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Death with Raindrops

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MARK AITCHISON

His eyes were closed against the soapsuds, and he reached above his head and pulled the lever that would tumble 20 gallons of clean rainwater down upon him. As the water crashed about his head and thundered over his shoulders, he heard a familiar sound, a sound he had heard only three times before in his life, a sound he had heard each time they had come for him- each time they had failed to take him.

Somewhere close by, in his own backyard, he heard the soft whistle of his assassin. This time they would take him, for the soap in his eyes all but blinded him from action. Three times before he had heard the low whistle, the one long note rising and falling and never breaking upon the humid Amazonian air. He could only cry. When his exhausted wife and frustrated bodyguards found him later in the outdoor shower- fallen, naked and with a single bullet wound in his forehead- his tears had become lost and mixed with the blood and rainwater which continued to bathe his still body.

The writer opened his eyes, and he was fully awake. In the black warmth of the room, he followed the light of a passing car as it moved up and around the

walls and sped off into the darkness that lay beyond the house. The car had not stopped. It was not who he was expecting. Though perhaps it was, and they were only playing with him- seeing that he was still there, scared, hiding, and locked up in his own house.

He climbed quietly out of bed and did not disturb his sleeping wife. He was sorry he hadn't been able to keep the brutality of the outside world from her, though he had thought he might in the beginning. She knew his fears and loved him more for them. It wasn't how they'd intended things to turn out. They only hoped now to keep the inevitable future away for just another day- another day that might have been different in any other time or any other place. Their future would not be long coming; they both knew that. That was how things stood.

He looked upon his wife's face by the soft light of the illuminated alarm clock-the face of a child-smooth and soft and seemingly ageless. He tiptoed from the room in his bare feet and was thankful the speeding car was gone. It would be another long day for everyone- the family, the rain forest, and Brazil, the country in which they lived.

On his way through the sparsely furnished living room, he picked up a bottle of scotch and a glass from the short table beside his favorite armchair. In the darkness, he scooped up the items from their ledge like a tree frog snaps up its supper from a moist lily pad. He opened the bolted back doors and stepped into the mesh-enclosed porch. He listened to the jungle's

symphony beyond him, and he was momentarily comforted.

A man stirred beside him in a wicker chair where he slumped, and the writer gently prodded the arm which hung above the floor. The man jumped to attention and thrust about the darkness with a concealed rifle. The writer pushed the gun out of harm's way and laughed softly. He could see the man who couldn't yet see him.

"Drink?" the writer asked. "It'll keep you awake."

The other man groaned in the darkness. He was one of the writer's bodyguards, a policeman assigned to protect him against the threats he'd been receiving, threats for the articles he'd been writing about the illegal logging that had been going on too long in his country. No doubt, the other bodyguard posted by the front gate was asleep as well, the writer thought.

"Sorry," the policeman said. "Not getting much time off these days. Too much trouble in town now."

"Don't apologize. Drink from the glass. I'll keep the bottle."

He poured the policeman a glass of scotch and placed it in his outstretched hand. The writer stepped up to the mesh screen that wrapped around the porch. Through the musky, weighty warmth- a clinging wetness really- the two men looked high above them. It was light above the forest canopy long before it grew light beneath, and they looked towards the treetops for the first flickering light-stars of the Amazon morning.

"Trouble in town, huh?" the writer said, though more to himself than to the policeman. He wished the morning would not come any sooner than it had too.

"The Indians strung up another cowboy last night. The Baron ain't happy losing these men."

"Serves 'em right," the writer said. "The Indians have more rights to the forest than they do. And the Baron knows that."

"There's a lot of bad talk now amongst the cowboys" the policeman continued. "It's gonna get outta hand."

"Good," replied the writer. "I'm tired of waiting myself."

He could feel the stupid eyes of the policeman on his back. He shifted his weight and leaned against one of the porch posts.

"We can't stop the killings, you know" said the policeman.

"Obviously."

"No, I mean, it's gonna get worse before it gets better. We haven't got the manpower."

"Then we might as well all leave."

The writer thought about what he wanted to say.

"But it's those bastard cowboys and their cattle who should leave first...but I don't see that happening, do you?"

"You're right there. The Baron's boys got little to fear what with all the guns they got. We're outnumbered no matter how you look at it."

"Then why do you stay?" the writer asked. "You're not being paid to die."

"I'm stuck here like everyone else" the policeman answered. "Where would I go?"

“Back to the city. Like everyone else.”

“But that’s what I left. There’s nothing in the city. Out here, at least, I own my house and can enjoy my property with my kids.”

“If you’re dead,” the writer said, “you can’t enjoy any of it.”

“I won’t get dead” the policeman countered.

“Watching over me and sleeping while you’re at it, isn’t helping your chances.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Forget it” said the writer.

They shared no words for several minutes. Around them the grey-green mist of day was born beneath a million pin-pricked shafts of light which streamed down upon them through the trees. The mass and specter of gigantic trees heavy with foliage began to glow and appeared to separate and come alive in the light.

“And why don’t you leave?” the policeman began again.

“This is my country. It’s under siege. These ranchers are an alien force here, an invading army of ignorant, greedy men. And until they leave- or change their ways- I stay.”

“You sound like a politician. Or a priest, maybe?”

The writer laughed.

“None of those people are left here. So I guess I have to do something in their place. I care a lot for the rain forest, always have. Like you, I’m stuck here too. And I believe I’ll die here, sometime soon.”

The policeman stood beside him and the writer refilled his glass.

“Don’t talk like that,” the policeman said. “It’s bad luck. Besides, I’ll be out of a job if you get killed.”

Around them, it was light enough to see each other’s sad, sleep-filled eyes. There was the porch with its mahogany supports and rough, hard-packed floors. There was a small stretch of cleared land around the house, dotted here and there with impressions from the ancient trees ripped up by the previous owner so he could see the forest better. The earth around the house was long dead and barren, for nothing lived upon the forest floor once the trees were gone. In the rain forest, life existed only above the ground, and below the trees. With no trees, there was no longer any nutrient cycle. The land that was left might support cattle or agriculture for two or three years, but then it’d dry up and be dead for sure. Then the ranchers and settlers would move on in search of more land, and another slice of the rain forest would disappear until...until what?

Until there was no forest left, the writer thought wretchedly. But it didn’t matter to him. Not now. Not anymore. He wouldn’t live long enough to see the end of the rain forest. Thank God, he thought. He took another sip of scotch. He couldn’t bear the thought of the forest’s death. His own death seemed to mean little in comparison. He would die first, and that was good. He would remember the forest as it had been for as long as he had been studying and writing about it. It was now that he was fighting for it. To die was probably the best thing that could happen, the writer thought. That would

take care of everything. The responsibility for the forest and its protection that he felt would be taken from his shoulders, and no one could say he hadn't done his bit to help. He'd die a martyr of sorts. And his wife and children? They'd be all right, sure. At last they'd be able to leave this accursed Eden he'd brought them to. The magazine he worked for would take care of them for a while until they got sorted out. So he could rest now. At long, long last, he could rest.

"I'm going inside," the writer said to the policeman. "My wife will be worrying about me."

"I'll walk around front then. Can I have the bottle?"

"Sure. Come back later, and we'll have breakfast."

The policeman held his rifle in one hand and the bottle in the other. He stepped from the porch and disappeared around the side of the house. The writer watched the man's heavy body as it moved away from him. He wouldn't live long with guys like that around him, he thought. Suddenly he grew lonely and scared. He wondered whether this might be his last day alive or not. He turned away from the forest, which he imagined moving closer as if stalking him. He no longer felt safe in the forest he had loved. He ran to his wife and made love passionately and urgently to her before morning found them out.

About the Author

Mark Aitchison has, since 1992, operated a riverboat tour company called "Swallows and Amazons", which is based in the city of Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil. He was born in England to Scottish parents, grew up in West Africa and Canada, and calls Cape Cod (Massachusetts) home. He graduated from Bennington College, Vermont, in 1985 with a Bachelor's Degree in Latin American Literature. At present he lives in Orleans, Massachusetts, where he is studying for a Master's Degree at Bridgewater State University. He teaches English as a Second Language at a local high school. He has published many of his short stories in various literacy journals.