

Rosie and the Wolf
by Tania Norfolk

It's in rain like this I think of Rosie. Teeming rain. Old-man-snoring rain. Tiny meteorites announcing their arrival with a splash of sparks on the deck. The roar of it, pouring over gutters, a pleasing static, like the cacophony of cicadas when you walk through Batton's Bush in the summer.

I wonder if there'll be slips again. Anxious faces monitoring riverbanks. It's what you do, since the floods. 'Culvert' and 'blockage', 'ditches' and 'drains', 'climate' and 'change' a dark new poetry on people's lips. I feel a flash of guilt, even as a part of me longs for the pelting to continue. The thrilling cosiness of it all, a white noise in which I am utterly present, but also swept away, chasing thoughts like forgotten dreams, snatching at rainy days of childhood. Snatching at Rosie, a girl I haven't seen for over forty years.

I struggle now to recall her exact features. I remember smiling eyes, freckles, a broad grin. The tinkle of a laugh? Pigtails? But I'm not sure if these are true memories, or something I've added over time, a black and white photograph coloured in. Our families had been close in those years, Rosie's mother, 'Auntie Del', a sisterhood born of endless nappies, heated milk bottles, dribbled bibs. Del had made my mother laugh; her Georgie accent an instant balm.

The memory might have remained buried, a mere flash filed away or forgotten along with countless other hours, minutes, seconds – a time when 'now' was all that mattered. It's not until I've had children of my own, have watched them grow into young adults, that the memory awakens. I find myself listening to the rain one afternoon and all at once I'm on a hillside, and there is Rosie. We must have been about seven. It's a memory made tender,

more vivid, by what came later; a sudden technicolour, as though I've clicked the lever on the old 3D Viewfinder I got for Christmas that same year and swung the moment into focus.

I don't know where we were exactly. Only this: we are outside, free and wild, released from the eyes of parents. Our brothers are there, but it's Rosie I recall, the shape of her beside me. And all around us wet-grass green – a peas-in-the-pod, Peter Pan green. A grassy slope, a periphery of trees. A mad dash through the rain to shelter? I remember only our huddle beneath a half-built hut, a roof of corrugated iron and that sound, the glorious din of raindrops on metal. We are laughing, overjoyed to be out in it. The weather. Smelling it. Tasting it. The raindrops a fizz of sherbet, a sparkler on our tongues. 'We're frogs!' says one of the boys, snapping raindrop flies.

We are inside a waterfall, the rain coursing off the iron in sheets. I close my eyes to slits, seeing colours in the water, like the plastic ribbons of the flyscreen at one of the old baches we stayed at in the summertime. I remember moving through the streamers, their swaying in the breeze, the clacking sound of the plastic.

The flyscreen might have been at Paige and Belle's now that I think about it. Their mother, Joan, a Nana Mouskouri double. Joan wore flowing skirts and large glasses before anyone else. Not flower-power, no, she was all avant garde Vogue. 'Joan of Chic' my mother used to call her. I went there with Rosie sometimes, our mothers' get-togethers for coffee and tea and More cigarettes before, you know, you shouldn't and all that. The four of us dressing dolls, and threading beads, and messing with Joan's work-in-progress macramé before the inevitable race to the dress-up box, claiming Cinderella or Pocahontas, Cowgirl or Genie. I like to think I was generous, that I let Rosie choose first, even as memories surface of diving headlong into tulle, clutching at organza, grabbing at sequins, a tug-of-war between the sisters, while Rosie quietly pulled out a wand. I wonder what became of them, Paige and Belle. I wonder if they remember Rosie.

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A wolf took Rosie. It snuck in, in the dead of night, disguised as a butterfly when Rosie was nineteen, leaving its bite on her face, lepidopterous wings unfolding across her cheeks in an angry red. I'd heard she was sick. Had updates here and there via my mother – she and Del had kept in touch. But I didn't know Rosie in those years; we'd long moved away. She was a dormant memory, a childhood friend. And while I was flatting, and becoming vegan while sneaking burgers at midnight, and walking under the moon, and falling in love, and breaking up, and laughing into gin and tonics, and driving up north in a Datsun 120Y, and leaving for London, and waiting tables, and clubbing til dawn, and au pairing in St Tropez, and visiting galleries in Vienna, and dashing for trains in the rain ... Rosie? Rosie was pulling her red cloak more tightly around her shoulders, drawing her hood up over her ears. But the wolf just grinned. It grinned in the forest of hospital beds, and needles, and excess fluid. Smacked its chops at her kidneys. Sniggered at daily dialysis, at transfusions, at diverted blood.

It kept coming back for more, that wolf, licking her skin, chewing her joints, gnawing on bones, sizing up organs, all before Rosie was twenty-two. It grinned and snapped up her legs. Howled with laughter when they brought out the wheelchair. As if that would stop it, a greedy wolf. A wolf with the initials S. L. E. A wolf named Systemic Lupus Erythematosus. Say it fast. Run it together:

Systemiclupuserythematosus

A magic spell. *Say it three times and your wish will come true.* A storybook word. Something Mary Poppins might have said, like supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Only, magic never arrived for Rosie. No Ms Poppins to whip her up and carry her off under her umbrella. She would have kept her cosy, Mary, if she'd known. 'Cosy Rosie,' she might have said, as they flew beneath rainclouds, floated their way through silver ribbons.

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I'm not sure of the last time I saw Rosie. It might have been at Joan of Chic's, sipping cordial and plaiting hair with Belle and Paige to the waft of percolated coffee and tobacco. Or at Auntie Del's, telling stories in felt cut-outs, patting two-dimensional puffy white clouds into place to the music of our mothers' chit-chat. It might have been the time we all stayed at the baches together, building sandcastles and racing flies through coloured streamers. But I like to think it was the day we were caught in a rainstorm.

It's easing a little now, the rain, and I breathe in its scent – The Gods' iced tea, a brew of soil and flowers and fenugreek and rocks, the sky a strainer, the earth its cup, and I wonder which stirs my memories more, the sound or the smell. It's the same scent that came with the floods – at first – a freshness and spice, and all things nice... until it wasn't. Until, for some, it changed to a stench of sodden sofas and carpet turned to sludge, the wet fur of bedraggled cats, the smack of riverbanks burst and belching. And down the river floated babies' shoes and plastic bottles and old blue jeans and flaxes and branches, wrapped around trunks, dancing past logs, caught in trees. I saw a photograph album pulled from the wreckage, stolen memories, faces that had once emerged out of liquid – a dark room magic – now disappeared, as though the river were enchanted, dissolving emulsions in a watery reversal spell.

I know I'm lucky, can feel the collective sigh of relief in the rain's easing, the letting up of the town's bracing for the worst, another heavy rain warning passed. Yet still I feel a familiar pang with the rain's departure, like something is slipping out of reach. Speaking of slips, just one, I hear on the radio, a driveway across town. I'll see the man on the news later, his face red with frustration, an angry blush spreading across his cheeks. Something about the Council.

She'd slipped from consciousness, Rosie, before the wolf began to gobble up her arms. I'm glad of that, at least. That Rosie still had her wings, before she went. The wings she held out to the rain, that day. The hand that took mine as we ran down the slope together, the

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raindrops bleeding our clothes into deeper blues and richer yellows, like two butterflies in the rain.