

Flower in Hand

By

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*If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream,
and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there,
and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke —
Ay! and what then?*

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge

As a kid, you believe in the Good Lord and as a teen you believe in church and as an adult you believe in neither. We were kids. Brothers — all the best and all the worst of what that word means. I was nine. Hayden was seven. Our play turned magical and really mundane all at once, thanks to a prayer and our heritage. A better author called it “good, tilled earth.”

In retrospect, I guess to an outside observer that whole year sounded like a debate between Coleridge and Wordsworth, though it went on between a nine year old and a seven year old. The Coleridge in me tried to show Hayden how *common* the fantastic, the mystic, the metaphysical, the magical was. I, the walking Ancient Mariner. The Wordsworth in Hayden tried to show me how *fantastic* the common, the daily, the drudgery, the bullshit was. He, a walking Prelude.

We were both right.

And that’s why we both ended up wrong: we each thought only one of us could win the argument. Meanwhile, the real Coleridge and Wordsworth worked as cowriters.

Took our whole lives and a ton of pain and pranks to realize it, thus the book you hold. Emerson said the city’s recruited from the country. That’s me and my magic: rooted in the black soil of Bellhammer. I and my worlds are nothing without Southern Illinois. But had Emerson lived longer, he also would have seen my country brother recruited from the city: his St. Louis Cardinals, his Nashville country music, his Detroit pickup, his New York-based bank account, his Seattle coffee, and Dublin whiskey. More honestly, though, all of the stuff he got from the broader magical universe: his Martian watch, his No’ad gemstones in his wedding ring (as well as its Negloa silver and Gehlhewgloan gold, braided), the Reygloa lava in his lava lamp, the bottle of Blazing World holy water his Catholic wife keeps (even though he’s pretty adamantly *not* Catholic), and so on. Without the rest of The Vale, his whole way of living in Southern Illinois would crumble. Each of our favorite things needed the opposite favorite thing in our brother:

The magic of the natural country.

The nature of the magical city.

They depend on one another because neither contains the cause of its own being and that includes their efficient causality — the human agency involved. New York bankers need Southern Illinois hicks. And Southern Illinois hicks need New York bankers. Earthen hillbillies and hobos and poor natives need

The Vale's mermaids and elven princelings and pirate barons, and The Vale's mermaids, elven princelings, and pirate barons need Earth's hillbillies, hobos, and poor natives.

Homeless magical wanderers both, me and my brother.

The heart of our childhood argument that has taken us a lifetime to resolve all started the year Papa "Captain Hook" Bren bought The Blue House. The Blue House tucked itself on the intersection of Cottonwood and Nottingham in Robin Hood Estates there in Bellhammer, Marion County, Little Egypt, Illinois. Yes, this full list of locations *is* important. While writing this chapter at Think Coffee in Union Square in New York, a barista wearing Carhart overalls told me she liked my cowboy boots.

"They were my Pawpaws," I told her. "My grandpa. He died last year."

"Oh so those are the real deal. Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks." I pointed to her Carhart overalls. "They wear Carhart where I'm from, but not ironically. More cause it's the quick way to get the cowshit off you in the mud room."

She looked down at her new overalls and hippie shirt. She looked up. "Where you from?"

"Southern Illinois."

"I've never heard of that. Always thought of Illinois as a northern state."

"It is," I said. "But it's also a very long state with nine rivers and tons of lakes and thresholds and the blackest soil in the world. We fed the world during the Dust Bowl when no one else had food — Joseph and Pharaoh. Southern and Central Illinois. Little Egypt."

"Wow," she said, "never knew."

Her and everyone that's ever only stopped long enough to see Chicago O'Hare's art deco madness — for your flight delay, I eternally apologize. But: your ignorance needs amending.

Little Egypt's a thing. A hidden thing, but a beautiful hidden thing. You've eaten our food. You've seen or read or listened to one of our cultural icons — I often say some of the best Americana was composed or invented within 400 miles of the Mississippi. Your lips have touched our water. Your car has burned our oil, oil the damn Texans stole to make everything bigger in their otherwise empty land.

The Blue House on the intersection of Cottonwood and Nottingham in Robin Hood Estates there in Bellhammer, Marion County, Little Egypt, Illinois had multiple stairs leading to the second floor, one to the basement, a whole lot of room in a weird sort of arrangement around a kitchen island. Pop was doing the spec house thing at the time, buying up lots or taking out loans to build houses in the subdivision, building on speculation, hoping others would buy.

That included a large lot he owned out behind The Blue House with a great old oak tree older than any in the neighborhood, more elder than most in the nearest woods, uncleared from an otherwise cleared land as deference to its wisdom, its long-suffering. We ran all over that open field — gosh, I think they put some seven or twelve houses on it in later years — throwing a football and playing tag and pretend. We tied a redbrick (which I couldn't look at without seeing Hayden's forehead sink into a divot that filled with blood, the sounds of his *Why...hy...hy?*) with a great banana-yellow hempen rope that burned the tar out of my hands when I gripped it too hard and it'd slip when I'd get ropeburn. Tied that fickle rope tight round that brick. Rope was half-dollar thick, easily. Felt really good in the hands. Like an anchor rope or something, something that normally might have a ton of seaweed and decaying moss and fish slime on it in a harbor. We tied enough knots around that brick that the bundle of knots grew longer and almost wider than the brick itself. Then I started swinging it in great looping swings like David and his sling, like

Grandad Remmy's trebuchet, over and again, more and more slack until we threw it up and over the great branch. It snagged on one of the side branches and wouldn't go over. The rope went limp from the extra slack that flew after it. I started pulling it until it caught tight against the snagged branch, making sure it was stuck. Amateur grappling hook made by a nine-year-old, thank you very much.

"No, no, nope, nope," Hayden said as he backed a way and started sprinting, back turned.

I tugged and tugged.

"*Leeea—be—heave it,*" he said.

I just kept on a pulling.

He kept on a running, scared it'd fall.

It came loose and the rope went wobbly-slack. It shot straight out and landed on my toes. Man did it ever hurt, I'm telling you, sometimes it's no fun having a body. Specially in a story. Hurt, oh it hurt. So I howled and danced around. Then I's mad, you know. You know how it goes, sure you do. So I picked it back up and started swinging it again. Just a swinging and a swinging.

"Oh no, boy, let it go," Hayden said.

"Can't," I said. I went to swinging it harder and harder.

Hayden backed up.

I turned loose. The thing went flying up higher than the branch I wanted and hit the branch up above. Bounced and flew down at my face like the other one'd done Hayden. I dodged out the way, but man it came close to taking out an eyebrow or something.

"Man, Toby, just—"

"You quit, now," I said. "Quit."

He stared at me, mouth open, then slammed it shut, watching from the sidelines.

Cause I was already swinging it a third time.

"Toby, *you* don't know how to quit."

"Sure I do. Sometime's quitting's the way to win." I kept swinging. "I don't think that's now." I turned loose. This time not too high nor too low, it arced up.

"Oh!" Hayden shouted.

It arced down.

"Turn loose!" Hayden shouted. "Turn it loose!"

I did. It unspooled like a dropped ball of yarn and the brick landed clean on the other side, a corner divot in the ground. I glimpsed Hayden's blood again in my mind's eye.

We both winced.

"You did it!"

"We did," I said. "Now I'll take it off me. You tie it around your waist and shimmy up."

"No way," my little brother said. "I know how *that* goes."

"I'm not gonna hurt you ever again."

"Uh huh," Hayden said.

"Fine, I'll go first. You belay." I tied it around my waist and under my crotch twice over.

"Be lie? Like lying?"

"Be the counterweight," I said. "Hang onto the slack and help me shimmy."

Hayden grabbed hold and wound the thing unknotted round his waist without cinching or tying off, his body like a capstan on a ship.

I shimmied up and used it something like reverse repelling, leaning into the rope more than the tree.

His bigger body held my smaller.

I slipped.

He let out slack.

I moved harder and faster.

He caught me. "On belay," he said.

"On belay," I said.

Up I went again, this time pushing a bit more with my legs, less climbing, less outright pull ups which my little form could barely handle. I scrambled and scraped skin on bark, bear-hugged the barrel of the branch and slowly puffed in and out, hoping I would not slip.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I whispered.

"You okay, Toby?"

"I'm okay, Hayden," I said louder. "I think I'll be okay." I first sat up so that the trunk of the tree gave me back support, saddled up on the branch, got my balance and then my bearings: the fledgling neighborhood opened up to me, wide and wondrous, weather rolling in from the north in the old forest behind the cow pasture behind the small apartments behind the great field behind the brown house across the street from The Blue House an entire field away from us. I saw the long and late-coming things first from up there, the distant things and middle distance, the far-off things on the horizon, like seeing other worlds and the secrets they'd hid from me: secrets of magic and mysticism and the being of all that is. I saw a pond ahead of us and the next neighborhood ahead of it where other friends lived who I'd never thought of walking through the woods over to see. I untied the rope first from its tower of knots and then from my waist and crotch and then looped it over the branch above me and called down, "Tie on."

"No way."

"You got this, Hayden, tie on."

"This one of your tricks?"

That hurt. I winced. "No, Hayden, I want you up here with me. Tie on, man."

He started, slowly, turning his capstan of a body to wrap more rope around him and then tied it several times in front, not underneath his crotch like me, but a simple barrel-belly tie. Heaving and leaning (it's a bit harder from that angle than the pulley system) and with his stubbornness to do pull ups at a younger age than I, we got him up there too. Immediately he untied the rope from his waist and let it hang loose on the branch, grabbed the other limb overhead and was up to the next level in the boughs.

"Careful, Hay."

"You be careful, Tov." He climbed even higher. "I bet I can touch the sun," he said.

"Hey, that's my job," I said. I started climbing after him and soon found the other side of the tree where the branches were thicker and farther apart, enough for me to sprawl a bit and reach a bit and gain ground — or rather sky — on him.

We raced higher and higher, him only a few branches above me. Then more as my hustling motivated him to hustle harder and faster and faster. He got so high that I wondered when the top of the tree would start swaying. He climbed up onto a scored and scorched limb where lightning had struck earth from heaven, had made it a lightning tree. Ahold of that burnt branch, the full brunt of his weight slung — great stories above that first branch that hung two stories above the earth.

The scorched branch snapped.

He screamed and fell, hitting branch after branch. Falling and falling and—

Would he die if he hit?

Some inkling of a story came to mind. I searched the horizon and saw a great old willow tree hanging over that pond behind the lot. “OLD MAN WILLOW, QUICK!”

Old Man Willow uprooted himself and sprinted in great strides, the swiftness only trees in hurricanes can know, whipping and then turning into a great tumbleweed, roots and willowswitches indiscernible. He was at us, under us, smiling. Literally.

Hayden fell past the rope branch.

Into Old Man Willow’s open arms.

“Waaaa!” Hayden said, scrambling to get out of Old Man Willow’s arms.

“Morning Old Man Willow,” I said. “I thank ya.”

Old Man Willow said, “Little learners, leave not good branches or you’ll fall. Breathe deep. Slow ye down and sleekly climb.”

Hayden wasn’t listening. He was still scrambling and every time he got close to the edge of one willowswitch branch, Old Man Willow switched arms. A great juggler, the giant tree, but a boy where the ball should be.

“HAYDEN!” Old Man Willow shouted.

My brother froze.

“Be still. Be steady. Be standing by waters.” Old Man Willow set him back up in the great oak, where Hayden clung for dear life.

I kicked off shoes (had come outdoors sockless, but shod) and said, “Old Man Willow! Catch me!”

“Don’t be has—“

But I had jumped.

He reached up and caught me. “Foolish boy.” He laughed and chortled.

Hayden had started climbing again.

Old Man Willow said, “Young man, you ought not climb so high, so fast again.”

“Mr. Oak will catch me,” Hayden said.

“I think you’ll find the thunder in Mr. Oak is slow to sound: simmering bark.”

“Getting struck by lightning stilled Mr. Oak’s voice?” I asked.

Old Man Willow nodded.

“But he’s tall and thick and strong,” Hayden said. “I’m sticking with Mr. Oak.”

I pushed back, “But Old Man Willow takes me on wind sprints, see?” I whispered in Old Man Willow’s ear, who turned again into a great tumbleweed and rolled across the land in a great ball, me at his center, his little hamster. We came back.

“But I can see farther,” Hayden said. He climbed and camped above and looked out over the whole land.

I looked back over the field Old Man Willow and I had torn up, the great ruts of mud as if some trees had fallen, been loved in their laying, and then lugged away. An older woman — Ms. Goff — watched unimpressed as she gardened across the hill and runnel vale. Another man was mowing a lawn and had let go of the machine to let it tear off down the grassy hillside, shocked at what he saw. I didn’t care either way. I looked up at Hayden who had climbed now again to the top, unworried of falling: Icharus with wings of iron and open wings of bone, meltless things that he might sooner approach the sun and without falling. “I can see all the treasure of the world from up here,” Hayden said, looking at the houses Papa Bren had built. “Anything I need to keep us safe.”

From the comfort of Old Man Willow’s arms, I whispered, “But money can’t buy courage.”