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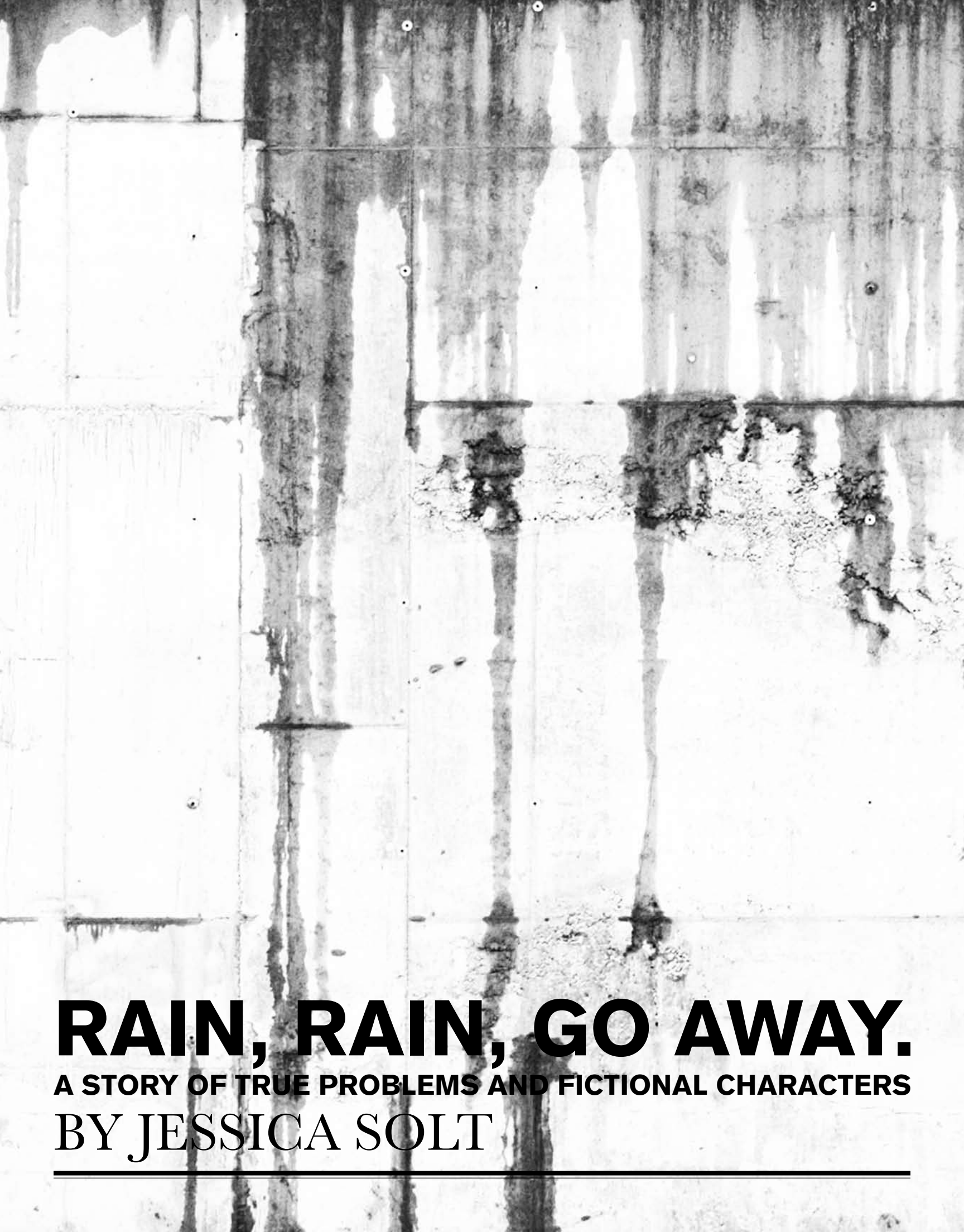
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RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY.

A STORY OF TRUE PROBLEMS AND FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

BY JESSICA SOLT

One of the inconveniences of living on the top floor of a five-story building with leaks is that on a rainy day, you're the one getting wet.

Marta curses in Mexican lingo as she kicks a baby blue bucket under one of the six damp cracks that adorn the ceiling. She hopes she were used to getting wet indoors. Her apron, securely fastened around her waist, holds the stains of many hours of kitchen labor. She has now become immune to the passing of cockroaches. The scent of wet dirt is overshadowed by the smell of fried chicken from the restaurant below.

A stream of unstoppable rain, accompanied by roaring thunder, has been falling for the last thirty minutes. The Duarte family doesn't seem to mind the outer chaos. The youngest of three, Miguelito, has overcome the thunder phobia by now. As far as everyone is concerned, the only thing that eventually quiets down is the sky outside.

The Duartes live right in the center of Spanish Harlem. There is one of the thousands of low-income households that live day to day on minimum wages and in overcrowded spaces. At times like these, it is not extremely uncommon to find landlords who choose to oversee the lack of legal papers to accommodate their tenants, in the hopes of keeping the monthly check coming. Some even bend the rules a little further and introduce more inhabitants per household than it would ever be humanely allowed; which inevitably result in unfulfilled requests for better living conditions.

Enrique Duarte came from California, where he used to work in the tomato fields. His long-time friend, Lucas, had settled in the New York area a few years ago and had claimed that illegal city dwellers found better opportunities than those working as farmers under the burning sun on eighteen hour shifts. Enrique now spends most of his days flipping burgers at a world-renowned joint and selling T-shirts with catchy phrases outside Yankee Stadium, on weekends. Crossing the border was so much of an ordeal for the Duartes that finding their way cross-country to New York was *pan comido*^[1]. Enrique was the first one to arrive with the promise that his wife, Martha, three children, Georgina, Rosa, and Miguel, and sister in law, Josefina, would have a decent place to

live. One can only stop and wonder how the word 'decent' can morph into a million different meanings. 'Decent' for any given professional New Yorker only means 'unattainable' to someone like one of the many Enrique Duartes that roam the city of New York.

Living in Manhattan is a luxury, and has been this way for quite a while. Most single professionals, despite master degrees, PhD's, and multiple jobs, still cannot afford to live without the inconvenience of roommates. If privacy is a must, then prepare for tiny spaces they shall.

For illegal immigrants, the housing situation must occupy the second or third spot in their long list of worries. Since the end of 2008, when the precarious job situation plummeted, hundreds of corporations were forced to 'let go' thousands of many qualified employees. For Americans, this meant losing a regular income; for many immigrants, it meant packing their belongings and returning to their place of origin, as some were better off going back to bad conditions in the land they call home, than in foreign territory. Despite the difficulties some choose to stay.

According to research performed by the Pratt Center for Community Development, immigrants are three times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than native-born New Yorkers. In addition, many immigrant families live in illegally converted basements or other spaces, and about half of survey respondents knew of families living in illegal units^[2]. These spaces are often unsanitary and extremely dangerous. For those who feel the pinch, this is often all they can really afford.

Enrique Duarte and his family are acquainted with these issues. The lack of comfort is daily endured by the three adults and three children (including one teenager) that live under the same leaky roof. The one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment possesses many threats that trespass the boundaries of privacy and health-related concerns. This apple is just not big enough for six.

The overpopulation problems in New York City go back as far as 1910. In fact, then Mayor Gaynor expressed the need for a Committee on Congestion and Population to solve the civic concern. From their perspective, "New Yorkers would eventually have to abandon Manhattan almost completely as

a residential section of the city and cross the East River and the Hudson in search of homes^[3]." Architect George W. Chance was quick to submit a solution to the Committee: the creation of two-story, one-family homes in the nearby boroughs of Astoria, Brooklyn and Bronx, featuring spaces of 15X23 ft. These would be able to hold four bedrooms and one bathroom, suitable for a family of six, without the use of the living room for sleeping. The plan also included a vegetable garden for each home and common playground and fountain. Today, this seems taken out of a fairy tale. Even with the capabilities to build sky-high buildings and luxurious Trump Towers, some families just can't avoid laughing at Architect Chance's ideals.

Today is 'taquitos' day at the Duarte's home. Even within this modest space, the family manages to have an agreeable meal together and forget, for a while, about the tempest. Martha and her sister Josefina are deep frying tortillas to later fill them with beans, and a small portion of chicken. The murmur of hot oil spurting, children playing, a teenager dancing to the sound of a radio, lightning, and the loud noise of the T.V., are all intertwined in a big knotted yarn. Maybe they already forgot the meaning of the word comfort; perhaps they are more interested in seizing this moment and giving way to family time. Someday, hopefully, these burdened families will live in better conditions. If we take into account that minorities will be responsible for 68 percent of the 14.6 million projected growth in households from 2005 to 2015^[4], it only makes sense that they should be able to afford asking for plumbing services and have their petition heard.

Meanwhile, Enrique is hooked on the Sunday soccer game. A fat drop of rain manages its way through a crack in the roof and onto the hand that holds the remote. He puts it down and walks towards the window to poke his head outside, hoping to stop bad weather with a mean stare at the sky. 'This rain should go where the tomatoes are, we don't need rain over here,' he thinks, as he finds his way back to the couch.

[1] Translation: Mexican expression that means "extremely easy".

[2] Confronting the Housing Squeeze: Challenges Facing Immigrant Tenants, and What New York Can Do Pratt Center for Community Development, with the New York Immigrant Housing Collaborative, December 2008

[3] One family homes to solve New York's congestion, New York Times, May 29, 1910.

[4] The state of Nation's Housing 2007, Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University.

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