

# DANCING IN THE RAIN

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## Ashes to ashes

Sarah Callinan

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. As much as they had all tried, there was no delaying the inevitable. The old world was gone. Humanity reduced to soulless rubble. The cataclysm was no more than a faint memory to him now, a ghostly entity tinged with fire and anguish. In dark nights like these he ached for it all to be over. But he lived for the girl. And so each day he took her by the hand and they walked along the highway in search of things that no longer existed.

The man sat watching the grey light congeal over the hills, a derisory testament to the daybreaks of before. It called to mind the old fable of the sun chasing his lover the moon across the sky. In this dimness, it seemed the sun had forsaken his desire, casting them as unwilling darlings of the evening.

The man poked the glowing coals with a stick, smoke spiralling lazily into the sky like a serpentine apparition. He folded his blanket and packed it and came back from his cart with a dented can of beans. He set it on the embers and crouched on the tarpaulin to watch his daughter, whose small figure softly rose and fell with each breath. She shivered under the damp blankets, the skin of her exposed limbs turned cracked and reptilian by the cold. The man sighed and leant over to wake her.

They ate their fill and took the cart and made their way through derelict streets. The stale wind teased their hair as their rag-clad feet sunk and slipped among the grit. Everything looked

the same. As if they were stranded in existence of indistinct moments that warped together like images projected onto running water. Cracked pavement. A rusted bicycle. Objects blackened and shrunken and covered with ash. So much ash. The girl hugged herself and coughed softly.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m really tired, Papa. And cold.’

‘We’ll take a break soon, I promise.’

He stopped and took a blanket out of the cart and wrapped it around the girl. It was thick and woven and lumped onto her shoulders, like a refugee carrying her world on her back.

It took them until midday to reach the edge of the town. Ahead, a building seemed to rise from the ruins, starkly juxtaposed with the burnt houses and crumbling brick that lay in the snow like the discarded remnants of a fire. Its ashen façade was obscured by the skeletons of oaks. The girl tugged on his arm.

‘What is it, Papa?’

‘This is a church. Do you remember what a church is?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Good.’

Good, because he did not.

They dragged the cart up onto the side of the road and wandered along a shattered cobblestone path to the door-less entrance, which gaped like a brick-lipped mouth. The structure whispered of stolen grandeur, with flutes of stone that arched through the ribbed barrel vaults of the ceiling. Broad columns rose from the stained wooden floor along to where the altar would have once been. A simple crucifix was fastened high in the fragmented tabernacle. He felt as though he should bow his head in reverence.

‘Do you think that anyone has been here, Papa?’

‘No. No one has been here for a long time.’

He tried to remember the last time he had been in a church. But he pushed aside the memories from his mind like the dust he now waded through.

The place had been plundered of anything of value long ago. The stench of decayed wood permeated the air and piles of rubble and abandoned possessions littered the floor. Festering blankets. Rusted cans. Pews upended and splintered. The walls were tainted by unintelligible markings, celestial motifs etched into stone. Light streamed through the windows, captured in particles of dust like dull constellations suspended in the grainy air. The girl looked up at him.

‘Papa, what did they do in churches?’

The man paused. ‘People came for mass. To hear the word of God.’

‘God spoke to people?’

‘To those who listened, they say. But you have to speak with Him also. Just like I’ve taught you.’

The girl turned away and gazed towards the crucifix.

‘I don’t think I’m very good at talking to God.’

‘Maybe being here will help.’

Even as he said it, he didn’t believe. He did not know what he believed anymore. But it was not this. Something had changed inside him.

They were pilgrims of a dying faith, vainly seeking a forgetful god. The man paced down the centre aisle. Holy water long since evaporated. Tattered tapestries embroidered with falsehoods. Stained glass windows, once rich in colour, depicting St Jude enshrouded in emerald robes, glazed cheeks hollow and gaze despondent. Nothing more than a jewelled mask concealing rotting flesh.

There would be no anointment of the sick, for they were too far gone. No plea of absolution, for tomorrow would never come. Nothing left here except to bear their hallowed talismans of dust. Remember the ancient litany. Then repeat. Continue the futile cantillations until phantoms rise from the ashes.

He couldn’t take it anymore. The memory of his departed wife and their union tortured him. As clear in his mind’s eye as

fresh paint on parchment. A vision of white floating towards him.  
Her face veiled. Vows softly spoken. Til death do us part.

‘We’re leaving,’ he muttered. The girl spun around.

‘Why? I don’t want to go. I want to learn how to talk to  
God.’

‘Don’t bother. God is not listening anymore.’

The man expected the girl to argue, but she was silent. He  
took her by the hand and led her back to the highway.

It was just him and the girl. Left behind when all others went  
quietly into the eternal night. Left to trudge on doggedly as fire  
and brimstone rained down upon them. Damned to purgatory til  
the universe’s last breath.



**Sarah Callinan** wrote this in 2015 when she was in Year 12 at St  
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