ISAAC ASIMOV

RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

“There she is again,” said Lillian Wright as she adjusted the venetian blinds carefully. “There she is, George.”

“There who is?” asked her husband, trying to get satisfactory contrast on the TV so that he might settle down to the ball game.

“Mrs. Sakkaro,” she said, and then, to forestall her husband's inevitable “Who's that?” added hastily, “The new neighbors, for goodness sake.”

“Oh.”

“Sunbathing. Always sunbathing. I wonder where her boy is. He's usually out on a nice day like this, standing in that tremendous yard of theirs and throwing the ball against the house. Did you ever see him, George?”

“I've heard him. It's a version of the Chinese water torture. Bang on the wall, bill on the ground, smack in the hand. Bang, bill, smack, bang, bill-”

“He's a nice boy, quiet and well-behaved. I wish Tommie would make friends with him. He's the right age, too, just about ten, I should say.”

“I didn't know Tommie was backward about making friends.”

“Well, it's hard with the Sakkaros, They keep so to themselves. I don't even know what Mr. Sakkaro does.”

“Why should you? It's not really anyone's business what he does.”

“It's odd that I never see him go to work.”

“No one ever sees me go to work.”

“You stay home and write. What does he do.”

“I dare say Mrs. Sakkaro knows what Mr. Sakkaro does and is all upset because she doesn't know' what I do,”

“Oh, George.” Lillian retreated from the window and glanced with distaste at the

television. (Schoendienst was at bat.) “I think we should make an effort; the neighborhood should.”

“What kind of an effort?” George was comfortable on the couch now, with a king-size Coke in his hand, freshly opened and frosted with moisture.

“To get to know them.”

“Well, didn't you, when she first moved in? You said you called.”

“I said hello but, well, she'd just moved in and the house was still upset, so that's all it could be, just hello. It's been two months now and it's still nothing more than hello, sometimes. -She's so odd.”

“Is she?”

“She's always looking at the sky; I've seen her do it a hundred times and she's never been out when it's the least bit cloudy. Once, when the boy was out playing, she called to him to come in, shouting that it was going to rain. I happened to hear her and I thought, Good Lord, wouldn't you know and me with a wash on the line, so I hurried out and, you know, it was broad sunlight. Oh, there were some clouds, but nothing, really.”

“Did it rain, eventually?”

“Of course not. I just had to run out in the yard for nothing.”

George was lost amid a couple of base hits and a most embarrassing bobble that meant a run. When the excitement was over and the pitcher was trying to regain his composure, George called out after Lillian, who was vanishing into the kitchen, “Well, since they're from Arizona, I dare say they don't know rainclouds from any other kind.”

Lillian came back into the living room with a patter of high heels. “From where?”

“From Arizona, according to Tommie.”

“How did Tommie know?”

“He talked to their boy, in between ball chucks, I guess, and he told Tommie they came from Arizona and then the boy was called in. At least, Tommie says it might have been Arizona, or maybe Alabama or some place like that. You know Tommie and his nontotal recall. But if they're that nervous about the weather, I guess it's Arizona and they don't know what to make of a good rainy climate like ours.”

“But why didn't you ever tell me?”

“Because Tommie only told me this morning and because I thought he must have told you already and, to tell the absolute truth, because I thought you could just manage to drag out a normal existence even if you never found out. Wow-”

The ball went sailing into the right field stands and that was that for the pitcher.

Lillian went back to the venetian blinds and said, “I'll simply just have to make her acquaintance. She looks very nice. -Oh, Lord, look at that, George.”

George was looking at nothing but the TV.

Lillian said, “I know she's staring at that cloud. And now she'll be going in. Honestly.”

George was out two days later on a reference search in the library and came home with a load of books. Lillian greeted him jubilantly.

She said, “Now, you're not doing anything tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a statement, not a question.”

“It is a statement. We're going out With the Sakkaros to Murphy's Park.

“With-”

“With the next-door neighbors, George. Haw can you never remember the name?”

“I'm gifted. How did it happen?”

“I just went up to their house this morning and rang the bell.”

“That easy?”

“It wasn't easy. It was hard. I stood there, jittering, with my finger on the doorbell, till I thought that ringing the bell would be easier than having the door open and being caught standing there like a fool.”

“And she didn't kick you out?”

“No. She was sweet as she could be. Invited me in, knew who I was, said she was so glad I had come to visit. Yau know.”

“And you suggested we go to Murphy's Park.”

“Yes. I thought if I suggested something that would let the children have fun, it would be easier for her to goalong with it. She wouldn't want to spoil a chance for her boy.”

“A mother's psychology.”

“But you should see her home.”

“Ah. You had a reason for all this. It comes out. You wanted the Cook's tour. But, please, spare me the color scheme details. I'm not interested in the bedspreads, and the size of the closets is a topic with which I can dispense.”

It was the secret of their happy marriage that Lillian paid no attention to George. She went into the color scheme details, was most meticulous about the bedspreads, and gave him an inch-by-inch description of closet-size.

“And clean? I have never seen any place so spotless.”

“If you get to know her, then, she'll be setting you impossible standards and you'll have to drop her in self-defense.”

“Her kitchen,” said Lillian, ignoring him, “was so spanking clean you just couldn't believe she ever used it. I asked for a drink of water and she held the glass underneath the tap and poured slowly so that not one drop fell in the sink itself. It wasn't affectation. She did it so casually that I just knew she always did it that way. And when she gave me the glass she held it with a clean napkin. Just hospital-sanitary.”

“She must be a lot of trouble to herself. Did she agree to come with us right off?”

“Well-not right off. She called to her husband about what the weather forecast was, and he said that the newspapers all said it would be fair tomorrow but that he was waiting for the latest report on the radio.”

“All the newspapers said so, eh?”

“Of course, they all just print the official weather forecast, so they would all agree. But I think they do subscribe to all the newspapers. At least I’ve watched the bundle the newsboy leaves-”

“There isn't much you miss, is there?”

“Anyway,” said Lillian severely, “she called up the weather bureau and had them tell her the latest and she called it out to her husband and they said they'd go, except they said they'd phone us if there were any unexpected changes in the weather.”

“All right. Then we'll go.”

The Sakkaros were young and pleasant, dark and handsome. In fact, as they came down the long walk from their home to where the Wright automobile was parked, George leaned toward his wife and breathed into her ear, “So he's the reason.”

“I wish he were,” said Lillian. “Is that a handbag he's carrying?”

“Pocket-radio. To listen to weather forecasts, I bet.” The Sakkaro boy came running after them, waving, something which turned out to be an aneroid barometer, and all three got into the back seat. Conversation was turned on and lasted, with neat give-and-take on impersonal subjects, to Murphy's Park.

The Sakkaro boy was so polite and reasonable that even Tommie Wright, wedged between his parents in the front seat, was subdued by example into a semblance of civilization. Lillian couldn't recall when she had spent so serenely pleasant a drive.

She was not the least disturbed by the fact that, barely to be heard under the flow of the conversation, Mr. Sakkaro's small radio was on, and she never actually saw him put it occasionally to his ear.

It was a beautiful day at Murphy's Park; hot and dry without being too hot; and with a cheerfully bright sun in a blue, blue sky. Even Mr. Sakkaro, though he inspected every quarter of the heavens with a careful eye and then stared piercingly at the barometer, seemed to have no fault to find. I

Lillian ushered the two boys to the amusement section and bought enough tickets to allow one ride for each on every variety of centrifugal thrill that the park offered.

“Please,” she had said to a protesting Mrs. Sakkaro, “let this be my treat. I'll let you have your turn next I time.”

When she returned, George was alone. “Where-” she began.

“Just down there at the refreshment stand. I told themI'd wait here for you and we would join them.” He sounded gloomy.

“Anything wrong?”

“No, not really, except that I think he must be independently wealthy.”

“What?”

“I don't know what he does for a living. I hinted-”

“Now who's curious?”

“I was doing it for you. He said he's just a student of human nature.”

“How philosophical. That would explain all those newspapers.”

“Yes, but with a handsome, wealthy man next door, it looks as though I'll have impossible standards set for me, too.”

“Don't be silly.”

“And he doesn't come from Arizona.”

“He doesn't?”

“I said I heard he was from Arizona. He looked so surprised, it was obvious he didn't. Then he laughed and asked if he had an Arizona accent.”

Lillian said thoughtfully, “He has some kind of accent, you know. There are lots of Spanish-ancestry people in the Southwest, so he could still be from Arizona. Sakkaro could be a Spanish name.”

“Sounds Japanese to me. -Come on, they're waving. Oh, good Lord, look what they've bought.”

The Sakkaros were each holding three sticks of cotton candy, huge swirls of pink foam consisting of threads of sugar dried out of frothy syrup that had been whipped about in a warm vessel. It melted sweetly in the mouth and left one feeling sticky.

The Sakkaros held one out to each Wright, and out of politeness the Wrights accepted.

They went down the midway, tried their hand at darts, at the kind of poker game where balls were rolled into holes, at knocking wooden cylinders off pedestals. They took pictures of themselves and recorded their voices and tested the strength of their handgrips.

Eventually they collected the youngsters, who had been reduced to a satisfactorily breathless state of roiled-up insides, and the Sakkaros ushered theirs off instantly to the refreshment stand. Tommie hinted the extent of his pleasure at the possible purchase of a hot-dog and George tossed him a quarter. He ran off, too.

“Frankly,” said George, “I prefer to stay here. If I see them biting away at another

cotton candy stick I'll turn green and sicken on the spot. If they haven't had a dozen apiece, I'll eat a dozen myself.”

“I know, and they're buying a handful for the child now.”

“I offered to stand Sakkaro a hamburger and he just looked grim and shook his head. Not that a hamburger's much, but after enough cotton candy, it ought to be a feast.”

“I know. I offered her an orange drink and the way she jumped when she said no, you'd think I'd thrown it in her face. -Still, I suppose they've never been to a place like this before and they'll need time to adjust to the novelty. They'll fill up on cotton candy and then never eat it again for ten years.”

“Well, maybe.” They strolled toward the Sakkaros. “You know, Lil, it's clouding up.”

Mr. Sakkaro had the radio to his ear and was looking anxiously toward the west.

“Uh-oh,” said George, “he's seen it. One gets you fifty, he'll want to go home.”

All three Sakkaros were upon him, polite but insistent. They were sorry, they had had a wonderful time, a marvelous time, the Wrights would have to be their guests as soon as it could be managed, but now, really, they had to go home. It looked stormy. Mrs. Sakkaro wailed that all the forecasts had been for fair weather.

George tried to console them. “It's hard to predict a local thunderstorm, but even if it were to come, and it mightn't, it wouldn't last more than half an hour on the outside.”

At which comment, the Sakkaro youngster seemed on the verge of tears, and Mrs. Sakkaro's hand, holding a handkerchief, trembled visibly.

“Let's go home,” said George in resignation.

The drive back seemed to stretch interminably. There was no conversation to speak of. Mr. Sakkaro's radio was quite loud now as he switched from station to station, catching a weather report every time. They were mentioning “local thundershowers” now.

The Sakkaro youngster piped up that the barometer was falling, and Mrs. Sakkaro, chin in the palm of her hand, stared dolefully at the sky and asked if George could not drive faster, please.

“It does look rather threatening, doesn't it?” said Lillian in a polite attempt to share their guests' attitude. But then George heard her mutter, “Honestly!” under her breath.

A wind had sprung up, driving the dust of the weeks-dry road before it, when they entered the street on which they lived, and the leaves rustled ominously. Lightning flickered.

George said, “You'll be indoors in two minutes, friends. We'll make it.”

He pulled up at the gate that opened onto the Sakkaro's spacious front yard and got out of the car to open the back door. He thought he felt a drop. They were just in time.

The Sakkaros tumbled out, faces drawn with tension, muttering thanks, and started off toward their long front walk at a dead run.

“Honestly,” began Lillian, “you would think they were-”

The heavens opened and the rain came down in giant drops as though some celestial dam had suddenly burst. The top of their car was pounded with a hundred drum sticks, and halfway to their front door the Sakkaros stopped and looked despairingly upward.

Their faces blurred as the rain hit; blurred and shrank and ran together. All three shriveled, collapsing within their clothes, which sank down into three sticky-wet heaps.

And while the Wrights sat there, transfixed with horror, Lillian found herself unable to stop the completion of her remark: “-made of sugar and afraid they would melt. “