

When It Rains

Every town thinks their own particular brand of storms are unique in their turbulence. Spectacularly wild, extremely electric, or a horrific whirl that blares through brick houses like straw, roaring all the while. Maybe they're even entitled to believe it, given the very slim definition of the common rain-and-thunder deal. But here's the real truth: No one's experienced a storm 'til they've seen the ones in Crown's Grove.

The day Raymond died, it was deep summer, and the sky acted as such. Clouds had settled in dark and gentle, curving with the humidity and the cicada static. After a day of Raymond's absence, the thunder rolled almost like an afterthought, and Charlie, who'd been beside Raymond every summer since he was eight and newly moved in, refused to go inside. "I'm going to Ray's," he'd said with all the confidence a fourteen-year-old could muster while beneath the shadow of a passing sky wyrm, grey fur thick with condensation as it brushed against the house roof. Its lips peeled back to growl, low and sparking, as it ascended back into the clouds, it's long and undulating body following behind.

It's unlucky to get caught in a storm, but it's just plain reckless to go out during one. "You know the rules?" His older sister checked. "No food, only lighted streets. Someone calls your name and you don't turn 'round until you get to Ray's house. Don't stop for anyone." Everyone learned it in school, between the shelter-in-place drills and the fire safety speeches. There's general stranger danger and then there's the simple fact that strange things happen in Crown's Grove when the sun is blocked out.

Something hit the back of Charlie's neck and he twisted to grab it. "It'll rain. Don't be stupid." And then his sister closed the door, and Charlie pulled the rolled-up rainjacket over his

arms because his sister was insufferable and also correct. If the sky wyrms were out and roaring, rain was sure to follow. Once that started you couldn't tell the difference between a sky wyrm and actual thunder, and maybe there wasn't, not with the snaking beasts blending into the clouds and how, with a click of their teeth, the spark spirits would burst from their toothy mouths and bolted into the ground, distant cousins of lightning.

A raindrop broke on Charlie's forehead as he turned a corner on Mainstreet and passed the local sandwich shop locking up. In seconds, heralded by a shivering rumble, a drop after drop split the humidity until, by the time Charlie ducked into a dirt path shortcut through the forest, a downpour hurtled down on Crown's Grove. Smoky fur tangled in the sky.

Here's what Charlie didn't see: the tricolor lights went dark at the only two intersections in town, and no one could reach them because, twirling around the wires were the arching limbs of the bright, crackling spark spirits. On another street, a black car lay abandoned with the driver's door open, lights still on and humming, as if the driver had stopped the car on a whim and left. He probably did, too, if the distant laughing was to be listened to and the folded up pamphlet on storm safety, fallen between the console and seat, noticed. The river that used to bubble under the flat boards bridging one half of the town's forestland to the next had soared over, laughing. On one of the hill estates, a woman stepped out onto her white porch to replace her hummingbird feeder, the new one smelling faintly of old pennies as this thicker, darker nectar pooled for the new birds, who were baseball-sized and hissing. (Their dog would stay in that day.) Down in the flower field outback, white shapes, as though they'd been punched out of the watercolor world, danced in swinging, delighted circles.

The world had dimmed by the time Charlie knocked wetly on Raymond's townhouse door. His mom pulled it open, dazed, and welcomed him in but forgot to close it before she was

hurrying up the stairs, brow shining with sweat. Charlie gently nudged it closed for her, thinking of that house on Smoke Circle that didn't have working electricity for half a year because a spark spirit had jerked through an open window and fizzled through the wallpaper.

Neighbors lined the thin house, arms full of casseroles and risottos that had kept their relatives alive, bustling to help, voices only cut by rattling cough, shaking the house's bones. It burst into a fit so grating and terrible that, when Charlie curled his fingers over the doorway to Raymond's bedroom and poked his head in, he half expected Raymond to be rusted metal, red-silver rib bones skating against the length of the ulna propped on his chest.

Instead, his skin looked like turned milk and the ruddy freckles on his arms were bright against it, his hair is dull. In the flicker of the bedside lamp, he saw the distant glassiness of Raymond's wide blue eyes, the icepacks tucked under his armpits and up against his neck. Charlie, hands under a bowl of soup he was supposed to be guiding to Raymond's mouth, told him not to die. For the first time that whole night, Raymond's irises moved, and they reached for Charlie's.

"I'm not sick." He breathed, the right side of his dry, chapped mouth quirking up. "So I won't."

This was obviously, absurdly, horrifyingly wrong, and proven as much when he wheezed out a pointed breath, probably to show Charlie that he could, and then didn't inhale again.

The bowl fell, the room exploded, and Charlie was pushed out of the bedroom door and into the hall, then down the stairs as everyone tried to get ahold of someone to help, be it God or the only other doctor in town. So he sat down on the brick walkup and felt the rain resoak his shorts.

Lightning cracked the darkness for many heartbeats too long, illuminating the smooth shape of a deer on the lawn. The doe turned to watch Charlie with all of her eyes, and when the murk flooded the street again –

Every wooden board in the townhouse screamed. Or maybe it was just Raymond's mother. Either way, Charlie stared back at the six-eyed doe and ran.

He'll remember this day as even darker, the growling louder, the circumstances harsher, but the truth was that the storm that raged while Raymond heaved into death wasn't a rage at all, not by local standards. It's the forest that seized when Charlie ran. Where once he'd have darted from streetlight to streetlight he charged through soaked leaves, breath frantic, and the undergrowth surged with him, roiling with emotion until it spat him out two streets down from his family's, and it would take very long for Charlie to remember the leaves trying to hold him.

The funeral was a week later. Raymond was lowered into the ground along the back edge of the sparsely populated green of the non-denominational grave. On one side was a wheat field and on the other, the same woodland that fisted the town tight. Charlie was there when they closed the casket and Charlie was there when the dirt spattered over it, watched over by the granite Raymond Barker, loving son and loyal friend, and yet, when a week later Ms. Barker's fingernails dug tight into Raymond's very much living shoulder, arms protective of his breathing body, Charlie questioned nothing.

Here are the things that Charlie noticed after Raymond was buried alive: the first week of school, Raymond gagged so hard over his desk that about a cup of wet dirt fell out his throat, mossy, with a couple of two-leaved seedlines poking out, and called it a party trick through a rasp in his voice. He watched the same TV shows and read the same sci-fi paperbacks and had the same sarcastic lilt, and then when they walked across the school courtyard the trees would

bend to Raymond as if they hadn't already stained his fingernails brown and the grass his kneecaps green. It wasn't uncommon for the nature to get rowdy, but after Raymond decided death wasn't his style, the fauna seemed to be fighting, tentacles of brown bark roots crushing a piece of road that Charlie had to traverse to get to school in the mornings. One tendril snaked towards Charlie's shoe and he let it tentatively nudge his sock before finding something more interesting to destroy – namely, a piece of the white median line.

Raymond followed in kind. When they first started playing soccer together, Raymond would shoot through the field without finesse or strategy, storming the ball and trampling anyone in the way. (Charlie played goalie.) This was how he charged the kids who set up a bonfire in the middle of the forest, purposefully tried to catch low hanging branches on fire and shoot fireworks low, so they'd light up the trees while soaring horizontally. A spitting mad teenager with half as many friends as he had toes would not have been intimidating, but the tree trunks groaned and twisted the way they always do in Raymond's presence. He'd animated the woods into something dangerous.

“It was just a couple of trees.” In any other county, Charlie was right. But in Crown's Grove, the forest's roots decimate a highway road in one night when it should take years.

Despite never going near the flame, Raymond's arms were mottled with burns. Charlie ran cold water over them, wrapped them, made some dumb excuse for Raymond's mom, and then stole his sister's lighter after dinner. Before he'd even reached the treeline, the raindrops were tapping on the leaf litter and sing-song laughter of the ghost dancers, just white shapes darting between distant trees, welcoming the stormy weather. Charlie flicked unskillfully at the lighter until a flame leaped up and out. Instead of staying put, it escaped, a smiling human shadow of flame. It made something akin to a thumbs up with one angular limb and jumped

away from the spark and butane that made it. Every time it touched a tree, it left a burning handprint as a keepsake.

The next morning, Raymond came to school with a red blistered palm on his left shoulder blade, fingers long enough to reach past his shirt collar. Charlie noticed this, too.

Junior year came with a new English teacher, Ms. Pruitt, with a tired, lined face, whose room always smelled like the ocean and enraptured Raymond so quickly, Charlie was convinced it was a crush. That particular line of thought was only amusing until Raymond started spending lunches in her room, question after question until it was just conversation.

Then Charlie's careful considerations of the leaves poking through Raymond's curls widened to encompass the never-dry shoe prints that Ms. Pruitt left behind on the tiled floor, and how her water glass always tumbled off her desk whenever someone startled her. Charlie waited outside her door more than once, because it was never a crush. It was a friendship, born of their rare similarity.

He couldn't stomach hearing their conversations, after a while. He wondered: did she die, too? Did she drown one day only to crawl ashore, soaked to the same bones, but a completely new person to the woman that fell in?

Did she become an uncomfortable parody of the person her best friend missed most?

Senior year, Charlie gave up noticing. He wallowed in it, crunched against a tree in a local park, reading a trashy sci-fi from forty years ago that Raymond would've liked.

Everything changed. And not the two-day long ache in your knee from growing bones kind of change. The world shifted on its axis. The earth split wide to swallow Raymond and his body and it never really spit him back up, did it? For all he knew, the real Raymond was still fourteen and six feet under.

Charlie straightened. Just that week, the pair of them were kept inside by one of those high spring storms, fast-hitting and littered with electricity. Whatever listless conversation they'd been struggling through had faded, and Raymond sat up and leaned forward in the delicate way his body was bullied for, blinking in time with a flash of lightning. As the rain pattered, deep and tender, Raymond opened his mouth.

"I've got a secret."

Charlie tilted his head and picked at a hole in his t-shirt to distract from the picture Raymond made, white shirt and dark lines of the suspenders he wore sometimes. With the gleam of his late father's watch on his wrist and the red-blond curl of damp hair under his ear, he could've been some kid out of the '60s.

"You know you can tell me anything," Charlie muttered, wondering if Raymond got himself a girl or if that was just another thing that died and bloomed differently.

"It's —," Raymond started, and then he turned his head to regard Charlie in full, brightness cracking over his features under another shot of lightning, and Charlie didn't know why, because Raymond hadn't done anything, but for a moment he could feel the beat of his heart in his entire body. Raymond slid off his bed and into the angle of Charlie's legs, where he'd laid back on a beanbag chair surrounded by roughed up novels with eyestrain covers. "It's the kind you have to take to the grave." And then Raymond put his hand on Charlie's much darker knee.

The tight-pulled bowstring of Charlie's spine snapped to the distinct sound of a sky wyrm's claws breaching the roof tiling and their attentions were ripped away.

Mow Charlie was going to listen. He'd take it to the *Goddamn* grave.

He shouldn't have been surprised when he found the graveyard overgrown. In four years

the quiet green drowned in the underbrush and waving ferns. Flat stones and the occasional weeping statue floating amongst the turned land, spotted with high stemmed wildflowers dripping with moisture.

Charlie stepped forward, hesitantly placing his feet in the right places until a cut of rock jutting from the thick greenery bore a familiar name. The thing should've been removed after Raymond came back, and it looked a little like someone tried, busted on one corner. It was practically food for the forest, the way roots curled around it, the way moss licked at it, and the way grass tilted in its direction.

Instead of retching at the sight of the carved name and sentiments like he wanted to, Charlie's hands dug into the dirt, fingers clenching and suddenly he was digging, scooping up the wet earth and tossing it away. He tore the flimsy roots from their place and scraped where he was sure, soon enough, his fingernails would scratch against the casket lid, but only if he kept pulling at the soil he flung himself into.

Because who was to say Raymond even came back? Who was to say he wasn't dead and gone the whole time, a body waiting to tell the truth? Who was to say the Raymond that Charlie last spoke to wasn't a fake, some weird comic book experiment or concoction from deep in Charlie's brain that wanted to let him down gently: *here, have this jigsawed Raymond and not the real one because that Raymond took his last breath in a bath of lightning-light before you could even understand it happening.*

He heard the forest crunch under someone else's foot, and he lunged further into the dirt, unpacking it with the frantic kick of his elbows. His name. His name again. Hands pushed at his shoulders until he turned and fisted the shirt of whoever dared stop him.

The grave wasn't empty, it *couldn't* be empty –

Raymond shouted, “What are you *doing* !?” and Charlie finally heard it, held in his best friend’s hands. Dirt smudged all over Raymond’s white t-shirt, but did it matter with how he smelled like freshly watered soil all the time?

At that thought, Charlie realized that he had started sobbing. He was going off to college in five months and his cheeks were wet and he was being pulled into Raymond’s chest, gasping around the full volume of his lungs. He’d managed to cool down enough to blurt, “I just want Raymond back.”

“Oh, Charlie.” Raymond sounded like he’d choked up a broken heart and was barely keeping it contained behind his teeth. “I am. I never left. Not really.”

Charlie wanted to shove him away. He didn’t. “You got sick and you died and now you’re different. You’re not even –,”

“*I’m him* ,” Raymond hissed, tone fiery in a way this boy made from petrichor and tree bark should never be able to. “Maybe I’m just different from what you expected me to be, Charlie.”

If they tilted sideways, Charlie was sure they’d drop off the earth entirely.

After a while: “Everyone acts like I’m a freak to fear. Maybe I deserve it, after everything, but... They agree that I exist, but then they mourn *how* I exist – like I’m better dead than weird. And I guess I thought –,” and then Raymond’s voice split over the words, so Charlie looked up. He shouldn’t have. It was devastating. “I thought you’d know I didn’t change.”

(The grave was empty.)

“I,” Charlie started before he realized that instead of throwing out a weak apology, he should just –

Maybe it was the years of rainy weather and freeze-melt cycles. Maybe it was the roots or

the crack from one corner, the job half done. But either way, Charlie planted two hands on Raymond's headstone and wrenched it from its base, stone cracking deafeningly into the forest. It fell face up, and together they watched the moss and mud crawl over the granite surfaces to herald those thick tree roots, strong enough to curl and crush and shatter. The pieces of Raymond Barker's gravestone disappeared into the dirt.