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Rain Into Glitter

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When it storms over the metropolis, the sky is so dark it creates a lid on the city, like the top of a dollhouse had been closed; it leaves the porcelain toys alone with their thoughts. At least that's what a little boy had thought as he walked down the street in what looked to be a dragon costume.

As the storm continued to beat down on the city, his onesie had soaked through to let the raindrops tickle his bones. The costume's footie pieces created an unattractive squelch sound with every step, and the too-long stuffed tail was tracing paths through the puddles. The fabric had darkened the way fabric does when it soaks up an unseemly amount of liquid; the costume was heavy now, and it made his journey down the street a strenuous process.

Carrying the invisible weight of the storm and running his sleeve-covered hand along with the dirty bricks of the buildings he passed, his mind wandered back to the powerful warmth of the fireplace in his playroom back home how it would illuminate the room around it, bathing the peeling wallpaper and dusty toys in golden light. Now he slunk down against the edge of a building, awash in the city's gray mist.

Different flooring types tend to make very distinct sounds when a child's plump feet smack against them during a game of tag or running away from the monsters that lurk in the shadows of a home. Wood and tile vary depending on the house's age and whether or not the child happens to be wearing socks. Both are particularly useful for increasing speed because if this child is wearing socks, he can slide over the flooring with ease, even if he occasionally gets caught on a loose string or splinter. Carpet tends to stay the same, though; it doesn't make the sort of *smack* that bare skin creates against wood or tile, and an attempt to slide on it often results in a rug burn.

Four-year-old Ashley Quinn considered himself very familiar with the logistics of carpet and the noises it made and feelings it produced. He knew the muffled rumble of each of his own feet against the thick carpet of his playroom like he knew the beat of his own heart; this is why he cursed himself so heavily when he'd attempted to slide across it.

He wasn't in the kitchen or the dining area, so he should have known he'd stumble and fall. He'd been running about the space with his beautiful wooden airplane (creating top-notch flying sound effects all the while) when he tried to skid to a stop in front of the fireplace and tripped instead. His tiny hands uncurled and the plane took its first real flight right into the blaze before him. His jaw smacked the ground and he bit his tongue on the way down, but what was really causing the tears to pool and spill out of his eyes was his Burkard Grumman F4F Wildcat turning to ash just a few feet away. Ashley watched in horror as his favorite model airplane burnt in the massive oak fireplace against the largest wall of his playroom.

As the remains of his favorite toy fell into the embers below, Ashley let out an ugly snuffle and began to hiccup loudly. The tears streaming down his round cheeks seemed to dry faster in the heat of the fire, but his eyes made up for it with just how many of these tears they produced. He sat back up on his heels and began to feel a slimy bubble of snot, making its way over his lips and down to his chin. The neighbors probably heard the wail he let out.

As he continued to sob, the faint sound of heels clicking on the wood floor in the hallway outside became louder and

louder, culminating with the playroom's heavy door swinging open with a large swoosh. His nursemaid, Penny, stood in the doorway breathing heavily, looking like she'd just run all the way across the large house in just a minute or so.

"Ash! What happened? Are you hurt?" she cried, rushing to kneel next to the crying child.

"Miss Penny . . . " he choked out in between sobs " . . . my . . . Wildcat"

She tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear and looked over to the fireplace, putting the pieces together in her mind. She pulled her sleeve over her wrist and wiped the glob of snot from Ashley's mouth.

"Oh, sweetheart," she began, her brow wrinkled. "It'll be alright. You have plenty of other airplanes. You really ought to be more careful, though. You'll hurt yourself," she said, offering him a small smile.

Ashley pushed her hands away and plopped down in her lap, burying his face in her corduroy skirt. Her hands found their way to his messy brown hair, combing through the tangled strands and massaging his scalp. He rolled over with a huff, still sniffing, and looked up at her, watching the flames dance shadows across her concerned features.

He brought a finger up to wipe his own nose. "It was my favorite," he mumbled.

"It was only your favorite because you have so many memories with it; the more you play with your other planes, the more memories you'll make with them, too," she suggested.

They stayed like that for a while until Ashley had no tears left to cry. Penny figured it would do him some good to get away from the playroom where his most cherished possession had just violently perished; she scooped the little boy up and carried him upstairs to his bedroom, as it was getting late anyway and he'd tucked himself out from crying. She plopped him on the bed and grabbed a knit blanket to wrap around him before walking over to the dresser to turn down the gaslamp that sat there.

"Miss Penny?" Ashley asked. "Why do things . . . go *away*?"

Penny stilled. She had begun to place a few dolls scattered about the room back into the toy chest by the armoire. Now she looked thoughtful, her lips puckered like a fish's as she pondered the question. The light from the gaslamp flickered in her eyes and her features softened.

"Someday, everything has to go away, even us. Everyone has their own path to walk in life. Maybe your Wildcat just came across a fork in the road."

Ashley played with the stitches on the knit blanket, sticking his fingers through the ropey yarn and creating little holes in the pattern; his mind drifted to other things that had gone away. His mind drifted to a time when he'd been even younger; the memory was clouded with a crisp fog. Ashley remembered standing on his tiptoes at his mother's bedside, her soft whispers onto the crown of his head, and her thin, wiry hands. Her breath had been ragged as if she had choked on the smoke from the fireplace in the playroom. He faintly recalled clutching Penny's wool skirt while she spoke to doctor after doctor.

Penny walked over to the bed and sat down near the edge of it, the mattress dipping beneath her. She gave him a nudge to indicate it was time to lie down, and he complied in almost a trance-like manner. Ashley rolled over to face the wall as Penny tucked the blanket around him and pulled the antique quilt up from the foot of the bed.

"Sweet dreams, Ash," she said, rising from the bed and walking to the door.

"G'night, Miss Penny," he whispered in response. She smiled and blew a ghost of a kiss before the heavy door closed behind her with a loud thud, leaving Ashley wrapped in old blankets and chilly darkness.

He spent the next few hours tossing and turning, listening to the springs of his mattress creak under him and rain begin to patter against the roof lightly. Ashley wondered about his mother and if she might be flying high in the sky along with his Burkard Grumman F4F Wildcat and tried to imagine them doing loop-de-loops around each other. Before his mother went away, she would always insist on having her bed next to a window so she could look up at

the sky outside. Ashley would sit on her lap and she'd point at all the planes that flew by the window, telling him the make or model of the ones she could recognize. They'd watch the sky until the day faded into night and his mother would roll over to tuck him in with a bedtime story of courageous knights and fire-breathing dragons.

Around what must have been midnight, Ashley sat up and swung his legs over the bed; he hopped down onto the dark wood floor and walked to the window by his bookshelf, dragging the knit blanket with him. He let the blanket fall into a pile at his feet and stood up on his tiptoes to peer over the windowsill at the city. It stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction, lights sparkling against the rainstorm; it was as if the stars that were meant to hang in the sky had fallen and dusted themselves across the skyscrapers or fairies had flown above the city with buckets of glitter and sprinkled it down to add a bit of magic to all the mundanity. Ashley thought that the night sky must have some of the magic from his bedtime stories mixed into it; how else could it have been so beautiful?

If he squinted hard enough, he could see his Burkard Grumman F4F Wildcat swirling among the fairies--doing figure eights, flying up and diving down, dappled with its own personal coat of glitter, stardust, and raindrops. All Ashley could think was how badly he wanted to fly, too. But he was just a little boy; he didn't have delicate wings to carry him up into the sky. Maybe if he had magic too, he could fly up just like his airplane and join his mother to do loop-de-loos against the stars. She could pull him close with her wiry hands as they floated and peek down at all the little people milling about the city below.

Then, he was struck with an epiphany. He rushed to his armoire and yanked out his dragon onesie, running his hands along the stuffed wings. He pictured himself, a jade kite against a watercolor painting of storm clouds. Maybe if he flew straight up into the storm, the clouds would break and he'd be up in the sky with his mother like he always wished. He opened his window after struggling with the rusty lock for a moment and felt a gust of wind blow against his face, nipping at his nose and biting at the corners of his eyes. Ashley looked down and began to plot, the best way he could, to climb down from the window. He sucked in a deep breath as he placed his dragon foot onto the first ledge, his claws on his hands hanging onto the window pane.

So now he sat, teeth chattering and costume sagging, against a mud-crusted building in the middle of the dollhouse that was his city, looking out at the people walking back and forth before him, obscured by their big black umbrellas. Cars zipped past at the speed of light, splashing gray water up over the sidewalks. It seemed the stars and the glitter could only dust the tops of the buildings and were unable to reach down here. Like sprinkles on ice cream, once you licked them off the top and felt their sweet taste melt onto your tongue, all you were really left with was a soup of melted vanilla. Like the ashes of his Wildcat scattered in the heart of the playroom's fireplace, he too could no longer fly. Whether he dreamed of soaring up into the clouds with his mother or play pretend pilot with his planes, it seemed he could never quite take off.

Ashley sighed. He'd been sitting here for hours, a splash of dark green against the monochrome of the storming city. Or maybe not, maybe the wall he sat up against had sucked the color out of his costume and he'd turned into a little dragon statue for tired pigeons to take a rest on.

His head snapped up as he caught a flash of vibrant red out of the corner of his eye; a man was pulling a cart full of strawberries out of the small shop across the street, presumably to sell them—finally, some color. Ashley smiled and, only after looking at the strawberries for a moment, realized how hungry he was. He supposed even mythical beasts had to eat. He rose on shaky legs from his spot against the dark building and began to stumble towards the street, waiting for a break in the traffic.

Once he saw his chance, he lifted his feet and began to run across the wet pavement, taking note of how the noise of his soaking wet onesie squishing against the pavement was different from his wool socks against the hardwood floor of his home. Ashley reached the other side of the road safely and wobbled for a moment when he nearly ran into someone. After mumbling out a halfhearted apology and waiting for the strawberry salesman to walk back into the shop to grab something, he reached out his dragon claws. He wrapped them tightly around a handful of bright red, juicy strawberries. They were soaked in the rainwater, but it only served to make them shine brighter; they were glistening in the storm. He clutched the berries to his chest and ran into the nearest alley to settle down again; here, he made a little nest by curling his stuffed tail into a circle and placing the berries in the center so they wouldn't touch the grimy pavement.

Ashley sunk his teeth (or dragon fangs) into one of the strawberries and was overcome with the warmest feeling imaginable; the cold had soaked through his costume long ago, mixing ice into his warm blood. The berries themselves weren't warm, but they tasted and smelled so very delectable it felt like they were. As the few strawberries he'd taken fell one by one into his belly, they started a fire there and began to thaw him from the inside out. The tangy sweetness was jarring but acted as a simple comfort as it dyed his tongue red; his small mouth transformed from a pout into a smile. Then Ashley was startled from his thoughts by a shriek to his right.

"Ashley Patrick Quinn! I've been looking for you in this storm for five hours! Just what do you think you're doing out here!?"

Ashley looked up to see Penny standing above him in the alleyway, gripping an umbrella handle so hard her knuckles were white and shaking profusely. The long coat she was wearing was completely soaked through; her heels were covered in mud that had splashed all the way up her tights, and her normally pin-straight red hair had turned brown and wavy from being wet. Her lip was wobbling, and her makeup was smudged and running down her face; she let out an unattractive snuffle as she grabbed Ashley, hugging him so tightly that water dripped out from both of their clothes.

He couldn't find the right words.

Ashley clutched the last of his strawberries and let Penny hold him while her shoulders shook and she let out little hiccuping sounds. He reached his arm up to push his dragon hood back so he could see better and awkwardly patted his nursemaid's back.

"Don't cry, Miss Penny, you can have my last strawberry," he offered.

She looked up and saw the round strawberry Ashley held in his fingers and frowned before snatching the fruit from his outstretched hand.

"I'd better get your last strawberry for all the trouble you've put me through today," she huffed and bit down into the small fruit.

Penny sighed. "Come on, Ash, we're going home. We'll both get sick if we stay out here much longer."

Ashley nodded and grabbed her hand as she chewed the strawberry and began to drag him along the sidewalk in the direction of their house. He heard a plane zoom over their heads and looked up just in time to catch its tail disappearing into the storm, leaving only a trail of smoke behind.

"Miss Penny, did you see the plane?" he asked, lifting a finger and pointing into the sky.

"No, I must've just missed it, honey," Penny replied.

"How is it flying in the storm?" Ashley asked.

"Planes can fly in storms. Maybe the pilot is on the radio and has someone to guide him through it." Penny paused. "Ashley Patrick, if you think you can distract me from your sneaking out by changing the subject, you're wrong! What in the world were you thinking?! When we get home and you've dried off, I expect a full explanation and apology from you! You scared me half to death and--"

His nursemaid continued to rant for the rest of their walk home, but Ashley tuned out all her huffing and puffing; he grabbed his soaked tail so it wouldn't drag on the ground and ended up carrying it like a purse. The storm continued to beat down on them, but it was alright because he had someone there to guide him through it. He gripped her hand tightly and as he thought about the yummy strawberries and warm presence of Penny at his side, Ashley figured that some of the stardust and glitter must have found its way to the floor of the dollhouse after all.