

I Can't Stand The Rain

By

Jon Fox

I can't stand the rain. Who first sung that? Whoever it was, I bet they didn't have my issues. I mean, I *really* can't stand the rain.

My name's Mike. Mike McKenna and I you're listening to a... well... a suicide voice memo I guess you'd call it. It's so much more interesting than the old note and, besides, I'm too tired to write right now. Too tired to do anything. Actually, if I'm honest, the 'suicide' bit of my 'suicide voice memo' is neither here nor there. It's just a bit of information about what happened next. You know, so you're not left thinking 'what happened next?' when you get to the end. Kinda like having the epilogue where the preface should be. Sorry... I'm rambling a bit, forgive me.

No, the reason I say it's neither here nor there is because this story – my life story I suppose - is a curious tale that I'd just like people to know about. It should be documented, I think, straight from the horse's mouth. By the way, anything I don't cover now you'll find on-line on Wikipedia or something. Possibly.

Enough. So, to my story, my story... yes my story. Okay, so I have a... Well, 'disability' is the wrong word for it really; I have what you might call a 'visual impairment'. I don't mean I can't see too well - I see fine. No, you see *I'm* the visual impairment. Or rather my body is. Sorry, I'm not describing this very well. The thing of it is; I'm fading. Washing out. Disappearing. And it's because of the weather.

Hang on. You might not get what I mean. Let me start over and try to explain myself a little better. So you know when you leave something outdoors for ages, it kind of fades. You know, like a car or something that's been

abandoned and uncared for, it sort of bleaches out. It faces the elements and just... fades. Well, that's what's happening to me. Weather is killing me.

Okay, some history: My Mum first noticed my 'fading' when I was just a toddler. We spent a holiday in North Wales (which I personally don't remember - I was lucky, according to my Dad, as he'd spent so long trying to forget it) and it pissed it down, non-stop. Being the kind of age where sitting indoors wasn't a viable option, I would, according to my mother, wander out and play in the rain with my sister, Sam, and our pet Collie, the imaginatively named 'Shep' (the dog I *do* remember). After a week or so of frolicking in the unwelcoming thermosphere of northwestern Wales, Mum remarked that I looked 'paler'. She kept insisting I was ill, but, skin tone aside, I was in seemingly good health. Dad said he couldn't really see a difference. But after one more week of messing around in the Welsh thunderstorms I was definitely off colour. Literally. It was enough for Mum to take me to the doctors.

So, by now you're thinking two things:

- 1, I'm crazy.
- 2, This is a science fiction story.

I would say that, in a way, both are correct, but it doesn't mean that both aren't sort of true. Anyway, if you're thinking both of those things, you're in good company. Our family doctor certainly thought both of those things. But Mum, bless her, was very insistent, despite the quack throwing her some highly incredulous looks in her direction. Inevitably the doc couldn't find anything wrong - I'm not going to waste your time or mine with the various tests and questions that I went through as a man of science tried to apply logic to my condition - but with my mother's insistence on a second opinion, off to the

hospital I went for more tests and more questions. I've been back dozens, nee hundreds of times since. The doctors now come to see me.

During my time on earth I've had tests for (in alphabetical order) Actinic Keratosis/Solar Keratosis, Alopecia Areata, Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC), Discoid Eczema, Eczema and dermatitis, Epidermolysis Bullosa Simplex, Hidradenitis, Ichthyosis, Keratosis Pilaris, Pemphigus Vulgaris, Psoriasis, Scabies, Seborrhoeic Warts/Keratosis (Basal Cell Papillomas), Vascular Birthmarks and Vitiligo to name just a handful.

And the results? Nothing. Not a thing. There's absolutely nothing wrong with me, medically speaking. Apart from that I'm fading. So, back to when I was kid, as long as I felt 'okay in myself' (whatever *that* means), it was suggested that I carry on life as normal. Huh.

'Normal' lasted about three months. Meteorologically, it was one hell of a summer. Sun, rain, sun, rain, heat wave, downpour. School finished and, 'carrying on as normal' I spent most of the summer outside with my schoolmates.

Everyday I would fade a little more. I could tell without even looking in a mirror – my mother's expression telling me that things were not getting any better.

Then, one Friday I remember for some reason, I had a game of football out in the rain for about three hours, which was followed by another five hours of sunshine. Toward the end of the day even my normally stoical friends suddenly began looking at me differently. You could actually see through the end of my fingertips, the little capillaries standing proud. They politely suggested that I go home and show my mother.

Unsurprisingly she freaked. I never went to school again.

I'm just going to stop there. Have a rest and glass of water. Bear with me.
There's not long to go now.

Okay, that's better.

So, Mum and Dad did brilliantly. Schooled me as best they could. Worked hard to afford private tutors. Even set up a little gym to keep me fit – really cute with weights and the like. But they would never let me outside. I remember Mum was especially vigilant. Hell, they were scared and, to tell you the truth, I was scared too. Scared enough never step out of the house, that's for sure. Scared enough to avoid windows, doors, the cat flap. Anything that I thought would make me fade. Just the darkest corners of the house would do. It was like I'd put myself in storage or something.

Oh, hang on... Actually, I tell a lie. I *did* go out once or twice. Yeah, I was dressed as a Ninja. Yep. That's right. You see, until the day I came home with the faded digits, Dad wasn't convinced my ailment was... well, *real* I suppose. Yeah, by that point even *he* started to believe at that point. But he couldn't stand the thought of me staying in - cooped up and held prisoner in my own home. He felt that 'every boy should be out playing football' or running around or whatever. Yeah, he really was an advocate for 'the Great Outdoors'. It depressed him that, all of a sudden, my life – our lives – were so badly compromised. I mean it really depressed him. More so than me I think. I once caught him crying in his study. It might not have been about me (and I tried to tell myself that at the time), but I suspect it was. To the day he died, he never knew I'd seen that. But, never mind...

Anyway, one day he decided to do something about it and he made me an outfit. A Ninja outfit. You know the ones – all black with just the eyeholes,

designed for stealth. He could have made it out of any colour I suppose, but he stuck to black because he thought I could tell my friends that I was cool, like a real Ninja. Hey, give the man a break. I was only young. It makes me cry every time I remember him saying that to me. Mum wasn't convinced, I could tell, but she went along with it, eventually. They even had an argument about whether a white outfit would be better or whether it made me look like a grand Wizard out of the KKK. And Sam? She had a field day. When it came to taking the piss, she couldn't believe her luck. Until Dad gave her the bollocking of her life, that was. She never said a word after that and, come to think of it, she's kept quiet from that day on. I think it's because at that point she finally realized what it all meant to Dad. To all of us.

So I donned my ninja outfit and out I went, down to the park. I made Mum and Dad stay at home while I went. I was already feeling uncool enough dressed as a highly trained martial arts agent without having my parents in tow to emphasise the point. I didn't even get to the end of the road before some shouted out 'Hey! Nice Burka!' I carried on, regardless. When I got to the park, my mates were all there, along with some other school acquaintances.

My friends tried, bless them, they really did... but after a while even my closest pals had to join in the berating. And I don't blame them – it was very funny. I don't blame anyone. I would have done it myself. But, well... I guess at the time it was just a little too much. I ran home, but even that turned into a nightmare as some of the kids ran after me and started shouting out, in their best Martial Arts Instructor's voice, how I 'a true Ninja must run like wind with invisible stealth.'

Ironically it was only a few weeks later that we discovered that clothes made no difference. Dad sent me out into the back garden in a rain mac one sunny days to 'get some exercise', but I still began to fade all over. I'll always love my Dad for trying.

So that was the end of my 'outdoor' days.

Just going to take another sip.

Okay. So, where are we? Well:

- 1, The medical doctors don't know what's wrong.
- 2, I am stuck inside with a condition that, it appears, will be with me for the rest of my life.
- 3, I am beginning to, or have totally become mentally scarred about the great outdoors.

Conclusion: Shrink. Psychiatrist I mean. Not like Alice in Wonderland.

Dr. Greenstreet first appeared that winter. A gentle, slightly overweight man who wore a fine line in tweed. I knew my folks had got him in to help me 'balance my mental health'. I think they also thought somehow that perhaps my condition might be caused by a psychological condition. Ha! Talk about grasping at straws. So, Greenstreet came. And he left. And he came again for a few more weeks. And, to give him his dues, he's still coming, even after all these years. He's a nice guy really. But he's got things wrong. To this day he keeps telling me I've got 'acute agoraphobia'. No shit. I'll die if I go out, so yeah, if by 'acute agoraphobia' you mean 'fear of outdoors', I'd say so. I'M FADING. And I don't know for sure what happens when I fade completely, but I'm pretty sure I'll die.

How's that for a diagnosis? Still, he comes and chats and that's fine. Anyway, I'm fast approaching overcoming my fear of the outdoors. Any moment now.

But before that moment I want to finish my story.

Life jogged on, as it tends to do. Eventually Sam went to Uni. She was reluctant to leave me, which was very sweet, but she had to go. Then it was just the three of us. Oh, and Mogwai, our recently acquired cat. Ginger thing. Very cute. Almost everyday I peaked through the blinds and looked out onto our back garden and onto the road beyond and, apart from what David Attenborough showed me on television, that was my world: As far as the traffic lights on Castleman Road.

Sam called once a week. Sometimes twice. She really cared and, being away, she was really worried - more than anyone else in the family by that time. I guess Mum, Dad and me just learned how to get on with it and it wasn't long that we all became experts in avoiding each other around the house, keeping any potential conflicts at bay. Still the fading continued in tiny increments - no matter how hard I tried there was always a... well, I suppose you'd call it a 'natural fading.' I think that's just getting old. I mean, if you think about it, we're *all* fading in one way or another. Physically, mentally... getting smaller, losing our cells, slowly making our way back into the atmosphere. When you put it like that, I shouldn't have spent so much time feeling sorry for myself. Many people live with worse conditions than mine. That's what I thought, until one day it went from 'condition' to 'curse', just as I knew it would. July 11th 2001 it says in my diary. My parents were out that day. They hardly ever left me, but they did that day. I made a note of it.

I remember it. I remember it well... I'm lying on my bed, my curtain's closed, a record on my deck. Then I hear a bang from the road outside. I get up and peak from below my curtains to the garden and onto the road beyond. A bright, sunny day. A day that's perfect for bleaching out young adults. A car has collided with a lamppost and other cars are pulling up to rubberneck. At first I consider this a lucky thing – some entertainment from the world outside is a rare occurrence for me. Then I see Mogwai. I see him as clear as I see the bright blue sky on that day. He is breathing. Barely. But the day is so bright that I *can* make out the rapid rise and fall of his abdomen, desperately drawing in any and all of the oxygen he can. I can see it all. So, of course I do nothing. What can I do? Go out and help? No. Call someone? Who?

The driver, the one I assume has hit the cat, is stunned. I can see that and I feel sorry for him. I keep watching. I keep watching him and I keep watching Mogwai. But Mogwai has changed now. He's gone limp. I squint to make out the rise and fall rise and fall, but he's still. I don't *think* I can see any breathing now... No, I'm sure I don't. The driver is looking from Mogwai to our house. I drop the bottom of the curtain from which I've been observing everything. What if he comes to the door? How can I answer the door? How do I explain the reason for not coming outside to help my poor cat? The doorbell rings. I do the only thing I can do. I cry for the cat.

Well, that was that day; some years ago now. It was a low point and if I've learnt anything from life is that once one thing goes wrong, it rarely gets better. Just like fading, it never gets better. Never. Mogwai was just the beginning.

Just a minute. This seems like a good place to take a moment.

Okay, I can't sit here all day. I'm going out! Mum's got some new garden furniture, which she uses a lot on sunny days. My folks bought it last summer. She has a lot of visitors since Dad's heart attack, so it turns out that it was a good investment in the end. But it's pissing it down at the moment, so no one's out there. I'm stripping off down to my underwear (I never saw the point in buying swimming trunks) and I'm going to have a long sit in the rain. Finally breathe in the Great Outdoors: Listen to the birds. Feel the rain on my skin. Touch the wet lawn. Do all the things that Dad wanted me to do. I can look up to the cloudy sky once again, just like I did as a kid. I can tell Dad how sorry I am that I couldn't come out and comfort him in the garden as he lay there dying, a garden trowel in one hand, the other clutching his chest. And me, just watching it all from my bedroom window. Unable to do anything. Not one thing.

Fading away doesn't seem like such a bad thing to me now. Mum's away for the whole day. I think that should be long enough.

Hey – you never know what happens when you fade altogether. Perhaps I'll get to see everyone again – Dad... Mogwai.

I just can't guarantee they'll see me.

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