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about 2,000 words

## **Rain**

**by Ariel C. Williams**

The weatherman said rain would pour all day. James and Jaleel have basketball practice and can't help me with these loads. I'm thankful for the Grays, our next-door neighbors, who pitch in from time to time. Their son, Larry, plays on the school team. Our boys – we call them the Three Musketeers. We joke about how they'll save us from the dry kind of rainy days we've all experienced lately. Wishful thinking, but a scholarship would put the twins in front of the right people. That's all my boys need – a shot. The irony of it all is baffling.

“Janae. Answer the door. I'm here to take you to the laundromat,” Kareen said. Her loudmouth disrupted my thoughts through the back-kitchen window.

“Hey girl. Sorry about that,” I said.

“Dang, child. Is your phone on silent or off again? I called you a hundred times,” she said.

“My bad, Reen. It was an accident. I got caught up around the house, but I was waiting for you the whole time,” I said.

“One of those days? Whatever. It’s fine. You ready?” Kareen asked.

It was one of those dual questions. *You ready for the laundromat*, meaning, do I have all my things packed and ready to go. *You ready for the next couple of months*, she meant, too, referring to my pending divorce from Scott. Reen has that way about her, to check on you in multiple ways at once.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I said.

Her trucked was packed with multicolored baskets and laundry supplies. Reen faithfully used Gain while I’d never been let down by Tide. One reason I secretly loved Tide was because of its name. Growing up, my grandma would complain of her ailing feet. You’d ask how she was doing, and she’d say her feet made her “tired” in the way we say tide. She always worked through it, though. Doing what she had to do, in spite of illness, death, limited resources, love lost. “Tide” but fighting through. Every time I used the product, I thought of her; the strength I remembered was exactly what I needed now.

The truth is: Scott isn’t coming back. And with him, went my car, washer, and smile. Kareen and the Grays say I should just move on and find another man for different reasons. Reen’s nasty butt is concerned with sex while the Gray’s think of the children. They know I need

help raising a strong set of male twins by myself. He's gone missing before for various reasons, but he always came back. This time, my gut tells me it's permanent and I wasn't prepared. Sad how it goes, considering I felt it coming all along.

"Come on. Let's unload the truck. What side do you want to start on?" Kareen asked.

"Whatever side's free," I said.

We took the baskets out one by one. The rain let up just enough to get us in the door of Old Matt's Self-Serve Laundry. Unlike most laundromats in town, Matt's was clean and inviting. The bathrooms and vending machines worked. People of all classes and background washed clothes in harmony without worrying about why anyone was there. Little things like this matter when doing laundry is something you loathe.

"Good to see you again, ladies," Matt said. He always welcomed us with a smile and wide wave. Matt made everyone feel important. If they were short a few quarters, he'd pass 'em out, no question. A good person all around.

"Hey, there, Matt! Looking good, even in this ugly weather," Kareen said. She'd flirt with any man under any conditions.

"Really Kareen Douglass?" I said.

"What? My fool of a husband is dead. Doesn't mean I am. I've been living ever since," she said.

"Don't I know it!" I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean, heifer?” she asked

“Nothing, Reen. Forget it,” I said.

“Look. All I’m saying is us women deserve to enjoy ourselves just as much as any man. They come, they get what they want, they leave. Meanwhile, we’re stuck washing their drawers in washers we don’t own anyway. At least do what feels right. I do,” Kareen said.

People had a lot to say about Kareen’s lifestyle, but she was right. She was one of the few real friends I had. She always thought about how I felt, even if the way she said it was crass. Half the time, I wished I had a fraction of her courage to live out loud without considering societal standards.

“You’re right,” I said.

“I know. Now gone on and speak to that man. You act like you don’t look but I see you looking all the time. Quiet as its kept, he looks right back at you,” she said.

“Hush, girl. Hush your mouth,” I said.

We laughed so hard I’d forgotten we were in a public place. I’d forgotten about my troubles, too. I’d forgotten that Scott, without my knowledge or blessing, bought a condo in Dexter to share with Michelle. I’d forgotten that he took a piece of my livelihood to furnish another woman’s, and their children’s, life.

“Hello, Janae. What’s so funny?” Matt asked.

“Oh. Hi Matt. Nothing. Just laughing at Kareen Douglass.” I said.

He was ten times more handsome up close. I deny myself getting this close to him out of respect for...honestly, I don't know. He's not married, and in a few months, neither will I be. I worry about what people might say. That my flirting will get back to Scott, a man who couldn't say goodbye to his own children before skipping town. Years ago, he convinced me to look the other way, cover his transgressions. Deny, deny, deny is all I've ever done when it came to him, and now, myself.

“She's quite the character,” he said.

“I know. I love her for it,” I said.

“You should. It is obvious you ladies are great, long-time friends,” he said.

“We are,” I said.

Kareen and I knowingly stared at each other for a few seconds. We've been through so much in the last twenty years. Our current circumstances would be just another thing to get through.

Matt stood there admiring us. His deep sigh got my attention. He wanted to say something, only God knows what it could be.

“Let me know if y'all need anything,” he said.

“Will do, Matt. Thanks,” Kareen said.

His mouth spat those words, but his eyes said something else.

“Janae, that man wants to ask you out. Trust me,” Kareen said.

“No, he doesn’t. Now pick your washer,” I said.

I couldn’t change the subject fast enough. The whole thing made me uncomfortable, but I could tell he wanted to say or ask something else. No matter, I did laundry as I would’ve any other Saturday in Midville.

Nearly three-in-a-half hours had flown by. Reen kept me entertained. We laughed so hard till tears rolled down our faces. Not a care in the world, the rain watched us live our best lives in that moment. We’d forgotten where we were again until Matt’s cologne brought me back to reality.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Matt. Your place is always so clean,” I said.

“We do our best to keep our favorite customers happy,” he said.

It was a flirt. I blushed and grabbed one of my baskets and headed for Reen’s SUV.

“Let me grab that,” Matt said.

“Thank you,” I said.

Rain drops lightly danced across his white t-shirt, leaving little to my imagination. This man is gorgeous – plain and simple. His Levi’s jeans were sculpted on his lower region. No matter what day of the week it was, a colored bandana hung from his back pocket.

“Why do you wear different colored bandanas all the time?” I asked.

“In support of my daughter, Tia. She’s struggling with her sexuality. I figure if she knows I’ve got her back, it’d be easier for her to accept herself,” he said.

“Commendable. How old is she?” I asked.

“Seventeen. Rough age for a girl,” he said.

“I remember. Hey, I work with teenagers from all backgrounds at the Advocacy Center every day. Many of my kids are like your daughter. It might be good for her to visit if you guys are open to that,” I said.

“She might love that. It could do her some good to know a community is available for her. I appreciate your offer, Janae,” Matt said.

His eyes were warm. If we’d been further acquainted already, the man would’ve hugged me. Hell, I wanted to hug him. He smiled, revealing a beautiful set of teeth that could only be strengthened by organic everything.

Matt was *it*, only I didn’t know if I felt this way out of desperation or loneliness. Men vie for my attention semi-regularly. At the end of every dead-end conversation, my mind rushes to Matt. The guilt floods in when I realize I felt this way in my marriage. Scott might’ve finally left but it’s been over for a long time.

“You’re welcome, Matt. Call the Center and schedule an appointment. If I’m there when you call, I can handle your affairs,” I said.

We stared at one another for a bit. I could feel Karen's beady eyes burning a hole in my back. There's no way this ride home will be a quiet one.

"Please forgive me if this is too forward. Are you free tomorrow after church?" he asked.

I swallowed deeply. This wasn't the day I expected to speak to him this much, let alone snag a possible date.

"Sure. Why?" I asked.

"It's just...look, I love having your business, but you're used to having a home washer. I can tell by the way you pack your clothes. I have a few refurbished ones outback. If you don't mind, I'd like to gift you one. Maybe help you out a bit," Matt said.

"What would I owe you in return?" I asked.

"Nothing but a business card so I can call the Center. Make sense to call you directly, right?" he said.

"Right," I said.

I dug in my purse for a card and pen. On the back of it, I jotted my personal phone number down. For once, I decided to take Reen's advice and go for it. I placed the card in his hands.

“My real phone number is on the back. Schedule your daughter’s appointment on Monday. Call my cell phone tomorrow. I’ll catch a ride here after church, but you’ll have to take me home. Deal?” I asked.

His eyes lit up. In a split second, I’d become the forward one. Reen was shooting air rockets in the background. Matt was pleased, and for the first time in a long while, so was I. It had little to do with him and more to do with finally acknowledging my needs as being real and valid.

Scott hurt me. The humiliation and embarrassment almost killed me. I’m not where I want to be in this stage in my life. Life is changing in ways I can’t control. And one day, all of that will be okay.

“Deal. I’ll call you tomorrow afternoon. Take care, Janae,” Matt said.

The doors on the truck slammed. Kareen screamed in my ear the whole way home about honesty, sex, being happy for me even though Matt was hot to her and living my best life. I tuned her out after the twelfth squeal.

We pulled into my driveway and unloaded the vehicle. I smiled the whole way. Just this morning, I laid helplessly across the bed after the boys left, wondering how I’d make it. The car and washer would eventually pay for themselves but what about me? The thought of not making it past this moment, the shame and degradation, haunted me. *Something’s gotta give*, I thought to myself. And it did. I gave me a chance.

At the same time heartbreak walked out of my life, peace walked in. I don't know what the future holds but for now, it has stopped raining.

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