

# WHITE LIGHTNING AND THE BROOM OF DANGER

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Winter was the part of the evening when God put his toys away. On the 20-somethingth of September, sometime around sunset, everything that chirped, blinked, or buzzed in Ontario took a hard turn to the right and careened on down to God's Great Toy Box somewhere closer to the equator. Not just the fireflies, you understand — the mosquitos, damselflies, and gall wasps, too. White Lightning waved good-bye to them as they left, marveling at their oily little bodies that blocked out the Sun. When the last of them had disappeared, tucked under the horizon, she pressed her ear to the dirty window to listen to the hum of their wings fading southward. The swirling host of insects would be passing over mother and father's farm by now.

The walls and ceiling of the girls' dormitory were plastered in a tea-brown floral print. They had been white once, perhaps a hundred years ago, but molds and stains had bloomed since then. The room was a shoebox, rotten cardboard and perfunctory assemblage, crammed with cheap furniture for an abandoned set of dolls. Glass goose eggs hung down from long cords over every second cot and gave off a buzzing orange light. There were numbered cubbies against the wall by the door that oozed coats and hats and overstretched sweaters. The ceramic floor tiles were caked with dirt. Some of the cots, including White Lightning's, had a shoebox under them.

"The dormitories feel so isolating at this time of day," Headmaster said. White Lightning started and turned around. "Then again, one is so unlikely to be disturbed." He was an ant-lion in the open doorway of the little shoebox room. White Lightning folded her hands over her lap and pressed her back to the barred and grimy window. "Why don't you go out, Joan? Go out and play a while." He didn't move to unblock the door.

"Can I really get out?" she asked.

"If you have a coin for the ferryman," he said. Headmaster clutched his coin

purse and lifted one side of his mouth in a half smirk. Perhaps he thought it was time for another one of their private conferences. But White Lightning would have none of this today.

“Sister Barbara will be along shortly,” she said in the firmest tone she could muster. “I saw her in the hall. She’ll be sweeping soon.” He glanced back into the hallway, apparently saw nothing, and stepped into the room. He unclipped a large keyring from his belt and began sorting through the keys. “She had the spare keyring with her,” White Lightning added. This made him stop, made him roll his eyes. Why me? he seemed to ask the ceiling. He clipped the keyring back to his belt, drove his claws into his pockets, and trundled toward her with a leonine eye.

“This is for your own good, Joan,” he said, lifting a heavy claw to her shoulder. “The world is a great and dangerous place. We can’t have a little savage like you out on the streets or mucking about in a field alone. You need guidance.” His other claw was on her waist now. “You need education. And discipline.” With his mandibles, he planted a single, tender kiss upon her forehead, then stepped back. She didn’t move. Apparently, he had decided that their private conference could wait. The ant-lion shuffled its great hulk backward through the doorway of the shoebox and vanished.

“That was a good bluff,” a voice whispered from beneath White Lightning’s cot frame. It was her bunkmate, Sheila, who had been hiding there the entire time. “But if he’d tried anything else I’d have chomped his toes off for you.”

“That’s okay, Sheila. I can handle him myself. A good girlfriend lets her girlfriends try to handle things themselves.” White Lightning flopped onto the bed to be nearer to her hidden companion. “But I’m afraid it was no bluff. Sister Barbara really is coming.”

Sheila had only moved into the girls’ dormitory a few days ago, but already the two of them were girlfriends. Sheila was a fine figure of a woman: she had legs for days and a coppery, hourglass waist that could turn heads. She was, in fact, a black lace weaver spider, and a very pregnant one at that. Some of the girls had asked White Lightning to squish her, or to take her outside, but a few Indian burns and punches to the gut had warmed them to Sheila’s presence. Not all of God’s toys had wings, you understand, and a lady in Sheila’s condition had no business travelling south even if she had any. The girls’ dormitory was dark,

moldy, and humid, which was just the thing for a weaver's nursery.

White Lightning had an affinity for Sheila's people. Males and females, red-skinned and strong, walked the open grass or the trunks of the trees on alternating quests for shelter or food. The women tended their young while the men danced in courtship. Through the long, hot summers when white men were too lazy to do anything but sleep, they worked hard in their own way for their own living. They were famous wanderers, not farmers. Sometimes in the dark solitude of her shoebox room White Lightning would dream a spider's dream and wish to be one of them. Then, and only then, could she wander out of reach of the ant-lion and the broom, out of the walls of the shoebox, out into the wide-open country where she knew she belonged.

"Joan!" something barked from the open doorway. One of the saplings from the orchard had put on a nun's habit and a human face. "You had better not be causing mischief again. If I catch you red-handed I will strap the rest of your pasty squaw hide to match your hands." The sapling in the habit shivered its leaves menacingly at her, but White Lightning knew it was an empty threat. Trees were notoriously slow runners.

"Yes, Sister Barbara," she muttered.

"Are you causing mischief in here?" The sapling shuffled toward her, but White Lightning crackled herself into a ribbon of electrical current and skittered behind her cot.

"No, Sister, I swear."

"Good. Now: get out or get back on your bed. And keep quiet. I don't need you kicking up my piles. I'll be sweeping in a moment. You gosh-darned girls are filthier than the boys." The sapling stretched its human face more tightly back against its trunk, turned, and shuffled itself out the door on gnarly old roots.

"I'm going to stick around for a while," White Lightning whispered to Sheila, "It'd be disaster if the two of you were alone." She dropped down on her cot, rolled onto her stomach, swung her body around, and dipped her head under the bed to check on Sheila. Would she be safe from the sapling's broom?

Her girlfriend looked so thin that White Lightning hardly recognized her. In her mouth, she held a massive egg sac, a shimmering white pearl almost as big as she was. She must have laid it after luncheon, the last time White Lightning had checked on her.

“Sheila!” White Lightning said, “Your babies! They’re here!”

Sheila was radiant but exhausted. In a one-on-one fight with a broom she would lose. Like many young women White Lightning had met, Sheila had learnt how to be pregnant well before she had learnt how to defend herself. At best, she’d lose the egg sac. At worst, Sister Barbara would beat her mightily with the broom head. What to do, what to do?

White Lightning reached for the shoebox under her bed, the one with all her cheap doll furniture in it, and removed the lid. With a single scoop of the lid she lifted Sheila, her egg sac, and most of her web away from the metal frame of the cot and dropped the lot of them down into the shoebox. Sheila was stunned and shrieked furiously.

“My babies, my babies!” Sheila cried, grasping at her eggs and scrambling for the lip of the shoebox. Sheila didn’t seem to understand that this was for her own good.

“Girlfriends always have each other’s backs,” White Lightning said.

“I thought good girlfriends let each other handle things themselves.”

“I’m sorry, Sheila, it’s the only way. You’ll be safe in here, I promise. This is for your own good.” White Lightning replaced the lid on the shoebox before Sheila could escape. “The world is a great and dangerous place,” she said, trying to sound maternal. “I’ll let you out when it’s safe for you, which won’t be long at all.” Sheila shouted something at White Lightning through the cardboard but the words were too muffled for her to make them out. “Watch your mouth, Sheila,” White Lightning concluded, assuming the worst from her friend, “or I’ll find the world’s smallest soap bar just for you.”

The sapling in the nun’s habit came squeaking into the room again. Onto one of its branches had been grafted a spider-proof broom handle with long bristles like a bazillion spider-hungry teeth. White Lightning had been wise to act. She sat upright and cross-legged on her cot and placed the shoebox lovingly beside her. When the sapling had finished its work, there were several piles of filth scattered around the room. A dustbin swallowed each of them in hungry gasps.

“Weekly sweepings will not do,” Sister Barbara creaked. “I am sick to death of this filth. Mark my words, I will be in here every afternoon to sweep this floor, and you and yours will be washing it every Saturday. And what are these crumbs doing here? You tell your little sisters — no bread in the bedroom!” She made a

finger-wagging gesture with one of her gnarled branches as she departed. She paused in the doorway, turning to face White Lightning. “I’m disappointed, young lady. Maybe you deserve another one of Doctor Dayspring’s ‘private conferences’, hmm?” She curled her mouthparts into the cruelest of smirks and was gone.

“There’s been a change of plans,” White Lightning whispered to her friend. “This place isn’t safe anymore.” White Lightning held the shoebox to her chest like it was a baby Jesus. “Brooms and mops. You can’t face it alone. I’ve got to take care of you. I’m going to have to keep you hidden till the babies are strong enough to head out on their own.”

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White Lightning waited a whole week before she would even entertain opening the shoebox to check on Sheila. Sheila had been mighty mad at White Lightning when she’d thrown her in there and White Lightning couldn’t bear the thought of a fight between good friends. She grew more and more nervous as the evening approached. After Sister Barbara had finished her work with the broom, and after all of the girls had crawled into their ice-cold cots, White Lightning dared to hang over the side of the bed to lift the lid of the shoebox.

Sheila was safe. She’d set up a new nest among White Lightning’s cheap doll furniture. A shiny, translucent gauze covered everything. The sac had grown larger and darker and looked pebbled all over. Now that she’d gotten used to her captivity she didn’t seem to mind it. She seemed to have forgotten about the trees of her ancestors and her mighty hunts across open grass. If anything, she looked a little happier — at least, White Lightning decided that this must be so, since she couldn’t live with herself if things were otherwise. Perhaps Headmaster and Sister Barbara were wrong — perhaps it was she, not they, who knew what was best.

“New plan, Sheila. You’re staying in here for good. You’re just not strong enough to make it on your own and neither are your babies. I just want what’s best for you. I’ll catch you flies — somehow.” White Lightning didn’t know where she was going to find food for Sheila and the children once they were born. After all, the flies had all flown south for winter in God’s Great Toy Cleanup just last week. But she’d think of something.

Another week passed while White Lightning dreamt up ways to feed the children. She didn’t want to disturb Sheila and the babies, not when the nursery

was so close to completion. She tried shaping pieces of oatmeal into flies, even saved a little bread, but as far as she could tell they looked nothing like real insects. And if they didn't look like insects they probably didn't taste like them, either. White Lightning had never even eaten a fly or a worm, so she had nothing to compare. Do black lace weavers eat earthworms? White Lightning would have to ask.

One afternoon White Lightning was alone in the dormitory. She got on her knees beside the cot, earthworm in hand, her mouth open to ask Sheila the nagging question she'd had earlier. She put down the worm, picked up the shoebox, and lifted the lid. Out of the box burst a bazillion little Sheilas and Cecils, scurrying to and fro across her hands and forearms and knees. White Lightning shrieked with surprise and dropped the shoebox on the floor between her legs, scattering little baby spiders that cascaded all about her. But Sheila was nowhere to be found.

"Sheila! Sheila, where are you?" White Lightning called out to the teeming mass of life at her knees. "Sheila, I've brought a nursery gift for the babies. Sheila, can you eat—" White Lightning stopped mid-sentence, mouth hanging open. Some babies carried long legs in their mouths; some fought over portions of a certain hourglass waist.

"Murderers!" White Lightning screamed. She clawed, raked at her memory for other insults. "Savages!" was all she could think of. It was the worst word she knew. She was on her feet now, eyes crackling. She stomped. She roared. She was the Fifty Foot Woman and she was on the attack.

"White Lightning, what's wrong?" a little voice asked. One of the younger girls, White Lightning wasn't sure which, had heard the commotion from the hallway and had come in. No telling what headmaster might be up to, after all. She leapt on the girl and clawed, kicked, and beat at her copper-skinned body with all the strength and hopelessness she had. The other girl's face was a mess of blood, snot, and confusion.

"Stupid savage," White Lightning bawled.

"Get off of her this instant, you wretched little beast," the sapling in the habit shivered. Trees moved faster than White Lightning had remembered. Sister Barbara's branches whipped through the air as if battered by a divine wind. She beat White Lightning's backside mightily with the broom head and tripped her

up with her gnarling roots. White Lightning was too angry to feel very much of the pain after the first blow; Sheila deserved a good send-off, and good send-offs take sacrifice. The stretch-faced sapling had only just succeeded in tearing the two girls apart when an ant-lion appeared in the doorway, mandibles slippery with juice.

“Girls, girls, what is the meaning of this?” the ant-lion boomed. The commotion ceased at once. Sister Barbara stood between White Lightning and the other girl, whose name White Lightning was only just now beginning to remember (it was Flatface), holding both of them by the ears. The broom lay on the floor, its handle broken.

“Forgive the disruption, headmaster,” the sapling shimmered. “Joan is having another one of her hysterical fits.” The ant-lion scuttled into the room, extended a claw to White Lightning, and caught her by the shoulder.

“Nothing to worry about, Sister. I’ll handle this.”

“She needs the strap, sir. Spare the rod —”

“— yes, of course, Sister. Tend to Helen’s wounds, would you?” He looked down at White Lightning, captive in his grasp. “Little lady, you’re coming to my office right this instant. This behavior of yours is unacceptable, simply unacceptable.” Then, in a voice just for her: “I think it’s time we had a private conference.”

Sister Barbara let out a single “Ha!” as White Lightning passed into the hallway.

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White Lightning used her smuggled tablespoon to scoop a few additional clumps of dirt out of the far left corner of the hole she’d dug at recess. She held the shoebox suspended over the hole once more; this time it would fit. She lowered the shoebox into the hole, toys and all, and started covering it with dirt. Resting on her right knee, just below one of her new bruises, was a popsicle stick cross marked ‘SHEIL’. She had run out of room for the ‘A’.

White Lightning was in the far corner of the turnip patch where the other girls at the school had been buried. Here and there a dark oval marked out a richer, better-fertilized patch of earth. “Better farmers in death,” Headmaster had said once. The wind picked up and blew back across the fields, carrying with it a faint clamor. The bell at Her Majesty’s Royal Chapel of the Mohawks was calling out the hour. The school’s supper bell rang as well in response. White

Lightning pretended they were funeral bells, like for that groundskeeper last summer. She pretended they were ringing for Sheila. When the grave was covered and the cross was placed, she didn't know what else to do other than to break out into The Huron Carol. She was belting out "*Within a lodge of broken bark*" when she noticed Flatface coming toward her.

"Hey! Hey. White Lightning. Supper time."

"I know. I'm coming. Thank you, *Helen*." White Lightning wiped the melted frost off her lower legs and held a wet hand out to Flatface as she stood up. "I mean, I'm sorry. Flatface. I dunno. I'm sorry. I'm not going to hit you again."

Flatface took White Lightning's hand and guided her back to the cafeteria without speaking. Children were streaming in from the fields — tools over shoulders, hot sweat on copper brows. The school looked like a great, brick shoebox, White Lightning thought, and all the children like little red dolls. Some lesser god was putting his toys away for the night, cleaning out the yard, sweeping away the mess of the day. As Flatface pulled her into the cafeteria, she looked up at the window next to her bed. Headmaster's black, jeweled carapace leant against the glass; he was sucking at a cigarette with his mouthparts. He looked at her, at all of the children, and yet also did not look at them. He seemed not to notice her at that moment. He seemed not to notice anything at all.