

Bolt

by Paul Melko

He was awake even before the lightning struck, drowsing in the sticky heat of the summer night. He lay above the covers, next to, but not touching, his wife. She breathed heavily, as if her throat was swollen nearly shut. Above him, the ceiling fan droned ceaselessly and uselessly.

Into that dead calm, the lightning slithered, flashed white-blue across the room.

He bolted upright in the bed, as the brightness danced across the dingy walls, and made them sparkle for a moment. Flickering shadows rippled upon the wall opposite the open window. In his wife's vanity mirror was the jagged flash.

His wife jerked and gasped. "What...?"

Then like the crack of a baseball bat, the thunder followed. One awesome snap that made the house shudder.

His wife screamed and grasped for him, finding him in the sudden darkness. She buried her face against his back; he knew she was afraid of storms. He sat there on the bed stunned by the thunder. He had never heard anything so loud. Finally he remembered to put his arm around his wife and soothe her, touch her soft hair.

She began to sob, and her grip loosened slightly. Outside the world was silent again, except for a distant rumble of thunder.

He took his wife's hand in his, removed her fingers from him. "I'm going downstairs to check on things."

She coughed, then let her hands slide down his body to rest in her lap. "Ok." She lay back down. "Please hurry." Again she coughed, throatily.

"Are you all right? Do you need your medicine?"

"No. I'm fine. Go."

He stood, feeling a chill. His body was covered in a sheen of sweat. He pulled his robe on and knelt by the open window.

It was too dark-- the lamp at the end of the driveway was not on-- and he realized that the electricity had been knocked out. He pressed his head against the screen and saw that his nearest neighbor's lamp was out too. To the east, he saw a

soft flash of lightning. A moment's fear gripped him, but the thunder that followed was distant.

He walked to the steps, finding his way through the clothes baskets and shoes strewn about the bedroom. His foot stepped on something hard. He reached down to find that a number of books had fallen off the shelf. He set them on top of the bookcase, reminding himself to put them back in their places in the morning.

Downstairs, he unlocked the front door and pushed it open. The night was pitch black and silent. Even the highway at the base of the driveway was empty. It was not even raining. A trace of ozone reached his nostrils, and he hoped that the strike had not started a fire. The nearest fire house was ten miles away. He stepped onto the porch.

There was an expectancy in the air. The thunder and lightning had passed, but the rain had yet to come, and the world was in the eye of the hurricane until it did. It calmed him, and he lingered on the front porch, until he was startled by a crashing in the brush.

From the west, three deer bounded into his front yard-- two does and a buck. They stopped suddenly not twenty feet from him, as if confused by the abrupt change from thorns and thistles to manicured lawn. The buck held his nose high, sniffing at the air, then he bolted forward again, the others following. It seemed they were in pursuit of the storm.

Finally, he realized that his wife would be worried, and he went back inside. The house was hot compared to the cool of the front porch. It was as if, even with windows open, the house was hoarding its heat.

He stumbled up the steps to the bedroom. The alarm clock sat blinking 12:01 at him, and he realized that the electricity was back.

"What time is it?" he mumbled as he squinted at his wristwatch. It said 12:01. He blinked, worried for a moment that his wristwatch had lost power as well. No, it was wound tight. He tapped the alarm clock controls until the blinking stopped.

"Is everything all right?" his wife asked, her voice raspy and slow from sleep. He felt her brow. She was burning.

"Yes. It's fine." He brought a wet washcloth from the bathroom and laid it on her forehead.

"I'm glad you're back." She curled against him.

"I saw deer in the front yard."

"Oh," she said, curious. "In the storm."

"Following it."

"How odd." After a moment, she added, "I can never sleep soundly during a storm either."

"You should try, at least," he said, concerned.

"I always dream the same dream whenever it storms, and I always wake up at the same time. Over and over again, all night long."

"What do you dream, Love?"

"I never remember," she said, her voice trailing off.

He lay there listening to his wife's breathing, hearing it gradually slow until he knew she was asleep again. He wondered if she were dreaming her dream again.

His body was exhausted, but his mind refused to yield to sleep. Outside the rain had yet to fall, but he was certain it must soon, perhaps in one giant drop, the humidity was so great.

Through the window, came the sound of a car on the highway. He listened as it passed, its engine loud and annoying, but it quickly faded away as the thunder had. Then he heard another car and another in quick succession. He listened as car after car passed by the house.

Gently removing his wife's hand from his shoulder, he sat up, and leaned over to the window. Headlights flashed past, all going from west to east in the direction of the storm. He saw motorcycles, campers, vans, and cars, all travelling as if in an ancient caravan.

He stood and grabbed his robe and trotted downstairs again. He pushed open the door and walked out. The grass was cool and damp and seemed to flow around his feet to cushion them. He stepped gingerly across the gravel driveway and stood by the side of the road.

The cars extended beyond his sight around the bend, pairs of headlights, one after another, like eyes in a barber shop mirror. Then the bulk of them were past him, and only one or two cars came, an old van choking out smoke, a motorcycle, a camper, and then a woman, cloaked in blue riding a black horse.

The motorcyclist glanced his way, and he saw him turn around in the neighbor's driveway and head back.

The motorcyclist was dressed in a black leather jacket, faded jeans, and black boots. He was overweight and had red hair and a long moustache that flowed behind him in aerodynamic shapes even when he was stationary. He pulled up into the driveway and let the motorcycle engine die away. The motorcyclist nodded to him, and he nodded in return.

"Where is everyone going?" he asked.

The motorcyclist cocked his head. "We're following the storm."

"Why? What for?"

He shrugged. "Some are pushed, some are pulled."

"The storm is pulling you?"

"You don't feel it, do you?" He threw his head back, sniffed at the air. "It's the calm, the serendipity, the silence between storm and rain."

He remembered how he had felt when he'd stood on his front porch. "Like the eye of a hurricane."

"You got it." The motorcyclist smiled. "And for those being pushed, it's the expectancy, the thrill. But I've had enough of that." He pointed to his forearm where a jagged scar etched its way between wrist and elbow. "It's the calm for me. You coming, man?"

He was taken aback by the question. To give up everything, just to follow a storm, to be in the calm. Maybe he could for just a little while. He looked up at the house, to where his wife slept. "No, my wife...."

"Yeah, no problem, man." To the west came the patter of rain, the sound increasing as it neared. The motorcyclist jumped down, and the motorcycle flared to life. "Gotta' go, man. Take care." The motorcycle roared away just as the rain hit.

He ran back onto the porch. He looked out at the night and realized that everything was different now. The rain obscured the world through a flickering filter that muffled its sounds, drowning them in staccato splashes.

Inside, the upstairs was silent, and he knelt by his wife's side of the bed to feel her fever. Her head was cool now, and then he realized that the sound of her breathing was gone.

He grabbed at the phone sitting on the nightstand, held it to his ear, expecting it to be silent, knocked out by the storm. But the tone was steady, and his finger touched the emergency button.

He hesitated as he realized what he was doing, pulling her back to him, childishly, jealously. Bringing her back to what? Another month of pain and waiting? He placed the phone in its cradle.

Already he felt immense loneliness. He heard the distant grumble of the storm, and the realization struck him.

His stomach lurched, as he stood and backed away, slamming into the bedroom door. He rolled against it, stumbled down the stairs and out onto the lawn. He shouted her name, but the only response was the cold rain that soaked into his body and made him heavy.

He ran to the road, looked to the east, but all was darkness. They were gone. She was gone. He

slumped to the asphalt, letting the rain pound him. The clouds had held off so long, they seemed to now attack with fury.

Finally, the cold of the rain grew too much for him, and he stood and walked back to the house. As he dried himself, serenity pervaded him; his wife was in the calm now, in the quiet following the storm. And there would be other storms if he wished to follow. But for now he would mourn.

END

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