

## The Smell of Rain

*“Out of difficulties grow miracles.”*  
—Jean De La Bruyere

“Dakota, I smell the coming of rain,” Granddaddy said as we walked through the park on this cool, breezy fall day.

I gave him a sideways look, thinking how weird his statement was and couldn’t help but notice Granddaddy was still in pretty good shape for an old guy. I haven’t seen him a lot over the years, but he hasn’t changed much. His body is still lean and muscular. He still cuts his hair the same way—military style.

I don’t know how old he is, but I’m certain he’s a lot older than he looks. The only thing that’s really changed over the years is that his hair has turned grey. It looks good though; kind of majestic even. He definitely looks like the kind of guy who’s been around and just knows stuff.

As I was studying him, I realized that in some ways his physique is kind of like mine—a much older version, of course. He must have read my mind because he looked at me like he was sizing me up too.

“You’ve been working out, Dakota . . . A lot by the looks of it,” he said.

“Yup.” I flexed a bicep to show off a little.

“You know, you remind me a little bit of myself when I was your age,” he said with a nod of approval. “Of course you are your own man. You aren’t me. You aren’t your father, either. You’re just you. Dakota. So . . . are you wondering why I chose the park for us to spend this special day together?”

“Sure.”

“Because this is the perfect place for me to share some very important lessons with you today.”

“Lessons? Lessons for what?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” he said. “But once you learn these lessons, you’ll have a deeper understanding of how to make your way in this world. You’ll be better prepared to grow into someone people

will respect and look up to. You won't have to settle for anything, either. You'll be able to choose work you love, but also work that has purpose and meaning. You'll be in a position to be a leader too. People will respect you as a leader, and as a leader, in one way or another, you'll be well compensated for your contributions to making this world a better place for yourself and everyone else you come in contact with."

"That sounds good," I said thoughtfully. A leader? I hadn't really thought of myself as a leader, but I liked the sound of it. I liked the thought of being able to make decisions instead of being told what to do.

Granddaddy continued, "The first of these very important lessons is represented by this walk in the park. The lesson is that the simple things in life really can be some of the best things in life. Always make time in your busy life to enjoy them. Take a relaxing walk in the park. Take time to appreciate a sunrise or a sunset. Take a moment to admire a bird in flight. Remember and cherish your first kiss with your girlfriend."

He stopped walking and looked straight at me.

"Don't let your life get so complicated that you end up negotiating away your values and not living up to your highest potential. Never forget the miracle you truly are, or all the miracles you're surrounded by every day. When you take the time to look at the world and begin to see all the possibilities around you, you'll always be able to find the strength to do what's right." He smiled and then looked up at the sky.

"Yup. Definitely a storm on the way."

I looked up at the sky and then at him, but he'd started walking again. My gut was telling me there was some truth to what he was saying, but I didn't really see him often enough to know if I could trust everything he said. Maybe he was just a cool older guy who told good stories.

He had an aura of authority, though, and talked with the deliberate wisdom of an old soldier. I knew he'd seen a lot as a World War II fighter pilot, but I wasn't convinced he could smell the "coming of rain." I sniffed the air, but I couldn't smell anything.

I couldn't see any shelter to run to even if it did start to rain. He must have been reading my mind.

"It'll be okay. I've weathered many storms in my life much worse than the one headed our way," he said clapping a hand on my shoulder. "I know you're only 16 years old Dakota, but I have the feeling you might have already weathered a few storms worse than the one headed this way too."

At first, I thought he was talking about the rain, but Granddaddy had a way of talking about things that made a person think. It was one of the things I liked about him.

Granddaddy continued walking.

"As a matter of fact, as unusual as it may sound, I love rain storms now. Maybe you will too someday. They remind me of the awesome power of my Creator. Rain doesn't discriminate. If we get caught in the rain, it will soak us without a care for who we are or where we came from. It doesn't matter how soaked we get, either. The enduring power of the sun will indiscriminately dry all of us off."

"Getting caught in the rain reminds me of how strong and how weak we can be at the exact same time. The rain and the sun are two more of life's miracles working together to remind us of life's cycles. Sort of like the movie *The Lion King* and the circle of life it described. Of course, the big difference between the real thing and the movie is that the movie is the same every time you watch it. The rain, the sun, our lives . . . well . . . they're all a little bit more unpredictable. When you pay attention, though, it gets easier to figure out what's important and what's trivial. If things seem overwhelming, just look up at the sky and suddenly your problems will seem small alongside all the majesty and wonder going on up there."

I looked up at the sky again, trying to figure out what Granddaddy was saying without having to ask him to explain it. His words made me think about thunderstorms and maybe even about other kinds of storms I'd gone through over the years. I remember what they'd felt like, and I didn't like thinking about those times anymore than I liked the thought of getting caught in the rain today. What did he know about me? Did he know about my past? How could he? He wasn't around enough to know that much, but he was right about one thing: I did have a tough life.

School wasn't easy for me. Home wasn't much better. It was always loud, chaotic, and stressful, just like it was for everyone else who lived in my neighborhood. At least I'd learned a few things to make it easier to deal with. And what could I do about it anyway? That was the way life was for us. And even though my life wasn't perfect, I still had a better life than a lot of other people. At least I had my sports and a great girlfriend.

My girlfriend is the best thing in my life. She's tall, very athletic, and beautiful. She has big, beautiful brown eyes and long, flowing hair that's brown with blond highlights. Sometimes she reminds me of one of those music divas—minus the attitude. She's awesome at basketball and track and is a great person with a heart of gold. She's perfect, except for the fact that she's always losing her keys. I think it's so cute when she loses them. I try not to laugh while she fumbles through her purse trying to find them. After a few failed attempts, she gets frustrated, sighs, and then tips her purse upside down, spilling the contents onto the table. Then presto, like magic, the keys are there, sitting on top of the rubble she calls "all her stuff." I know how fortunate I am to have someone like her in my life because most of my friends aren't as lucky. They don't have someone solid in their life; someone they can count on and hold on to when times are tough. It probably feels to them like the sun doesn't shine much in their world. For them, it's dark skies and storm clouds most of the time. My girlfriend is like the sun. I just feel better when she's around.

It's tough when you feel like there's no one around who cares. I guess that might be one of the reasons so many of my old friends have turned away from school, sports, and even the law. They don't feel like there's anybody who really cares about them. Instead, they turn to gangs and end up a part of all the drugs, crime, and fighting that comes along with them.

It doesn't seem that long ago that we used to laugh and play in the streets and didn't have to worry about looking over our shoulder all the time. We played sports and pretended we were superstars hitting home runs, scoring touchdowns, or sinking the winning basket.

I miss those days sometimes. We used to have such a great time. We had our sports and our friendships, but time kept moving and we started getting caught up in what was going on around us.

Before too long, we were fighting in the streets too. After a while, we turned to different things.

I stuck with sports and joined teams. I learned it took discipline to get better and I liked it. I liked the routine. I learned about persistence, but my old friends didn't see the value of organized sports. To them, it looked like too much work and too much being bossed around. For me, it was an outlet. I got to channel the same frustration, anger, and aggression we all felt into something a whole other group of people cheered for.

I like how physically demanding the sports I play are. I get a kick out of the fact that it's legal to hit the enemy as hard as I can on the football field without worrying about being arrested for it. I find it amazing that people praise me and admire me for brawling on the wrestling mat in front of stands full of bystanders instead of suspending me. Even the principal watches and then congratulates me after I've skillfully nailed my opponent to the ground.

With sports, I get to focus all my intensity into becoming a force to be reckoned with in both wrestling and football. Turning to sports made it easier for me to walk away from fighting in the streets. Now I put my energy to good use by putting up a good fight in competitive sports. I know I'm only 16 years old, but I'm pretty lucky to have already figured out other ways to channel my anger. I use it to punish the weights in the weight room with a ferocity rarely seen in guys my age. I've grown muscle and developed incredible strength for my age too. Being so strong has also enabled me to keep up with the older varsity guys in both football and wrestling. I know playing sports has helped keep me out of trouble with the police too. In my neighborhood, probably a lot of neighborhoods, you don't always have to be committing a crime to get the police to pay attention to you. They still might look at me now, but it's different.

Playing sports has created this weird phenomenon in my life. In general, people look at me differently. They don't look at me like I'm a thug or another "reject" from the streets. They don't talk about me as just another one of those kids who grew up in a "dysfunctional" family. Instead, people respect me.

Strangers say hi to me everywhere I go. They tell me they saw me play or wrestle or that they'd read in the newspaper about what

I did. People are always congratulating me now. Once a kid even asked me for my autograph! It blows my mind that I get all this positive attention for putting up a good fight in sports rather than on the streets! Sometimes it's a little strange too because it feels like people are watching me and waiting to see what I'll do next. But maybe that's what people do anyway. They just kind of watch each other to see who's going to do something worth watching. How strange life is! Sometimes my thoughts wander, and I start thinking really deep about the things going on around me, or about things I read in school, and then it's like I become the watcher. Sometimes I get really deep into my thoughts and start making weird paradoxical connections, like seeing the adults at school telling kids not to be angry and not to fight, but then turning around and praising me for putting up a good fight in sports. I also think that in a bizarre way, my experience from the streets and the anger I felt as a result of some of the things I've had to deal with have been beneficial to me. Would I have made the varsity wrestling team as a freshman without any formal training if I hadn't started on the streets?

I don't know. I know there's a big difference between a 14-year-old and an 18-year-old. Fourteen-year-olds are usually significantly over-matched and can't compete against 18-year-olds. Fourteen-year-olds with no formal training just don't make varsity teams. But I did! Some people say I'm a natural, and maybe they're right, but I want to believe there's more to it than that. I mean . . . I'm the one who did it, right?

Okay, I might have gotten a head start with wrestling from fighting when I was younger. But then I learned about gladiators, and I wondered if maybe they grew up dealing with some of the same stuff. Did Roman adults go around telling Rome's gladiators not to be angry or fight in the streets when they were growing up? Some of those ancient gladiators made it all the way to the Roman Coliseum!

I know we need order in this world, but I think it's a little bit ironic. When we're kids, they tell us not to fight, but we have famous warriors in our history books and famous prize fighters on TV. They tell us not to do it, but the better we are at it, the more handsomely paid and praised we are for it.

Sometimes it feels like there's a lot of distance between the streets and the arena. There wasn't really any "glory of the battle" when I was fighting—just survival. I didn't want to continue with the chaos of that path even though a lot of my old friends are still there. My decision to focus on sports has been much more productive than fighting in the streets and it keeps me out of trouble. I just wish my old friends had chosen sports over the streets too!