



Where The Rain Belongs

POE BALLANTINE

For Cristina Dorado Hughes

After three nights at the Broadway Motel out on the highway (\$12.95 a night, color tv), seven nights in a forty-dollar-a-week First Street flophouse with free running roaches and dying winos, and two rumped and freezing nights listening to the rain clatter against the roof of my car, I took to the streets of Eureka, California, on foot in search of an apartment and a job. I had just quit the drinking-and-drugging life cold and was starting over, one more time. I

had in my possession a world globe, a sleeping bag, a box of clothes, a battered and thumb-worn 1969 American Heritage Dictionary, a brand-new copy of *Writer's Market*, an IBM Selectric typewriter, and the unfinished manuscript of my second novel, which I knew would be scooped up by a publisher the minute I finished it, unlike the first.

Since the bottoms had dropped out of the fishing and lumber industries in the early eighties, the only people who came to Eureka were oil and acrylic painters from LA, slender and wasted young homosexual men who had migrated north from San Francisco to die quietly and inexpensively of AIDS; a few woolly, misanthropic forestry students who attended Humboldt State University in Arcata six miles north; and a handful of fog-dwellers like me, who, whether they had a dream about art or painted by numbers in the sewing room at twilight, had chosen to live here because it was cheap.

It rains a great deal in Eureka. (This is a rain forest, after all.) The coastal redwoods create their own drizzly, prehistoric microclimate, sipping the fog from the sea as if it were a root-beer float. The sun rarely shows. The pulp mill out on Samoa Peninsula chugs out its fetid orange efflux twenty-four hours a day. Eureka seemed to have more than its share of blighted neighborhoods. In my campaign for a room, I hit some striking Third World pockets, with lawns like Mesozoic tar pits and toothless drifters asking *me* for money and mud-splattered porches crowded with soggy naugahyde couches and busted Sears barbecues. At one house, a squat gothic relic that hadn't been painted since 1910, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of nine answered the door at high noon in a bathrobe. I showed her the newspaper ad. "Do I have the right address?" I said.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Come in. Sorry I'm not dressed." She didn't seem sorry not to be dressed. The house smelled of hay and soiled diapers and World War I breakfast grease. The children gathered around, droopy-drawered and drippy-nosed, imploring me with their eyes to become their father.

The mother of nine, a blue-eyed baby on her shoulder, showed me the rental room on the first floor: a bedroom with three chests of drawers and a bed into which a circus elephant had been dropped from the rafters. The curtains hung twisted in the stale air like nicotine-stained ghosts. The ceiling launched itself high into the lumber-tycoon darkness.

"Is there a kitchen?" I asked.

"It's through there."

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Upstairs."

"How many bathrooms are there?"

"Only one."

"For how many people?"

"Twelve — but it's never a problem," she added hastily. The toilet flushed, as if to underscore her remark. "Do you want to see the kitchen?"

The children all stared up at me expectantly, their eyes beseeching me to park my carriage, roll up my sleeves, and

roast them a big goose with sloe fruit and farkleberries and saskatoons.

"I'm going to have a look at a few more places," I said.

After a week of such forays, growing weary of living in my car, I finally stumbled upon an orange-and-green gingerbread Victorian, shiny-shingled, one spindle turret leaning in the mist: APT FOR RENT read the sign in the curved bay window. I walked up the steps and through the door into the vestibule to knock on the door of Number 1, which had the letters MGR scrawled in felt pen under the broken buzzer. A pregnant woman in her twenties answered. She seemed surprised to see me.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"Is the apartment still available?"

"Is it for you?" she said.

An angry-looking little man glared at me from the couch.

"Yes, it's for me."

"Then yes," she said, continuing to stare at me. A Heart record played in the background. "You know who you look like?" she said.

"Who?"

"Clark Kent."

The angry little man, whose name turned out to be Del, sprang from the couch and swaggered across the room, his muscular arms bowed so wide you could have shot arrows from his sides. "I'll show him the apartment," he said.

The apartment was ancient, unfurnished, high-ceilinged, and cold, with a huge bay window that looked out onto the street. I liked the big kitchen. I also enjoyed the absence of vermin and no fruity smell of death. The promise of my own bathroom, even if the lion-footed bathtub was barely large enough to drown a moth in, excited me.

"You can park around the side here," said Del, showing me through the kitchen door onto a porch above a muddy yard. "Be careful of that dog," he said, pointing to a Siberian husky chained to the house. It sat calmly in the grass, staring at us through icy blue eyes. "He's a killer."

"What's his name?"

"Czar."

"He's a good-looking dog," I said.

"Meaner than a snake," Del said.

"Who's he belong to?"

Del jabbed a thumb into his sternum. "Me."

After I'd paid Del the dog lover \$185 for a month's rent in advance and a \$125 deposit, he told me about the junkies on welfare who lived upstairs. "I'd kick 'em out if this was my place," he said. "But her old man owns it." He gave a jerk of the head that I took to indicate his pregnant wife. "They give you any trouble, you let me know."

I now had thirty-eight dollars to my name, and I had to save five dollars for gas. I went to the store and bought groceries. I didn't have enough to buy cheese. But I was sober now, and a nonsmoker, so I could live on very little. I worked for a while on my novel, a scathing social critique that veered off inexplicably into science fiction. Everything I wrote in

those days veered off inexplicably into science fiction.

Later that afternoon, I sat out on my kitchen porch for a while in the mist, and the dog and I stared at each other. Two children played nearby with a ball, which got away from them and rolled into the killer's territory. He eyed it, uninterested: the classic killer pose. The children stared at it, too, arms hanging dejectedly at their sides. There were four more such balls molding in his domain, like gold coins in the lair of a slobbering troll. The kids turned their gaze to me.

"Don't look at me," I said. "I'm new here. I don't even know where the hospital is."

The only source of heat in the building was a senile dwarf in the basement who rubbed two files together whenever the wind blew down from Nome, Alaska. Though it was spring, the weather was freezing. Eureka is never a warm place, having maybe two days in the summer with temperatures above seventy-five. I slept on the floor in my sleeping bag and periodically awoke with a start when something crashed or tumbled across my ceiling. The junkies upstairs lived on Peter Pan time. Long, oceanic lulls in the clamor were followed by squabbling, followed by the sound of spoons clattering across the floor, followed by the stereo blasting (no matter what time of night it was), followed by another long lull, then a sudden roaring burst of the theme song from *I Dream of Jeannie*. Occasionally, I heard a child howl or cry as if struck. Visitors clomped up and down the stairs at all hours, staying just long enough to say hello or exchange some small item, perhaps a baseball card or a slice of homemade German chocolate cake.

I looked for a job, but there simply were none in Eureka. Finally I broke down and answered an ad that had been running in the newspaper since I'd arrived. It was for a cook in Arcata, the little hippie college town six miles north. The four owners of this restaurant had all been mistreated as cooks and waitresses in another restaurant, so they'd pooled their money to open a restaurant of their own, complete with an unmanageably large menu. They tried hard to be hip and agreeable, but I could see that the fourteen-hour days, ignorant help, thieving waitresses, wily and overcharging purveyors, 242 items that had to be prepped fresh daily, number-ten cans of tomatoes mysteriously exploding in the pantry, and cooks who didn't show up were wearing them down. Soon they would have to make certain concessions to competitive business reality and become more like the owners of the restaurant they had left behind — either that or flee into the hills and live in tepees.

They seemed happy to see me, probably because I wasn't fresh out of jail. (How many responsible, competent, experienced cooks come walking in the door ready to work for minimum wage?) I told them I could cook only part time because I was working on my novel, which I was convinced would be a commercial success the second I finished it. "Cool," said the kitchen manager, a nonviolent macrobiotic eater who dressed like a medieval peasant. He gripped my hand in a firm Grateful Dead handshake. "You start tomorrow."

In my second week of living in the green-and-orange gingerbread Victorian, a pot of pinto beans simmering aromatically on the stove, I heard a kid bang through the vestibule door and shout on his way up the stairs: "Are you *cooking* something, Mom?" A moment later, he was back downstairs, knocking on my door.

I opened it to find a small, thin, wide-eyed boy with big pink ears sticking out from the bald sidewalls of his punk-rock haircut. He wore grass-stained orange bell-bottoms, an oversized blue polo shirt, and black mud-encrusted Goodwill oxfords. He looked to be about eight years old and had a cast on his arm with a happy face painted on it. "Are you the new neighbors?" he said.

"Yes, I am."

"The people who lived here before got kicked out."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah." He arched his eyebrows at me. "They didn't pay no rent."

"I usually pay my rent."

"What's your name?" he demanded.

I told him.

"I'm Henry," he said in a tuneful little voice, extending his good hand. "I live upstairs."

I shook his hand, which was soft and small as a mouse. "How'd you break your arm?" I asked him.

"Fell off my bike."

"How long you have to wear the cast?"

"Eight more weeks."

"Itch?"

"Oh, yeah. I scratch down there with a hanger sometimes. Do you cook?"

"Yes, I do."

"It smells good. What is it?"

"Beans," I said. I considered inviting him in, then thought better of it.

"Where'd you learn how to cook?" Henry asked.

"Just picked it up along the way."

"My mom don't cook," he said dolefully.

"What about your dad?"

"My dad's dead."

"Who's that up there with your mom?"

"That's her boyfriend, Terrance." He pronounced the name with a snarl.

I nodded, feeling vaguely depressed. Henry pressed his lips together. "I gotta go," he said, whirling and banging back out the vestibule door.

(end of excerpt)