

Second Place
Middle School

Like Summer Rain

by Sarah Kopacz

The music from my iPod reverberates through my head with every step I take and my ponytail swishes against my back. I love running—so exhilarating! The wind rushes into my face while my pink sneakers slap the road. I slow my pace and, breathing hard, walk up the sidewalk to our house. Our Christmas lights are still up from last December. It is October. That’s how slowly things happen in our family. Most everything is on hold “for the time being,” according to my dad.

I gulp down a huge glass of water and hurry into the shower to soothe my tight muscles. Normally, I am very particular about my routine in the shower, but today I wash my hair furiously. There’s no telling how much time we have before we leave for the hospital to see James. Even though it’s a school day, we are still going to visit. Thankfully, my mom cleared it with my teachers that I won’t be at school today, and a friend will pick up my homework for me. Scenes flash through my mind ...James smiling broadly as he receives various awards, picking me up and placing me on his shoulders to run around the football field at half time, encouraging me to climb “just one branch higher,” letting me put my pink hairclips in his hair, dancing with me to Beatles’ songs, teaching me how to catch and throw a football, blowing kisses back and forth to each other, and even playing dolls with me. I remember dancing outside of our Seattle home, turning our faces upwards to catch drops of the warm summer rain on our tongues, without a care in the world. I wish I could feel that free again.

In the heat of a state championship football game last November, James collapsed and was rushed off to the emergency room. He returned home that night and seemed to recover. He tried to behave like his normal, strong self, but soon his football coach told him to take a break from football. James was too weak to make it through the practices, much less the games. I used to love watching him play football; he was so happy. He said it made him feel like Superman—able to do anything. Because he couldn’t play football, James and I started getting up early in the mornings to run so that he wouldn’t get out of shape. We ran all winter without a problem, but as soon as spring peeked around the corner, it became harder for James to run for more than a few minutes at a time. A few weeks later, during one of our runs, he collapsed onto the rain-drizzled sidewalk near our favorite climbing tree, several blocks from our house. He stayed in the hospital for a few nights. The third morning, my parents received a call to come to the hospital immediately. My mom and dad figured James was desperate to return home so they dressed up nicely and left to pick him up. I stayed behind because I had homework to finish. Several hours later, they stumbled through the

door without James, pale with red-rimmed eyes, to tell me the bad news. Near the end of his junior year of high school, my only brother was diagnosed with Leukemia. The prognosis looked bleak. At the time, I didn't understand—I still don't. Now, a year later, he is still fighting.

“Lexy!” My mom’s loud voice shocks me back to reality. Grudgingly, I shut off the delightfully steamy shower. In less than five minutes, I am dressed in comfy jeans, a tank top, and a sweatshirt. I shove my feet into my sneakers and pile my hair into a messy bun while I fly out the door and into the car. I dig into my pocket and, thankfully, find a twenty-dollar bill. It will come in handy if James wants something to eat something other than bland hospital food. I would too if I were him. The car ride to the hospital takes exactly seventeen minutes; I have memorized every tree along the way. The rush I had during my morning run has melted away; I rest my head on the seat and close my eyes. My mother’s voice drones on and on—I wish I could have some of that energy she overflows with. She monologues about her work at the office, the boring tan color she wants to paint the foyer, and the cable knit sweater she plans on buying at Kohl’s. I mutter under my breath, “Like we would have enough money to buy anything from anyplace but the Salvation Army.” We haven’t been able to go on a single vacation since this whole thing started, not even a day at the beach. Then again, it’s not like James wanted this, so I shouldn’t complain.

“What was that?” my mom asks. Apparently, I wasn’t as quiet as I thought. She turns around in her seat and raises one incredulous eyebrow at me. I just mastered that family trait last month.

“Nothing,” I mumble. We pull into the hospital parking lot and my mom rushes out of the car and walks briskly into the rotating doorway, her layered brown hair fluttering in the wind. My out-of-shape Dad and I hurry to catch up. The door explodes with a blast of heat; I’m sure people keep hospitals warm just for the old and sick people, but I’m thankful anyway. Last month, it still felt like fall, but now with the biting wind, it feels more like winter. My parents almost run to James’ room but I slow down to buy a hot coffee from the Starbucks near the entrance. Even though I’m hoping the coffee will wake me up, I flop down in my favorite chair in the lobby and relax. This is our normal routine. If I give my parents time alone with James, they give me time with him later. I pick up a glossy edition of People magazine and casually flip through it. Photos of smiling celebrities mock me. Life just isn’t like that. If it was, I wouldn’t be sitting in a hospital right now reading last month’s gossip about these perfect plastic people! “Get a life girl!” I tell myself. But I can’t. I have to be there for James. Who knows how much time we’ll have left with him? What if he actually dies? What am I going to do then?

Isabella’s high voice shatters my thoughts. “You’re here again? Aw. . .” she says with a condescending look. Isabella Mancini, a senior in my high school, is pretty, popular, and very proud. She is in the Virginia Mason Medical Center here in Seattle for an eating disorder and walks around the hospital daily eating frozen cherries—one of the few foods she will let touch her lips.

I know all too well that she thinks James is going to die. I jump out of my chair and try to give her some of her own signature attitude, but I'm afraid I look ridiculous standing here sticking out my hip. "He'll get through it, Isabella. James is stronger than anyone I know. You just watch and see. Why do you keep coming around here anyway if you just want to shatter my confidence?" I ask, raising that one eyebrow, hoping it affects her the way it does me when Mom does it.

Isabella studies the Styrofoam cup in her hand, avoiding my question. She pops a frozen cherry in her mouth and takes her sweet time chewing it. How does she look so perfect all the time? At 8:30 in the morning she has on makeup, her dark glossy hair is curled, and she wears a pink sweater and probably the smallest size designer jeans ever made. That's amazing—practically impossible by my standards. She's still too thin, like she could blow away in the wind, but sometimes I wish I could look like her. Suddenly, the first few bars of "Just Dance" by Lady Gaga fill the air. Isabella glances at her phone then answers it with a flirtatious, "Hello?" just as if she were hanging out at the mall, even though everyone knows she's here at the Medical Center.

I roll my eyes and slump past her to throw away my empty coffee cup in one of the huge brown trash cans. Then I wander the halls to kill time and finally make it to room 83. My parents stand to leave as I peek around the corner of the door. On her way out, Mom gives me a quick hug. I notice that some of her energy seems to have dissolved—is he worse? Oh, James looks awful. His eyes are closed and his head rests lightly on the crisp, white pillows. At first, the only noise in the room is his erratic, labored breathing. Then, under the sheet, his hand clicks a pen open and shut about ten times. He knows that this annoys me. His bright green eyes open and his pale lips stretch into a mischievous smile. A split second later, my brother sits up Indian-style, throwing off the sheets, revealing old navy blue and white sweatpants under his hospital gown. I sit next to him. When he tilts his head towards me, I stroke it with my fingertips; his half an inch of hair feels as soft as a chick.

"Hey, how are you, Baldy?"

He lifts his thin hand and rubs my head, too, messing up my hair, "I'm better, can't you tell?"

"Not really," I reply dryly.

"My apologies, Your Highness," he sasses me with a bow of his head. Even though his health has diminished, his attitude and sense of humor have not.

We talk about movies we've seen recently until he jumps up and pulls on my hand. "Come on; let's go somewhere. I'm going to *die* if I don't get out of here."

I stare at him, "That's not funny."

"Yes, it is. You know it is," he retorts, laughing and coughing. He throws his hospital gown on the bed and pulls on a faded burnt orange t-shirt. I lead the way to the vending machine and spend my twenty-dollar bill on Sour Patch Kids, Coke, and lots of chocolate—James's favorite. People give it to him all the time, but the nurses confiscate it. I can just picture them saying in a

superior tone, “He is in no condition to be filling his body with junk food. He needs nutrients, not empty calories.” We lounge together in the lobby’s overstuffed loveseat and talk about school, who dumped who, who asked who out, running, and all the latest gossip from West Seattle High. I don’t have to act tough or cool with James; I’m just me and that’s enough. James devours two chocolate bars and opens a Coke. As he brings the cold metal can to his lips, he grows suddenly serious and looks at me. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

“I’ll be fine. Stop worrying about me; Mom and Dad do that enough without your help.”

“They’re parents,” I say. “That’s just what they do. If I don’t worry about you then who will—besides them, I mean?”

“But you don’t need to because—”

“Yes, I do,” I interrupt, getting louder.

“Hey, hey, calm down,” he consoles me. “Remember what I told you? I know where I’m going and I’m not afraid.” A few months ago, James agreed to go to a youth retreat with a good friend and returned all transformed. He has become a Jesus freak and tries to convert our parents and me.

“Yes, I remember, but I don’t think I’m on board with that, James. I mean, how can a loving God put people on earth only to get sick and die? I just don’t get it. If God’s real, He’s cruel. Or at least it seems like He doesn’t care.”

James only says, “He’s there, really. And He does care. In fact, He loves you; so do I. I’ll always be watching you from heaven, Lexy. I’ll love you forever. Oh, and I’ve got something for you back in my room,” he says with a faint smile on his lips, “something you can remember me by.” He puts his arm around me and then tears well up in my eyes. I brush them away so he doesn’t see, but it’s no use; he does and he hugs me again. I start sobbing. Close in my ear, I hear him start to sing; his voice deep and rich—like chocolate. My sobs subside as I listen to the words. He’s singing something called “Grace Like Rain,” his favorite song lately. Great, this is just what I need . . . a religious hymn. I lift my head from his shoulder and give him a look that says, “Seriously?” His voice falters, but then he laughs. In a strong, steady voice, James sings song after strangely comforting song; I wonder if people are watching us, but close my eyes and listen.

Eventually, I wake to James quietly laughing for some unknown reason. What’s there to laugh about? Was I snoring? I probably look like a mess. How long have I slept? James looks at me, still amused. “It’s only been—,” he glances at his watch quickly “—an hour.”

How does he do that? Either he can read my mind or I am not very good at hiding my thoughts. Anyway, I stand up and stretch. We walk to his room in silence. There isn’t anything more to say.

Room 83 is unusually busy. Nurses run around frantically while my parents anxiously watch the door for us. Amala, James’ favorite nurse, exclaims, “Ah, there you are! You were gone too

long—we have more tests for you!” She turns to my parents and smiles, asking, “You want to stay or are you leaving?” We head toward the door, but James calls me back. He presses a small Bible into my hands. He doesn’t say anything but opens the cover to show me an envelope with my name written on it—I’ll look at it later. For now, none of us want to stay and watch my brother getting stuck again by needles. My mother normally stays to be with James, but right now, she’s not up to it. We go to Wendy’s instead.

Surprisingly, I can make it to my last three classes of the day when we get back. Sam, my best friend since kindergarten, waits for me inside the door of our history class. “How was it?” she asks, concern in her deep brown eyes. “It was okay, I mean-,” the bell buzzes and it startles me. Sam laughs. I guess I am a little jumpy today. Ms. Crane strides into the room, her high heels clicking on the hard, cold floor. “Okay, settle down, settle down. There’s nothing like a bunch of energy-packed teenagers, is there? Oh-” she pauses and stares at me. “How’s your brother, Lexy? I thought you weren’t coming to school today.”

My throat feels sandy but I manage to croak out a measly response, “He’s okay.” Wow, pathetic. Sometimes I despise myself! Why am I so quiet? I replay that scene in my mind all day until I have to ride the disgusting, noisy bus home. Kids yell, music blares, and my head pounds. I want to sleep.

Twenty minutes later I am wearing sweatpants, lounging on my bed, and worrying instead of sleeping. Unable to rest, I drag my lazy butt down the stairs to check my email. I sort out school emails and put them in a folder for later. I browse through the news. Great stuff out there; mass murders, shark attacks, and floods. What is the world coming to? I pull up Sam’s blog and look at some new pictures she’s found on the internet. A huge emerald tree bursts from the dry brown ground of an impossible photo. A little boy in the tree reaches for the next branch. He’ll never reach it. He’s stuck there on my computer screen forever. I want to help him get to the top of the tree. I can’t. I can’t cross the bridge from reality to a picture. It’s not possible. I take a deep breath and scroll down. The next photograph is of a girl completely dressed in black, sitting on the concrete floor of a shadowy room, her arms wrapped around her legs. She looks so lonely. Her eyeliner-rimmed eyes stare blankly at her pale bare feet. I feel like her. She looks desperate for someone to hold her. I imagine myself in her place. Okay, moving on—I refuse to go all soft and mushy. The next picture is of a little girl wearing a frilly lace dress, smiling at the soft chick in her cupped hands. I used to be that little. I feel as if I am a hundred years old instead of fourteen; I don’t always go to school, I almost never hang around with friends, and I will have NO interesting extracurricular activities to put on my college applications. It’s because of James, but I don’t blame him. I mean he can’t help it; it’s not as if he chose to get Leukemia! Why couldn’t I get it instead of him? He is the outgoing one; everybody knows him. I’m the quiet one that nobody would miss. Why am I thinking like this now? I wander upstairs, bury myself in blankets, and listen to the soothing sound of rain on our roof as I drift off to sleep.

Months fly by in a blur of tests, hospital visits, and general chaos. I feel as if I'm not really living anymore. Maybe this is why James told me to stop worrying about him. Maybe I'll try. So, after some serious consideration, I do. I try to get out more and put a lot more effort into my appearance. For the first time in my life, my mom loves going shopping with me because I will actually look for new clothes. I try to make more friends, friends who don't know James, and I'm earning A's and B's in all my classes. I feel more alive, but muted at the same time—like I'm wearing a mask over my emotions. I think about those cheesy shirts that say “life is good,” the ones with pictures of smiling stick figures camping or playing soccer. How can life always be good? Especially when it's not.

There's only about a month of school left, and James is going to have a bone marrow transplant. He isn't nervous, but I am. The doctors assure us everything will be fine, but what if his body rejects the transplant? As sick as he is, any procedure is risky.

Two weeks later, we all hug James one more time before he goes into surgery. He hugs me last and whispers, “Remember, I'll love you forever.” I whisper those same words back to him and try to keep from crying. Once they wheel him through the double doors, I run to the ladies room and bawl. My mind spins from the possibility that the transplant might not be enough. I wipe my eyes with a tissue and decide that no matter what happens, I will be strong for James.

Five long days later, I methodically shower and dress in black. Silently, we drive to a deceptively welcoming building, and heavily walk to the doors.

Death is a cruel word. Sharp and bitter, it leaves no room for anything else. Numb, I sit next to Sam at my brother's funeral service. My parents are crying, Sam is crying, even Isabella is crying. I won't. I cried as I held James' hand while he breathed his last breath, but not since then. I can't. I promised myself I would be strong once he was gone.

Gone. James will never dance with me again. We won't climb any more trees, or eat another chocolate bar. His last words echo in my head: “I'll love you forever . . .” I'll never hear those words again.

After the service, I try not to talk to anyone. Despite my best efforts, Isabella finds me. Her eyes are red and she seems genuinely sorry. She hugs me and starts apologizing for being so condescending, telling me that she really loved my brother. I look at her, startled. I knew they dated for a few weeks last year, but when he became a Christian, she dumped him. I can't believe this girl; now that James is dead, she starts coming around. I don't say a word.

Days pass by and morph into weeks. My grades are slipping, and my mother suspects I'm depressed. Who wouldn't be in my situation? After school one day, I sit in my room and stare at the wall. After a minute, I can't stand it—the silence screams in my ears! I used to find the quiet comforting, but now I want to do something instead of moping around. I stand up and run a hand through my bedraggled hair. My room is such a mess! First, I turn on my stereo and turn up the volume as loud as I can stand. Next, I sort out junk into trash bags, fold clothes, and vacuum until I

am satisfied. Curious, I look under my bed. I pull out gum wrappers, various English papers, and a small black book. I turn it over. It's the Bible James gave me. Now I remember—there's a letter in there that I was supposed to read! Hurriedly, I pull it out the envelope and open it. A Bible verse is written at the top: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Well, I am not so sure about that. I read on. "Dear Lexy, First of all, I want you to know something and I don't ever want you to forget it. No matter what, I'll love you forever." I can't read anymore; it feels like my heart is breaking all over again. For the first time in weeks, I start to cry. My tears drop onto the paper clutched in my hand and smear the beautiful words. My brother is gone. How can someone who's dead love me forever? Tears turn into sobs and when they subside, something feels different. Suddenly, I can picture James close by, like he's in the next room. And you know what? I can believe that he still loves me, wherever he is; I can feel it. Tears roll down my face and into my hands, warm like summer rain.

