

Excerpt: The Rain Drinkers

By G.Finan

He got up from the table and walked over to the window. He made to say "Where?" but he didn't have to. It was easy to see a small boat had just crested the entrance to the little canal and was making its way toward them. He could see it had a mast like a sailboat, though no sail was up. One person was rowing the boat and another sitting toward the rear. They were a good distance away, but Jamie could see they would be here in no time at all. Mary flashed a look at him, and he could sense in her eyes inside she was something close to frantic.

Her eyes then scanned wildly around the room, as she began moving this about and putting that away. Apparently, making sure everything was just so, or everything was exactly where it was expected to be. Jamie felt a bit startled at the change of mood in the room. In a few moments, Mary seemed satisfied everything was in its place. However, she was no less agitated.

"Uh...We should... probably go outside. We need to wait outside!" She said, very nervously and very quickly, and pulled his arm to lead him out the door. Jamie allowed himself to be led this way, curious as to why this woman would be behaving in such a manner. She led him over to where they could see the dock and where they would land the boat.

Shortly he was able to hear the voices of two men talking and then the sound of wood against wood as the boat was seen to ease into its mooring along the wooden dock. The dog took off down to the dock to welcome them. Jamie could see the two men moving about as they began to disembark from the little vessel. He could see one of the men was a large middle-aged black man. He climbed out first and was handed some large cloth bags from the other man. Eventually, the other man stood up in the boat. Jamie could see he was a relatively tall man with greying sideburns and something of a hard look to him. He noticed the look because the man's eyes locked on him as soon as he stood up in the boat.

Jamie looked at Mary standing next to him and didn't understand why she wasn't walking down the dock to welcome them. She stood where she was as if this was where she had to be. Where she was expected to be. She kept shifting her weight somewhat apprehensively from one side to the other and smoothing her apron down from time to time. This added to the sense of agitation that was beginning to make Jamie feel somewhat nervous. Soon the black man could be seen carrying the stuffed bags into the little building Jamie thought was the boathouse and disappearing somewhere within.

The other man climbed out of the boat and stooping down, picked up a couple of rifles along with a couple of duffel type bags and gear they had placed on the dock. After pausing to call out something to the black man in the boathouse, he began to make his way up the path to where Jamie and Mary stood waiting. As he approached, Mary called out to him. "Hi Frank, did you have a good day?" She said in an overly cloying voice.

Frank did not reply. He just continued to stare at Jamie as he walked up to where he and Mary stood. When he got within a few feet of where they were, he asked in a cold tone. "Who the hell is this?"

"Uhm.. well, Frank, uhm, this boy says he's your nephew. His name's Jamie, Frank." Mary said while taking some of the gear Frank was carrying.

"I ain't got no nephew," Frank said and continued walking past the young man as if that settled the matter.

Unsure of what to do at that moment, Jamie blurted out after him. "My mother made me promise to come to you after she passed, sir. My mother was Beth Gibson. Are you Frank Hall, sir?"

This made Frank Hall stop and turn around to look at the boy. "What'd did you say your mother's name was?" He said, taking a closer look at the young man who stood before him.

"My mother was Beth Gibson, sir. My father was John Gibson. Your brother, or... your half-brother, sir. 'Least, that's what my Ma told me. She said you were expecting me? That she wrote to you." He said this last bit unsurely as it was very apparent Frank Hall was not expecting him in the least. "My mother, she, uh, she wrote you a letter for me to give to you, sir." He fumbled the crumpled letter out of his jacket pocket and extended his hand out to give it to the man. Jamie hesitated for a moment, saying. "Uh... that is if you're Frank Hall ...sir."

The man didn't take the letter at first and left Jamie to stand there, holding it out to him. He stood there staring, examining the young man for a moment as if trying to discern some familiarity in his face or his manner. Jamie could not be sure if the man had found any. Slowly the man said, "I'm Frank Hall." He reached out to take the proffered letter from Jamie.

Frank reached into an inside pocket in his coat to retrieve his glasses. He slipped them on, ripped open the letter, and began reading. A couple of times as he read, he would stop and look up at Jamie for a moment. Then, look down and continue to read the letter in his hands.

"Have you read this?" Frank asked, looking up at Jamie coldly. "Do you know what's in this letter?"

"No, sir," Jamie responded. "My mother told me to put it in your hands myself. Not to give it to anyone else."

"Frank, I think maybe..." Mary began to say.

Frank cut her short with a cold look and said, "Shut up." This stopped her in mid-sentence, and she looked down to the ground. Looking toward the boathouse, Frank called out. "Darryl!... Darryl!" in a loud voice.

After a moment, the black man appeared from the doorway with a look on his face that said, "What you want? You know I'm busy!". He walked with a slight shuffle, either from age or wear. "What you want, boss?" Darryl called out.

Indicating toward the young man, Frank said. "This here's my nephew. What'd you say your name was?" he asked Jamie quietly.

"It's Jamie, sir," Jamie replied.

"His name's Jamie," Frank called out to Darryl again. "He's going to be staying with us for a little while. Get him set up in that room in the boathouse. He should be all right back there."

"You have a nephew?" Darryl asked, disbelievingly. "Really? All right, if you say so! C'mon this way, boy." Darryl waved the boy to come on. "We'll see if we can't get you set up all right.... As if I don't have enough to do." He mumbled this last to himself, as he disappeared back into the boathouse.

"You go follow Darryl. He'll see to you." Frank Hall said, not unkindly. "When you're settled, come up to the house. You can have some supper. We can talk then. Figure out what to do with you. You can tell me how you ended up looking like that." Referring to the bruises on Jamie's face.

"I was gonna' give him something to eat, Frank," Mary said, almost apologetically. "He looked hungry...."

Frank shot her a look that made her stop speaking immediately. "Get up to the house," he told her, in a tone as cold as a cloud passing in front of the sun. Mary immediately turned and giving half a look toward Jamie, started to go. "The gear!" Frank barked. Mary came back quickly and picked up as many of the bags Frank had placed on the ground as she could carry and hurried back up to the house.

Frank turned, and half watched her go, he made as if to speak. But he didn't. This made Jamie feel even more apprehensive as if he had done something wrong. "It's all right, boy." Frank said, "Go get settled. We'll talk later. You can tell me how you are here."

"Thank you, sir. I hope I'm not to be a burden to you. I'm only here because I promised..." Jamie started to say.

"All right. Tell me all about it later." Frank said, picking up his things and turning to make his way toward the house.

"Well...thank you,...Uncle Frank," Jamie said in a kind of wooden and awkward manner.

Frank Hall stopped when he heard this. Turning around, he looked at the boy for a moment and said. "You can call me Frank. ...I don't think we need the other." He seemed to pause and think about this for a moment, before proceeding on his way. After a moment, he stopped again. Turning and looking at Jamie, he asked. "How old did you say you were, boy?"

"I didn't, sir," Jamie replied. "But, I'll be sixteen years old in May."

Frank seemed to think about this for a moment before he gave a short grunt, and turning continued on his way.

Jamie watched him as his uncle made his way up the slight incline toward the house. Not entirely sure what to make of their initial meeting, Jamie took a deep breath, and picking up his small bag made his way down to the boathouse.