

A photograph of a white bird perched on a branch in a misty, rainy landscape. The bird is the central focus, perched on a dark, wet branch. The background is a soft, hazy green and blue, suggesting a forest or a valley shrouded in mist or rain. The overall mood is quiet and atmospheric.

# The Year of the Rains

by Jennifer Macaire

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I met Viola the year of the rains. White water tumbled in such a quantity down the falls that it ripped the pedestrian bridge out, and Mr. Harvey's tourist boat disappeared overnight. The rains didn't slacken, and our town seemed to shrink, then swell, as water seeped into basements and woodwork. Everyone had their heaters on, and fires in their chimneys to keep the damp at bay. It didn't work – after a month you could dig your fingernail into any wall in the village and pull out soggy, powdery wood.

My usual perch was on an overturned barrel on the balcony of the Riverside Hotel. It was sheltered from the rain by the roof, and I had a good view of the whole west side of town. It was from there I caught my first glimpse of Farley Wain, his son Thomas, and Thomas's fiancée, Viola Copperly. The daily nine-O-five had pulled in and out, leaving behind it the usual flotsam of mailbags and packages, crates of goods and tourists. Even with all the rain, we still got tourists. They stayed at the Riverside, or took rooms with Mrs. Harvey – and before the flood Mr. Harvey would take them downriver, then swing around and treat the tourists to a mist shower at the foot of the falls. The flood had swept his boats away though – and tourists were getting scarce.

These three made their way across the rain-battered street, black umbrellas held overhead, overnight bags clutched close to their thighs. Viola wore an ankle-length skirt and by the time she arrived to the hotel, it was heavy with water. That didn't diminish her charm. I was the bag-boy, so I hustled downstairs and took their bags. I hadn't placed them yet; I didn't know, for instance, that Viola had been Mr. Wain's ward since she was ten, and that she and Thomas had been engaged for three months now. I took their wet coats, umbrellas and bags and led them to their rooms - three different rooms in a line, with Viola in the middle.

Mr Wain flipped me a silver dollar and said, "Our equipment is still at the depot. Would you be kind enough to make sure it arrives in the Hotel basement without delay, and without damage? Some elements are fragile."

I nodded, but being mute, couldn't say anything or ask him just what kind of fragile equipment a gentleman tourist could possibly bring to a decrepit old mill town such as this. I hied to the railway station and helped Sam carry the mysterious packages into the basement. We prodded them a bit, and Sam speculated as to what was in them, but his guesses were in vain.

The next morning, I was on duty when the three tourists came to breakfast. I hastened to seat them and bring them their menus. Mr. Wain had assessed my muteness, and he yet he spoke to me in a normal, polite tone of voice. So many people, when they find out I cannot speak, feel obliged to shout or talk to me as if I'm simple-minded. Mr. Wain, his son and Viola spoke to me as if I could answer them, and even asked me questions, waiting patiently as I mimed the answers or wrote them on the pad of notepaper stuffed in my pocket.

"Tobias", began Mr. Wain (my name was Tobias). "Has anyone rode down the rapids since the flood began?"

I shook my head. Since the flooding, no one had gone near the river.

"Has anyone ridden over the waterfalls?"

I grinned and held up three fingers, then drew a sharp line across my neck. Three men had tried. Three men had died.

Miss Viola gave a little gasp. "Please Mr. Wain," she said, "I wish you would reconsider. Or at least, if you insist on riding the flood, tell Thomas to stay with me. I'm frightened."

Mr. Wain just laughed. "My dear child. There is absolutely no danger. Why, we have the very latest in scientific and sport's equipment and the best laid plans. The last people to try this white water did so fifty years ago. Times have changed. Thomas and I have conquered the Colorado, the Snake and the Genesee Rivers, this one is even smaller, and the fact that we will be the first to succeed will insure plenty of media coverage."

I was impressed by his flowery language and serene confidence. Thomas looked as self-assured as his father. Only Viola wrung her hands in her lap and begged them to reconsider. "Nonsense," said her warden. "I've already contacted the radio station and a cameraman will be here to film the whole proceeding. Thomas and I will become famous, my dear. Won't you enjoy marrying a man whose name is on everyone's lips?"

Viola shook her head, her short, bobbed hair swinging like black silk against her pale cheeks. "No, I would not. I would prefer to have a quiet wedding and live in a peaceful life in perfect anonymity. I wish you would reconsider, Thomas. For me, please?"

Thomas patted her head, as if she were a spaniel, and said, "I didn't know you were so faint-hearted. Don't worry Vee. We're going to have a great time, the rapids are incredible here, we'll shoot down the river in record time."

"I have to make arrangements for us," said Mr. Wain, looking at his watch. "I've found a man who has a horse and cart. The terrain is too rocky for a car or even a jeep, but Mr. Kinas says his horse can pick his way right to the river's edge. Everything else pales besides Mr. Kinas's importance. His presence is capital to our success."

"Mr. Kinas? Who is he?" Viola looked puzzled. "Why is he so important?"

"Don't worry your pretty head about that," said Mr. Wain. He glanced again at his watch. "I won't be long. Mr. Kinas doesn't live far. Thomas, why don't you go see to our equipment?"

"I don't want you to go," Viola said, clutching Thomas's hand.

"Stop being so wet," said Thomas, then he laughed. "Wet - that's a good one. We're the ones getting wet. I'm just going to the basement to unpack." To me he said, "Would you like to help me? I could use a hand."

I nodded, after glancing at Viola. She was sitting very still now, her hands in her lap, her eyes looking past us out the window, at the raging torrent rushing past the old mill. The frothy water plunged into the gorge with a noise like a car wreck, and then it snaked through a narrow chasm to finally end up at the river bend, where the river widened so suddenly it created a lunar land, a marsh both rocky and muddy, where ancient boulders had broken off the cliff and strewn pieces of themselves for hundreds of meters along the shore. The marsh calmed the wild river, and the transition from rapids to wide, tranquil watercourse was so sudden it was like stepping through a magic doorway. Even the exceptional flooding couldn't disturb the marsh's tranquillity. It absorbed the raging waves, soothed the mad currents, spreading to accommodate the extra rain without the slightest loss to its appearance of eternal immobility.

I went to the basement with Thomas and helped him unpack. As we uncovered each object, he explained their use. "This is my helmet, it has a face mask and chin protection. My head will be entirely encased in shock-absorbing foam. I will breathe through this tube, attached to this tank full of un-pressurized air. The tank works with osmosis, I can assure you it's effective and won't explode if hit against a rock."

I thought this was a good point, and nodded affirmatively.

"This is the surfing board I'll use for buoyancy. As you can see, it is as long as my torso, and won't interfere with my legs. My arms fit into these holes, and the whole thing locks around my back, protecting my spine."

Another good point for Thomas's equipment. The rest consisted of wetsuits, kneepads, flippers and special gloves. I was impressed, and starting to believe that perhaps they would be able to plunge down the rapids with their incredible gear. I shook his hand, and then wondered if I should get his autograph now, or after the feat. Another thought niggled at the back of my mind. The man they'd hired, Mr. Kinas, was a tin man who lived at the edge of town in a ramshackle house. His trade was tin, he was the last tinker in the state, and he was to be seen driving his cart up and down the dusty roads, ringing his little bell, calling in his rusty voice 'Tin! Tin for sale. Sharpen your knives and scissors!' He had a grindstone in his cart too. He was a colorful character, but in my mind, not a reliable one. I doubted he could be counted on to meet the two river-runners at their destination. I wrote a note to this effect and showed it to Thomas, but he shrugged and said, "It's of no importance. If he's there, fine. If not, I'm sure they'll be enough spectators to help us carry our affairs."

"But Mr. Wain said his presence was important?" I scrawled.

"No, that's just for Viola. My father is a psychologist. He knows that Viola is bound to worry."

I was impressed. Decidedly, these men had everything worked out. And soon everyone knew Viola's fears. It made for lively conversation around town, and people started to take bets as to whether or not the Wains would go through with their exploit. Thomas and Farley encouraged the betting, and Mr. Harvey suggested using the hotel safe to keep the bets until the day of the descent.

The rest of the week passed quickly, and word spread that two men were about to brave the falls and rapids. More tourists packed into the hotel, and Mr. Harvey's boarding house was full. I heard from Sam that for five towns over all the hotels and rooms were full. Three local newspapers interviewed Mr. Wain, and his photo appeared in our Daily. Viola continued to beg her Thomas not to descend the river, and he took to avoiding her – coming to perch with me on my balcony. We would sit in companionable silence. I couldn't speak, and I think Thomas appreciated the peace and quiet.

Mr. Wain was in his element. The more people around him, the happier he was. His voice, deep, melodious and assured, was perfect for film and radio. He answered all questions, no matter how lunatic, with a gentle smile. "No, my kind sir. There is no danger of sharks here. They dislike strong currents anyhow." He signed autographs and recounted a hundred, nay, two hundred times a day how the feat would go. "We'll take off just above the falls – where the water is swift, but not frothing. That way, we can get our bearings and our pictures can be taken. We'll sweep over the falls in approximately thirteen seconds from the time we set foot into the water. The plummet will last two point eight seconds, after which we'll find ourselves at the foot of the falls in the maelstrom. Luckily for us, our equipment will keep us from being dashed to pieces. Then we'll be carried through the chasm – another two minutes and eleven seconds of white water, before coming out into the calmer, deeper water. At that time," and he glanced at Viola. "Mr. Kinas will be there to assist us. His job is essential to our undertaking. I hope you will all be watching from the hotel balconies, or from the station platform, where you'll have the best views."

The fateful day dawned. Rain poured from the slate-colored sky, and thunder growled overhead. In the breakfast room, the smell of fresh orange juice and fatty bacon welcomed the tourists. All the lamps were lit, in an attempt to drive away the gloom, for it was still dark out.

People were getting off the train and making their way in droves to the hotel. Soon there was no more room on the terrace, and the balconies were full. The station platform was full too – but it was hard making out the crowd through the driving rain.

A rumour swept the throng. It was raining too hard. Mr. Wain and his son would cancel their show. But before the whisper could become a roar, Mr. Wain stepped onto the platform erected for him, and waved his arms. He was dressed in his wetsuit, and Thomas, standing behind him, was likewise dressed. The crowd applauded, the sound merging with the pelting rain.

"We are proud to be a part of this endeavour," said the mayor, coming to stand beside Mr. Wain and shaking his hand. "We wish you and your son the best of luck."

Flashbulbs went off like lightning, showing the drenched crowd, Mr. Wain's beaming face, and Thomas, looking for someone in the crowd.

Where was Viola? I searched for her, but didn't see her. It seemed unimportant, though. I helped Sam carry the equipment. We followed the men through the streets to a small dock, where the last check was made to insure all the equipment was in order.

When everything was ready, or seemed so, Viola came running to the dock. Her hair streamed with water, her face looked like wet chalk and her lips, white in her pale face, were twisted. "Thomas!" she cried.

She ran to him, and he hugged her. "Silly goose, you're all wet," he scolded. "Where is your umbrella?"

"I've gone to see Mr. Kinas," she gasped.

"My dear! How thoughtful." Mr Wain took her hand in his. "You're frozen. Hurry back to the hotel and get a hot tea. Tobias! See that Miss Viola gets something hot to drink – and that she changes into dry clothes."

"I've been to see Mr. Kinas, and I've made sure he won't be at the foot of the falls to reception you." Her voice was shrill. "He won't be there. You'll have to stop this folly now. Please, I beg you!"

"Don't fret, Viola! It was part of my plan!" Mr. Wain crowed. "I knew you would try to stop us. But never fear, I have everything under control."

Thomas gave her a fond look. "Father was right. Don't worry Vee, it was all to get you off our backs for a bit. Mr. Kinas was only hired to help us carry our equipment. But others will be at the foot of the falls, there's bound to be a big crowd there. So don't worry. Give me a kiss. There now, go back to the hotel with Tobias. We'll see you in half an hour."

"In exactly twenty three minutes," said Mr. Wain. He pulled his mask over his face and gave a thumb up to the waiting crowd. Most people had bet that they would not stop the feat, and a roar of approval rang out.

Viola and I watched as they slid into the black water. The surface of the river was chopped to ribbons by pelting rain, grey shrouded them, and then they were gone.

Viola gave a sob and covered her face with her hands. I took her elbow and led her to the hotel. She hardly seemed to realize we were walking. She kept stumbling. Before we got there, she looked up at me and said, "I must get Mr. Kinas. Come with me, we have to hurry. His presence is capital."

I shook my head, motioning to the hotel, but she skirted the crowd and headed down the rain-slick street, holding her skirts high, dashing towards the tinker's house. I followed her. At the house, she pounded on the door, and sobbing, nearly fell into the tinker's arm when he opened it.

"Quick, we must hurry!" she shrieked. "Get your cart."

The man scratched his head. "I wanted to see the feat anyhow," he said. "I was a bit put out when you axed me to stay put." He shuffled to the backyard, while Viola paced his tilting porch, her hands wringing. "Hurry!" she beseeched.

His mule was hitched to the cart, and we scrambled into it. There was a canvas roof, so we were out of the rain. We trotted the back way – the main street was packed with bystanders. Then we went down the hill towards the swamp. Mr. Kinas held to the brakes

with both hands, while we clung to the sides of the cart. The mule slipped and slid, his iron-shod hooves throwing sparks. At the bottom, the rain stopped. It stopped so suddenly I thought for a minute I'd gone deaf as well as mute, and I clapped my hands to my ears.

"Thomas!" I wasn't deaf. Viola's shriek nearly split my head open. She leapt out of the cart, rushing over the rocks and boulders to the water's edge. She cried, "Thomas! Where are you? Thomas!" She turned to me, her face tragic. "Where are the reporters? Where is the crowd?"

"I s'pose they all stayed uphill." Mr. Kinas shrugged. "What am I s'posed to do now?"

"Help me find them," screamed Viola.

We searched for hours. People trickled down the hill, bored from waiting so long. The sun came out, and steam rose off the round rock and mist started to fill the swamp. Viola was maddened with grief. She waded hip-deep into the water, calling Thomas's name until she lost her voice. Mr. Kinas and I waded next to her. We felt guilty, somehow. She never said it, but we knew we'd failed her. If Mr. Kinas had been at his post, he would have seen them rush by. He would have seen the bright yellow surfboards, the neon orange of their suits and the flashy pink helmets. He could have said where they'd gone, into which tributary they'd been swept into the swamp – for there were many, many slender swift arms of water reaching into the swamp from the white-water river. There were too many to search. When dusk came, and it started raining anew, the search was called off. Temporarily, assured the mayor, urging Viola into Mr. Kinas's cart and slapping the mule's rump with a heavy hand.

"We'll keep searching, won't we?" she begged, her voice a mere whisper.

"Of course." Mr. Kinas patted her back and I had the audacity to hug her. My heart felt as if it were about to explode. I was holding the woman I loved. Maybe she would forget about her fiancé. Would she stay here? Where would she go? I would offer her a place to stay, I decided. I accompanied her back to the hotel and saw her to her room. She turned just before she shut the door and touched my cheek.

"Thank you, Toby. You're a good friend."

That night, she vanished, and the next morning the full extent of the scam was revealed. As everyone had searched the river and swamp, someone had broken into nearly all the hotels in the area and stolen the money and jewellery in the safes. Even the shops were not spared. Their cash registers had been vandalized. A small fortune was missing. As were all the Wain's luggage. Viola took off with her small bag and no one saw her get on the train or take a cart out of town, so it was figured someone had come to get her.

"Someone, huh. We know who that was," said Mr. Harvey darkly. "Damn river-floaters tricked us completely."

The rain stopped that afternoon, but it was a long time before the sun brightened any of our spirits.