THE LIGHTNING MAN

The thunder woke her. Then she had dressed, gathered her things, and waited for the sounds beyond her door, where she expected to hear the frantic desperation of a husband's boots running towards her home at this late hour. The midwife had no love for nights like these, when the sky opened and rain tore into the dusty dry land of her little town. Rain was rare in Lowell, and thunderstorms rarer still, and the midwife knew that tonight was a bad night to bring a baby into the world. It wasn't yet dawn, and lightning intermittently cut the darkness.

Farmer's boots splashed through puddles outside, as she had expected. His fat, clumsy knuckles pounded on her door. She was already turning the handle, and reaching for the leather bag she inherited from her mother. She kept it by her door with her linens and tools inside, readily available at any hour. She had midwifed many of the births in Lowell, all of them, in fact, since her mother passed away, but never before had she drawn a child into a thunderstorm. Just as farmers knew when the field must be harvested and had the sense for those things built into them, the midwife knew things also. She had the intuition of her trade, as did the generations of midwives before her. She awoke and knew this storm would bring a child.

The child was in trouble, twisted around the wrong way and the midwife knew what to do. It took the night, and the dawn, but by day, though the sky was black with storm, the midwife had turned the infant enough that it was free to be born. The farmer now had his fifth child, a boy, and the boy's mother rested and recovered from a hard labor. The newborn was healthy despite his struggle for air, though there was a blue about his skin that did not immediately pink as newborns are expected to.

The baby wailed as babies do, and remained faintly blue in his face and fingers for the days after, while the midwife watched over him and his mother. Outside, as loud as the baby cried, the storm raged, for days, and months, thereafter, he cried and it rained.

The baby grew, and as he grew his crying remained loud and the rain always followed. During the short periods when the baby was quiet the rain softened to a drizzle, and occasionally a muted sun could be seen through clouds.

His father enjoyed the sounds of this distress, in the way that men appreciate the tenacity of their offspring. Fathers name the cries of their children, and this father was no different. If the child had been born to a warrior, that father would proudly tolerate crying and happily tell you that his child's cry was certainly the cry of a mighty warrior, like himself. He knew his child would grow to be mighty. Had the boy been born to a King the raucous screams would be celebrated, and the King would hear the cry of entitlement such that only a great King could ever cry. His baby would grow rule. This boy was born to a farmer, who heard his son cry a cry that came from beneath the earth itself. From the earth the cries came, and the father knew it was the cry of a farmer, as it certainly must be, and so it was.

The father slept soundly on the nights that he came home to sleep. Not even the baby wailing could wake the man, for like all the farmers, he spent his days and much of his nights working the lands, trying his hardest to manage their failing crops and livestock amidst the vast amount of water that had flooded their once dusty little town of Lowell. Now the dust was gone, replaced by rivers, ponds, and a growing deluge that threatened to swallow it all. The howling windy storms cut and pushed and swept their farmlands and carried it away in a river, and though they lost much of what they had, some days were better than others. Some days there was sunshine, and other nights there even shone the moon, and it was on those rare occasions that the farmers could breathe easier, and wonder why they were tormented so. No one dared to say that they were cursed, but they thought it and wondered if there was someone to blame. They blamed many things for their problem, but not one of them thought to point a finger at a baby. Infants can't be blamed for things, as everyone knows, but the baby cried, and when he cried it rained, and the coincidence was, for the time being, ignored.

For two more years it rained, and the boy came to the age of speech and dreams, and on this night he was babbling and whimpering and unable to awaken as one nightmare rolled over another, while outside, a very bad storm swelled up in the darkness, the likes of which the little town had not yet seen. The boy became fevered and his mother woke to comfort him. Her farmer husband had gone out in the night to save the town's cows from being drowned, and thought she knew her husband was in the company of many strong men, still she worried.

The swollen banks of the river broke, and the flooded grasslands forced the main herd into two smaller ones. One group escaped to higher ground while the other half was stuck in the darkness with banks of a splintering river rising around them.

The people of Lowell had suffered in the seasons and years of foul weather, and could not afford to lose half their cattle. Armed with rope and the will to defend their home, the men from the town had set out into the night to pull the cows through the flood, despite the lightning and the rain, to the safety of higher ground.

The boy whimpered in his bed, dreaming fevered dreams. His mother stayed by his side and sent her eldest daughter to fetch an elixir that would break his fever. The midwife came and provided the assurance she could, but her brows were taut with worry. The mother saw this and asked frightened questions about her son, but for a while the midwife only stared out the window. Eventually, she said that, yes, the boy's fever would break, but it wasn't the boy that made her worry so, it was the storm. The midwife alone knew the boy's secret.

The midwife stayed as much for the boy as for his mother, who she eventually calmed enough to fall asleep an hour before the rising sun began to gray the black overcast. At dawn the boy awoke from his dream and the storm abated, and in the faint light of the hidden sun, there came a knock on their door.

Farmers stood outside, wet, exhausted, and related to her the story of the night previous, and how her husband had gone into the river on a rope to tie a bull by its horns, but before he got the animal tied it lost its footing in the mud, and the river swept it away. They told her this, as though they didn't believe it themselves, and held up the end of the broken rope from which the man had been torn away.

They were gentle in telling the children about their father, especially gentle in telling the youngest. The farmers had always known there was something different to be expected of a storm-born child, but it wasn't until he lost his father that the stories about the storm-child started to spread. The day the first bolts of lightning tore through the town of Lowell.

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It was true that once in the past you could not walk the roads in Lowell without a silt of reddish dust coloring your clothing, but seven years of rain had passed, and the rivers ran red with the color of the roads and the blood of those who worked the land. It had been a dry part of the world, but despite this the reddish earth was very rich. Lowell had once claimed the best soil in the region, but seven years had since passed, and the rivers had washed the richness downstream. There was a smaller town just to the south, also dusty, though the soil was not the rich soil of Lowell. The recent years had changed that, and the crops thrived on the rich red topsoil that washed into their lands from the north.

This town had been known as Highbrown, but as it became rich and grew larger it was given a new name. Travelers called it Yonder Blackmountain, named for the mountains at whose base the town was nestled, and as more traders and travelers came to make their way to this place the nickname became its only name. It was easy to remember Yonder Blackmountain if you had ever seen the great clay river to the east of it, or tasted the cherries that grew from the finest cherry trees within a hundred miles. From anywhere in the lush countryside you could stand under one such cherry tree, and from there, be able to see the black sky on the northern horizon where yonder mountains had been swallowed by deep clouds, and where the town of Lowell was known to be, and avoided.

North of Lowell, north of the ever-storm, there was but a single forgotten place before you crossed into the endless, uninhabited, northern plains. This town on the edge of the plains was called Down, even though it was, in fact, up from anywhere you might be coming from. Nevertheless, if you made your way up the road to Down, you would pass through the muddy red wetlands where Lowell remained, and just when it seemed like you would never be dry again, you would go farther north and arrive in the town of Down, where you would find yourself missing

the rain. Just as the last seven years saw Lowell suffer the rain, Down suffered a drought. Few people made this uncomfortable journey, since there was no reason to travel farther north than Yonder Blackmountain, but those few who did took with them the stories they heard from one place to another. It was in this way, and by accident, that word reached Lowell of a plea for help, and that plea found its way to the home of a widowed mother of five children, whose youngest son had recently had his seventh birthday.

"Bring us the boy who makes it rain," said the story. "Down will go the way of its name and crumble to dust and be swallowed by the land unless you bring us the boy with the face of the thunderstorms. There is a room in our inn, and what money we have will be yours if only the storm-boy comes."

The stories trickled in slowly, and over time they became harder for his mother to ignore. More and more people encouraged her to send him away as their superstition grew, but the boy's mother would not hear of it.

The boy heard what people were saying about him; they made a point to speak about him within earshot. It was silly to say that a child could cry so hard that the sky would be made to cry along. Everyone knew that, but somewhere in the back of their minds remained an ancient fear of curses that couldn't be reasoned away. They wanted him to go despite reason, and the boy knew.

There was another important reason for the boy to leave home; a reason that came not from the gossip of townspeople, but from his family. It began as a joke among his brothers and sisters, the stories of him as a baby, his crying so shrill that it had forced them out of the house, and so loud that it broke the sky. Then their father washed away in the storm and the joke became a different thing.

Somewhere in their minds, in that place where we are all afraid of such things, they grew afraid of their littlest brother. For this reason the seven-year-old boy made up his mind to leave on his own, and wrote a letter for his mother as best as he could. In the dark of night, the boy stowed himself in the back of a north-bound wagon.

The journey on the covered wagon was long, and the boy lay in the back of it tucked under dry hay. He slept there without meaning to sleep. Despite leaving home, despite leaving everything

behind, the dry gentle hay wagon lulled him to sleep. He had learned to sleep deeply and not be woken by noise since he had, after all, learned to sleep through thunderstorms.

Of all things it was the sun that felt strange enough on his skin to wake him up from his warm, dry bed that morning. He thought it had been fire, and he had dreamt it was, but woke to a shock of an entirely different variety.

A clear sky.

To the south, he could see the dark clouds over his home appearing passive at this distance, and milder than he knew them to be. He could see their blurred underbelly and the invisible slant of distant falling rain. The boy was homesick, but he knew he would return soon, and he would bring the money his family needed.

By midday he arrived in Down, and the town received him exactly how a dying town would receive a damp, mildew-covered child: no one noticed him arrive. No one at first, until a few children began to inspected him with expressions that suggested they were not entirely resisting the urge to try and suck the moisture from his garments to slake their obvious thirst.

He realized immediately that he was out of place. The people here were brown and sun-dried, while he was blue, and damp, and a stranger. Even though he stood out, not a single person so much as asked him his name. When he tried to catch their eyes, he found that they feigned blindness from the sun and folded their dirt-covered faces away from him, or simply remained indoors.

As he explored the town, he realized why the people of Down avoided the sunlight at all costs and stayed away from windows. The sun was so hot it burned the skin, and water so scarce mouths were cracked and ashen. The few people who did choose to walk in the open would hunch their heads down to their chest and hike their shoulders over their necks in an effort to exploit what little shade their own body could cast.

The boy was hungry and his skin hurt in the daylight, and in an effort to escape it he followed the road to the inn, where he had heard there would be a room waiting for the storm-child. A tiny man sat inside at a desk, and before the boy could state his case the man gurgled a strange

sounding laugh. He looked the boy up and down, examined his color, his garments, and shook his head with disappointment, but making only small noises and not speaking.

The boy was puzzled, and tilted his head curiously at the man, wondering what he was trying to say. The man narrowed his eyes at the child, appearing impatient. He gestured at his own throat while staring pointedly at the boy, and then shook his head.

He had no voice.

The boy figured it out, and in youthful fashion, began to accommodate the tiny old man as seemed appropriate to him. He pointed at his chest, and then mimed the falling of rain with his fingertips. The tiny man raised an eyebrow at the performance, considering whether or not to let on that his ears functioned perfectly well, but the boy was already halfway through his introduction and was now asking him with hand pictures if he could have something to eat. The man's face darkened as he looked outside. He pointed to the sky, the hot sun, and the dry land, and then his jaw set higher into his cheekbones in a stern display of finality. The boy's shoulders fell a little, robbed of their strength.

Without another option, he was forced to leave the hotel and try to plead his case to someone else, but everywhere the boy went the people refused him. Some were even so put off by the bluish color of his face they shooed him away without hearing him at all. The people who lived on the main road told him to try and find a generous farmer in the lands surrounding to put him up, but the farmers told him the people on the main road could afford more generosity than they could. Wherever he turned, faces folded away from him, windows folded closed, and doors folded shut, and by the evening everyone in town knew of the blue-faced boy who had come from the storm-lands looking for a home. When asked why he had come, he explained to the people that they, themselves, had asked for him to come and bring the rain. He came because his family was hungry and he needed the money.

But there was no rain, and all together the people of Down frowned at the foolish boy who should have known better, but they were all of them secretly disappointed. They knew perfectly well that it was silly to have hoped that the rains would follow a boy to their town, but still they had hoped.

The boy had never stolen before, but he stole now, though he could hardly feel bad about it. There was a small batch of shriveled trees on a farm outside the town where he found a round orange fruit the size of his fist hidden in the leaves, overlooked by the farmer. This was the only meal he had, the day he was turned away from the village of Down.

He slept behind the hotel, in an abandoned old barrel that was halfway buried in the cracking dry mud of a long ago rainy day. How he missed the rain, the boy thought, as darkness set in on him.

He was very thirsty and hungry, and his head ached from the heat and his tongue felt a little swollen in his mouth. Just when he though his body was exhausted of all its energy and all of its moisture, he began to cry. He cried for home, for his mother, his sisters and brothers. He cried for his town and the father whose face he had forgotten, and he cried for himself and the terrible tomorrow when he knew, as best a seven-year-old boy can know, that unless someone took pity on him he may die. He cried like he had not cried since he was a baby, and though he cried, still, he slept.

It was not the thunder that woke him; instead, it was the cold. His body was shaking, freezing in his soggy clothes. Water ran over the hard earth and over his feet that poked out of the entrance to his shelter. His sideways barrel had begun to flood. He woke up choking mud out of his mouth and pushed himself as hard as he could to escape. He tried to get out, but his body was weak and hungry and the current of the water grew stronger. Then his head was underwater, and the rushing filled his ears.

All in one quick motion the boy was out in the air, though more upside-down than he wanted to be. The air was cold. Much colder than the water, he noticed. Someone was holding him by one of his legs, and hitting him on his back with their other hand. He hung there in the cold air having the mud and water slapped out of him until the stranger noticed him coughing and finally flipped him upright. The boy wiped dirt from his eyes until he could see the man who rescued him.

The boy realized this alley was probably where the man lived too, he looked derelict. Though his face was red and a childish grin split his face. He was gesturing drunkenly and excitedly at the

sky while he mumbling things the boy couldn't understand. His other hand searched blindly for a bottle of brandy on his belt that now lay in a puddle behind him.

When it became obvious the boy did not understand, the man guided him around the side of the inn and into the center of town. Over the undulating white noise of rain and biting wind, the boy registered the sounds of people, and then saw a thing he hadn't ever seen before. The people of Down had come out in the middle of the night to dance in the once sun-scorched dirt road. Mud covered them. Most of them still wore their bed gowns, though there were a few people who wore nothing at all; and no one cared, and instead, they danced. The swaying, hiccupping man who had pulled the boy out of the water danced amidst the crowd. He looked foolish, and his dance was a repetition of pointing fingers at things while balancing on one leg at impossible angles. The boy saw a whole pub full of dancers across the road, where music could be heard playing, and where people hung themselves out the windows and alternated between drinking from their bottles and performing long, graceful backbends to drink from the sky.

Not immediately, but eventually, the people dancing noticed the boy, and they came to him, celebrating him on high with songs and cheers. The boy did not know what to say to such a turn of events after being starved, abandoned, nearly drowned, and then saved by an imbecile. He did the only thing a seven-year-old boy could do in the circumstances. He doubled over in the mud and lost the only meal he'd had since leaving home. His head swam with a heat that the storm did not ease, and he tasted the orange fruit just before he collapsed in the mud.

The townspeople brought food to the room at the inn where the boy spent the following days in bed, fevered and covered in sweat. He was cared for by the tiny old man who had no voice, and brought herb teas when well enough to drink, and warm soup when well enough to eat. There was no shortage of teas and soups for the boy now that the townspeople were eager to share all of what little they had with him. They made offerings to the poor child, who had fallen ill bringing them the rain. They praised him, and there was a growing collection of gifts and coins that the landlord, being an honest sort, stockpiled for him.

The boy didn't much like talking with the people of Down with all their questions about the rain and where it came from and why it followed him. He didn't know, and didn't know what to

say. He talked very little, and instead chose to stare out his window at the gray sky and the storms that had followed him. It made him angry to see the grey sky, even though it had saved him. He hated the rain, and his hatred kept him from getting well. Weeks went by and he slept and ate and remained in his bed.

His fever worsened, and one night he fell into a terrible sleep. The tiny landlord worried for the boy so much that he spent that night watching over him. The boy was speaking and moaning in his sleep, and the landlord listened to the cries.

That was the night the thunder came to Down.

Great sonic lashes shook the windows of the inn, and those few people who remained celebrating late into the night were forced to flee the muddy road and find shelter. With the thunder came the lightning, and it came in no small measure. It struck the trees, and the farms that stood on hilltops, and it struck often, and fierce. Against his better judgment the landlord inched his way closer to the window to see outside. He was afraid of the thunder, but still he was curious. He stood before the window, and a reflection of an old man holding a lantern looked back at him. He stared at himself until the lightning struck and illuminated his little town, and the fire that began despite the rain. Farmhouses blazed, and trees split and fell down. Between the flashes of lightning, the tiny old landlord was left staring at his own reflection, and behind him, the boy with the thundercloud face who lay shining with sweat.

The people of Down had loved and blessed the child who brought them the rain, but the tiny man knew that the people of Down would not be able to forgive the fevered boy who brought the lightning. The landlord filled a basin with ice-cold water from the well and picked the boy up in his bed sheet and lowered him into the bath. He stroked the child's damp hair while his unconscious little body shook with cold. The man's other hand still held the lantern and it shivered in fear each time the thunder snapped, and each time it made his shadow dance around the walls of the washroom. The man stroked the damp hair until the boy eventually lay still, and deathly quiet. He drew him back out of the water and dried him, and once he was dry, laid him back down in bed, all the while continuing to gently stroke the boy's hair. For hours he comforted the boy, and the boy's

breath remained soft. The landlord observed that outside the thunder quieted and the lightning moved away until it passed over the mountains.

Then the time had come. He couldn't let the boy sleep through the night. The first southbound wagon would be leaving soon, and the boy had to be on his way home where he belonged. The landlord had taken it upon himself to keep safe the money that the boy had been gifted. It remained fair, in the landlord's mind, that the boy was rewarded for bringing them what they asked for. It was fair also, he reasoned, pulling two coins from the pouch and placing them in his own pocket, that he also be honored for his services in the same spirit of fairness.

He roused the boy and dressed him as best he could while the child swayed and weakly protested against being made to rise, but rise he did, and if he wondered why the old mute man was dressing him so hurriedly, he did not ask or gesture. The landlord had a stern face, and the boy did not dare argue with him as he was guided outside before dawn, and then taken to the town's grain depot. There they found a man loading a wagon. He appeared to have come from somewhere far away, and was in good spirits when he greeted them. He spoke animatedly about the good fortune of rain finding Down after all this time. The landlord did not speak to him, but instead held a coin toward the man and pointed south; while gesturing at the ill-looking boy at his side. The wagon driver nodded and lifted the child up and set him between sacks of grain. He tugged the reigns of his mule, and set off on the road heading south.

The landlord remained standing there as the wagon and the boy trundled away. Soon the boy could no longer see him, and the blur of the rain swallowed him from view and he was once again alone. The boy looked into the leather pouch that the tiny man had pressed into his hands before leaving, and an exhausted smile crept onto to his face. All in that moment he felt stronger, healthy even, and happy. His family would be overjoyed when he arrived home bringing this bag of fortune with him. The boy let his legs hang over the back of the wagon, while tapping his heels against it and humming. The sky overhead cleared a little as he rode, and by the time the sun did rise he was looking at the storm from afar. The gentle warmth of the sun was pleasant on his face, and he was calm. His belly was full of soup and he felt stronger than he ever had. When the wagon finally came near enough to his town, he jumped off it, keen to walk the rest of the way in the

sunshine. The road into Lowell was welcoming and bright, and while nearing home he observed a town he now barely recognized. People were out in the streets wearing clean boots, and the ever-muddy road had grown firm and easy to tread. Grass had poked up through the soil and transformed the dull red mud he knew so well into a place brimming with life. People were happy; some even carried a tune with them as they set to work building fences and gardens. He could see his own home from the edge of town and his family was there among those who worked outside. His brothers, sisters, and mother had come out and together were laughing while building a small fence around the plot of earth beside the house. His oldest brother was digging at the soil, turning it over in preparation to sow the seeds that the midwife had brought with her. She stood, a little less hunched than the boy remembered her to stand, and she and his mother were talking.

The boy stopped there, at the edge of town and at a distance where he could not be seen. A strange feeling came up inside him as he looked at his family. They were so happy and hopeful, and their house looked so different in the shining sun. The feeling inside him tightened into a knot as the sound of thunder faintly rolled behind him. He could feel the black clouds following him, and knew without looking that they would find him soon. His fingers tightened around the little leather pouch in his hands. He had brought home things of universal value to a place where silver and bronze held no value. His brothers and sisters needed sunshine and grass, not wealth and storms.

Once again the boy had to make one of those hard choices that sometimes have to be made. Again, thankfully, he was alone, and again there was no one that would try and make the choice for him. The storm went where he did, he knew that now, and so he would make it follow him far away from his family. He would lead it to Yonder Blackmountain, and he would stay there long enough for the storm to pass over Lowell and catch up to him. Then he would leave Yonder Blackmountain and go to the next town, and no one would have to suffer him very long.

The sun shone on Lowell, and the sun helped him feel hopeful. Perhaps if he kept walking long enough, then maybe the storms would forget to follow him. If he kept going south he could try and chase the sun, and if he chased the sun far enough, perhaps the sun would keep the storms away.

He left Lowell, and walked the long way around town where no one could see him, and kept walking until he found his way back to the road. Then he walked some more. He did not once turn back around to look at the town or the storm in the sky above it, and instead, he continued to walk. His feet hurt from walking, and his thoughts turned away from his family and his heartache and his feelings of foolishness, and turned instead to shoes, and then he smiled a sad little smile.

He could buy shoes.

He was hungry, too, and he realized that he could buy food. He could buy a backpack, and he could fill it with food, and he could have food with him while he walked. He hummed a little as the sounds of coins jumping around in his leather pouch provided him a hopeful rhythm for him as he walked. He could live this life. He could live it until the day came when he could turn around and go back; the day when he wouldn't have to walk anymore. He would keep to the road, until one day he learned how to return home.

We hope you have enjoyed

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