

Rain on East 6th Street by Rome Reginelli

I need some goddamned rain or I'm going to go crazy. I mutter this aloud on my way to class, glare up at the cloudless Inland Empire sky, and mutter it again. The statement itself is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more I think about it, the less I can help feeling more and more crazy about the parched, aching dryness peeling away at my skin and making heat rise in waves from the ground.

Marsten Quad, usually my sanctuary from the dusty non-nature that is Claremont, is shimmering with heat. The pine tree provides almost no shade, and the sparse leaves on the ground give no hint that it's the middle of October already. Why did I decide to go to school here, in the wasteland they call Los Angeles County? My own reasoning from two years before escapes me. I could've gone to pre-med anywhere, maybe Berkeley; hippies would've been better than putting up with this desert.

I am on my way to class, a history class I don't want to attend because I haven't done the reading. I don't know who would want to read hundreds of pages of inane religious rambling by some monk who couldn't accept the utter incompatibility of Acts and Aristotle.

I hack up some mucus from a night of ill rest (as I have been patiently evaporated of health by the Oldenborg Residence Hall air conditioning system). I mutter my mantra of the day and take another step forward when a voice halts me in place.

"Isn't this wonderful weather?" exclaims some obnoxious girl from my class. I wait for her to catch up, so that my surly self can rail against the inexplicable love for this fake, dead place.

"Honestly, I don't see what you mean," I bait her.

"Well, I was just talking to my mother in Denver and they've had their first snow there already. Can you believe it - snow? I've been sitting around sunbathing here!"

"Disgusting," I taunt. "Don't you get sick of having the same weather all the time? This place is a huge, static nothingness. If we weren't constantly stealing water from north of here, we'd all be parched bones in the desert."

"Well, if you're going to be such a spoilsport, why'd you even go here?" She seems offended. Good.

"It's the best school that offered me a full ride," I say matter-of-factly.

"That's a dumb reason to go here," she says, and ends our exchange.

o o o

Much to my surprise, I awake the next day to a cover of clouds and a slight chill in the air. It seems as if I may get a reprieve from this wasteland after all. The church bells echo across campus, signaling 8 *ante meridiem*. Still early. But if it's going to rain today... then I have things to do. I get out of bed, quickly throw on slacks and a button-down: this is going to be one of those days, I can sense it. Shutting the door behind me, I emerge into Oldenburg's Spanish Hall, and begin the brisk walk toward the other side of the building. I wind through the passageways expertly, cutting through German Lounge, taking stairs up to the third floor and back down to the second. Finally I arrive at the storage closet I have been seeking. My hand reaches out, twists the handle. It's locked. I twist it the other way. Still no response. I push inward, twist right, hard. A click. I glance over each shoulder: no onlookers. The door pushes open and I vanish inside.

Once I am fully in the dark, I can open the other

side. The wall panel slides open, revealing my lair. I love calling it that. The dusty room appears to be a lost part of the Oldenborg floorplan, a gap between rooms where I stash the costume. It's an ugly costume, a fuzzy blue bird-thing in a T-shirt. Cecil the Sagehen. I waste no time putting it on, transforming into the protector of the 5C's. I think it's a wonderfully conceited irony that the mascot of just Pomona and Pitzer is used for this purpose.

Using the fire stairway, I emerge into the courtyard by the Oldenborg dining hall, ready for action. I can feel the moisture in the air building up: I was right to do this. My only question is where they will strike. I have noticed them practicing on the dormitories already: it seems too easy to hit Harwood yet another time. They strike there because it's such a weak point, a moral victory more than anything else. No, that has just been a warmup. They will go for bigger fish this time. I will have to consult Engineering.

The trip up to Harvey Mudd's campus is not difficult. I slink along behind the Rains Center, wave at the practicing women's rugby team and make my way up the steps past Frary. From there I pass Walker Wall, Honnold-Mudd library, Claremont McKenna's and Scripps' admissions buildings, and follow Columbia Avenue the rest of the way. Dodging a unicyclist on his way to an early class, I hop down to the underground passageways. I must be careful not to draw too much attention: I am not so inconspicuous here as I am on the campus of a school that actually cares about sports.

I weave my way indirectly under Parsons and find my way to the physics lab, where I run into Alfred. That's not his real name, of course, but he likes the code name if only because it lets him pretend to be Michael Caine.

"Cecil!" he hisses. "What's going on?" Flicking off the lab equipment, he brings me to a corner of the room where

we won't be overheard.

"It's the first rain of the semester. They're going to strike. I can feel it," I explain. "I need to know where."

"You know that's beyond what I can do for you."

"Then whatever you've got."

"Righto," he says, and we hit the Stockpile, a closet of old gadgets, many of which are probably from the nineteen sixties. Alfred hides his inventions here before he has a use for them. Usually that use is me.

First he chucks me what looks like a can of Colgate. "Fire extinguisher," he explains.

"Looks like shaving cream."

"Well," he thinks, "You could probably use it that way, actually. Smells kind of bad, though. Also, careful - there's a lot of pressure in that thing."

I nod and stuff it into my costume's pocket.

"Next, this," he says and passes me what looks like a Student ID.

I glance at the picture and name. "Cecil Sagehen, birthday 1887. Very funny."

"That's no ordinary ID card," Alfred clarifies. "It's got a strip of self-adapting electromagnetic memory tape. It'll pass any swipe in the world on the second try."

"Is that so?" I say, eying the card curiously. "Did you have to put a stupid photo on here, though?"

"Yes."

I'm not going to question it. "Anything else?" I ask.

"Yes, one last piece." He tosses me what appears to be a yellow poncho.

"What's this?"

"A yellow poncho. It's raining outside."

o o o

By the time I'm back outside, leopard spots of damp concrete inform me that the rain has already begun. I need to figure out where they're going to strike, and fast. The clouds overhead are getting darker by the minute and the class day has begun. If I'm lucky, they'll strike before 11 and I won't have to skip my Chaucer class. Professor Worley usually makes it worth attending.

I pull on the poncho since the rain is only going to get heavier and it wouldn't do to be walking around soaked before I even located them. Besides, it actually helps me blend in better while I'm here at Mudd. Not that I'm staying long: I don't think they've ever bothered to strike at Harvey Mudd. Too many underground passageways to escape through. I jog over to Pitzer, where variously pierced and bearded students are loitering in the underhangs with their cigarettes before class begins. I never understood why everyone at Pitzer smokes. Maybe it's just that I always see the people who are smoking because they do so outside.

Then it occurs to me that, whatever the reason, that's a perfect excuse. I'm shocked my predecessor didn't warn me about it. Pitzer seems like an easygoing school and it's not like they need to convince Pitzer students to join their side like they do at Claremont McKenna, but still... all it would take is a cigarette held up to a fire extinguisher and they'd have the perfect getaway: any number of students could be held to blame.

I search the campus frantically. Double-layered hexagonal academic buildings speckled a surprisingly pretty campus; another thing I never understood about Pitzer is how the campus manages to even *look* like University of California Santa Cruz, despite the fact that it's located in the foothills of the rocky San Gabriels and not in wooded ocean cliffs. The wonders of imported water and artificial shade, I guess.

Trodding past the largest fountain in the Claremont Colleges (and not for lack of competitors) I catch a glimpse of white inside Mead Residence Hall. That must be them! I run up to the doors and realize that the only way I'm getting in is the magic card key Alfred gave me. I dig around in my pockets awkwardly before reaching it out, then hastily give it a swipe. It fails. Damn it, Alfred said this would break any lock in the -- oh yeah, it takes two tries. I swipe again, hurriedly, but it works, and the door unlocks. Sweet.

Inside: the hall smells faintly of cigarette smoke. I am energized by the possibility of catching them this early. I glance around, ignoring the layers of colored posters for this and that event, the innocuous paintings on the walls (though I admit that Pitzer dorms seem to be nicer decorated than the sparse halls of Pomona). Nothing suspicious: straight ahead is where I thought I saw the culprit, so I run there, and whirl around the corner. There is nobody walking down the hall. Nothing to be alarmed about.

I hear the beep of a door being swiped open behind me and a Pitzer girl walks in. I suddenly realize how conspicuous a wet, poncho-wearing mascot is in the residence hall of a college at almost nine thirty in the morning. Not good. She gives me a wide berth but walks past. I decide to turn around, having probably imagined seeing the distinctly white fake fur. I'm almost out the door when I hear the girl say, "What the heck?" I bolt back and find her sitting in a stairway, staring at a huge stuffed polar bear toy. I had been right after all.

"Oh, sorry, this is for me," I explain, and start briskly back out. When I am in the lounge and she has stopped giving me strange stares, I take a look at the thing. It's a cheap thing, likely the prize from a carnival game at the Los

Angeles County Fair, but as a calling card it's as audacious as it is distinct. Damn that Climate Bear. I notice that a card is pinned to the stuffed bear's chest. It's got a photo of a Humpback Whale breaching for the front, the unmistakable World Wildlife Federation panda icon marking the back, and a handwritten haiku inside. Classy.

Our fair-feathered friend,
Please visit our spectacle
In Pomona's heart.

It appears that the F in "feathered" has been written over a halfway-erased W, as if the poet couldn't decide which word to use. I puzzle what this could mean. I suppose the double-meaning of "weathered" and "feathered" is meant to be me. Then this is a calling card directly from the Climate Bear to me... a decoy, perhaps? Then they are striking at "Pomona's heart", whatever that is... and they are so far ahead of me that they think they've got me beaten already. Damn, damn, damn. I'm nowhere near Pomona...

I drop the bear and run to the door. I sprint dangerously downhill in the direction of Pomona College, blasting through Claremont McKenna and cutting across fields of already-muddy grass. The rain is pouring down heavier now, and I'm not going to make it in time. On my way I think about where the heart of Pomona might be. I suppose if it's supposed to be the heart, they must be talking about the Smith Campus Center: defined as the center of campus, it's the hub where students of all majors and years convene... That must be it!

Though I am nearly run over in the Lawry parking lot (Who drives their car to class?) finally I am on sixth, heading in the direction of the Campus Center. I can

already see it: am I too late? I can't hear the alarms going off yet...

I practically fly into SCC, where... things seem pretty normal. Students are finishing off papers in the Fireplace lounge, the Career Development Office is open for business... I am *not* too late!

But where are they? They could strike from anywhere in the building. It would have to be somewhere discreet, though. It'd be too easy to point out the culprit in a big white bear suit in plain view. No, the Climate Bear would be more discreet. Upstairs. Upstairs is where I would find him. Her. It. Them?

Up the stairs, I pass the ASPC office - too crowded, not a target - the AAMP - not open - the senate offices - empty - and the practice rooms - also all empty. No sign of the bear anywhere. The writing center - closed. The presentation room - empty. That leaves only the President's Room, the deluxe (and usually closed) center for various high-class, low-profile events. I have only been in once, and that was when I snuck in to write a paper. There are plenty of places to be out of sight in that room, and yet you could sneak out easily. It would be perfect.

I yank open the meeting room door, dash over towards the adjoining doors to the President's Room. The handle refuses to move; I try the other one. Locked. Am I foiled already? These are ordinary metal keyhole locks, not the kind that I could use the card key on. There is no swipe for me to use...

Except... I look at the doors. Between them, just enough of a crack... I whip out the card key, force it in between the doors, level with the handles. I jimmy it a little, shove... and the doors came open.

"It can open any door on the 5C's in two swipes... or less," I mutter to myself as I blast through the (unlocked)

second set of doors to the president's room. Confident and ready, I announce, "Climate Bear, I've come to put your reign of terror to..."

My voice trails off. The room is empty. Could I have been wrong? I have made a series of inferences to get here... is it possible that somehow I had been... Wrong. The fire alarm echoes hollowly, my disillusioned self hearing it distantly, as if... Not as if. Hearing that it is not coming from Smith Campus Center. It is coming from Alexander Hall. The center of administration. The Smith Campus Center wasn't the heart of Pomona from the haiku. Alexander is. The clever misdirection is maddening. They wanted me to misinterpret it like this. I was meant to be here, to be close enough to hear the alarm go off but be helpless to stop it.

I glance at Alexander, as administrators and staff in suits began filing out into the now thick rain. Claremont, I have come to realize, never has rain where it does not pour down in torrents. It is all or nothing here, and right now a man with a blue tie is getting the "all" of it. And coming from the other door, on the side of the building... is a person in a slightly muddied white polar bear suit. Our culprit.

I fly out of the President's room, soar down the stairs in a way no Sagehen has ever flown. My poncho billows out behind me, a fluorescent cape in the wind. Rain spatters my suit as I whirl around the corner to the back entrance of Alexander.

The man in the blue tie - I recognize him as the Dean of Campus Life - cannot understand what he is seeing; I don't blame him. He reaches out and grabs my arm as I try to run past him. "Hey, fire alarm," he says as if I can't hear the alarm piercing my ears like the quacks of a mutant duck in its death-throes.

I simply point toward the escaping polar bear, trying to gasp out that I have to catch it. He takes one look, and I wrench away from him, explaining that I'm sorry but this is the only way I can put a stop to this madness. I look back at him as I chase off in hot pursuit of the polar menace, and catch a sight I will never forget.

The Dean holds out both his arms, rain and wind whipping his dress shirt wildly, as two filthy costumed mascots escape his grasp, and he shouts, "Don't you know who I am? I'm Ric Townes, bitch!"

This is the last I see of him as I round the corner of sixth street, with Climate Bear rushing up the steps in front of Millikan but not entering. I silently thank the gods that my costume has reasonable sneakers and not some silly bird feet as I bound up the steps, gaining on the escaping ursine.

The bear rounds the corner and makes towards the stairs to ITS. I'm panting heavily, sweating inside this bird head despite the temperature outside, but so must Climate Bear be. It still hops the steps three at a time. I am gaining, but Climate Bear is at the top before I have reached the bottom. It pauses a moment.

"Did you think you could escape?" I call out.

"Give up! I have the high ground!" it retorts ineffectually. Funny: the mascot head masks the voice so I cannot tell if the person inside is a man or a woman.

"Why do you do this?" I demand back, also catching my breath at the bottom of the steps.

"It's a wake-up call to a foolish generation!" is what I think the bear says next, though the wind and rain corrupt the message.

I've had enough: I start up the steps, as quickly as I can; the bear sees my advance and takes off again, rounding the corner and starting off into the courtyard behind the

new buildings. It takes me longer than I like to make it up the stairs; I'm not going to catch the bear at this rate. Then I remember what Alfred gave me: the fire extinguisher. Of course there's no fire to put out, because it's a false alarm, but that's a lot of pressure packed into a small canister. Mid-stride, I dig around for the shaving-cream-sized dispenser, and hurl it straight at the pillar in the courtyard in front of the Climate Bear.

The can flies straight and true. It turns end over end, hitting the pillar and exploding in a burst of foam, breaking in two pieces of twisted metal that fly in opposite directions; one end scrapes the labradorite monument as it flies into the air, and the other clinks against the floor. The polar bear finds itself suddenly a lot whiter than before, with spattered foam everywhere. Most importantly, the face is covered and the person inside can't see. Climate Bear stumbles, foamed-up hands failing to wipe the muck off the eye grating. I know this time that I have finally done it. I wasn't able to stop the alarm, but I've caught the perpetrator. All those weeks of track practice paid off.

The bear is not going down without a fight, though, and as I get in, it wrenches me around and I wrestle back until I've tackled it to the grass. "Why do you do it?" I demand again when the person stops squirming. "Every time it rains, you set off a fire alarm somewhere. Is it just some kind of stupid joke? Why do you have to wear the bear suit from Climate Awareness Day?"

"It's... a message," the person in the bear costume grunts out. "A reminder to the people of these colleges of what real weather is like. We live in a land where every lawn is sprinkled by the ill-gotten gains of our water district. This place should rightfully be a desert. People don't realize the waste they're creating."

I loosen my grip a little. I'm basically straddling the

bear now; there's no way to escape. "That may be true, but you're just causing an inconvenience for everyone you victimize. It's like half-assed terrorism."

"Call it what you want, but somebody has to point out the absurdity of it all. Nobody listens to words, but actions will slowly get the message across." I hear the inhabitant of the filthy bear suit clear her throat. I'm beginning to become certain it's a she. "What about you?" she asks. "Do you fancy yourself some sort of protector of the innocent, wronged students of Claremont? When they waste as much energy as anyone."

"I suppose you could say that. I was given this duty by my predecessor and when I graduate, I'll pass it on to someone new. Cecil is chosen to protect the colleges from whatever threat appears. Who RA's for the RAs? I do. I have to keep Mufti in check, to discern innocent fountain-dumping from unfair bullying, and to keep random boys from wandering Scripps dorms by themselves. It's an important job."

"Wait, you wander the Scripps dorms? Who are you?"

"I could ask the same of you: Who ARE you?"

At first there is no response. Finally, weakly: "It's getting stuffy in this mask. I'll let you remove mine if you take off yours."

Slowly, I release my grip on the bear's hands. She lifts them up, grasps the big blue bird head and pulls it off my shoulders. At the same time, I remove the foamy polar bear face from hers. And nearly recoil in shock.

"Jessica?!" I exclaim.

"D----?!" she says at the same time, calling my name.

I don't believe it. The Climate Bear, my archrival for three semesters, has been my classmate and dorm neighbor. She was in my goddamn sponsor group. At least she is as shocked as I am. "Ugh, get off of me!" she suddenly says,

shoving, but still I hold her down. "Wait, you're not getting away yet."

"I could scream out and attract the attention of campus security. We're in between academic buildings. Somebody would come," she threatens.

"Nuisance," I say. "But without a safety whistle? I doubt anyone would pay you any mind. So just answer me one thing and I'll let you go -- how'd you become Climate Bear?"

"Well, it was halfway through freshman year; Daniel approached me, and..."

"Damn!" I shout, probably too loud. Our sponsor was responsible for the whole thing. He set us up. His friend was the old Cecil, and he picked me as his successor. If he picked Climate Bear, too, then it must have been all an elaborate ruse to set up a conflict between Jessica and me. The bastard. He knew I'd had a one-way crush on Jessica since day one. To think that he would be leading me on, planning for this long... his cleverness was unparalleled.

"And so Daniel's friends have been giving you advice and instruction this whole time?" I ask her.

"How did you... no! You mean they...!"

"Yep. It was all an elaborate setup. It must have been designed to get us into this position," I say, realizing as I speak it that it bears a double meaning. I have Jessica in a very compromising position, it occurs to me. "And being as we've walked right into their trap, we may as well..." I begin, leaning in and puckering my lips...

and ending up slapped in the face. "Spoilsport," I call her.

"Pig," she counters.

"Fine," I say, lifting my hands up and standing up. "I promised I'd let you go, and so I shall, though you're missing a wonderful opportunity here. We're not so

different, after all, you know. I hate this desert as much as you do. If you gave us a chance, you might find that we have even more in common.”

“No thanks,” she brushes her bear head off off, “and besides: I have class in less than an hour. As I recall, so do you.”

I don’t know what time it is, but it occurs to me that she’s probably right. The Climate Bear body with Jessica’s head begins to trudge off in the rain, and I glance around at the mess. I’m almost as covered in fire-extinguisher cream as she is, and my shoes and legs are caked in mud. My sodden bird-helmet lies collecting rainwater below me and my poncho is hardly doing the rest of my suit any good.

As I slog off to my lair to change and get ready for class, I come up with a new mantra. The more I think about it, the less I can help feeling more and more crazy about the soaked, pervasive wetness sinking into my skin and making streams of runoff trail downhill. I need some goddamned sun or I’m going to go crazy.