. You try it.

I don't know.

Just do it.

I raised it and aimed at a pigeon and fired.

Missed.

Never shot one before, I said.

He took it back and quickly shot another pigeon before they had all flown away.

A snake's tail flicked the top of the water and disappeared beneath the surface. We hopped to the grass and checked out his kills. We counted seven.

Come back tomorrow and their bodies'll be hollowed out by maggots, he said.

That's disgusting.

Same thing would happen if you died. Well, maybe a vulture or something would get you first.

I looked at him. He focused on one of the bodies, picked up a short stick from the ground and poked at it. With the sunset we rode our bikes home. He went ahead with his bb gun slung over his shoulder. I pedaled behind him, moving slowly, watching the sun spread its orange flames over the water, palm trees and clouds mirrored in it.

Jason and I became friends because we had no other friends. Nobody sat beside us on the bus rides to school, so we sat together. Same thing happened at lunch. We ate our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and watched pretty girls from across the cafeteria. We walked home in the afternoon because the other kids had woken up and would throw things at us. The bus driver's eyes would rise in the mirror, but she'd never say a word. Jason knew all the paths through the forest behind the school. We stayed out there for hours, knowing we could still make it home before our parents. We sharpened sticks with our pocket knives and declared war on the world. Prisms of sunlight circled through the oaks and pines.

Think anyone would notice if we never came home? Jason said.

Our parents.

Besides them.

Probably not.

Neither do I, he said.

A lizard crawled up one of the trees. Its throat became a big red bubble. Jason lowered till his head was level with it.

Don't hurt it, I said.

He raised the stick over his head and thrust the point into the lizard's spine. Its back arched violently. It writhed for a moment before slouching, rivulets of blood trickling down its back.

Why'd you do that?

Bored, he said.

He pulled the stick out of the lizard. It stuck to the tree for a moment and then dropped to the ground. He kicked dust and leaves over its body. Leaning against the same tree he began skinning the wood again. I kept my eyes down and did the same, glancing furtively at him from time to time.

Jason held the door open for women, said please and thank you, yes sir and no ma'am, never lost his temper in public, accepted yes or no as an answer from adults, and made straight As. I was lucky to get Bs and Cs.

The more you act like you care the more they believe it, he said.

We had climbed onto the roof and stared through the eye of the telescope at the fiery horizon. The treetops were like dark hills and mountains and above them the fingers of the sun spread across the sky in dying pink and orange.

I try to make As, I said. I don't know.

I don't even study, he said. Just pay attention in class.

I do.

He looked at me then raised the glass to his eye. If you're not bound by rules, there's another way.

What do you mean?

You heard me.

Everyone has rules.

You could always cheat, he said.

What if I get caught?

Don't.

I thought you paid attention.

But when I don't pay attention, I cheat.

How?

The day before a test he made a cheat-sheet, folded it into a small square and stuck it beneath one of the metal rods under his desk. When the teacher passed out the tests, he pulled it out and stuck it between the sheets of the test. Due to his good behavior, the teacher never suspected him. You can do whatever you want if you know how to overcome their rules and play by them at the same time, he said.

I'd get too nervous.

You can fix that, he said. Just remember that all the laws of this world are invented, made up. Then it doesn't matter if you get caught. Nothing matters.

Half his face was covered in shadow and the other half was lit up like a flashlight was shining upon it.

I don't believe it, I said.

He shrugged. Then what the hell can I do?

For a while we stopped hanging out so much. We still always walked home together to avoid taunts from the back of the bus. Even on those walks we didn't say much anymore. Then, on the last day of school that year, he asked if I wanted to see the clubhouse he had built.

Alright, I said.

He led the way. We came to a shack nailed together with ply-board. Four cats hung from ropes tied to the limbs of surrounding trees, their bodies skinned and roasted, as though he had taken a blowtorch to them. A small pit was dug into the ground inside which lay various birds: crow, bluebird, cardinal, pigeon. Inside the shack he kept a transistor radio, a flashlight, a butcher knife, WD-40, a plastic lighter and a stack of books.

I vomited upon the brown leaves that lay on the ground. His feet crunched around me.

Don't be such a pussy.

It's sick, man.

I'm testing myself.

For what?

For life.

The hell does that mean?

Just what I said.

Doesn't make sense.

He set his backpack on the ground and took out a kitten. Its legs were tied together with rope. A piece of string was tied around a cloth stuffed in its mouth. He set it on the ground.

The hell are you doing now?

You need to kill it.

No, I said.

You gonna be a pussy all your life?

I didn't answer. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and lowered my eyes to the dead leaves. I felt him staring at me. He went to the shack and brought out the WD-40 and lighter and from his backpack removed a six-inch knife.

Don't, I said.

He sliced into the center of its chest and carved downward. Through the cloth I heard the kitten's stifled cries.

I'm leaving.

Go ahead, he said.

I walked away. I heard the flames and pictured them engulfing the kitten's body.

We didn't talk all summer. Then, before school started, he came by my house. He stood in my room. His hair was dyed black and silver chains dangled round his wrists.

What have you been up to?

Nothing, I said.

You're not still pissed, are you?

Not really.

Let's do something, he said. We need to hang out more. We're about to be in high school. Neither of us is gonna know anyone.

I don't know.

Come on, man.

I said okay despite what I felt inside. I was too weak to say no.

We rode around on our bikes. By the creek we sat upon the rocks and listened to the gentle lapping of the waves. A cool breeze blew by us.

Think you'll get a girlfriend? he said.

I don't know.

I heard everyone gets a girl in high school.

I thought that was college.

Whatever, he said.

I rolled a few pebbles around in my hand and one by one tossed them into the water.

There's this one girl, Melissa Wright. You know her?

I know who she is.

She's hot.

Yeah.

I fucked her.

Huh?

I did.

When?

Early summer. He looked at the water, dipped his fingers in it, studied his reflection. Her parents weren't home and we went swimming. Then back in her room...

Man, I said.

I think maybe she regrets it. We haven't talked since. She won't even look at me anymore.

Who knows.

From his back pocket he took out a pocketknife, opened it and cut the ends off his fingernails. Wonder how many guys she's been with already.

Hard to say, I said.

With the point of his knife he poked a hole in his palm and a stream of blood rolled out. He squeezed his hand and held it over the water and the blood slowly dripped into it. The red spread out in the dark blue and disappeared.

I hate this life, he said. Everything is such a waste.

How come you don't hang around Jason as much anymore? my mom said.

I don't know.

She set my dinner plate before me. He's such a nice boy. Seems lonely.

He's not.

She sat across from me. How do you know that?

I just know. I stared at my food: green peas, mashed potatoes, roast.

She shook her head. I don't know what happened. You two used to be best friends.

Things change. We still hang out sometimes.

I can't remember the last time I saw him before today.

He doesn't stop by that often, I said.

It's not good for you to be alone so much. She chewed on a piece of roast.

I'll live.

Not happily.

Nobody's really happy.

That's not true, she said.

I pushed my plate away and went to my room and locked the door. I put on my headphones and listened to the Velvet Underground. Faintly I heard her knocking on my door. Closing my eyes I pretended to float through the sky, body and mind parting. I couldn't sleep that night and kept my headphones on and sat by the window staring out at the night. Around 2 a.m. a figure moved in the shadows of the trees by the curb. I leaned closer to the window. Was it Jason? I couldn't be sure. It seemed that, whoever it was, he was staring at our house. The hairs on my arms rose. A few minutes later the figure was gone. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

We walked through the woods the following day on the way home from the first day of school. Jason didn't say much, just kicked at the leaves, his face pale and sullen.

What'd you do last night? I said.

Slept.

That's it?

What else would I do?

I don't know. Try to find Melissa.

Fuck that slut.

You don't like her—

You heard me.

What's your problem?

He turned, grabbed me by the throat and pushed me against a tree. His eyes were glazed with hate, as though he'd waited for this moment for a very long time. Don't mention things I don't want to talk about, he said.

I couldn't say a word. My face and head were filling up with blood.

He swiped open his pocketknife and cut off one of my eyelashes, blew it into the wind and smiled. Then he brought the knife to my throat, widened his eyes and laughed. I'm just fucking with you, he said. He let go and staggered away, spread his arms and circled.

Above the limbs of the oaks and pines the sky was dark grey. Rain sprinkled down.

That wasn't funny, I said.

You kidding? That was funny as hell. He fell backward into the leaves, his arms and legs spread wide.

I balled my fists. Fuck you, Jason.

He laughed. Don't go too far. You said a curse word.

That was bullshit.

There you go again.

Don't play around with me like that, man.

Don't play around with me like that, man, he mocked.

I'm gone. I stormed through the woods without looking back.

He always found me after school whether I wanted him to or not. I could take different paths, but no matter where I went, there he'd be waiting.

Not trying to avoid me, are you?

Just looking for a change of scenery, I said.

I need that sometimes too. He walked beside me. I'm turning sixteen soon. Be able to drive us around.

Cool. I kept my eyes on the sidewalk.

We walked beside the highway. He pulled out a clove and lit it.

Since when do you smoke?

These babies burn holes in your lungs. Like making love to smoke.

When he got his beige 1983 Chrysler New Yorker, he drove it everywhere, driving just to drive. It ran like new but had no a/c. We rolled the windows down. He smoked his cloves and I stared out the window at the beautiful girls that would never be mine. Sometimes we skipped classes, went to the woods and smoked weed. We never talked much, just sat there, glad to be away from school, listening to the heightened sounds of nature: birds chirping, wind blowing slightly, squirrels chattering and hopping from branch to branch.

Whatever happened to that clubhouse? I said.

Burned it down.

Why?

Grew tired of it, I guess.

We should make a new one with a little radio and TV and stuff.

Nah, I like being out in the open. He lay back and crossed a leg over his knee, folded his hands behind his head. Know what I did the other day?

What's that? I bit into an apple from my backpack.

Picked up a little girl. Must have been six, maybe seven. She was waiting for her mom outside the school. I don't know why I did it. I was just driving by, saw her, and pulled in, nothing malicious in my head. I asked if she needed a ride. She said yes. She slid inside. I didn't touch her, but the whole time I thought how easy it'd be, you know? I could have done anything.

But you didn't.

I didn't.

The hell made you do it?

I don't know. He raised his pocketknife to the sunlight and reflected it into the dying grass.

Stupid, man.

He laughed. I know. I just didn't care.

Not funny, I said. A little girl?

He rose and folded his arms around his knees and stared at me. Everyone's the same. Age doesn't mean shit. It passes like that. He snapped his fingers. We were all babies and we all die. What does it matter?

It just does.

What's the difference?

Don't pull this garbage with me. You know it matters.

One death is the same as the next, he said. Whether from war, old age, drugs, it doesn't fucking matter. He sketched I Am God in the dirt with a twig. That's what the truth is, he said.

My eyes were heavy. I closed them and set my hands on the ground. When I opened them again he was squatting before me.

You know I'm right, he said. You know it.

Her name was Amber. Her long black hair fell to her waist. No makeup traced her pale and angular face. She never said a word. We rode along, the radio humming. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of Jason's hand on her skinny leg, his eyes fixed on me in the rearview, a smile curving his cheeks. She chain-smoked cigarettes all the way to school and all the way home. Jason told me stories of the many ways he fucked her. I couldn't tell what was true and what wasn't. He said he bought her different tools off the internet: chains and whips and handcuffs and blindfolds and astroglide. He could do what he wanted with her. His parents were never home, so all they did was fuck and get high.

You can get in on it if you want, he always said midway through his stories.

That's okay.

Once we went to his house to smoke a bowl during a school assembly. About an hour after taking hits from the bong, the doorbell rang. He pushed me into the closet and closed the door. I figured it'd be his parents, and I didn't want to talk to them anyway. Through the cracks in the closet door I saw him lead Amber into the room. They didn't say a word. He loaded a bowl and each of them took a hit. Then she took off her clothes

and lay on the bed. He took a rope from under the bed and tied it round her neck. I closed my eyes and stuck my fingers in my ears but couldn't block out the noise. Three hours later she finally left, two of them were spent smoking cloves and cigarettes in silence.

He opened the closet door. All you have to do is ask, he said.

I joined an after-school reading program to avoid rides home with him. We read Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway. Afterward I walked home. I avoided the woods for fear of running into him. Anytime I saw him at school I pretended I didn't and went the opposite way. Sometimes he caught up to me.

How's that reading club going?

It's alright, I said.

Making straight As yet?

Not yet.

Still haven't learned. You need a ride home today?

I was planning on walking.

We'll wait for you.

Don't worry about it.

Come on, man.

It's cool.

Dead dogs began showing up around the neighborhood, hanging from trees, their entrails ripped out. A stray cat was found here and there, skinned, flies circling the raccoons' and possums' leftovers.

It's horrible somebody would do that, my mom said.

Yeah.

She sat on the couch reading her cooking magazine. You think it's somebody from the neighborhood?

I don't know. Might be kids or something.

Kids? She set her magazine down and looked at me. You think kids could've done it?

I shrugged. You never know.

Jason walked beside me. He was paler than usual, dark rings circling his eyes. Amber had broken up with him. I don't know, he said. Just needed someone to talk to. Think you could ride home with me today?

Sure, I said. What else could I say?

After school he sat on the hood of his car waiting for me. He climbed inside when he saw me. He lit a fat joint and passed it to me.

Where we going?

I don't know, I said.

I just didn't want to be alone, you know?

Yeah.

We spun slowly through the surrounding neighborhoods and burned the joint down to a roach, hardly saying a word to each other. When we finished it he parked beneath an oak tree by the park.

You think I'm weird? he said.

Everyone's a little weird.

That's not what I mean.

What do you mean?

Am I weird?

I guess.

She said I was too weird. He lit his lighter, studied the flame. Fucking bitch.

There'll be other girls.

Everything's messed up, man. He slid a clove from his pack, fired it up and took a long drag. I look at the world and all I see is darkness. I can't remember the last time I was happy.

There's good things in life.

Alright, he said. Tell me what they are.

Food, weed, sleeping. Hell, I don't know.

He blew smoke out his nose. Only time I could forget everything was when I was fucking her. Getting high just makes me remember now. Used to make me forget. I don't sleep anymore. Whatever. Forget it. He started the car back up.

He pulled in front of my house. Ride home with me tomorrow?

Alright.

Inside the house I stood by the window and watched him. He placed his hand on his head, maybe crying. Then he left.

After school he leaned against the car with the clove between his fingertips, a string of smoke coiling upward. A dead rose was in his other hand. Behind him the clouds were stark grey. Puddles covered the ground from the overnight rain.

What's with the rose?

Amber needed a ride home. It's for her.

She walked toward the car with her hands in her pockets and her head down, her hair done up in a ponytail. Jason handed her the rose and she smiled. She whispered something to him and they got in the car. She showed us the tattoo of disjointed waves she had sketched on her ring finger.

We rolled down the road adjacent to the school. Jason clicked on the automatic locks.

It's a special day, he said. That rose means something.

She twirled it between her thin fingers.

I tried to raise the lock. It wouldn't work.

He reached over, one hand on the wheel, eyes still on the road and pulled a .45 out of the glove compartment. He looked at me in the rearview. Your life's gonna change forever today, he said.

Is that real? she said. What'd you bring that for?

You'll see.

She tried to open the passenger door, lifting the handle over and over again.

It's no use, he said. I control that.

Please don't. I couldn't see her face but heard in her voice that she was crying. I'll be your girl again.

It's too late. He reached his hand over to wipe away her tears. Don't cry.

She slapped at his hand.

This is fucked, man, I said. Let me out.

This'll be good for you, he said. Teach you what life's worth.

He set his hand on her leg and she slapped it repeatedly. Everything—

I hate you, she said. She spit on his shirt. Please let me go. I hate you I hate you I
hate you.

He pulled through the gates of the cemetery and drove out on the grass.

This car is our headstone, he said.

Jason looked at me once more. He raised the barrel to her head.

Her hands were folded, her head bowed. She whispered something to herself or
maybe God.

He stroked her hair. It's okay. It's okay.