

**3rd Place
Middle School**

**Raindrops
By Dani Smotrich-Barr**

A Y A N A

I used to dream of rain. It would look like it smells, of hope and promises, it would look like it tastes, wet and refreshing, it would look like it sounds, calm and pattering. And I would press it against my cheek and it would be beautiful.

I don't think about the color of rain anymore, don't care what it looks like. Instead, I think about my father and I wonder what he looked like.

Today is Katarina's birthday. I have bought her a book and wrote her a card. Mom and her are getting to read Braille pretty well, but I use regular letters anyway.

Deer KatarinA,

You are an amazing sister. I love you veR y much and hope that you have the best 16^h biRthday you cood posseibly have.

Love,

Ayana

Writing has always been hard for me, but I am taking a class on it and now can write a pretty reasonable letter. Miss Tina, the teacher, takes my hand and puts a pen in it and gently guides it over paper to write the letters. Of course I can't read what I wrote, so I write all my school essays and assignments using special computer software that can write in Braille. Mom bought it for the home computer, too.

K A T A R I N A

Yesterday was the best birthday ever! Mom took us out to dinner and Ayana wrote me a card herself. I'm really happy for her that she's learning to write, but it makes me feel kind of stupid that she can write in Braille and normal letters and I can hardly write in normal letters, as my English teacher revels in writing on all of my essays. Oh, well. She always was the more poetic one.

This morning, Ayana was acting kind of weird. I made pancakes and slathered hers with raspberry jam, how she likes it. But as soon as I handed the plate to her, she asked what it was. I told her it was pancakes with raspberry jam. She handed the plate right back to me and ran up to her room in tears. It took me a few minutes to remember that raspberry jam was dad's favorite.

I worry about Ayana sometimes. I think she thinks I blame her for the accident. I think she blames herself sometimes. She used to let me throw her into my arms and call her Aya. Now she hardly speaks at all.

I tell her that it was raining. It was slippery. He would have crashed even if she hadn't called out to him. But I know what she is thinking. It wouldn't have happened if she could see.

A Y A N A

So today at school, Miss Hanna told me that I had exceeded my group level and would be moved up to the next class. This may sound strange, but at Nova Academy, nothing is strange. You see, there aren't any grades at our school, just groups based on maturity and academic level. My old class had me and four other kids, one of whom was almost sixteen years old but tended to be as hyper as a puppy. As you can imagine, our class was beyond chaotic.

I was happy to be moved up to the next class until I found out that there was only one other kid in it, a 15-year old kid named Harry. He has severe epilepsy, so he can't walk or talk or anything and he has a lot of seizures. I might as well have been invisible. The teacher tried her hardest to help me with my writing, but it was really hard to concentrate while he was babbling across the room. At one point, I asked the teacher what all the noises were about, and she responded that I was lucky not to be seeing the poor kid's seizures. I bet he was drooling too. I know that he probably has a brain as sensible as mine and it's all just physical, but it's hard to feel at home with him.

K A T A R I N A

There's one word in our house that is forbidden. It's not idiot, it's not stupid, it's not even a cuss word. It's retard. Mom has drilled into our brains since we were little that this word was used to describe someone who was developmentally challenged. She said that kids today use "retard" as an insult, so it WILL NOT BE SAID IN OUR HOUSE. When I was really little, I used to whisper it to the mirror, wondering what was so bad with it. When Ayana was born, I stopped saying it. The rule in our house was ten cents for any old name-calling, grounded for THE WORD. But that wasn't what made me avoid

the word. Nor was it Mom's angry look that could make a drooling vampire start crying. No, it was that Ayana heard THE WORD enough already. When they saw her leaning on me just to walk down the street. When they saw her feeling in front of her to avoid trees. Nobody said it to her face, just mumbled it to their friends, sometimes even mouthed it so she wouldn't see them.

I ask her if she still gets teased and she says. NO KATARINA, as if she is insulted that I could even think up such a notion. But I see it anyway, the way people stare at her when she wears her NOVA ACADEMY shirt, the way some days she comes home crying, the way she never uses her cane anymore.

A Y A N A

School is coming along fine in terms of my writing, but poor Harry is still having seizures, and constantly. Today he came to school in his blue NOVA ACADEMY shirt. Scrawled above it were the words *I go to* and below it were the words *because I'm a retard*. Miss Rhianna, my teacher, told me to go to the office and ask for a change of clothes for Harry. She knows that I am quite capable of finding my way down the school hallways. In addition to the fact that I have been going to Nova for six years, the hallways are covered with big footprints that rise above the floor and lead the way around the school so that blind students can get around. It makes me feel handicapped, but it does help.

When I got to the office, all they had was a giant sweater which some kid had lost. It had a grape juice stain on it, Miss Rhianna told me later as she discarded it and instead put Harry's sweatshirt on him and zipped it up so it would cover his shirt. I have never cared much about my appearance, but I am careful to wear a clean T-shirt and jeans every day. My mom has long given up on taking me shopping and instead orders all my clothing online. It's kind of weird, sometimes Katarina will tell me about this cute new dress she got and I'll ask her what it looks like. She'll say it's light purple and I wonder, what's it like to be in a world full of color? To know what purple means? What about blue? Red? Green? It almost makes me cry.

K A T A R I N A

I am running a fever today so I stay home from school. I lay on the couch and mindlessly click the remote. Soap opera. Advertisement. Basketball game. Cartoon. Finally I settle on an "I Love Lucy" re-run. It's the episode where Fred, Ethel and Ricky bet her that she can't not tell a lie for twenty-four hours. When an ad comes on, I click off the TV and close my eyes. Ayana used to love TV. She would listen to the dialogue and the music, laugh at the right times and pretend like she could see it all. She hardly ever

watches it anymore though. She says its too confusing, like watching a band play without hearing their music.

Ayana comes home, banging the door behind her. Her guide from school yells a good-bye to her as she heads back to the bus. “Ayana...” I say, sitting up. “Oh, hi, Kat.” She says, just noticing me. “Feeling any better?” “A bit.” I respond, sitting up. “Ayana, do you want to play cards or something?” Ayana has special cards written in Braille that she got from her school. “Not really.” She mutters and begins to make her way upstairs. I notice that her face is streaked with tears. “Aya-papaya.” I coax, using her favorite nickname from when she was little. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She tells me, still heading up the stairs, feeling for the next one with her feet, knowing there are fourteen of them.

I stand up, headache gone now, and run after her. She is sitting on her bed, hugging her pillow, tears streaking down her face. “They took my books from me. They wrote all over them, in ink.” She cries through gasps of breath. “They called me- they called me a blockhead and a bozo. They said I was THE WORD.” I hug her, fever forgotten. “I’m sorry, Aya.” She ignores me, covers herself with her blanket.

“I just want to be normal.” She whispers, her voice muffled through her white covers. Her whole room is white. She says she likes it that way. She doesn’t want to have to wonder what she’s missing. “I know.” I tell her. I kiss her on the forehead like I did when she was three and I was seven. “It’s raining again.” She says. “I used to love it. Rain, I mean.” “I know.” I tell her. “I used to love it too.”

A Y A N A

Tomorrow is Christmas break. It couldn’t come sooner. I tell my mom that I can’t possibly go to school today. To my surprise she agrees. She stays home from work, where she tells me they’re just having a party anyway, and plays cards with me. We listen to the radio and she makes mac and cheese and chocolate cake. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a whole day just to ourselves. She tells me that Katarina has a wonderful surprise for me for Christmas and I try to get her to tell me what it is. She doesn’t.

K A T A R I N A

It’s Christmas, finally! I wrap my gifts in purple paper and tuck them safely under the tree. Finally Ayana wakes up. Mom makes hot chocolate and pancakes and we wolf them down. We sit around the fireplace and sing carols. Grandma calls to wish us a Merry Christmas. Then it’s time to open presents. We both take Mom’s presents first.

She's gotten me three pairs of jeans and a pink cardigan. I hug her and a tiny origami flower falls out of the package. Mom's really into origami. Ayana gets speakers for her ipod and a baseball cap. She gets an origami frog. She's grinning and thanking mom, but I can tell she's kind of sad. I swallow. This is our first Christmas without Dad.

Then I open Ayana's gift and she opens mine. I can feel the tears coming. She's given me a framed picture of Dad and her and me on our trip to the Rockies. Her eyes have the same dull, sad expression they always do, but she's smiling and her hair is blowing in her face. Dad looks just like I remember him, tall, happy and quiet. I go over to Ayana and hug her. It's the best gift she could have possibly gotten me.

Finally she opens the gift from me. Usually mom has to tell her what she's gotten, but not this time. It licks her face and settles right into her lap. I tell her that he's a vision dog. I tell her that she can go anywhere she wants with him, she can even go to a normal school. She's laughing and crying at the same time, petting the Labrador puppy in her lap. I ask her what she's going to name him and she answers right away. "Raindrop." She says.

