

THE ENTREPRENEUR

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A red-winged blackbird swooped down and landed on a branch of the maple tree next to the porch where the creaking of old wood beneath the rocking chair is heard as the yellow-yolked sun began its slow descent to the horizon over a Grant Wood landscape of trees and rolling fields. Crickets began to chirrup their plaintive music, joined by a chorus of whining mosquitoes as shadows lengthen like lines drawn eastward across the countryside.

Tod tensed upright to steady the rocker as he stretches his slingshot to the limit of his strength. His young arm begins to shake, then he releases with a touch of English in his wrist. The rubber strip gives its energy to the tiny river rock, propelling it forward until there is a sharp eruption, a loud plunk, followed close by the rich tinkling of glass shards of a former mayonnaise jar exploding over the black lichen-peppered basalt boulders of the thick wall separating the south forty from the rutted dirt road called Searle Street.

The boy celebrates his marksmanship with a holler then quickly loads another smooth pebble, like David of old facing the six-fingered Goliath. An amber-eyed owl hoots from the top of an ancient gnarled oak tree from whose banded arms depends the gently swaying pendulum of a well-worn wooden swing. The blackbird flashes glance at the owl.

The boy pauses as his eye catches by a tiny flash some miles away on the west horizon emanating from the iota of a slate-gray cloud, the only flaw in a rapidly fading summer sky. Again he stretches his weapon in line with the rusty can he has set upon the wall, but eases off when a crack and rumble of thunder reaches his ear. The birds jump from their perches and fly off.

Has the cloud moved closer? He cannot not really tell, but it seems to have changed somehow. Tod swats a mosquito on his wrist, sweeps its crushed form from his rosy skin. A stroke of red angles across his forearm which he washes away with a finger wetted on his tongue.

“Tod!” his mother yells from the busy kitchen. “It’s time to come to supper, boy!” The boy rises, stuffs his slingshot into a back pocket of his patched dungarees and slams the screen door as he enters the house, hearing the inevitable shout of “Don’t bang the door!” from his father after the fact.

“Sorry, Dad,” he mumbles, baring a nervous, toothy smile

After supper reads a book in a stuffed chair near the fire, his face glowing with the flicker of light as he digests the evening’s beef. Tod dries his hands on a towel after the last clean plate and cup is nestled in the cupboard. His mother tousles his hair in appreciation of his help with the chores, then kisses him on the forehead and bids him to bed.

He reads for a while until the book falls from his hand to flutter like a butterfly upon the multicolored quilt. His breathing falls into step with that of his hound curled on the braided rag floor rug by his bedside. His father sneaks in and blows out the candle

and all is now wrapped in the blackness of a room lit only by a square of stars beyond mullioned wavy glass.

2

The lad rides his dreams through the night 'til nearly just before daybreak when he is roused by the sound of scratching at the window sill. Rising, he rubs sleep from his eyes, slowly stumbles to the window where the dog is still pawing at the glass with a low growl in his throat.

“What do you see, Rebel,” the boy asks, smoothing the hairs that are rising on the back of his dog’s neck. Rebel reaches to lick his hand, then turns its wet nose back against the pane.

Dew shines upon on the leaves in the moonlight and a spider rests in the center of its radiating web that has become a glistening series of crystal drops, draped like conjoined necklaces. A spreading of moist vapor films the cold glass as the boy breathes his warmth. With a pudgy hand he wipes away the haze for another look.

The previous evening’s lonely gray cloud has grown and moved throughout the night from the horizon to a position over the woods close to the west which is riven by the old meandering road.. The cloud glows translucently, like a dim Chinese lantern, as a shadow slumps through the near woods beneath the cloud, accompanied by a symphony of sounds: a clatter like a sheaf of loose lances, the squeak and rub of leather straps, the course chafing of wrought iron bound to wood, hollow bonks of heavy pans like pumpkins tumbling in a box, the rhythmic clopping of hooves on cobbles and mud, the sucking in of phlegm and spat of expectoration. And there! he squints to see, the intermittent flash of a flame, possibly a torch, peeking between saplings only to go suddenly dark around a bend, leaving fireflies to rule the gloom for a moment, then the whole kit reemerges, closer to the cottage, more ominous of shape and motion.. His nose is suddenly assailed by a whiff of ozone.

The dark forms and bright fire slowly emerge from the copse of elms and trudge up the incline toward the house. There is a whinny and grunt from a black swayback pulling a wagon, driven by someone so covered by the cowl of the rig that Tod can only see the glint of the flame from two dotted white balls where a face should be.

“Whooaa!” cries the driver of the strange contraption now even with the boy’s bedroom window.

Tod is uneasy now, but strains his eyes to see in the dim light what kind of a night specter has invaded the peace of his front yard. The sky is beginning to lighten, and the hard shadows are beginning to soften. There stands in the drive a wagon like no outfit he has ever seen. It is a patchwork of wobbly wheels, cast iron springs, splintery wood and stretched leather, like some misshapen medieval chimera dragged behind a worn-out war horse around the square. The torch sputters and swirls its orange flame, spitting little smudges of smoke into the morning glow which rise, rise, rise, to meet the ever so slowly spinning cloud that sits a thousand feet above the scene. The boy looks as far to the left and right as the window frame will allow, but there appears not a hint of other clouds in the ever-lightening sky. Reb begins to growl. The boy’s hand quiets the nervous dog.

The wagon is black. In peeling red paint, outlined in yellow across the broad side between the spoked wheels, in an ornate and rounded typeface, Tod reads: THELONIUS

RODMAN, and centered below in black block letters: LIGHTNING RODS FOR ALL STRUCTURES.

Shuddering off an early fly from a mangy flank, the horse turns its head and shakes it from side to side, causing snot to fly to the ground. An old man, thin as a rake and tall as gate-post eases a long black boot from the floor of wagon to a cast iron foot step behind the front wheel and with gouged and roughened leather gloves ties off the reins to a rusted cleat. He inches carefully down and plants both feet upon the soil, stretches his arms in a huge Y and arches his weary back.

The old man wears something on his head that is more a contraption made out of various pieces of old leather than a hat. Straps hang down both sides of his head over his ears and hanks of matted black hair tuft out from under it.

The man's skin is tanned in the way good leather is tanned, deep, dark, and lustrous. He seems, upon further staring by the boy, to be totally made out of leather, for his shirt, his pants, his belt, his gloves, and that curious creation upon his head, are all different hues, but could be nothing but variously treated hides. All, that is, except his boots, which are thick-soled gum rubber.

this apparition bends his knees, cocks his head to crack his neck, braids and pops his knuckles, and opens his mouth as wide as a long-bearded man can, revealing a corn-row of yellowed teeth, many of the kernels missing. He takes a dignified stance with his legs far apart like the Collosus of Rhodes straddling the harbor, like a stupendous "A", then turns his wrinkled face direction toward the boy's window.

Tod shrinks back at the fiery glare of the old man's eyes. A crooked smile appears in the valley of the black beard, just below the sharp tip of his nose. He pulls off one of his gloves and cricks a long bony finger, beckoning the boy to come out.

The boy gasps as Reb begins barking loudly bringing his father bounding out of bed and into the room.

"What's the matter, Tod?" his father yells.

Pointing out the window at the tableau of strangeness, the boy just breathes heavily.

His mother is now beside him, wrapped in a quilt. She hold him by his shoulders and says, "It's just some old peddler. George, go out and see what he wants."

Father waves at the man in the road who raises a skinny arm in reply.

3

Tod pulled his shirt and pants over his pajamas and pulled on his shoes without socks. Shoelaces flapping he follows close behind his mother, who has put on a bathrobe and is a few steps behind her husband who is quickly walking out to greet the stranger.

The horse shies back at their approach.

The curious peddler doffs his leather cap, bows at the waist and lowers his head. His pate shines through thinning hair on top and tendrils of unkempt locks orbit his ears.

"May I introduce myself?" he nearly whispers, the sibilant esses holding a little longer than one is used to.

"My name is Thelonious Rodman, entrepreneur extraordinaire, dealer in the finest line of personally designed lightning rods this side of Thor's eternal palace. They have

been worked by my own calloused hands with devotion and an eye toward a rather gothic esthetic so as to please the eye at the same time they protect the body.”

The cap swept back onto the old man’s crest like the helmet of a medieval knight and the flourish of his hand was so smooth that it seemed unassociated to his arm, attaining a life of its own as he gestured toward his wagon of goods. One could almost see curlicues left in the wake of his movement. The baroque old character continued his spiel.

“I carry within my traveling store all that I need to design, manufacture, repair or install any product that I have in my inventory. There is within this wagon a forge and an anvil and tools that would make any blacksmith cry with envy, my friend.

There was a low rumble from the small cloudbank overhead, and George and his wife looked up a second to see a blue finger of lightning zap from one bulge to the another in the gray mass of aloft.

“Sheet lightning, my friends,” Thelonious said. “Couldn’t be a better visual aid to my point. These implements of protection from the untimely stroke of the power of Zeus are the artifice and focus of my humble genius. They come with a written guarantee, signed by my own hand, that whatever structure my rod has been appended to and rooted into the loamy earth by the finest gauge copper wire is impervious to the destructive powers of the fires of the firmament. All of the electric tongues of hell itself will be directed down into the infernal depths, away from those properties which you have so diligently collected, and away from the loving souls you have living in your home.

The man had whipped up quite a stream of sweat upon his brow with his oration and he pulled a stained cloth from his equally mottled vest and mopped his face and while tucking it back in the pocket said, “Let me direct you to my showroom, as it were,” whereupon he led them all to the back of the rig and dropped the tail-gate noisily, pulled out several one inch thick black iron rods and propped them against the wagon wheel.

Tod’s eyes widened. He had never seen such wicked looking objects. They were like ancient halberds, or lances. Some looked like they might have been wielded by knights or berserkers in battles. There were rods with battle-axes, and rods with brass balls, and balls fitted with dragons and sharp-taloned birds of prey, some carved with ornate filigreed designs of fanciful animals he had never see before. These malicious shapes frightened, but also satisfied the eyes of the boy. .

Thelonious reached for a particularly gothic looking lightning rod and help it before him in his blistered right hand. He looked very imperious, like a deranged king of some impoverished monarchy, scepter of power brandished with might.

“You folks are very lucky, indeed this day,” the old man spat. “I’m having my mid-year inventory sale and you may obtain one of these absolutely indispensable implements for a price never before seen in this part of the territory. I see you have a barn and outbuilding as well as a cottage. Take your pick of any three of the several I have here and I will give you a bargain you will never regret. Why the peace of mind alone, Sir, that your wife and boy as well as any pets you might have like this gorgeous hound licking at my boot, will be as safe as Jesus in the manger.”

George rubbed his chin with one hand while he ran his other over the cool black metal then stepped back and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Rodman, but we are god-fearing people here. We do not shrink from the elements. Our faith is in the Lord and his mercy and whatever he throws our way we receive with trust, be it fair or nay.”

The old man did not say a word. He simply put his rods back and closed the tail-gait.

“If you good people change your mind, I’ll be in your town plying my wares. May you be lucky enough to survive the gale.” Another rumble issued from above, which sounded strangely to Tod like some animal voicing disapproval.

Waving a long spindly finger in the air in a final adieu, the lithe figure of Thelonious Rodman climbed aboard his singular wagon, gathered the reins in his left hand and cracked a little whip against the flank of the swaybacked mare. “Giddyap!” he yelled and the rig clattered and banged down the road toward Groveland Town, dust rising in the shadow of the cloud which now formed a long serpentine running back into the west woods from whence the wagon and its strange driver had come and east to where it was now headed, reminding Tod of the trail of mucus left by a snail. It seemed to the boy that the cloud was lengthening, like a tail. The wisp of a breeze kicked up a tiny spiraling column of dust, which disintegrated like smoke in the distance.

“Time for chores, boy,” father said as he and his wife ambled down the short flagstone walkway and into the cottage.

“Okay, papa,” Tod said and he gave a last glance after the strange man and his improbable wagon. The last thing he saw as it rounded a bend was a tiny spark form in the cloud above which dropped at an odd angle and exploded upon a sapling growing at the side of the road, which ignited and was consumed by flames.

4

Tod attended to his chores, fed the horse, milked the cow and helped his mother pour the milk through the cheesecloth to filter it. He washed his hands and sat down to a breakfast of bacon and eggs, thick toast from homemade bread spread with dark strawberry jam.

“I’ve got to go to town for some things this morning,” George said to his son. “Do you want to go with me?”

“Oh, yes, papa!” Toddy said. He loved going to town. He might see some of his friends, might get to spend a few pennies of his allowance on candy. He might see what had been going on in town since he was there a fortnight ago.

The buckboard bounced behind the pony on its slow and pleasant way to Groveland Town while Tod and his father joked and talked.

“How come you didn’t buy one of those lightning rods, papa?” Tod asked.

“Didn’t need one, son,” he said. “We’ve lived here all of our lives and I have seen some fierce lightning storms for sure, but I have never seen anyone’s house or barn hit by a bolt. Besides,” he patted his son on the shoulder, “we’re God-fearing people hereabouts. If we work and are honest, God will protect us from anything that might want to harm us.” He smiled down into his boy’s beaming face and raised his eyes to the beautiful blue of a calm sky.

Tod watched a bird fly overhead in the direction of a burned tree, hover for just an instant and fly off to a green one. It was then that he began to watch and as they

proceeded through the woods to the town, he noted that every quarter of a mile or so, sometimes on the left, sometimes on the right, there stood the ashen skeleton of a bush or sapling.

5

While Tod's father was in the general store picking up paint, nails, tarpaper, wire, and other things to use on the farm, the boy was free to wander around town until the big hand was on the twelve and the little hand was on the ten on the old town clock in the square of green appointed with wrought iron benches and a small duck pond.

He patted the nag on its flank as he strode down the street, past the cut stone structure of the Odd Fellows Hall, past the many saltbox houses with their central doors and windows balanced on each side, past the little cottage industries of the town with their colorful signs. Tailor. Smith. Fowler.

He was headed to the candy store, a tiny shop with glass jars and scoops, wooden barrels full of wonderful treats to tempt a boy's tongue. He bought some horehound and lemon drops, a white candy stick with red spiraling its length. Under the wide smile of the sales lady he counted his coins, pushed them toward her and jammed the few pennies he had left back into his pocket to keep company with two ceramic marbles, a folding knife, an old brass key, an acorn and a pebble he had found in a streambed.

He was ambling past the barbershop, his teeth covered with sugar, when a shiver ran up his back. A breeze had come up and a great shadow had blotted out the sun melding all of the dappling shadows around him into one ominous grayness. There began in his chest a sense of uneasiness, but he was not certain why it had begun.

Directly across the street was the old Church, surrounded by the green expanse of the town graveyard, leaning crosses, small rectangles marked by aging wooden fences, trees growing up between the stones. The peddler's dark wagon was parked on the green, the flea-bitten nag tied to the iron grill surrounding a large plot in which the Parker family, the oldest and most prominent family of Groveland Town, had gently laid their dead for nearly a century.

There was a commotion near the door of the church. Two men appeared to be arguing but Tod was not close enough to hear, so he walked across the street, dodging a buckboard. When he got to the peeling white wooden fence gate, he could clearly hear the booming voice of the local pastor, John Grimsby. He was shouting at the slightly bowing form of Thelonious Rodman, who was sporting one of his magnificent scepters at an angle, so that he looked like a wretched soldier standing at ease.

"Be gone you evil tempter!" the pastor was yelling, "God alone is my shepherd, my protector, my defense against the forces of the world. He is my refuge and my succor. In Him do I place my faith! I place no trust in the arm of flesh or the mechanisms of a faithless time!" A sudden wind whipped the pastor's robes furiously against his spindly legs and his hair flagged wildly at his brow and around his ears. An audible groan seemed to fall from the long slate-gray cloud that Tod now realized was hanging above the church and stretching out across the sky in the direction from which his father and he had just come.

"How do you know," the Rod Man yelled against the power of the gale, "that my rods are not His rods, those that comfort and protect thee against the fires of the sky?"

The cloud thickened like a column of smoke as the air became suddenly very still and then there was heard an enormous crack of thunder and a flash blinded the pastor's eyes and stopped his ears.

Tod covered his eyes for a moment and dropped to the ground. When he peeked between his fingers again he saw the pastor cowered down beside a gravestone and the peddler, face shining with anger, standing above him.

As the constellation of sparks behind his eyeballs began to dissipate, the pastor experienced another roar in his ears as he looked up to see flames shooting out from the belfry of the steeple which swayed slowly then toppled over, dropped straight down to bury its point into the middle of the iron-fenced plot where the Parker had gathered their dead for some many generations.

The peddler's mare did not even flinch, but kept munching as if nothing had happened. The huge cone of the inverted steeple was balanced perfectly, like a fat javelin in the churchyard. The pastor was gulping air as smoke poured from the hollow square which once secured the steeple to the church. The bell had rolled free and now lay in contact with a leaning gravestone marking the final resting place of Levi Parker, the town's founder.

Rodman did not move. The pastor arose unsteadily and composed as much dignity as he could muster and entered the church. He was gone a short few seconds and emerged with a handful of bills which he gave the peddler who handed him the wicked looking staff, turned and strode triumphant to his horse and rode slowly out through the gate and over to the town square, where he tied his rig to the clock tower.

Tod could hear the old man mumbling as he passed and winked at the boy. All he could make out were two words: science, and commerce.

6

The townspeople spent the better part of a month rebuilding the steeple atop the old church, filled the hole and straightened the stone over the grave of Levi Parker. To anyone passing through Groveland Town everything seemed normal. The sky was blue, the birds sang in the trees. The people went about their business in a way that was being done everywhere in the country around them. Children played in the town square below the great clock. The clerks in the stores dispensed their wares to the farmers who regularly came into town for supplies. The candy store held a full stock of sweets for boys who had earned a trip to town and a small allowance for diligence in doing their chores.

Everything seemed timeless and unchanged in Groveland Town, but if one were to know a little history, one could see something strange. One could see that people seemed to be a little preoccupied by the weather. They watched the clouds. They kept track in their almanacs of the equinoxes, the solstices, and the seasonal weather patterns, and everyone in the town walked at least once a day past the old church to make sure that there was an ornate rod still flying high above the new steeple, just in case.

And Tod? Well, Tod got to go to town once more that month after he helped his father install a new lightning rod on their cottage, and one on the barn, and one on the outhouse. Just for luck.

