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## Lightning Strikes

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## Lightning Strikes

A cloudburst looms—cumulonimbus massed over the city, tracking northward to shadow the University bus; the embedded convective cloud thickening and spreading to plunge this campus into premature dusk with slanted shafts of rust-coloured rain: I remember everything I ever learned about the weather.

So cross an open playing field and the oval track from the bus stop and head for the tallest building and the best vantage point from which to watch. Hear first and then smell the searing hiss of ozone: sense the crackle of scorched grass, the air so static-filled my hair tingles, caught as I am between a seething sky and the bristling, smoking earth: and then me, the conductive material linking two oppositely-charge bodies.

The pyrotechnics here in the heavy east will be foreign, different from the faint flushes of lightning over the cool inlet back home, in the rain forest, and the luminous ribbons that fluttered along the mountain ridges—although, that's all nostalgia and not really how it was or could ever be. That's all geography, from textbooks, carefully worded to say nothing about proximity.

My mother lies on her side, curled around her own clenched fist, which she clutches to her stomach. She keeps her face turned away, but I'm waiting in the doorway to her room, one tentative hand on the glass doorknob, the other on the jamb, because she calls me to her. Despite her position on their unmade bed I can still see the bruises over her eyes, along her cheekbones. She makes no attempt to hide from me the welts on her back and shoulder, raw seams on her skin running beneath the thin straps of an old slip she wears, angry weals like the kind left on white flesh by leeches

from the lake. And the backs of her thighs, lumpy like the bread dough she pummels with those fists and rolls into lard-smeared baking tins.

She snuffles and wipes her bloody nose on the green bedspread.

"So get a clean glass," she says, swinging her pallid legs around and sitting up. She places her yellow feet on the floor amid shards of broken glass. She wears a pair of my father's diamond socks to keep her feet warm, and she keeps a bottle of his whisky under the bed. It's this she's reaching for, one strap falling loose and revealing vivid red lashes across her sallow chest, and on that single withered breast a brutal rash I later come to recognize as a series of fresh cigarette burns.

One great truth has always sustained me. If my father taught me anything he taught me that women won't run away.

"What are you afraid of?" my father asks hunched over. He discovers me hiding in my closet, because if I open my eyes and lightning flashes I might see it, and if I take my fingers out of my ears and thunder cracks I might hear it.

His ruddy, insistent face—the ever-present beads of alcohol sweat that glisten on his high, slick forehead, that coast his protruding upper lip with an oily sheen—demands an answer.

"The thunder," I say, lying like any other frightened eight-year-old.

He laughs, a thin, whining sound. "There's no thunder," he says and touches my hair, unaware that my stomach's churning, that my guts are in a vicious knot. "Go outside," he booms, "and see if some lightning hit a tree or set the old garage on fire. Then you go and sit there. Go on. Lightning never strikes the same place twice. You remember that."

Probably, there's no reason to fear him, although nothing he ever says convinces me that I'm safe, that he won't one day come after me. But he has other ways: on camping trips he likes to tell ghost stories in the tent at night. Pitch dark and he'll say, "Make sure you don't sleep too close to the tent pole, there. Lightning might hit it. You never know." Only once do I ever glimpse a sheet of silver lightning through the blue canvas. It renders the sky membranous, exposing the ripe veins. "Was that thunder?" he'll say at the dinner table, cocking his head in an exaggerated tilt, and cupping an ear. Or, "We sure could use a good thunderstorm. To clear the air." then he watches while the paralysis that grips his son—me—takes hold and spreads, thickens. There is never the need to beat or mark my flesh.

"Where's he going?" kids at school ask whenever thunder chases me from the classroom. A single flash or just a dimming of the overhead lights, the roar of a jet, the rumble of another class being marched down the school corridor, any of these send me rushing home in cringing humiliation to see if she's ok.

"He's afraid," someone always shouts. Whispering starts, nervous, excited.

"There he goes again!" they shriek as I run, disgraced, bowels gurgling, breath sour with panic and coming in short sharp pants.

Often she forces me to return in the afternoon, steeped in my shame. Only during the summer holidays is occasional comfort derived from one of these degrading bouts of hysteria. While neighbors and kids on my block revert to normal activity after a heavy thundershower, come out again on the steaming streets or chatter on their verandas, I wait quaking in the profound silence that follows a summer squall. Is it over? Is it really over?

Storms have been known to backtrack. It's much like the fabled quiet before a storm, but more conclusive, final.

When he beats her she rewards herself with a hot bath in Epsom Salts. He brings her Five-Star whisky in a cheap champagne class, to drink while her bruises soak. He places the plastic radio angled on the edge of the tub, and he plugs it in, while I do homework and wait for the radio to drop.

Twelve years old, I stand in short centerfield hoping Ross will pitch this guy low and away, like we planned before the game. But Ross comes in over the plate and the batter just misses his pitch, sending a weak line drive right at me, instead of lifting a high flyball over the fence for a home run. No need for me to even move. Just reach up with my glove and pluck the dying ball out of the air.

"Nice catch," Ross calls from the pitcher's mound. He knows it was close. The coach will wonder why I'm playing so shallow.

From centerfield I can see the flow of the game. Everything is always in front of me. From the outfield I can pretend this park doesn't belong to this school, this town, this age.

When Ross strikes out the second batter on three straight pitches, the infield begins to chatter. "Hey, hey! Hey batter!"

Clouds surround me. Somehow they swing around from behind, anvil-headed thunderclouds, top-heavy with black bursting underbellies. It could be too late already.

To my right, the outfielder chants, "Two four six eight nine, batter looks like Frankenstein!"

That weak liner came from the bat of their best hitter. I should have been deeper. It's easier to run in than back to make a catch. Keep the ball in front of you. But I lucked out. Ross and I both committed mental errors. He gets the pitch in and up and I misplay the hitter. Yet we escaped unscathed. If the hitter gets hold of on. . . But then I see those clouds, black and boiling up with summer static. Sharp slanted rays of the fast-disappearing sun create planes of deepening black and downward fans of sudden rain.

Ross runs the next hitter to a full count then loses him. He walks a second man on four pitches.

The left- and right-fielders talk it up, calling encouragement. "This one swings like a rusty gate!" They expect me to start stuff like that. The centerfielder is supposed to be in charge. The infield tries to rattle the batter as he steps into the box and taps the plate—"Hey! Hey! Batter! Swing!"

Two runners on but I still play in tight. If one gets by me it's good for two, maybe three runs. I don't see lightning but thunder

breaks and rumbles overhead. Parents stir on the sidelines. They move their lawn chairs back and send their smaller kids to the cars while I drift further out in centerfield, deeper with each pitch, away from them all, hoping no one will notice.

The batter shifts his grip and wriggles his feet in the dirt. He's nervous and fouls off another pitch.

I stare straight ahead. My chest constricts, leaving me breathless; my buttocks clench in cold fear. Off to the side I sense a flash, a cool whiff on the periphery of my eye. I'm sure I see one. Why is Ross playing around with this guy? Why doesn't he finish him off?

The hitter strikes out with runners on first and second, releasing me. He throws his bat down in the on-deck circle.

My cheering teammates run in. Without looking back or up or to the sides, I float off the field, past the row of trees and the school. Far enough away from the game I break into a panicky trot, my feet seemingly mired in molasses, finally racing home to hide in my bedroom with my fielder's mitt still clutched on my left hand.

Desert them. My teammates. In the middle of an inning. Before my turn at bat.

Pull the drapes and close my door and wonder how long before I jam my fingers in my ears and crawl into bed. How long before I squeeze my eyes shut.

I never should have been playing in so tight: it's starting to affect my game.

Sixteen, and I steal my father's Plymouth on a regular basis. He's too drunk every Friday to notice. I join the wrestling matches at the local Drive-in theatre, fumbling with my ashen girlfriend, the two of us sipping from a bottle of lemon gin, that trusted panty remover, so legend has it in the girl's locker room as well as the boy's. On-screen Godzilla fries half of Tokyo with his breath while Japanese scientists bombard him with electronic shockwaves. He eats the stuff, growing stronger on the fumes.

Sinewy tendrils of heat-lightning flicker in the distance. Too far off to worry about yet, but I'm more relieved than disappointed when I give up trying to render the girl naked and drive her home. We paw each other briefly in front of her house, both of us sweaty and frustrated, then she rushes inside.

At my place my father sprawls unconscious in the kitchen. I step carefully around a shattered whiskey bottle; splinters of glass still glint in his headwound. My mother's jaw is broken and three of her teeth lie on the floor, snapped off like chicklets, like tossed white dice.

Sweep the glass and drive her to the Emergency Ward where they wire her mouth shut.

While she sleeps I stand guard. My bleeding father can stitch himself up. I take the long, carving knife and bury its steel blade in the kitchen wall, surprising myself by not killing him.

June. The end of school. The last summer before college in the fall. He purchases a lightning rod, then shares a twenty-sixer of Five-Star with her and offers me the plastic star from the front of the bottle. I used to wear them stuck on my shirt, my puny chest plastered with a half dozen or more sheriff's badges. My galaxy of stars.

Dad—for that's who he is, despite the cruelty, the rancid breath, the constant sweats, the incoherent rages and tirades. I'm as dependent on his disturbed fatherhood as were any of the early-sixties television kids on their domesticated, well-meaning Pops—Dad swings an old wooden ladder to the eavestrough and climbs to the roof, breaking first the bottom rung. He clammers up the shingled slope, scrambling on his hands and knees, the prized lightning rod clutched like a freedom flag in one hand.

"Watch this," he shouts, tickled with his own ludicrous image. "Look at me, college boy."

My inebriated mother watches from our overgrown front lawn. She's giddy and holding on to what's left of the Five-Star. "You know your father," she apologizes.

The father I am guilty of knowing straps the lightning rod to our red brick chimney. Miraculously, he doesn't fall and break his grimy neck, but he does manage to mangle the tv antenna. With a high, girlish giggle he slides down the roof on his rump, and makes it down the ladder with only a couple of clumsy missteps. Back on solid ground again the father who knows best around our place stumbles to his knees, wheezing and choking on his own laughter.

"If we don't get hit now," he claims, and struggles to his uncooperative feet to brush at his scuffed knees, "then there's no God. How about them apples?" he says smiling at me, challenging the skinny kid who graduates on the honor roll, who looks more like his mother than his dad. Where tv fathers bumble, he stumbles and staggers; where they recover their good-citizen balance and the graces of their neighbours in the final fading few minutes of the show, he trips over his own feet on his own front lawn.

Summer jobs take me to small towns and hot climates in the interior of the province. Between my turbulent first and second

semesters, when I am placed on college probation for excessive absences from class, lightning sets a nearby barn ablaze roasting alive the pigs penned inside. For days the bitter air reeks of their electrocution and bacon.

Driving a local girl's rust-encrusted Chrysler, a real boat, I'm momentarily blinded when a towering bolt with a dozen crackling rootlets strikes the white line down the middle of the highway that winds out of town. In our darkened room rented for the night, she wants the curtains open so she can watch. Electrical storms excite her. Furious sheets ignite the skyline and sizzle overhead, all flashing at once. Multiple cannonshots crash and pound our small motel. While I will my eyes shut and my ears plugged, she lies nude, entranced. The thunderclaps are deafening. The storm grinds on for hours. When she sleeps I cover her, draw the curtain closed and remain awake until the danger passes minutes before daybreak. It's safe again. She'll never know how close she came.

The fourth doctor I see in six months is more impatient than the others. He's not a fan of phobias, and not the least impressed with mine, despite its persistence. He is also not overly excited about putting in time working for the campus student health services.

He shakes his head at all I say, sucking in smoke from the cigarette drooping from his bottom lip.

Between years two and three I eat lunches parked in a shiny black Bronco owned by the foreman of a reforestation crew. I've grown bolder away from the charged atmosphere of home.

Here, thundershowers sweep the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Alternating patterns of light and shadow flow along the low hills.

My mother has been hospitalized, my father finally jailed. She is treated to electroshock therapy. He's doped, stupefied by narcotics, given jolts of aversion therapy. The juice only sustains him. The bastard loves it. I can only wonder if this long-overdue breakdown is caused by my absence. Without me there does he pursue her harder?

But my mother always takes the path of least resistance.

Third year and I transfer out-of-province.

Lightning strikes dilapidated barns, cows grazing in the fields, golfers slicing along fairways, boats floating on lakes, people getting in and out of cars, children hiding under smoldering trees and a man in the United States a total of five times until he takes to his car one afternoon to escape the onslaught of a storm, drives

across the stippled countryside, stops and gets out at what he considers a safe distance and is struck by a rogue bolt a sixth time, and killed.

*Ripley's Believe It or Not* contends that another man, exiting from a small stone church, is hit by lightning that first strikes the piked steeple then bounces off and burns all the clothes from his body. He's found unconscious and naked but unharmed except for a seared ring of scar tissue left around his neck by the gold crucifix he wears. Believe it or not.

Before beginning classes my final year I go to the Graduate Student Lounge where they are supposed to refuse me service at the bar. I do not join the graduate elite for another year yet. The air outside carries the acrid sting of burnt ozone, and the Grad Lounge is located on the top of a fourteen-story highrise of offices.

Women here see me as something of a prodigy, so young, and they volunteer to buy me drinks. They inquire into my non-existent thesis and are informed that various psychology texts maintain that phobias are used to express feelings too complex and frightening to put into words, and that they only occasionally respond to conventional forms of therapy. Struck inarticulate like that, I am assured seduction.

My last undergraduate year crawls by. A fifth psychiatrist hypnotizes me.

"Forget the past," he says. "We can change your life starting right today." I flashback instantly to my leaving home two years ago. The loaded plane holds on the tarmac as late-summer lightning streaks across the horizon. The pilot receives clearance from the shrouded tower, I close my eyes—it's planes and flying these fellow passengers will think I'm afraid of, and I smile to myself and listen to the sibilant whoosh down the runway as we're sucked off the ground by a vacuum our own momentum creates in front of us, so I believe. Engines roaring defiantly, we angle up through the thunderheads.

This fifth shrink, a coffee-guzzler who's applied for internships at every hospital in the country and several abroad, tells me while I'm in a trance to think of something likeable when there's a storm. "Think of sex," he advises me.

He then takes me on a trial run. In my head, clouds appear; they build into murky thunderclouds. Fork lightning bursts across the sky, followed almost instantly by sledge-hammer thunder. On my own I toss in hurricane-force winds—thinking, what the hell—to blow the downpour across my brain like bullets, to uproot trees



and flatten houses. In this tempest he tells me to imagine women I have loved.

Graduate School embraces me within its enclave. To earn living expenses for my second term I accept a night job in Calgary hammering together pre-fab trusses for the housing boom. A savage scrawl, seen through the dirt-streaked window of the washroom where I extract long slivers of wood from my greasy hands, signals the eruption simmering all afternoon and evening.

The guys eat their eight-o'clock lunches outside in the yard.

"Not yet," says Len, not the foreman and not the oldest, but everyone's choice as leader. His return to his press signals the end of coffee breaks. When he rolls closed the brown paper bag he carries his tuna fish sandwiches in each day, we follow him back to work.

"Not yet," he says again. I listen and hear a rising steady roar I don't recognize.

Lightning dings the transformer in the yard. The real foreman, an unpopular hireling from an outside competitor, dressed in oilskins and a yellow slicker, eats his lunch exiled to his forklift. He parks beneath the transformer seconds before it's blasted into flame. Sparks shower down onto his bloated body. The raingear makes him appear inflated. The lights inside the shop sputter, then die. He races from his forklift as thunder cascades over his head. The crew—including me—convulses into laughter. Len too. The machines, fed by electricity, go down for the remainder of the shift.

"Now!" shouts Len, scooping up his lunch bag and thermos bottle. We all rush inside, squeezing through the doorway just in time.

The incessant roar grows louder as a volley of hailstones arrives from two blocks away where it has been drumming on rooftops. A torrent of ice cube-sized propellants ricochets off cars and lumber. Smaller pellets skip through the open door, their velocity shooting them against the far concrete wall as they invade the plant.

When the squall line passes over, we lean out behind Len and silently witness the pulverized ice in the yard, the sun's reappearance below the ragged edge of the cold front, and an eerie green light. Feeble lightning flicks, followed long seconds later by the reassuring lull of soft, distant thunder and an impossible rainbow.

The atmosphere in the lecture hall sparks with the whiplash of bottled tension. This is it, my last exam. This will mark the end. It's like a death in the family. You won't have to deal with it

anymore. Like a dead parent, it won't be there when you go home at night.

The place is full of nail-biters; but I met a girl last night. She takes me home. We drink red wine and sleep on her white couch. Afterward, a peal of thunder awakens me, starts me to my feet.

She grabs my arm. "What's wrong?"

"They told me at the hospital that if there was a storm I'd think about sex," I say, reassuring her, "but they never warned me that if I had sex first I could cause one."

Better judgement counsels me to accept a job in the Psychology Department of another university, in order to leave a girlfriend I'm close to living with. This morning the sun's barely visible through a thick haze. It soon disappears behind a darkening bank of cloud.

The dead humidity has me praying for it.

I can't spend another night in her apartment. We draw too close; too close. Last night the fan I bought for her room proved a great success, blowing over us while we undress, evaporating our perspiration. Her fine body warm against me; but it's a warmth I find strangely cooling. Finally, the noise of the fan just keeps me awake all night.

I wish I could know I won't hit her. I wish I could know that she will leave me if I do.

Lightning finally strikes the playing field, the oval track, the parking lot below. Another rattling bolt, it seems to me, jolts the flagpole. My tingling hair still bristles, even here inside where the air hums. So how can I stand so calmly at this window, my shoulder braced against the frame, my eyes sparkling as I blink them clear, while the Psych Lab vibrates and trembles, shook by sonic blasts of radiant thunder?

Light casts odd shadows in the east. Release is a relief.

What a mismatch they were: him flushed and florid, her so anemic. What could possibly have linked them? . . . Opposites attract, years of schooling have taught me. Lightning never strikes twice. Remember. That. Me: the Educated Man, forever apologizing to each new woman for crimes committed against the last.

The power kicks off—knocked out. The intense blackness fades to a dull gray in a deluge of pelting rain, as the tides shift.

My mother lies buried, the only real shock being that she died what they call a natural death.

My father has remarried.

*Brian Burke*