

The Storm Seller

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A storm was coming to pound the streets of Harrow, Arkansas, and the Storm Seller walked before it like Helios in his chariot pulling the sun to wake the world. He had an oversized briefcase in one hand and a pregnant rucksack slung half over his back in the other. His boots were travel worn, and his clothes were storm colored. They matched in spite of the fact that they clashed.

He'd made the storm that morning, performing all kinds of dances (many of which weren't legal in Arkansas) and many more of which would have been illegal if the men that made the laws knew they existed. He burned plants that made colored smoke and he filled various basins with water and he did other things which didn't make a lot of sense to anyone but him.

He strode into the impossibly little town like a blood hound scenting for prey. His nostrils flared hungrily as he stepped onto main street. He scanned the crowded road with humid eyes, passing over a pair of farmers loading feed into the back of their trucks, a housewife packing up a cart of groceries on the corner, and an old man piddling across the street in a single glance.

Although he made no move to blend in or stay out of sight, not a man or woman in Harrow could have claimed, an hour later, to have seen him. His feet ate up the sidewalk until he'd walked well through the town's center, all the way down to 5th street, and that's when he spotted the boys, just as easy as a weatherman might spot a big funnel cloud forming over a preschool.

There were two of them, and they were lazing on some fresh cut grass, fiddling with pocketknives and carving up bits of errant wood they'd claimed from some place or another. These were precisely the boys the Storm Seller had hoped to find.

He could tell they'd been all over the city in the weeks since summer began. They were resting now only after spreading their footprints in every field and path between the mountains that hemmed Harrow in to the north and the lake that hugged it to the west. Only after putting their oily fingers on every branch and turning over every stone, after sinking two rafts and building three tree forts and making six fires, (only two of which got out of control).

They spied him a long way off and watched him coming, talking quietly to themselves in voices they thought he couldn't hear but which he could, because among making capital S Storms (and capital S Selling them) he could do a lot of other less impressive but sometimes equally useful things like hear people who were talking about him even when they were whispering.

He hailed them a ways off. "You two look like a fine pair!"

The boys regarded him seriously. They'd been called many things before, but *a fine pair* was a new phrase. They rather liked it.

When they didn't answer, he tried again. "This seems like a sleepy town. Wouldn't you two like to see it wake up?"

The boys, who looked alike enough to be brothers, considered. Privately, they'd often thought Harrow could do with an exciting event or two. Stephen, who was the older of the two by a whole month, spoke up and told the Storm Seller as much.

He walked a few paces, nodding, and hunched his shoulders. He seemed suddenly aware of the many windows that watched from the fronts of the many houses looming around the three of them. He sniffed at the air, feeling it, and the first breeze of the Storm came and rattled the river oaks and pines. The boys shivered and cried out at how cool it was.

They jumped to their feet and wondered at where the wind had come from. The Storm Seller brought their attention to the dark clouds approaching from the horizon. A long ways off now, a bit like Fall, but they'd be here within an hour rather than a few months.

The Storm Seller stepped off the road and into their yard. Not so close as to make them nervous. "What do you two call one another?"

The nearest of the two boys, who had hair as black as burnt bark, introduced himself as Stephen and named his friend Harvey. He looked at the Storm Seller with wide, trusting eyes that were clear as river water. Harvey maintained a more careful expression. Strangers didn't come to Harrow often.

"Well how do you do, Stephen and Harvey?" He beamed at them, and then motioned at the branches hanging languorously above them. "Take a look at those oak leaves, minted gold by that wonderful sunlight."

They looked above them, seeming to notice the leaves for the first time, and marveled at how the sun seemed to light them up.

Stephen blinked at them, mouth ajar. "Golly!"

"Just like lightbulbs!" Harvey crowed, punching him on the shoulder.

The Storm Seller smiled at them, pleased. "Have you boys got any money?"

Stephen shook his head sadly. Harvey merely stared.

The Storm Seller turned his attention to the latter boy. His eyes were like hard chips of glass. "You boys know any trades? Carpentry, maybe?"

They looked at each other conspiratorially. The kind of talking two boys who are good friends can do without actually speaking happened. The Storm Seller used to know how to talk

that way, when he was their age, but that was so long ago he couldn't even remember the year. He watched them politely while they chatted things over with their eyes.

Stephen eyed the man up and down. "You sellin' something?"

The Storm Seller marked him for the leader. He looked at his watch, making a show of tapping it, and then looked back at the Storm. "Matter of fact, I am. I've got one full day of summer for sale."

Harvey crossed his arms and blinked at him incredulously. "It's a bright—"

But Stephen was ahead of him. "Not for long." He got to his feet and strained his eyes, looking toward the clouds the Storm Seller had so helpfully pointed out for them. He licked his finger and held it up into the brisk breeze, as if he couldn't already tell where it was coming from by all the dust and pollen that'd blown into his blinking eyes.

Harvey looked sincerely worried. "How long do you reckon those clouds will—"

"Not long, I'm afraid." He set his rucksack down, leaned his briefcase against it, and yawned. "Storms make an old man like me sleepy. Something about the idea of a full long day of sun and play being washed away makes me feel like resting. It makes me want to lie for hours, and then crawl up in bed once the sun has finally been beat back by all the wind and rain and thunder and sleep all night, too."

The boys, who didn't particularly like lying still (especially not inside) looked at one another in abject horror. While the summer seemed somehow infinite when the sun was out, the thought of losing a whole day, especially such a nice day, to a storm, seemed as inedible to them as brussels sprouts.

Harvey looked at Stephen with terror plain on his dusty cheeks.

Stephen stood up and reached into his pockets. “You got something in your bag that can make a storm go away?”

He stooped nearly in half to fish in the bottom of his rucksack and the boys realized, for the first time, just how thin the curious man was. His clothes looked more worn than their oldest hand-me-downs and his shoes were just about nothing more than pieces of thin leather with bits of lace over the top of them. He was like nothing more than a bit of wind ruffling up some of their father’s things on the clothesline.

The Storm Seller jangled and banged in the bag. It sounded to the boys like he had the whole kitchen sink in there and they stood up, reaching on their toes to try and peek inside. Just as they started to get a good look, he swept out of the depths with a flourish and produced a plain wooden box.

“What’s that?” Harvey reached out for it, but the Storm Seller pulled it out of reach.

“Just a simple old box,” Stephen said. “Couldn’t barely fit my lunch box in it, couldn’t—”

The Storm Seller gestured wildly. “Just a simple old box? Do you boys have a schoolhouse around here? By God above, I believe I’ve never heard such an ignorant estimation in all my time walking the world, and that’s a long time by even an old man’s measure.”

They looked at it closer. But upon further inspection, it still looked like a normal, plain box. Perhaps it even looked a little more boring. It wasn’t even a rich colored wood. It was light, probably birch. And there were some scuffs on it that made it look old and badly used.

“What could we do with it?” Harvey ventured to ask.

The Storm Seller waved a hand over the box and then thrust it out for them to look at and the boys gasped. A moment ago—but no. No, that didn’t seem possible. They must have seen

wrong. They hadn't noticed the writing carved into the wood before because he'd been holding it close to him. Now that the strange man had stuck it out for them to really see, they could actually appreciate it.

"Boy howdy," Stephen breathed, flashing eyes alight with excitement.

"That looks like *some kind of* writing!" Harvey gaped.

Stephen blinked the pollen out of his eyes. "Sanskrit?"

"Probably Sumerian," Harvey guessed wisely. "Or maybe even—"

"You're both right," The Storm Seller cut in. He found it wasn't good to let his customers wonder too long at the box. If they looked long enough they might see something they didn't like. He pulled it back toward his stomach and smiled at them favorably.

"Well what's it *do* though?"

"Catches storms like an old cowboy catches ornery bulls that've slipped out of the pen and gone to bother the milk cows. Tames them like a good equestrian will tame a wild steer, by golly, it whips them into shape good as any lawman that's ever caught a vagabond and put them to test."

They gawked at him hungrily. Then they looked at one another and conversed again without speaking at all.

Finally Stephen whispered, "it's a whole day of summer."

"Must be worth a fortune," Harvey lamented, barely parting his lips. "What do you reckon we could use to pay for it? My folks got the keys to my mom's new car in the kitchen drawers and—"

"But maybe he wants cold hard money," Stephen worried. "My dad's got some gold coins, not near so nice as that box, but—"

“He’d never want some ugly old coins,” Harvey cried, his voice rising like the tide. “Maybe we could—”

“Boys?”

They turned sharply, shocked to find him still standing there. When they looked at the Storm Seller they saw the rumbling, black mold clouds coming fast behind him and felt the pressure of the trillion pounds of rain that those clouds held in their bellies pressing on their backs. The weight of it made their knees weak.

“We aren’t sure what we could offer you,” Harvey finally stammered.

“Not for something so... so...”

“Pretty,” Harvey tried, and hated himself for choosing such a dumb word. “I mean—special.”

“Extraordinary,” Stephen helped him, smiling up at the Storm Seller hopefully.

“Rare,” the Storm Seller agreed. He patted the box fondly and then offered it for them to take another look at. “It’s a special box, boys, the only one of its kind. At least until I can get back home to make another, and that could take an awful long time. Maybe years.”

They gazed at it frantically. That box meant a whole day of summer. Or maybe it meant a lot more. What if...

Stephen peered at the Storm Seller carefully. “I was wondering something.”

“Go on.”

“How many storms do you think that box could hold?”

The Storm Seller grinned. The corners of his mouth kept moving, and each time the boys thought he’d smiled as big as he could, his lips just kept getting further away from his nose and

closer to his eyes until they thought he looked like a Jack-o'-lantern and had to avert their gazes for fear of seeing something that they weren't supposed to see.

"Stupid question," Harvey decided. He punched Stephen on the arm to drive home his point. "Baby question."

Stephen looked down at his feet. It was hard to knock him down a peg, but he suddenly felt very little and foolish. "Sorry."

The Storm Seller waved away the apology. Then he looked at his watch again. "I guess we don't have more than twenty minutes to get that Storm wrangled."

"What's all the writing on the box?" Harvey leaned forward to look at it better. "Looks like a bunch of different languages."

The Storm Seller leaned back on his feet. "Sure is."

Stephen peered at it appreciatively. "What for?"

"What for?" he echoed, swooning with shock. "Well what language does the wind talk, son? From what country does lightning spawn? From what lake or river or ocean does the rain hail? And where does the thunder hide when the storm leaves it behind?"

They looked at one another with honest understanding and amazement in their eyes. "Guess it has to talk to a storm from anywhere, then. Can't just speak one language."

The Storm Seller nodded grimly. "Not a hurricane on Earth this box couldn't swallow. No foreign land from whence a cyclone came borne out of some chasm in the deepest valleys of the furthest forests that this box wouldn't whip."

They were thoroughly convinced that the box could capture the storm. But the problem remained. "We don't have anything to offer you, sir. Barely got two nickels to rub together between us, and, well..."

“But I don’t want anything so base as coins or cars or quarters,” the Storm Seller declared happily.

They conferred together hopefully. Stephen continued to do the brunt of the talking on account of him being an entire month older than Harvey. “Well then what do you want?”

He stooped down again, making the boys think of a scarecrow. Were his arms too long for his body? Did his legs go up all the way near to his neck? What was it that made him look so oddly shaped as he bent over and flipped through files in his briefcase? Searching, searching, searching...

“Got it!” He waved a sheet of heavy, printed paper that had a dozen simple lines of text on it and held it out for the curious boys to look at.

They cast their eyes on the paper and as they began to read, the wind started to blow again and the clouds boiled and the faint scent of rain fell on the town of Harrow with the kind of promise that nature very rarely, if ever, broke.

The Storm Seller pulled the paper back and produced a pen from behind his ear. Neither of the boys had noticed the pen there before. Stephen thought it hadn’t been there before, and Harvey was sure it had been the whole time and wondered how he could have missed it.

“All I’d charge for a full day of blissful summer is a year each your time, to be subtracted from your life before its natural end.”

Stephen crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. “You mean a whole year of our life? Each?”

“Two years in total,” The Storm Seller agreed. “One from each of you.” He held onto the paper tight now. The capital S Storm seemed to want to rip it free from his grasp. It worried at it, maybe even trying to rip it. He brought it close to his chest.

They looked into ones another's eyes, shivering at the cold wind, and then glared at the dark clouds. "Kinda sounds like slavery. What kind of work will we do?"

"Oh you won't have to work," he cried with a sinister gleam in his eyes. "You'll be far too tired to work."

Harvey landed on the truth of what the Storm Seller wanted and shivered at the thought. "You mean the last year of our life? When we're real old?"

"So we'd die when we were 98," Stephen clarified, still trying to wrap his head around the request, "instead of 99?"

"Or 99," The Storm Seller offered, "if you'd have made it to 100. And boys, what do old men do, really, but sit around and lie inside all day?" He studied his nails. "It's not even really being alive."

Something occurred to Harvey and he let the thought fly. "Well but what if we were going to die young, like my Uncle? He was only 40 when he died, and—"

The Storm Seller flapped his free hand at the boy. "With modern medicine, we're living longer and longer every day. And you two boys look fit as fiddles. Got any cavities? Any ailments to speak of?"

They shook their heads. Stephen felt like living to 100 would be dying young. "We're healthy."

He beamed and thrust the paper at them, holding onto the top tight. "Just need your signatures. What's a year of lying in bed and wasting away with hurt old bones and bad teeth and aching bellies compared to a full day of sprinting through the green grass and swinging on low branches and fishing for trout in the stream?"

"Doesn't get dark until near nine," Harvey whispered. "A full day of summer, Stephen."

Stephen analyzed the paper suspiciously. Then he saw the clouds and felt the wind whip through his dark hair and tickle his ear and groaned. What was he hesitating for?

The Storm Seller hefted the box in his right hand, still holding the contract in his left. The boys grabbed at the pen together, wrestled over it for a moment, and when Stephen wrenched it out of Harvey's hand to write his name first, it seemed to him like he'd won a great victory.

The Storm Seller put the paper against an old oak that looked young to him, and Stephen wrote his name. The familiar letters looked like curious chicken scratch and he furrowed his brow as he handed the pen to Harvey, who wrote his name just beneath Stephen's, and wondered at the fact that he'd never quite noticed how an A looks when it's nestled between an H and an R. Their names glistened wetly on the thick paper. The black ink drank up the sun. It seemed to absorb it.

The Storm Seller took a deep breath. Harvey and Stephen wondered if he wasn't breathing in those two years they'd promised him. It looked to them like the tall, skinny man grew as he took that long, drawn out gulp of air. They wondered together how many times he'd taken a long breath like that and drank in the years of a pair of young boys and offered a long sunny day of summer in return.

They took the box and held it between them like a precious relic. Stephen brushed his fingers over the top of the lid and Harvey pressed his fingers into the wood as if he could make himself become part of it if he squeezed it enough.

"You boys wander on over to the top of the hill there," The Storm Seller pointed helpfully. He was already packing up his things. "Open up that Storm Catcher. You'll find a whole sunny day ahead of you if you do that."

"That's all?" Stephen queried carefully. He realized he felt older after the transaction. Not as if he'd given a useless year of old age away, but as if he'd grown a year instead.

Harvey felt something of the same tickling in his chest. He thought his heart might have beat a years-worth of beats in the moments before, during, and shortly after he put his name down on the Storm Seller's contract. He wasn't scared. But his body seemed to know something had been lost.

Yet his heart and his mind realized what had been gained. A whole day of being a boy with his friend. Seven or eight hours of sunlight, an hour or creeping dusk. Oak leaf glowing like fireflies, a lantern of sun blooming off the lake, cicadas and katydids screaming as the dark comes; *one whole day of summer.*

The tall man hefted his pack with a noticeable pep in his movements. Somehow, it was half the size it was when he came, although all he'd removed from it was the tiny Storm Catcher they now clasped between them.

"That's all," he confirmed.

Stephen and Harvey watched him leave. He walked toward the dark clouds that he'd come out of. His storm colored clothes were just as loose on his wiry frame, even though he was markedly larger.

He seemed old when he came into Harrow, but he seemed far younger now.

A couple of years younger, at least.

The boys wasted no time. They ran to the top of the hill, racing the storm. The wind pushed against their small bodies. It wanted to stop them and they dug their feet into the earth, hunkering down close to the grass to fight it.

It howled as they dropped the box into place. Thunder crashed, and when they looked up to check the progress of the Storm Seller, they saw he was gone, although the road was too long for him to have walked straight out of their sight.

“Open it!” Stephen cried.

Harvey clawed at the lid. His fingers fumbled; his nails scratched; he pried the top open as a dead man might pry the cover of his coffin free if only he had the power to do it.

“There!” he cried triumphantly.

The last bit of sun that remained in the quickly darkening sky revealed the inside of the box to be bare. The Storm raged against the opening of such a profane and offensive thing and a straight line of wind rocked the boys off their feet. They fell as if thrown. Harvey tumbled and flipped backward while Stephen rolled like a bunch of tobacco in his father’s cigarette.

A bolt of lightning launched from the Storm like a javelin. It struck the place the boys had been a moment before the wind knocked them off their feet and they saw the box go up in a blaze like a red hot horseshoe being plunged into a vat of cool water.

It glowed red, steamed, hissed, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

They righted themselves at the same time and cried out in anguish. Twin sets of feet rushed up the windless hill, scouring the earth for any sign of the Storm Catching box. Stephen fell into the smoldering grass and ran his arms through the cinders like a blind man. Harvey stood above him, eyes spinning like a vinyl album on a record player.

The box was gone.

“But the storm—”

“The storm!”

The boys looked into the sky and gaped at the uniform blue expanse that stretched like a blanket atop the town of Harrow.

There were no charcoal clouds; there were no harsh, cool breezes; the sun was alone. The sun was alone and they were alone and although the hilltop was hot and smoky, there was no box to evidence the peculiar happening.

Stephen gestured helplessly. “You remember the clouds?”

“And the wind?”

“It was about to rain.”

Harvey stuck a finger in his ear. “Thought I heard thunder.”

“Definitely saw lightning.”

They sat still for a minute, just thinking. Trying to remember the look of the man that sold them a whole day of summer. Trying to remember what he’d been wearing or where he came from or even how his voice sounded.

But they couldn’t.

“We never even got his *name*.” Stephen put his hand over his heart and wondered at the way it was hurting. What was it aching like that for?

“Don’t even know where he lives.” Harvey sat down and tried to take a deep breath. His lungs wouldn’t quite open up enough to let his head clear. He didn’t remember running hard enough to wind himself.

Stephen looked up at his friend, concerned at the way his face was turning purple. His heart felt like it was trying to *glug* through a pool of old, thick oil. “What’d we even offer him for that old box?”

Harvey thought about it. His head felt fuzzy, like he’d just come up from swimming down at the ravine. “I don’t know.”

They leaned back together and gazed up at the sky, feeling tired. Stephen felt Harvey's hand fall into the grass beside him and grabbed at it. He felt like hugging him, but he'd have to stand up to do that, and he didn't quite have the energy.