

Tears and Rain

BY BABETTE GALLARD

“The seat belt sign will stay on while we fly through a few rain clouds and, from my experience now... um... otherwise, but don’t worry, we’ll be out on the other side in a few minutes.”

In my country, we do not fear the rain. We watch the sky for signs that it is near, and we sing a welcome song when it comes. But now we are leaving—Mama, my two brothers and I—because the rains are late again and our maize is dying. My father left a long time ago, but soon we will be a family again. We are happy, and Mama only cries when she thinks of our garden.

Sleeping helps the time pass. When I wake, I see that we have flown a long way. Below us is only blue water, and small bundles of white cloud hang under the wing of our aeroplane.

The man next to me says the clouds are called Fair-Weather Cumulus, and when I can’t say the words, he writes them down on a paper bag that’s been put in the back of the seat in case you need to be sick. His name is Dan, and he is an English scientist who has been working in my country. He is also going home to his family. Gahiji is sitting on his knee so that Adebe, my youngest brother, can lie down and sleep. Mama tells me to watch out for the seat belt sign.

We are going to live in England, the place my father went to because of the shootings and the killings, and from where he sent us money for food and for a pig so that Gajiji and I could go to school. When my uncle died, we moved in with his wife, who was too sad to work. After that, we didn’t have time for school anymore, but now there is nothing to do because everything is dry and nothing can grow. All our grain is gone, burnt like the earth, and as hard as a baked pot.

Often we are sick with malaria and can’t walk even to the Aid Station but when I tell Dan this, he says we will be fine in England because it is too cold for the mosquitoes.

We eat the food the kind lady brought us. I eat slowly because I am shy and don’t want to offend anyone by spitting out the strange red vegetable I have never seen before. But Gahiji is hungry and eats so fast he gets sick. Mama tells me to take the bag to the toilet at the back of the plane, but when I am scared, Dan goes for me.

Then I sleep some more, dreaming about dark clouds and rain on our fields. So much rain that the maize comes alive again, and so much money that Gahiji and I can go to school without Papa working in England. But when I wake, Dan has gone, and Mama tells me we have arrived and that I must help Adebe put on his coat.

We have new coats, each given to us at the airport before we left by a woman from the Church. She said we would need them because England is cold. Perhaps if the mosquitoes in England had coats, they would live, but I am glad they do not.

When we come out of the plane, Papa is waiting for us on the other side of the glass. He has a big smile and is wearing a coat, but the men in uniforms won’t let us go to him. Mama tells me to sit quietly on a bench with Gajiji and Adebe.

It is nighttime, and I can see the sky through the high windows. The moon hides behind thick clouds, and I think that if Dan were here, he would make me feel better by giving them a name and writing it on the same paper bag as before, but when I look in my pocket, it's gone.

The rain starts soon after, huge drops banging on the glass. It is dirty and wet, and I can't make Adebje stay behind the thick yellow line painted on the floor, but just as I try to pull him back, one of the men says we may go over. Mama tells me these people are our new friends, so I must smile and say thank you.

By the time we get outside, Papa has gone, and Mama says he must be waiting outside. I can see she is scared, but she tells me not to worry, so I don't. We walk through a long corridor until at last we see him, standing alone in the rain, beads of water shining in his hair like bright pieces of coral. I will keep that picture in my head for when I am feeling really homesick.

The last time I hugged Papa, I was nearly as small as Adebje, but now my nose reaches up to his chest, and I smell old water in his coat. He can only hug us quickly because a car is waiting with its door open. He says, "Quick, children, get inside before you're soaked."

Then we drive away from the airport. The windscreen wipers hit the rain like fists fighting the sky. Adebje is trying to climb into Mama's coat, and the man driving asks if we are cold. Adebje is only tired, but Papa says, "Yes, we are cold," and "Please turn the heater up."

We drive and drive, down wide roads and then narrow streets with houses and more lights than I have ever seen before, each one reflected in the water that makes lakes on the road. I am in a city of light, and I feel sure that in England our life will be good, that is, until the rain starts talking to me. Then the ugly sounds are everywhere, in the swish-swish of the wipers, in the sloooooosh of the water under the car, an angry muttering with no singing or joy in its voice.

There are two families in the house we are staying in, but it is big, and we have a lot of room.

I have a bed for myself and want to lie down with my arms and legs touching each corner, but Mama says we must eat first.

Mama has brought *injera* bread. Papa says it does not matter because we must learn to eat like the people here in England. He calls someone on the telephone, and Mama tells us to wait for the big surprise Papa has prepared.

When the surprise comes, Mama is the first to cry, then Adebje, then me. Gajiji says nothing, but he will not open his mouth for pizza.

"Fine, I will eat it all myself!" Papa shouts. "Pizza is very special, and you children will learn to appreciate the good food we have here in England."

But I know my stomach will throw this pizza thing back, so I wait until everyone is looking at Gajiji and put it in my pocket. When Papa turns around and sees my empty plate, he says, "I see

you've been a good girl." I have never lied to my father before, but everything is different here in England: the food, the people, the houses, the place where you pee, and even the rain.

When we go to bed, I stretch out my arms and legs, trying to touch each corner again, but I cannot reach. Mama says I will have to grow some more. She is smiling now, and I wonder if she is thinking about the rain beating on the window and how it will feed our garden here in this new country.

The pizza is still in my pocket. I wait until Mama has left the room and Adebje and Gajiji are asleep before I get up. Then I open the window—even though the air comes in with badness on its breath—and throw the pizza out.

The rain beats fat, heavy drops into the soft yellow cheese, and the red sauce spreads like blood. I think of the warriors' battles my sad aunt told me about: the noise of rain drumming on a dustbin lid as if a king were coming; the water, rivers of it lost down a hole when it could be feeding our garden at home.

The next day Papa gets up before us. Mama tells us to eat the English bread he has left on the table. I would rather eat dung, but I am hungry and my brothers must be too, because they say nothing and even drink some of the strange milk. Then we go out to the stone place Papa calls a garden and where Mama says nothing can grow. I try kicking the pizza away before she sees it, but it is wet and sticks. She turns to me with tears in her eyes and I know this is not just because I have lied.

Later, Papa comes back from work and says he is going to show us an English park where the boys can play football and Mama and I can look at the flowers. The sky is grey and Papa says, "It looks like rain." I want to tell him that a sky can only ever look like a sky, but I know he will be angry if I correct him, so I say nothing and we put our coats on again.

In the park, everything is green and flat and full from the rain, but the water climbs into our shoes with cold fingers. Adebje starts to cry and Gajiji won't go on the swings because they are wet.

Mama asks if I like the bright flowers. I can see in her eyes that she wants me to say yes, but I know that if I speak the water will pour out of my mouth and drown her dreams.

Papa says we can go back and watch the big television in the room we share with the other people. He is too sad to put Adebje on his shoulders, even though the little boy is standing with his arms stretched up into the grey sky.

"Papa carry."

"Not today. We must hurry home before the rain starts again."

Rivers run in the drains at the edge of the road, brown like venomous snakes, hungry like wild dogs, picking up bits of paper and eating the dust.

Back at the house, Papa tells us to take off our coats and hang them over the plastic so the water won't wet the house. The nasty rain is angry and I know it is because she remembers the old country—every drop of it, and how wet the sky that gave it to us.

There are cartoons on the television and we put cushions on the floor. Adebje and I laugh together and Gajiji sits by himself, looking as if he is on the moon because he is nearly a man. Then Mama goes to make more *injera* in the room Papa calls the kitchen. He follows her and I hear them talking in low voices, so I know they are arguing and will be there a long time.

The cartoons are in English and the rain is crying long tears down the window. I want to cry too, but if Gajiji sees me he will tell Mama, so I go outside to check whether the pizza is still there.

In the stone garden, the rain runs down my face and into my clothes, so cold it makes me shiver as if I have a fever. Dan said the mosquitoes cannot live in England and we would be fine, but he lied, and I am glad I lost that paper bag.

Now I think of my aunt and her sadness, the school I can't go to anymore, and my friends who wrote letters for me when I left.

My tongue is hot and dry, and when I lick my lips they are so salty they sting. I am crying, crying for myself and my country, the place where the rain sings with joy because every drop is treasured like a tear.