CRYING IN THE RAIN
By Tanith Lee

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A moving story of a life in a world half-destroyed by military folly and the nuclear Sword of Damocles. The soaring talent of the author of The Birthgrave and the Flat Earth novels is at its best in this short but very disturbing tale.

There was a weather Warning that day, so to start with we were all indoors. The children were watching the pay-TV and I was feeding the hens on the shutyard. It was about 9 a.m. Suddenly my mother came out and stood at the edge of the yard. I remember how she looked at me: I had seen the look before, and although it was never explained, I knew what it meant. In the same way she appraised the hens, or checked the vegetables and salad in their grow-trays. Today there was a subtle difference, and I recognized the difference too. It seemed I was ready.

"Greena," she said. She strode across to the hen-run, glanced at the disappointing hens. There had only been three eggs all week, and one of those had registered too high. But in any case, she wasn't concerned with her poultry just now. "Greena, this morning we're going into the Center."

"What about the Warning, Mum?"

"Oh, that. Those idiots, they're often wrong. Anyway, nothing until noon, they said. All Clear till then. And we'll be in by then."

"But, Mum," I said, "there won't be any buses. There never are when there's a Warning. We'll have to walk."

Her face, all hard and eaten back to the bone with life and living, snapped at me like a rat-trap: "So we'll walk. Don't go on and on, Greena. What do you think your legs are for?"

I tipped the last of the feed from the pan and started toward the stair door.

"And talking of legs," said my mother, "put on your stockings. And the things we bought last time."

There was always this palaver. It was normally because of the cameras, particularly those in the Entry washrooms. After you strip, all your clothes go through the cleaning machine, and out to meet you on the other end. But there are security staff on the cameras, and the doctors, and they might see, take an interest. You had to wear your smartest stuff in order not to be ashamed of it, things even a Center doctor could glimpse without repulsion. A stickler, my mother. I went into the shower and took one and shampooed my hair, and used powder bought in the Center with the smell of roses, so all of me would be gleaming clean when I went through the shower and shampooing at the Entry. Then I dressed in my special underclothes, and my white frock, put on my stockings and shoes, and remembered to drop the carton of rose powder in my bag.

My mother was ready and waiting by the time I came down to the street doors, but she didn't upbraid me. She had meant me to be thorough.

The children were yelling round the TV, all but Daisy, who was seven and had been left in charge. She watched us go with envious fear. My mother shouted her away inside before we opened up.

When we'd unsealed the doors and got out, a blast of heat scalded us. It was a very hot day, the sky so far clear as the finest blue perspex. But of course, as there had been a weather Warning, there were no buses, and next to no one on the streets. On Warning days, there was anyway really nowhere to go. All the shops were sealed fast, even our three area pubs. The local train station ceased operating when I was four, eleven years ago. Even the endless jumble of squats had their boards in place and their tarpaulins over.

The only people we passed on the burning dusty pavements were a couple of fatalistic tramps, in from the green belt, with bottles of cider or petromix; these they jauntily raised to us. (My mother tugged me on.) And once a police car appeared which naturally hove to at our side and activated its speaker.

"Is your journey really necessary, madam?"

My mother, her patience eternally tried, grated out furiously, "Yes it is."

"You're aware there's been a forecast of rain for these sections?"

"Yes, " she rasped.

"And this is your daughter? It's not wise, madam, to risk a child-"

"My daughter and I are on our way to the Center. We have an appointment. Unless we're delayed " snarled my mother, visually skewering the pompous policeman, only doing his job, through the Sealtite window of the car, "we would be inside before any rain breaks."

The two policemen in their snug patrol vehicle exchanged looks.

There was a time we could have been arrested for behaving in this irresponsible fashion, my mother and I, but no one really bothers now. There was more than enough crime to go round. On our own heads it would be.

The policeman who'd spoken to us through the speaker smiled coldly and switched it off--speaker, and come to that, smile.

The four official eyes stayed on me a moment, however, before the car drove off. That at least gratified my mother. Although the policemen had called me a child for the white under-sixteen tag on my wristlet, plainly they'd noticed I looked much older and besides, rather good.

Without even a glance at the sky, my mother marched forward. (It's true there are a few public weather-shelters but vandals had wrecked most of them.) I admired my mother, but I'd never been able to love her, not even to like her much. She was phenomenally strong and had kept us together, even after my father canced, and the other man, the father of Jog, Daisy and Angel. She did it with slaps and harsh tirades, to show us what we could expect in life. But she must have had her fanciful side once: for instance, the silly name she gave me, for green trees and green pastures and waters green as bottle-glass that I've only seen inside the Center. The trees on the streets and in the abandoned gardens have always been bare, or else they have sparse foliage of quite a cheerful brown color. Sometimes they put out strange buds or fruits and then someone reports it and the trees are cut down. They were rather like my mother, I suppose, or she was like the trees. Hardbitten to the bone, enduring, tough, holding on by her root-claws, not daring to flower.

Gallantly she showed only a little bit of nervousness when we began to see the glint of the dome in the sunshine coming down High Hill from the old cinema ruin. Then she started to hurry quite a lot and urged me to be quick. Still, she didn't look up once, for clouds.

In the end it was perfectly all right: the sky stayed empty and we got down to the concrete underpass. Once we were on the moving way I rested my tired feet by standing on one leg then the other like a stork I once saw in a TV program.

As soon as my mother noticed she told me to stop it. There are cameras watching, all along the underpass to the Entry. It was useless to try persuading her that it didn't matter. She had never brooked argument and though she probably wouldn't clout me before the cameras she might later on. I remember I was about six or seven when she first thrashed me. She used a plastic belt, but took off the buckle. She didn't want to scar me. Not to scar Greena was a part of survival, for even then she saw something might come of me. But the belt hurt and raised welts. She said to me as I lay howling and she leaned panting on the bed, "I won't have any back-answers. Not from you and not from any of you, do you hear me? There isn't time for it. You'll do as I say."

After we'd answered the usual questions, we joined the queue for the washroom. It wasn't much of a queue, because of the Warning. We glided through the mechanical check, the woman operator even congratulating us on our low levels. "That's section SEK, isn't it?" she said chattily. "A very good area. My brother lives out there. He's over thirty and has three children." My mother congratulated the operator in turn and proudly admitted our house was one of the first in SEK fitted with Sealtite. "My kids have never played outdoors," she assured the woman. "Even Greena

here scarcely went out till her eleventh birthday. We grow most of our own food." Then, feeling she was giving away too much--you never knew who might be listening, there was always trouble in the suburbs with burglars and gangs--she clammed up tighter than the Sealtite.

As we went into the washroom a terrific argument broke out behind us. The mechanical had gone off violently. Some woman was way over the acceptable limit. She was screaming that she had to get in to the Center to see her daughter, who was expecting a baby--the oldest excuse, perhaps even true, though pregnancy is strictly regulated under a dome. One of the medical guards was bearing down on the woman, asking if she had Insurance.

If she had, the Entry hospital would take her in and see if anything could be done. But the woman had never got Insurance, despite having a daughter in the Center, and alarms were sounding and things were coming to blows.

"Mum," I said, when we passed into the white plastic-and-tile expanse with the black camera eyes clicking overhead and the Niagara rush of showers, "who are you taking me to see?"

She actually looked startled, as if she still thought me so naive that I couldn't guess she too, all this time, had been planning to have a daughter in the Center. She glared at me, then came out with the inevitable.

"Never you mind. Just you hope you're lucky. Did you bring your talc?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Here then, use these too. I'll meet you in the cafeteria."

When I opened the carton I found "Smoky" eye make-up, a cream lipstick that smelled of peaches, and a little spray of scent called I Mean It.

My stomach turned right over. But then I thought, So what. It would be frankly stupid of me to be thinking I was naive. I'd known for years.

While we were finishing our hamburgers in the cafeteria, it did start to rain, outside. You could just sense it, miles away beyond the layers of protection and lead-glass. A sort of flickering of the sight. It wouldn't do us much harm in here, but people instinctively moved away from the outer suburb-side walls of the cafe even under the plastic palm-trees in tubs. My mother stayed put.

"Have you finished, Greena? Then go to the Ladies and brush your teeth, and we'll get on. And spray that scent again."

"It's finished, Mum. There was only enough for one go."

"Daylight robbery," grumbled my mother, "you can hardly smell it." She made me show her the empty spray and insisted on squeezing hissing air out of it into each of my ears.

Beyond the cafeteria, a tree-lined highway runs down into the Center. Real trees, green trees, and green grass on the verges. At the end of the slope, we waited for an electric bus painted a jolly bright color, with a rude driver. I used to feel that everyone in the Center must be cheery and contented, bursting with optimism and the juice of kindness. But I was always disappointed. They know you're from outside at once, if nothing else gives you away, skintone is different from the pale underdome skin or chocolaty solarium Center tan. Although you could never have got in here if you hadn't checked out as acceptable, a lot of people draw away from you on the buses or underground trains. Once or twice, when my mother and I had gone to see a film in the Center no one would sit near us. But not everybody had this attitude. Presumably, the person my mother was taking me to see wouldn't mind.

"Let me do the talking," she said as we got off the bus. (Me driver had started extra quickly, half shaking our contamination off his platform, nearly breaking our ankles.)

"Suppose he asks me something?"

"He?" But I wasn't going to give ground on it now. "All right. In that case, answer, but be

careful."

Parts of the Center contain very old historic buildings and monuments of the inner city which, since they're inside, are looked after and kept up. We were now under just that sort of building. From my TV memories-my mother had made sure we had the educational TV to grow up with, along with lesson tapes and exercise ropes--the architecture looked late eighteenth or very early nineteenth, white stone, with toplids on the windows and pillared porticos up long stairs flanked by black metal lions.

We went up the stairs and I was impressed and rather frightened.

The glass doors behind the pillars were wide open. There's no reason they shouldn't be, here. The cool-warm, sweet-smelling breezes of the dome-conditioned air blew in and out, and the real ferns in pots waved gracefully. There was a tank of golden fish in the foyer. I wanted to stay and look at them. Sometimes on the Center streets you see well-off people walking their clean, groomed dogs and foxes. Sometimes there might be a silken cat high in a window. There were birds in the Center parks, trained not to fly free anywhere else. When it became dusk above the dome, you would hear them tweeting excitedly as they roosted. And then all the lights of the city came on and moths danced round them. You could get proper honey in the Center, from the bee-farms, and beef and milk from the cattle-grazings, and salmon, and leather and wine and roses.

But the fish in the tank were beautiful. And I suddenly thought, if I get to stay here--if I really do--but I didn't believe it. It was just something I had to try to get right for my mother, because I must never argue with her, ever.

The man in the lift took us to the sixth floor. He was impervious; we weren't there, he was simply working the lift for something to do.

A big old clock in the foyer had said 3 p.m. The corridor we came out in was deserted. All the rooms stood open like the corridor windows, plushy hollows with glass furniture: offices. The last office in the corridor had a door which was shut.

My mother halted. She was pale, her eyes and mouth three straight lines on the plain of bones. She raised her hand and it shook, but it knocked hard and loud against the door.

In a moment, the door opened by itself.

My mother went in first.

She stopped in front of me on a valley-floor of grass-green carpet, blocking my view.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Alexander. I hope we're not too early."

A man spoke.

"Not at all. Your daughter's with you? Good. Please do come in." He sounded quite young.

I walked behind my mother over the grass carpet, and chairs and a desk became visible, and then she let me step around her, and said to him, "This is my daughter, Mr. Alexander. Greena."

He was only about twenty-two, and that was certainly luck, because the ones born in the Center can live up until their fifties, their sixties even, though that's rare. (They quite often don't even cance in the domes, providing they were born there. My mother used to say it was the high life killed them off.)

He was tanned from a solarium and wore beautiful clothes, a cotton shirt and trousers. His wristlet was silver-I had been right about his age: the tag was red. He looked so fit and hygienic, almost edible. I glanced quickly away from his eyes.

"Won't you sit down?" He gave my mother a crystal glass of Center gin, with ice-cubes and lemon slices. He asked me, smiling, if I'd like a milk-shake, yes with real milk and strawberry flavor. I was too nervous to want it or enjoy it, but it had to be had. You couldn't refuse such a thing.

When we were perched in chairs with our drinks (he didn't drink with us) he sat on the desk,

swinging one foot, and took a cigarette from a box and lit and smoked it.

"Well, I must say," he remarked conversationally to my mother, "I appreciate your coming all this way-after a Warning, too. It was only a shower I gather."

"We were inside by then," said my mother quickly. She wanted to be definite-the flower hadn't been spoiled by rain.

"Yes, I know. I was in touch with the Entry."

He would have checked our levels, probably. He had every right to, after all. If he was going to buy me, he'd want me to last for a while.

"And, let me say at once, just from the little I've seen of your daughter, I'm sure she'll be entirely suitable for the work. So pretty, and such a charming manner."

It was normal to pretend there was an actual job involved. Perhaps there even would be, to begin with.

My mother must have been putting her advert out since last autumn. That was when she'd had my photograph taken at the Center. I'd just worn my nylon-lace panties for it; it was like the photos they take of you at the Medicheck every ten years. But there was always a photograph of this kind with such an advert. It was illegal, but nobody worried. There had been a boy in our street who got into the Center three years ago in this same way. He had placed the advert, done it all himself. He was handsome, though his hair, like mine, was very fine and perhaps he would lose it before he was eighteen. Apparently that hadn't mattered.

Had my mother received any other offers? Or only this tanned Mr. Alexander with the intense bright eyes?

I'd drunk my shake and not noticed.

Mr. Alexander asked me if I would read out what was written on a piece of rox he gave me. My mother and the TV lessons had seen to it I could read, or at least that I could read what was on the rox, which was a very simple paragraph directing a Mr. Cleveland to go to office 170B on the seventh floor and a Miss O'Beale to report to the basement. Possibly the job would require me to read such messages. But I had passed the test. Mr. Alexander was delighted. He came over without pretense and shook my hand and kissed me exploringly on the left cheek. His mouth was firm and wholesome and he had a marvelous smell, a smell of money and safety. My mother had labored cleverly on me. I recognized it instantly, and wanted it. Between announcements, they might let me feed the fish in the tank.

Mr. Alexander was extremely polite and gave my mother another big gin, and chatted sociably to her about the latest films in the Center, and the color that was in vogue, nothing tactless or nasty, such as the cost of food inside, and out, or the SEO riots the month before, in the suburbs, when the sounds of the fires and the police rifles had penetrated even our sealed-tight home in SEK. He didn't mention any current affairs, either, the death-rate on the continent, or the trade-war with the USA-he knew our TV channels get edited. Our information was too limited for an all-round discussion.

Finally he said, "Well, I'd better let you go. Thank you again. I think we can say we know where we stand, yes?" He laughed over the smoke of his fourth cigarette, and my mother managed her deaths-head grin, her remaining teeth washed with gin and lemons. "But naturally I'll be writing to you. I'll send you the details Express. That should mean you'll get them-oh, five days from today. Will that be all right?"

My mother said, "That will be lovely, Mr. Alexander. I can speak for Greena and tell you how very thrilled she is. It will mean a lot to us. The only thing is, Mr Alexander, I do have a couple of other gentlemen-I've put them off, of course. But I have to let them know by the weekend."

He made a gesture of mock panic. "Good God, I don't want to lose Greena. Let's say three and a half days, shall we? I'll see if I can't rustle up a special courier to get my letter to you extra fast."

We said good-bye, and he shook my hand again and kissed both cheeks. A great pure warmth came from him, and a sort of power. I felt I had been kissed by a tiger, and wondered if I was in love.

At the Entry-exit, though it didn't rain again, my mother and I had a long wait until the speakers broadcast the All Clear. By then the clarified sunset lay shining and flaming in six shades of red and scarlet-orange over the suburbs.

"Look, Mum," I said, because shut up indoors so much, I didn't often get to see the naked sky, "isn't it beautiful? It doesn't look like that through the dome."

But my mother had no sympathy with vistas. Only the toxins in the air, anyway, make the colors of sunset and dawn so wonderful. To enjoy them is therefore idiotic, perhaps unlawful.

My mother had, besides, been very odd ever since we left Mr. Alexander's office. I didn't properly understand that this was due to the huge glasses of gin he'd generously given her. At first she was fierce and energetic, keyed up, heroic against the polished sights of the Center, which she had begun to point out to me like a guide. Though she didn't say so, she meant Once you live here. But then, when we had to wait in the exit lounge and have a lot of the rather bad coffee-drink from the machine, she sank in on herself, brooding. Her eyes became so dark, so bleak, I didn't like to meet them. She had stopped talking at me.

Though the rain-alert was over, it was now too late for buses. There was the added problem that gangs would be coming out on the streets, looking for trouble.

The gorgeous poisoned sunset died behind the charcoal sticks of trees and pyramids and oblongs of deserted buildings and rusty railings.

Fortunately, there were quite a few police-patrols about. My mother gave them short shrift when they stopped her. Generally they let us get on. We didn't look dangerous.

On SEK, the working street-lights were coming on and there were some ordinary people strolling or sitting on low broken walls, taking the less unhealthy air. They pop up like the rabbits used to, out of their burrows. We passed a couple of women we knew, outside the Sealtite house on the corner of our road. They asked where we'd come from. My mother said tersely we'd been at a friend's, and stopped in till the All Clear.

Although Sealtite, as the advert says, makes secure against anything but gelignite, my mother had by now got herself into an awful sort of rigid state. She ran up the concrete to our front door, unlocked it and dived us through. We threw our clothes into the washbin, though they hardly needed it as we'd been in the Center most of the day. The TV was still blaring. My mother, dragging on a skirt and nylon blouse, rushed through into the room where the children were. Immediately there was a row. During the day Jog had upset a complete giant can of powdered milk. Daisy had tried to clear it up and they had meant not to tell our mother as if she wouldn't notice one was missing. Daisy was only seven, and Jog was three, so it was blurted out presently. My mother hit all of them, even Angel. Daisy, who had been responsible for the house in our absence, she belted, not very much, but enough to fill our closed-in world with screaming and savage sobs.

After it was over, I made a pot of tea. We drank it black since we would have to economize on milk for the rest of the month.

The brooding phase had passed from my mother. She was all sharp jitters. She said we had to go up and look at the hens. The eggs were always registering too high lately. Could there be a leak in the sealing of the shut-yard?

So that was where we ended up, tramping through lanes of lettuce, waking the chickens who got agitated and clattered about. My mother wobbled on a ladder under the roofing with a torch. "I can't see anything," she kept saying.

Finally she descended. She leaned on the ladder with the torch dangling, still alight, wasting the battery. She was breathless.

"Mum . . . the torch is still on."

She switched it off, put it on a post of the hen-run, and suddenly came at me. She took me by the arms and glared into my face.

"Greena, do you understand about the Alexander man? Well, do you?"

"Yes, Mum."

She shook me angrily but not hard.

"You know why you have to?"

"Yes, Mum. I don't mind, Mum. He's really nice."

Then I saw her eyes had changed again, and I faltered. I felt the earth give way beneath me. Her eyes were full of burning water. They were soft and they were frantic.

"Listen, Greena. I was thirty last week."

"I know--"

"You shut up and listen to me. I had my medicheck. It's no good, Greena."

We stared at each other. It wasn't a surprise. This happened to everyone. She'd gone longer than most. Twenty-five was the regular innings, out here.

"I wasn't going to tell you, not yet. I don't have to report into the hospital for another three months. I'm getting a bit of pain, but there's the Insurance: I can buy that really good pain-killer, the new one."

"Mum."

"Will you be quiet? I want to ask you, you know what you have to do? About the kids? They're your sisters and your brother, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes. I'll take care of them."

"Get him to help you. He will. He really wants you. He was dead unlucky, that Alexander. His legal girlfriend canced. Born in the Center and everything and she pegged out at eighteen. Still, that was good for us. Putting you on the sterilization program when you were little, thank God I did. You see, he can't legally sleep with another girl with pregnancy at all likely. Turns out he's a high deformity risk. Doesn't look it, does he?"

"Yes, Mum, I know about the pregnancy laws."

She didn't slap me or even shout at me for answering back. She seemed to accept I'd said it to reassure her I truly grasped the facts. Alexander's predicament had anyway been guessable. Why else would he want a girl from outside?

"Now, Angel--"said my mother "--I want you to see to her the same, sterilization next year when she's five. She's got a chance too: she could turn out very nice-looking. Daisy won't be any use to herself, and the boy won't. But you see you get a decent woman in here to take care of them. No homes. Do you hear? Not for my kids." She sighed, and said again, "He'll help you. If you play your cards right, he'll do anything you want. He'll cherish you, Greena." She let me go and said, grinning, "We had ten applications. I went and saw them all. He's the youngest and the best."

"He's lovely," I said. "Thanks, Mum."

"Well, you just see you don't let me down."

"I won't. I promise. I promise, really."

She nodded, and drew up her face into its sure habitual shape, and her eyes dry into their Sealtite of defiance.

"Let's get down now. I'd better rub some anesjel into those marks on Daisy."

We went down and I heard my mother passing from child to child, soothing and reprimanding them as she harshly pummeled the anaesthetic jelly into their hurts.

For a moment, listening on the landing, in the clamped house-dark, I felt I loved my mother.

Then that passed off. I began to think about Mr. Alexander and his clothes and the brilliance of his eyes in his tanned healthy face.

It was wonderful. He didn't send a courier. He came out himself. He was in a small sealed armored car like a TV alligator, but he just swung out of it and up the concrete into our house. (His bodyguard stayed negligently inside the car. He had a pistol and a mindless attentive lethal look.)

Mr. Alexander brought me half a dozen perfect tawny roses, and a crate of food for the house, toys and TV tapes for the children, and even some gin for my mother. He presumably didn't know yet she only had three months left, but he could probably work it out. He made a fuss of her, and when she'd spoken her agreements into the portable machine, he kissed me on the mouth and then produced a bottle of champagne. The wine was very frothy, and the glassful I had made me feel giddy. I didn't like it, but otherwise our celebration was a success.

I don't know how much money he paid for me. I'd never want to ask him. Or the legal fiddles he must have gone through. He was able to do it, and that was all we needed to know, my mother, me. (She always kept the Insurance going and now, considerably swelled, the benefits will pass on to the children.)

She must have told him eventually about the hospital. I do know he saw to it personally that she had a private room and the latest in pain relief, and no termination until she was ready. He didn't let me see her after she went in. She'd said she didn't want it, either. She had already started to lose weight and shrivel up, the way it happens.

The children cried terribly. I thought it could never get put right, but in the end the agency he found brought us a nineteen-year-old woman who'd lost her own baby and she seemed to take to the children at once. The safe house, of course, was a bonus no one sane would care to ignore. The agency will keep an eye on things, but her levels were low, she should have at least six years. The last time I went there they all seemed happy. He doesn't want me to go outside again.

Six months ago, he brought me officially into the Center.

All the trees were so green and the fish and swans sparkled in and on the water, and the birds sang, and he gave me a living bird, a real live tweeting yellow jumping bird in a spacious, glamorous cage; I love this bird and sometimes it sings. It may only live a year, he warned me, but then I can have another.

Sometimes I go to a cubicle in the foyer of one of the historic buildings, and read out announcements over the speaker. They pay me in Center credit discs, but I hardly need any money of my own.

The two rooms that are mine on Fairgrove Avenue are marvelous. The lights go on and off when you come in or go out, and the curtains draw themselves when it gets dark, or the blinds come down when it's too bright. The shower room always smells fresh, like a summer glade is supposed to, and perhaps once did. I see him four, five or six times every week, and we go to dinner and to films, and he's always bringing me real flowers and chocolates and fruit and honey. He even buys me books to read. Some days, I learn new words from the dictionary.

When he made love to me for the first time, it was a strange experience, but he was very gentle. It seemed to me I might come to like it very much, (and I was right), although in a way, it still seems rather an embarrassing thing to do.

That first night, after, he held me in his arms, and I enjoyed this. No one had ever held me caringly, protectingly, like that, ever before. He told me, too, about the girl who canced. He

seemed deeply distressed, as if no one ever dies that way, but then, in Centers, under domes, death isn't ever certain.

All my mother tried to get was time, and when that ran out, control of pain and a secure exit. But my darling seems to think that his girl had wanted much, much more, and that I should want more too. And in a way that scares me, because I may not even live to be twenty, and then he'll break his heart again. But then again he'll probably find someone else. And maybe I'll be strong like my mother. I hope so. I want to keep my promise about the children. If I can get Angel settled, she can carry on after me. But I'll need ten or eleven years for that.

Something funny happened yesterday. He said, he would bring me a toy tomorrow--today. Yes, a toy, though I'm a woman, and his lover. I never had a toy. I love my bird best. I love him, too.

The most peculiar thing is, though, that I miss my mother. I keep on remembering what she said to me, her blows and injunctions. Going shopping with her, or to the cinema; how, when her teeth were always breaking, she got into such a rage.

I remember mistily when I was small, the endless days of weather Warnings when she, too, was trapped in the house, my fellow prisoner, and how the rain would start to pour down, horrible sinister torrents that frightened me, although then I didn't know why. All the poisons and the radioactivity that have accumulated and go on gathering on everything in an unseen glittering, and which the sky somehow collects and which the rain washes down from the sky in a deluge. The edited pay-TV seldom reports the accidents and oversights which continually cause this. Sometimes an announcement would come on and tell everyone just to get indoors off the streets, and no reason given, and no rain or wind even. The police cars would go about the roads sounding their sirens, and then they too would slink into holes to hide. But next day, usually there was the All Clear.

In the Center, TV isn't edited. I was curious to see how they talked about the leaks and pollutions, here. Actually they don't seem to mention them at all. It can't be very important, underdome.

But I do keep remembering one morning, that morning of a colossal rain, when I was six or seven. I was trying to look out at the forbidden world, with my nose pressed to the Sealtite. All I could see through the distorting material was a wavering leaden rush of liquid. And then I saw something so alien I let out a squeal.

"What is it?" my mother demanded. She had been washing the breakfast dishes in half the morning ration of domestic filtered water, clashing the plates bad-temperedly. "Come on, Greena, don't just make silly noises."

I pointed at the Sealtite. My mother came to see.

Together we looked through the fall of rain, to where a tiny girl, only about a year old, was standing-out on the street. Not knowing how she got there--strayed from some squat, most likely. She wore a pair of little blue shorts and nothing else, and she clutched a square of ancient blanket that was her doll. Even through the sealed pane and the rainfall you could see she was bawling and crying in terror.

"Jesus Christ and Mary the Mother," said my own mother on a breath. Her face was scoured white as our sink. But her eyes were blazing fires, hot enough to quench the rain.

And next second she was thrusting me into the TV room, locking me in, shouting, Stay there don't you move or I'll murder you!

Then I heard both our front doors being opened. Shut. When they opened again and shut again, I heard a high-pitched infantile roaring. The roar got louder and possessed the house. Then it fell quiet. I realized my mother had flown out into the weather and grabbed the lost child and brought her under shelter.

Of course, it was no use. When my mother carried her to the emergency unit next day, after the All Clear, the child was dying. She was so tiny. She held her blanket to the end and scorned my mother, the nurse, the kindly needle of oblivion. Only the blanket was her friend. Only the blanket had stayed and suffered with her in the rain.

When she was paying for the treatment and our own decontam, the unit staff said horrible things to my mother, about her stupidity until I started to cry in humiliated fear. My mother ignored me and only faced them out like an untamed vixen, snarling with her cracked teeth.

All the way home I whined and railed at her. Why had she exposed us to those wicked people with their poking instruments and boiling showers, the hurt and rancor, the downpour of words? (I was jealous too, I realize now, of that intruding poisonous child. I'd been till then the only one in our house.)

Go up to bed! shouted my mother. I wouldn't.

At last she turned on me and thrashed me with the plastic belt. Violent, it felt as if she thrashed the whole world, till in the end she made herself stop.

But now I'm here with my darling, and my lovely bird singing. I can see a corner of a green park from both my windows. And it never, never rains.

It's funny how I miss her, my mother, so much.