

Rain of Ashes

chapter one

Tomorrow I die. That's what the new teacher says. How can she know? Joe and Larry died a long time ago. Maybe ten days, or thirty? It's hard to know what days mean any more when it is always night. The teacher's name is La Honda. Funny name. She says it is where she grew up, or where she was before, I can't remember. La Honda says it will be day again. One of these days she said. I've sort of forgotten what "day" means. Night was when we were in bed, but now I sleep when I'm tired. So many hours are a day. But, how do you know what hours are? When La Honda said I die tomorrow, she meant soon, I think. Because I threw up in school. Well, not really school. It is that house where some people lived we did not like. I don't know why we did not like them; I thought they were okay. But, my mom says they do bad things. How does she know?

My mom also says that she has lost count of the days that it has been night. But, she thinks it may be months. Perhaps a year. She does not sleep, she says. Maybe when she and my dad sleep together that is when she sleeps. They did that a lot at first. Now they are too tired, she says. My mom says she cannot see. Maybe she is blind. No, there is something wrong with her eyes she says, but not blind.

I remember months. One month I had a birthday and nine boys came, and we hung around although my dad kept telling us to play games. My dad is not really my dad, but he wants me to call him dad. He sleeps with my mother. That's all they do now. Before, he used to go to work. Sometimes we saw him, then he was gone for a long time. And I remember another month was Christmas, with a tree with lights in the house. Not real light, but little electric things that blinked on and off. Mom says that was supposed to look like candles. We had candles for a while. Until they were all gone.

It's not really night now, not all dark. We can see. But the sky is dark. My mom says that the bombs pushed the sun away, but one of the teachers we had, says that is not true. The sun is still there, he said. The bombs made smoke so that we can't see the sun. He says the sun will come back when we're all dead. That teacher died, but then we got another. Now we have a woman. She is not very good at teaching, she says. She doesn't know anything, she says. I don't know anything either; so what? The teachers are not really teachers, like the ones we had when I went to school. But, my mom wants me to go to school, even in a house. About two blocks from home, it has a big room and we all sit around. The teacher tells stories. Sometimes they are real stories, she says. How can you tell, I asked her? You can't, she said. Sometimes she tells. One of the man teachers we had said he told only real stories, things that really happened, but when they happened so long ago how real is that?

Now the teacher says we should call her Elaine, but first it was La Honda. Do you have two names? No, she said that was another teacher. But, my mom says it is not polite, we should not ask and call them all just teacher. What is polite? It's a name. That is true, she said.

I used to be hungry, but not now. I drink water. The faucets in our house don't work any more, but we have a big round thing under one of the spouts that come from the roof. When it rains, we have water. Sometimes it is thick. It crunches when you chew it, because my dad says it has ashes in it. I don't know where the ashes come from; we never had a fire here. But, my dad says it is the ash from dead people. Or perhaps from their houses. If they had wood houses. Stone does not burn. Does it? But, my dad says; whole buildings burned because the fire was so hot. I've never seen stone burning.

Grandma was the first to die. Probably because she could not go to a hospital. There are no more

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doctors. They died too, probably. Or perhaps they cannot be doctors without hospitals. Grandma was always sick, and lying down. Then the dog died. Probably all the dogs died because I haven't seen one for a long time. There's a cat I saw. He is not dead yet. The neighbor girl died too. Suzy. Her name was really Suzanne, but we say Suzy. Her eyes got real big; she could not eat. I don't remember the other people who died. They mostly disappear. Kids go to school, and then they disappear. A few new kids came, but not any more. There are only five kids left. Our teacher says we are dying.

My mom says that when we die we go to heaven. But, my dad does not think so. He says when you die you just go away. To where, I said? Just away, gone. Maybe to a big city, I think. I went to a big city once, we drove in our car for a very long time and there were so many houses and people; they had lights on the street that turned different colors. And a place where I saw a movie with my dad. About ships that shot puffs of smoke and then far away the buildings broke. They showed that too. But so fast that I closed my eyes. Like when you turn your head very fast, and you almost get dizzy. The puffs of smoke and then the buildings falling down. There were people in it too. Running around and yelling at each other. And other people you could not see only hear their voices yelling. Like a radio. And a woman and a man kissing, then she slapped him in the face, but then they were kissing again. But maybe that was another man, he had no shirt on. And loud music all the time. Big cities are dangerous places, but perhaps when I am dead I shall go there again. But, if all the buildings are broken by the puffs from the ship I won't.

My mom is dead; my dad said. But she is still here. So how can she go to heaven? My dad is running around, looking for matches. We used up all the matches when we had candles. Now he cannot find matches. I told him we have no more candles. He said he wanted to burn the green sofa that mom was lying on. She did not talk, and she looked sort of funny. One eye was open, but the other was closed. Don't touch her, my dad said. That is not really my mom, he said, it is only her body. My mom stepped out of her body. How do you do that? Never mind, he said. That's all he said, *never mind, and help me look for matches.*

He found one, and then we found some paper, books and old magazines that nobody looked at any more, and all mom's clothes and some other stuff, like boxes and some branches from the dead tree in front of the house. And then he said, take some clothes and go outside. Then he came outside too. He did not talk; and the house burned. Now we live in the school. But, the teacher has already gone. Maybe she died too. Only two other kids stay here, and a man who sleeps all the time. I sleep too, most of the time. The water here is different; it sits in a tub outside. I cannot reach inside, but one of the girls showed me what she called a dipper, a cup with a stick. Mostly I sleep.

And then, my dad killed himself. He always said, next year he would show me how to shoot, and we would go hunting. I don't know what we would hunt. There are no bears. Maybe birds? He had a little string tied to the trigger, and the gun was in his mouth. I did not hear the gun. When the girl and I found him he was dead. I thought about taking the gun, but what would I do with it? Have not seen the cat around any more. The other girl said we should bury him. My dad. I said we should burn the house, that's what we did when my mom died. Now there are no more matches. We moved to another house, the two girls and I. The older girl found some crackers to eat, a whole box. We all were sick. Then we could not find water, but after sleeping again we found some. In another house. My head hurts a lot. The smaller girl said she wants to sleep too. The older girl too.

Carefully the man approaches what at first sight looked like a heap of old and very dirty clothes. He walks bent over, with a gnarled stick that must be older than the man although it is hard to tell the age of man or stick. He is thin, very thin. Bald, of course, although now snow white fuzz dances around his head. His face is unlined, the skin leathery and tight across the bones. His hunched over posture makes him look old. He talks to himself. *Wonder how I found them. It's the smell. Human shit. Some kids curled up in a ball. Still alive?* He reaches down and gently runs his free hand over the back of the boy, who slowly opens one eye. Then, with a sound of surprise, disentangles himself and sits up. The two girls wake up. The older one licks her lips and says, Water, water. The old man reaches behind him for his water bottle and hands it to the girl who does not seem to know what to do with it. *Drink, it is good water!* All three sip, then drink, now fully awake.

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The man sits down with them. He looks more closely at the children. Yes, they smell. The youngest could be ten at most. *All of them are filthy. Of course, how could it be other?* The little girl has tufts of hair missing, but she still has some dark hair, now tangled in thick knots. They are all thin, of course. *The older girl seems to have no flesh on her any more. The boy looks thirteen, perhaps. Big frame,* the man thinks, *needing some flesh, muscle. The older girl might be twelve or fifteen. Hard to tell. She seems tall, lanky; her hands with long fingers, nails bit raw. How to start a conversation? Do not want to ask questions; that is what adults did with strange children. Things are different now. Survivors together.*

I have been walking for a long time, he says. Looking for food mostly, and for people. He opens his backpack and carefully takes out another bottle of clear water and two raw potatoes. He shrugs his shoulders, Not very good raw, but it fills the stomach. He has a knife, and cuts thin slices to hand out. Do you have more water, old man, the little girl asks? He smiles, Yes that is good enough for a name, Old Man. Do you have a name? Yes, she says, before drinking a big gulp, but she does not volunteer a name. The boy reaches for the water, looks at Old Man, and says, My name is Chuck. The children pass the water around until it comes back to Old Man, who puts it away in his bag, now in front of him. They sit, not saying anything. He's been alone so long now, that he talks to himself, *We've gone through life times of shock. Back to basics. We must find food. No need to ask whether these kids are hungry: they have been hungry too long to know what it is like not to be hungry.* He looks at them, one by one, I shall look around and find something to eat. You kids stay here.

Nobody says anything. They look at him. He slowly stands up. Here, I'll leave this bottle of water with you kids. I shall come back as soon as I can. He looks at the boy, Chuck, you stay with the girls, okay? Chuck nods.

Old Man slowly walks away. He wants to look back at the children, but doesn't. *This new world is too uncertain, too new,* he mumbles softly. *This is a small town. No, not even that: a village.* He passes a dead gas station, a ruined church. Houses deserted, many burned down, or obviously broken into. Nothing new. There is a small General Store, visibly emptied. The Ma and Pa who ran this place lived upstairs. The store is completely empty, of course. He expects it. He goes upstairs. One bedroom, nothing seems to be touched. He finds no dead people. A small kitchen. The first thing that attracts his attention is a cast iron frying pan. Heavy, but useful perhaps. He looks in the small refrigerator. *Nothing, of course. No, there is a plastic tub in the back.* He carefully opens it. A white powder. He carefully puts a few grains on his finger and licks. *Milk powder! Perhaps a bit rancid, not fat free.* He searches the kitchen, and then the other rooms, very carefully. Thick mold on what could have been a bit of chocolate. No longer edible. A very small, sealed bag of peanuts. He finds a good canvas shopping bag, puts the milk and the peanuts in, adds the frying pan at the last. On a hunch, he finds a little garden outside. Nothing green, of course. But, some digging brings a few edible carrots, a few small potatoes. *We have to learn to make a fire with two sticks again,* he says to himself.

As he is leaving to go back to the children his eye is caught by a beat-up garbage can, leaning at a crazy angle against a down spout, one side dented: as if someone kicked it. The lid twisted on so tight that it does not come off with only one hand. *Someone must have been mad at it, kicked it, took a rock to it?* Carefully he works to pry up the lid. The garbage can is very heavy. Maybe water, he thinks, although he does not hear sloshing. He works on it for a long time, then suddenly it pops open. Priceless treasure: tightly filled with canned food and things in heavy plastic, Round cans, square cans, large and small cans, many without label. Whoever did this, carefully filled holes with smaller cans, and even smaller tins, and some things in heavy plastic.

Old Man sits on the back steps of the little house and weeps. He deliberately licks up the tears. *Water is precious, and so is salt. Not many tears left. These are for the children. When you're not around people very much you need to talk, otherwise, you forget how to. No, that's not true. When your head is too full of thoughts and memories that cannot be resolved, you talk to forget. Not true either, but maybe. When the world is dark and still you talk to keep your spirits up. A human sound. The only world I knew is dead, what is this new world? For some reason, I survived the radioactive whatever it was in the air. Barely survived. Everyone around me died. I walked. Getting away from it. Scavenging food and water in houses, a little here, a cup of water there. Another reason to move. How many miles have I walked? I don't even*

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know how many days I have walked! Months maybe. Years! It seems like forever. And now there are the children. They survived. Maybe. I must take them some of this food. What do you give to people who are skin and bones?

Old Man carefully selected some cans of that thick soupy stuff that was made for old people. Oh, a can opener. It takes a while to find a can opener in another house.

The children seem asleep again. Too weak to sit up they had curled themselves in a tight huddle again. Old Man sat down close, silent. Waiting for them to wake up.

Again, the boy is the first to open one eye, see him, sit up. *The girls wake up; they were not asleep perhaps, just bone tired. "Wasted" is the word.*

Carefully Old Man feeds them the sweet soup. The effect is almost miraculous. The children sit up straighter; something lights their eyes again. Easy does it. Not too much at once, he remembers reading somewhere. Starving people was not unknown in the old world. Frequent small portions, as often as can be taken, he remembers. Stomachs shrink.

Old Man and the children lived on the cans out of that forgotten garbage can for a long time. When the children were strong enough, they had walked to the little store to be closer to the food. They had found a water tank nearby that someone must have had for cattle. They had baths. But, the greatest luxury perhaps was an outhouse with some lye left in it.

Are you a new teacher, the little girl asked? Old Man thought how to answer that. Maybe in a way, he said.

Do you tell stories?

Yes, but first we need to eat before I can tell stories.

The children slept most of the time, but now for shorter periods. They could eat more, but he had to think about rationing the cans from this hoard and find more food. Water they had enough now, they even had washed their faces. Amazing to see the color of their skin when ash and dirt is washed off. Chuck's skin was dark. The little girl was the lightest of all of them, the big girl olive; her hair too seemed to be coming back in a dark fuzz.

He asks the children what the name of this village is. Something with Rock in it, they agree, but none of the three can remember. In fact, they cannot remember much at all. Their life before the Dark had been so suddenly and completely cut off that it is difficult to remember anything. They remember going to schools in a nearby town. A bus had taken them. Yellow, the little girl asks? Yes, there were colors then; now everything shades of gray and black. Old Man realizes he must have walked through that town with the schools on his way here. Burned out. They were in a mountainous region. He had climbed to get here.

Once they heard noises as if something alive were rooting through the ruins. Old Man had gone to look, very carefully, peeking around trees. A rat he had thought. Small anyway, and probably no danger. After that they heard no other sounds. They must be the only four people here.

The children recover remarkably in what seems like a short time, but hard to judge without daylight. And they talk more. They begin to remember. Each of them has a different way of dealing with shock and starvation. The youngest, whom they have started to call Girl, has soft crying spells when she mentions something she lost. Where is my calico doll? A sweater, or someone knitting a sweater for her. Where are shiny shoes?

Chuck suddenly stops in mid-sentence and stares in the distance. We went up the mountain, he says, and there was someone living up there. She had a goat and chickens. Maybe two goats.

The older girl, who now is Missy, talks the most, but what she says is unrelated to the present. *I told her not to do that, but she would not listen.* Or, Nancy and Paul said they were going to get married, but you cannot get married before you are eighteen, or perhaps sixteen? Old Man asked how old she is? A blank look. I don't know, I cannot know; before the Dark I was fourteen. Nancy was a few months older, but in the same class. Paul too; he was not a good student, he always... And there the memory stops.

They all learned not to press; leave each to their own memories. Don't ask. They avoid talking about the Dark, or family, or even looking each other in the eyes. They don't ask.

They must start looking for more food and water. Old Man tries to organize them, but it takes time to

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learn to search houses systematically and thoroughly. Old Man looks for another store or perhaps some kind of storage or warehouse in this village. They found only a few cellars with preserved vegetables and fruit in old Kerr jars. Missy got cut on her hand by a sharp piece of glass. Fortunately, it heals well and quickly. Old Man thinks probably the glass had been from a bottle of liquor.

One time, after they had eaten well and sitting back pleasantly full, the boy speaks suddenly: I have a new name. Chuck belongs to another boy. Old Man asks what name he has now. I've been thinking about a dog we had. He was always looking in garbage. His name was Brown. I feel like a Brown.

They all agree that is a good name for him. Missy turns to Old Man, Do you have another name than Old Man? You're not really old, are you?

No, before the Dark I was twenty-five. That is not really very old.

My dad was forty, Missy said. Is she blushing? Hard to tell.

Nobody talks about dads and moms. There is a long silence, then they sleep again. Scavenging, eating, and sleeping.

A few meals later Old Man says his name before the Dark really does not fit him any more either. Perhaps the others can think of a name for him? But, nobody can think of a better name, so he remains Old Man.

Just as it became clear that the village would not yield more food and water, it also seemed to have become a little lighter. Or, at least some of the time they thought they could see lighter patches in the universal gray. And they had a few rains that were not black.

Old Man says, as casually as he can, Maybe we should wander on and find some new places to look for food and water.

Girl says, I saw green.

They look at her. Color? Green color?

Yes, not far from here. A tree with green on it.

They almost run. They stare in awe at an evergreen tree that actually seems to have green needles. They get closer almost reverently. They feel the bark of the tree, and listen, perhaps for a heart beat? And it smells, too, they agree. It smells good.

Old Man mumbles something: The green of life. Have we found another survivor? Even without light, this tree is still alive. Nobody says anything for a long time.

One of them—who? They look at each other—suggests they sleep by the tree. Without a word they sit down, resting their backs against the tree, touching the tree.