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Opening extract from

Blood Red Road

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Lugh got born first. On Midwinter Day when the sun hangs low in the sky.

Then me. Two hours later.

That pretty much says it all.

Lugh goes first, always first, an I follow on behind.

An that's fine.

That's right.

That's how it's meant to be.

Because everythin's set. It's all fixed.

The lives of everybody who's ever bin born.

The lives of everybody still waitin to be born.

It was all set in the stars the moment the world began. The time of yer birthin, the time of yer death. Even what kinda person yer gonna be, good or bad.

If you know how to read the stars, you can read the story of people's lives. The story of yer own life. What's gone, what's now an what's still to come.

Back when Pa was a boy, he met up with a traveller, a man who knew many things. He learned Pa how to read the stars. Pa never says what he sees in the night sky but you can see it lays heavy on him.

Because you cain't change what's written.

Even if Pa was to say what he knew, even if he was to warn you, it would still come to pass.

I see the way he looks at Lugh sometimes. The way he looks at me.

An I wish he'd tell us what he knows.

I believe Pa wishes he'd never met that traveller.

If you seen me an Lugh together, you'd never think we was the same blood.

Never think we grew together in the same womb.

He's got gold hair. I got black.

Blue eyes. Brown eyes.

Strong. Scrawny.

Beautiful. Ugly.

He's my light.

I'm his shadow.

Lugh shines like the sun.

That must of made it easy fer them to find him.

All they had to do was follow his light.


Silverlake



The day's hot. So hot an so dry that all I can taste in my mouth is dust. The kinda white heat day when you can hear th'earth crack.

We ain't had a drop of rain fer near six months now. Even the spring that feeds the lake's startin to run dry. You gotta walk some ways out now to fill a bucket. Pretty soon, there won't be no point in callin it by its name.

Silverlake.

Every day Pa tries another one of his charms or spells. An every day, big bellied rainclouds gather on the horizon. Our hearts beat faster an our hopes rise as they creep our way. But, well before they reach us, they break apart, thin out an disappear. Every time.

Pa never says naught. He jest stares at the sky, the clear cruel sky. Then he gathers up the stones or twigs or whatever he's set out on the ground this time, an puts 'em away fer tomorrow.

Today, he shoves his hat back. Tips his head up an studies the sky fer a long while.

I do believe I'll try a circle, he says. Yuh, I reckon a circle might be jest the thing.

Lugh's bin sayin it fer a while now. Pa's gittin worse. With every dry day that passes, a little bit more of Pa seems to . . . I guess disappear's the best word fer it.

Once we could count on pullin a fish from the lake an a beast from our traps. Fer everythin else, we planted some, foraged some, an, all in all, we made out okay. But fer the last year, whatever we do, however hard we try, it jest ain't enough. Not without rain. We bin watchin the land die, bit by bit.

An it's the same with Pa. Day by day, what's best in him withers away. Mind you, he ain't bin right fer a long time. Not since Ma died. But what Lugh says is true. Jest like the land, Pa's gittin worse an his eyes look more'n more to the sky instead of what's here in front of him.

I don't think he even sees us no more. Not really.

Emmi runs wild these days, with filthy hair an a runny nose. If it warn't fer Lugh, I don't think she'd ever wash at all.

Before Emmi was born, when Ma was still alive an everythin was happy, Pa was different. Ma could always make him laugh. He'd chase me an Lugh around, or throw us up over his head till we shrieked fer him to stop. An he'd warn us about the wickedness of the world beyond

Silverlake. Back then, I didn't think there could be anybody ever lived who was taller or stronger or smarter'n our pa.

I watch him outta the corner of my eye while me an Lugh git on with repairs to the shanty roof. The walls is sturdy enough, bein that they're made from tyres all piled one on top of th'other. But the wicked hotwinds that whip across the lake sneak their way into the smallest chink an lift whole parts of the roof at once. We're always havin to mend the damn thing.

So, after last night's hotwind, me an Lugh was down at the landfill at first light scavengin. We dug around a part of it we ain't never tried before an damn if we didn't manage to score ourselves some primo Wrecker junk. A nice big sheet of metal, not too rusted, an a cookin pot that's still got its handle.

Lugh works on the roof while I do what I always do, which is clamber up an down the ladder an hand him what he needs.

Nero does what he always does, which is perch on my shoulder an caw real loud, right in my ear, to tell me what he's thinkin. He's always got a opinion does Nero, an he's real smart too. I figger if only we could unnerstand crow talk, we'd find he was tellin us a thing or two about the best way to fix a roof.

He'll of thought about it, you can bet on that. He's watched us fix it fer five year now. Ever since I found him

fell outta the nest an his ma nowhere to be seen. Pa warn't too happy to see me bring a crow babby home. He told me some folk consider crows bring death, but I was set on rearin him by hand an once I set my mind on somethin I stick with it.

An then there's Emmi. She's doin what she always does, which is pester me an Lugh. She dogs my heels as I go from the ladder to the junk pile an back.

I wanna help, she says.

Hold the ladder then, I says.

No! I mean really help! All you ever let me do is hold the ladder!

Well, I says, maybe that's all yer fit fer. You ever think of that?

She folds her arms across her skinny little chest an scowls at me. Yer mean, she says.

So you keep tellin me, I says.

I start up the ladder, a piece of rusty metal in my hand, but I ain't gone more'n three rungs before she takes hold an starts shakin it. I grab on to stop myself from fallin. Nero squawks an flaps off in a flurry of feathers. I glare down at Em.

Cut that out! I says. What're you tryin to do, break my neck?

Lugh's head pops over the side of the roof. All right, Em, he says, that's enough. Go help Pa.

Right away, she lets go. Emmi always does what Lugh tells her.

But I wanna help you, she says with her sulky face.

We don't need yer help, I says. We're doin jest fine without you.

Yer the meanest sister that ever lived! I hate you, Saba!

Good! Cuz I hate you too!

That's enough! says Lugh. Both of yuz!

Emmi sticks her tongue out at me an stomps off. I shin up the ladder onto the roof, crawl along an hand him the metal sheet.

I swear I'm gonna kill her one of these days, I says.

She's only nine, Saba, says Lugh. You might try bein nice to her fer a change.

I grunt an hunker down nearby. Up here on the roof, I can see everythin. Emmi ridin around on her rickety two-wheeler that Lugh found in the landfill. Pa at his spell circle.

It ain't nuthin more'n a bit of ground that he levelled off by stompin it down with his boots. We ain't permitted nowhere near it, not without his say so. He's always fussin around, sweepin clear any twigs or sand that blow onto it. He ain't set out none of the sticks fer his rain circle on the ground yet. I watch as he lays down the broom. Then he takes three steps to the right an three steps to the left. Then he does it agin. An agin.

You seen what Pa's up to? I says to Lugh.

He don't raise his head. Jest starts hammerin away at the sheet to straighten it.

I seen, he says. He did it yesterday too. An the day before.

What's all that about? I says. Goin right, then left, over an over.

How should I know? he says. His lips is pressed together in a tight line. He's got that look on his face agin. The blank look he gits when Pa says somethin or asks him to do somethin. I see it on him more an more these days.

Lugh! Pa lifts his head, shadin his eyes. I could use yer help here, son!

Foolish old man, Lugh mutters. He gives the metal sheet a extra hard whack with the hammer.

Don't say that, I says. Pa knows what he's doin. He's a star reader.

Lugh looks at me. Shakes his head, like he cain't believe I jest said what I did.

Ain't you figgered it out yet? It's all in his head. Made up. There ain't nuthin written in the stars. There ain't no great plan. The world goes on. Our lives jest go on an on in this gawdfersaken place. An that's it. Till the day we die. I tell you what, Saba, I've took about all I can take.

I stare at him.

Lugh! Pa yells.

I'm busy! Lugh yells back.

Right now, son!

Lugh swears unner his breath. He throws the hammer down, pushes past me an pratikally runs down the ladder. He rushes over to Pa. He snatches the sticks from him an throws 'em to the ground. They scatter all over.

There! Lugh shouts. There you go! That should help! That should make the gawdam rain come! He kicks Pa's new-swept spell circle till the dust flies. He pokes his finger hard into Pa's chest. Wake up, old man! Yer livin in a dream! The rain ain't never gonna come! This hellhole is dyin an we're gonna die too if we stay here. Well, guess what? I ain't doin it no more! I'm outta here!

I knew this would come, says Pa. The stars told me you was unhappy, son. He reaches out an puts a hand on Lugh's arm. Lugh flings it off so fierce it makes Pa stagger backwards.

Yer crazy, you know that? Lugh shouts it right in his face. The stars told you! Why don't you jest try listenin to what I say fer once?

He runs off. I hurry down the ladder. Pa's starin at the ground, his shoulders slumped.

I don't unnerstand, he says. I see the rain comin . . . I read it in the stars but . . . it don't come. Why don't it come?

It's okay, Pa, says Emmi. I'll help you. I'll put 'em where you want. She scrabbles about on her knees, collectin all the sticks. She looks at him with a anxious smile.

Lugh didn't mean it Pa, she says. I know he didn't.

I go right on past 'em.

I know where Lugh's headed.



I find him at Ma's rock garden.

He sits on the ground, in the middle of the swirlin patterns, the squares an circles an little paths made from all different stones, each their own shade an size. Every last tiny pebble set out by Ma with her own hands. She wouldn't allow that anybody should help her.

She carefully laid the last stone in place. Sat back on her heels an smiled at me, rubbin at her big babby-swolled belly. Her long golden hair in a braid over one shoulder.

There! You see, Saba? There can be beauty anywhere. Even here. An if it ain't there, you can make it yerself.

The day after that, she birthed Emmi. A month too early. Ma bled fer two days, then she died. We built her funeral pyre high an sent her spirit back to the stars. Once

we'd scattered her ash to the winds, all we was left with was Em.

A ugly little red scrap with a heartbeat like a whisper. More like a newborn mouse than a person. By rights, she shouldn't of lasted longer'n a day or two. But somehow she hung on an she's still here. Small fer her age though, an scrawny.

Fer a long time, I couldn't stand even lookin at her. When Lugh says I shouldn't be so hard on her, I says that if it warn't fer Emmi, Ma 'ud still be alive. He ain't got no answer to that cuz he knows it's true, but he always shakes his head an says somethin like, It's time you got over it, Saba, an that kinda thing.

I put up with Emmi these days, but that's about as far as it goes.

Now I set myself down on the hard-packed earth so's my back leans against Lugh's. I like it when we sit like this. I can feel his voice rumble inside my body when he talks. It must of bin like this when the two of us was inside Ma's belly together. Esseptin that neether of us could talk then, of course.

We sit there fer a bit, silent. Then, We should of left here a long time ago, he says. There's gotta be better places'n this. Pa should of took us away.

You ain't really leavin, I says.