

# LIGHTNINGSTRUCK

by

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*I crossed the evening barnlot, opened  
The sagging gate, and was prepared  
To go into the world of action and liability.  
I had long lived in the world of action and liability.  
But now I passed the gate into a world*

*Sweeter than hope in that confirmation of late light.*

Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*

## PART 1

### 1: Lightning

*May 22, 1964*

Even before my horse got struck by lightning—a crazy thing all by itself—the world had gone stark raving mad. I saw it on TV: the President’s funeral after he was shot and killed by an unshaven man who was himself gunned down on live TV; colored marchers fire-hosed and beaten by white policemen; churches with children inside bombed and reduced to char and rubble by the Klan. Crazy. I saw it at home: my own world changing—thanks mostly to the gift of a horse that was anything but the horse of my dreams—pushing me off-balance the way bullies did my little brother on the school playground.

Technically the horse wasn’t even mine anymore. There had been an accident back in March—a terrible one—and my father had talked one of the tenant farmers into taking him off our hands.

That tenant, Jesse, lived alone at the opposite end of the field that stretched behind our house. He already had a pen right next to his shack; the old horse wouldn’t be any trouble. But Troy, true to habit, refused to stay where he was supposed to. Right away he started wandering back to his old home, the barn that used to house mules in the pasture beside my grandfather’s house. There Troy, now that he was cast out, seemed to have decided he belonged after all. Nobody could figure out how the horse, who surely couldn’t jump a fence, kept escaping from Jesse’s pen.

But that day in late May when the thunderstorm hit, he *was* in the pen, standing still as a statue, according to Jesse, with sheets of rain slamming against him.

It was after school on Friday, and I was curled on my bed absorbed as usual in *Ancient Wonders of the World*. When boots stomped on the porch, and then the doorbell rang, and a fist knocked, I figured it was one of the Scurlock boys, drunk already (the weekend had begun) and primed with some made-up story about needing money. I looked through my window. Not a Scurlock but Jesse.

Cleo, who got to the door before I did, now hurried off for towels. Jesse looked like he'd just come out of the creek. "Your papa home?" He was breathing hard, as though he'd run all the way here. "The old horse. He's down, lightning-struck." Jesse's shirt stuck to his big heaving chest and to his heavily-muscled arms. Drops fell from his tight silver-and-black curls and off the end of his nose.

Cleo spread bath towels on the tiles of the entryway. She put another around Jesse's shoulders. She patted his face and neck as if he were a baby and couldn't do it for himself. "Drowned rat," Cleo mumbled. "You going to catch pneumonia."

Cleo had worked for our family since I was born and used to fuss over me the way she was doing with Jesse. But not anymore.

Papa, just then home from work, came towards us through the den. Besides farming with my grandfather, Mr. Mac, he had a town job lending money to other farmers.

"That old horse down, Mr. Frank." Jesse was still trying to catch his breath. "Crack of lightning shook the house, made the ground jump up. I look out and there I see Troy knocked over on his back. He ain't moved."

"Is he dead?" I asked. "Really dead?"

“Got to be. Or near about.”

A half-hour later Dr. Fowler, the veterinarian who looked after the cows and whatever dogs and cats took up with us, came splashing in his white-roofed brown Impala beneath the pecan trees that lined the driveway. While Papa and I waited to crowd into the front, he lifted a case rattling with glass vials off the front seat and slid it onto the back seat beside Jesse. “Don’t let this fall off, you hear?”

I had never seen an animal who’d been struck by lightning, only trees stripped naked and bleached, like skeletons scratching at the sky. Would Troy be a skeleton? Who wouldn’t be curious? But more than anything I wanted to see for myself that Troy was finally dead and gone, out of my life as though he’d never come in the first place, bringing with him one catastrophe after another.

Dr. Fowler’s car smelled like dogs and hospital disinfectant and the rotten-fruity red medicine I had to take for a week along with Will to keep me from getting the pinworms he’d picked up from no telling where. As we hit the ruts and bumps of the dirt road that skirted the field, the glass bottles clinked. I turned to look back. Jesse was gripping the case with both hands.

Once we veered off onto the track that cut through the field towards Jesse’s house, the tires spun. We were going to get stuck. I’d bet anything. Just as well, then, that Will was missing the excitement. My brother hated getting stuck. Right now he was probably on his way back with our mother from seeing the doctor in town. Yet another ear infection. Dr. Fowler gunned the motor.

Jesse’s yard was a muddy mess. We had to wade clear around to the other side of his house, the side near the trees, to reach the pen. Jesse carried the case, and Dr. Fowler, in green

coveralls, had his leather bag. The rain was still falling steadily. No one had thought to bring an umbrella.

The odors hit me so hard I could almost taste them. Before I even saw Troy, I smelled the rotten egg of burnt hair, the charcoal of scorched meat, the odd new-penny smell of what must have been electricity from the lightning. I pushed my forearm against my nose and tried to keep the rain from running into my mouth, bringing with it the thick smell. I struggled not to gag. The men coughed and cleared their throats. Jesse held a handkerchief to his face.

Lying there on his side, legs stuck out stiff and straight, Troy looked dead. Surely he was dead. Lightning had seared him in a bizarre pattern. Like a swollen meandering river, the raw red-black wound ran along his exposed side and down both legs. Around his belly and over onto his back, the flesh and rust-colored hair looked singed as though from a shotgun's scatter. The horse wasn't moving. His eyes were open, but he didn't seem to be seeing anything.

Dr. Fowler pulled out a stethoscope from his bag. He crouched for several minutes, then shook his head. He started to get up, but stopped mid-stand. He cocked his head as though he heard something in the pattering rain. Again he crouched. He lifted Troy's front leg away from his body and asked Jesse to hold it up. In a manner that called to my mind Cleo's palms kneading biscuit dough, Dr. Fowler pressed his hands just beneath the shoulder joint. Then, lacing his fingers together to make a fist, he hit Troy's upper chest hard—one, two, three, four times. He forced the lids up from both eyes and shined his little flashlight into them. He listened again with his stethoscope. He cocked his head. Again he hit Troy's chest. One, two, three, four. Again he listened.

He stood and wiped his face. He looked first at my father and then at me. He was short for a man and I was tall for my age; we were almost eye level. “Son of a gun’s alive. In shock, but alive.”

The vet gave Troy a shot with a needle so long it made my knees wobble. He wiped his hands down the front of his coveralls. “He’s blind, probably deaf. He may recover, partly. No way to know for sure.”

Troy’s legs twitched. The twitches turned into kicks, and after a few tries he worked himself to his feet. He huffed and tried to shake his muddy mane, but something was wrong. His head hung crooked to the left, as though drawn by a magnet to the wound, and swayed from side to side. He stumbled, tried again to shake himself. But his body wouldn’t cooperate.

“I’ve seen this only once before, an animal surviving a lightning strike, and that was a 3000-pound bull. Troy got lucky. Lightning came up from the ground. Went in here.” The vet pointed to Troy’s left foreleg. “Went out here.” He gestured to the rear leg.

“What’s wrong with his head?” I asked from behind my arm.

“It’s spastic, Etta, because of the blindness; there may be some paralysis. As I say, it might wear off. But old Troy’ll never be the same.”

I thought this over. Perhaps that was a good thing. Troy couldn’t possibly be any more disagreeable than he had been.

Dr. Fowler shook his head and grinned, showing his white teeth. He and my friend Margot’s mother were the only grownups I knew who didn’t smoke. “Troy must have twenty years or more on him—and lived through this. That’s something.”

The rain had slowed into a fine mist. Dr. Fowler reached into his case—Jesse was still carrying it—and handed a jar of big orange pills to my father.

Papa had been off to the side, talking quietly to Jesse. The two men—without so much as a word to me—had reached an understanding.

They walked Dr. Fowler back to his car. He scribbled something in a little notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to Papa—not Jesse. The men rocked the Impala out of the mud, which had splattered all the way to the car’s white roof, and Dr. Fowler drove away. Jesse tied a rope around Troy’s neck and handed the end to my father, who handed it to me.

Papa and I led Troy along the farm road towards the pasture beside Mr. Mac’s house. Every few minutes we had to stop and wait for the horse to untangle himself. Troy kept stumbling, one leg crossing in front of the other. He couldn’t straighten his neck, even with the rope around it, but kept it lowered and curved to the left.

The mist turned back into rain, a slow and steady drizzle.

“If he survives—and you know he might not—nobody’s going to ride this horse again. Not even Will,” Papa said. We were sloshing through puddles in the muddy road. “But if Dr. Fowler’s right, and he lives, he’s your responsibility, Etta. You were the one who asked for him.”

I bit my tongue. I never asked for *this* horse, I wanted to say.

I had had a fit for a horse. I had nagged my parents for months. Then, on my eleventh birthday back in August, I got my wish. His name was Jim Dandy. To make him mine, I changed it to Troy. In *Ancient Wonders of the World*, there was a picture of a wooden horse on wheels, the Trojan horse, outside the walls of Troy. New name or not, the horse would not be mine. The old horse defied me at every turn. Long before the accident in March that wasn’t my fault, though I blamed it as much on Cleo as on Troy, I had wanted nothing so much as to be rid of



him. Now it seemed I was stuck with him after all—Troy was mine, but not as I, or anyone else, would ever want a horse to be.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Cleo liked to say. She had sayings for everything.

My shoes squished. I could hardly watch my step and lead Troy at the same time. My feet seemed to find the deepest puddles. Drenched, with my clothes stuck to my skin, my last-year’s overalls halfway up my calves, I felt ridiculous.

I glanced over at Papa, who was scowling and swinging his arms, the way he did when some worry latched on inside his head. His springy, copper-colored hair had come alive in the rain. His ears stuck out. I patted my own hair, as if to smooth it down—it had gone to frizz like my father’s, had pulled loose from my braids to fall into my eyes. At least I didn’t have his ears like Will did. At least my face wasn’t covered with freckles—only my nose.

Sometimes I leaned over my bedroom dresser and touched my nose to the mirror. I stared at my eyes, willing them to turn blue like my mother’s. Around the pupil was a thin gold band that never got wider but bled into a dull brownish green. Hazel, Mama called it, which was not even a real color. I did have her high cheekbones, though. They’d been passed down from my mother’s father whose ancestors included a Cherokee Indian princess, or so the legend went. There was nothing more to the story—my mother claimed to have no other details—but cheekbones with even a skeletal legend were better than nothing.

Papa shook his head, and droplets flew. He slapped at his sopping shirtsleeves. “Your horse is just about the last straw. First he kicks little Trudy—could have killed her—now this. I might as well tell you, Etta. I have my eyes open for a job in a city. Columbia, maybe Charlotte, maybe even Atlanta. Will needs specialists who aren’t a hundred miles away.”

“Good,” I said. “I like cities, and I hardly ever get to go.”

It was true. Even though painful surgeries were what took Will to Columbia, I envied my brother those trips. Last year, when he'd gone there for an operation, he'd found beforehand as a present for me in a downtown department store the book that introduced me to archaeology. Despite its having come from Will, *Ancient Wonders of the World* became my favorite book ever. I pictured Columbia as a place of wonder, where you could find treasure as easily as turning the pages of an illustrated book. So, yes, moving there would be good.

Yet, no sooner had I said it than I had second thoughts. For what that book showed, as well as riches, were empty stretches of land—deserts, plains—not a lot different from the fields that stretched for acres behind our house, and buried below which there were *wonders*. Not just anyone could find buried treasure. But I was going to be an archaeologist, and before long I'd have all summer to become one. We couldn't be moving soon!

And there was Mr. Mac to think about. And Cleo. Suddenly it hurt to draw a breath. I wouldn't miss Cleo, I told myself—Cleo who claimed that Will and I were her “children.” Before the accident that wasn't my fault, the one with Trudy, I would have felt leaving Cleo was like leaving a mother. Why, she might as well have been my mother, since my own had pretty much given all of her attention to Will since he was born. But now I didn't care. Cleo had failed me, betrayed me even. Her constant presence was a burden.

It was different with Mr. Mac. I had always been his “hard rock,” still was—though I was having trouble coming to terms with the new interest he was taking in Will. Recently Will had begun to show a talent for baseball. He was playing Little League, and our grandfather never missed a game and afterward never missed a chance to brag on Will. Sometimes, when he bragged on Will to me, it seemed he was implying that I was in some way deficient, that he was challenging me to measure up to Will, much as Cleo was forever praising Will's “sweet

temper'ment" while criticizing my "bad" one. Mr. Mac's interest in Will as a boy threw me off balance—not as Cleo's betrayal had done—but at least a little. Still, it wasn't as if he were paying me less attention than before, not exactly, and I relished my weekends with him out on the farm, reveled in the chores we did together—especially when Will was sick or at ball practice, and it was just the two of us.

All the same, if we did move, at least I'd be done with this chore of a stinking horse.

"I'm ready to move," I said, but not so loudly as before. "Good and ready."

Troy went right into the mule barn and stood there, bobbing and swaying his crooked head. From across the fence, my grandfather's screened door whacked shut. The wooden gate creaked open. Mr. Mac joined us and folded his arms over his belly, which had grown so plump lately that it hid his belt buckle. The rain didn't seem to faze him. "That was some kind of branding iron marked the old fellow," Mr. Mac said, chewing on his unlit cigar. He smiled, but the corners of his mouth turned down as they always did. He lifted his hat and resettled it upon his nearly-bald head. "Horse going to have his way. Nothing we can do about it."

Cleo wasn't so philosophical. Especially when Troy went on living. "I gots to look at old Lightningstruck every morning on my way here cross the pasture. And every morning I gets the same evil eye. Dead and brought back to the living. Ain't natural. He been down to visit the Devil and come back up, so now he got one eye cocked down to the Satan world and one eye looking up at this one. Ain't natural. He's a hant-horse, that's what."

Troy was blind, I tried to tell her. He wasn't seeing anything. But Cleo refused to be corrected. And finally one afternoon, when I went to give Troy an orange pill stuck in an apple, I found, much as I hated to admit it, that Cleo was right; the old horse could see. What was more, though I couldn't then have put it into words, it occurred to me that somehow the stark raving

madness of the world, which had seemed for almost a year now to keep me off balance, lived in this gruesome horse, whose one good eye, so Cleo said, was evil. Yes, Cleo was right; the old horse wasn't blind. Nodding like a drunkard, Troy rolled his good eye until it settled on me and focused, locked me in his vision and kept me there.