

God of Our Fathers

Alan Meyer

GOD GAVE DAVID NIGHTMARES. The flame-eyed giant hurling thunderbolts from the mountain of heaven, hair and beard blown back by the storm of righteous wrath — it was he who haunted the boy.

David knew his father was dead. He knew he was nearly an orphan, but it was an intellectual knowledge. It didn't mean anything. He didn't feel it. The feeling part of him expected his father to come striding through the door, drop his briefcase, and hold open arms to catch David on the fly. It had been only three days since the accident. His father was often gone on business trips for a week or more. David felt that the news of his father's death was a mistake or perhaps a twisted joke he was too young to understand. He didn't believe any of it until he opened the old book he found in the funeral home's waiting room.

He was supposed to be looking at magazines, but they were all grown-up magazines, full of small print and dull pictures. The room was uncomfortable, too warm and sweet smelling. His nose was stuffing up and his neck itched from the tight collar and tie. David slid off the tufted leather couch to examine the glass-doored bookcase.

It wasn't locked. "If it isn't locked, they must not care if I open it," he told himself. Even so, he still looked over his shoulder before pulling back the doors.

The smell was wonderful, a dried leathery richness that was the antithesis of the cloying cut-flower perfume of the room. One book caught his attention. It was bigger and thicker than the rest, so big it wouldn't fit upright on the shelf but lay across the top of the others. The ribbed leather binding was surprisingly soft. *Ancient Heroes of the Bible*, the cover said, in deeply embossed gold letters an inch high or more. David traced his fingertips over the shining words. His hand started to shake. The heavy book slid from his grasp. It thumped open on the dark wood floor.

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On the open page was the picture of his nightmares. God the Father raging against chaos with an upraised lightning bolt. The picture looked almost three dimensional. It seemed to David as if the icy-eyed Creator was blasting a universe from the void by the overpowering force of his fury. David knew this God, Lord of wrath and vengeance, Creator and Destroyer.

At first, he didn't realize his fingernails were scratching at the thick paper. It felt so right: the rhythmic digging, the brittle page shredding under his fingernails. Tears blurred his vision. He clawed at the face until the page ripped.

The trip from New York's East Side to his grandfather's northern Utah sheep ranch seemed like the last bus ride to oblivion. David had only met his grandfather once, two years ago, when the patriarch had stayed with them for a week and left cursing the city as "a piss hole in the snow!" David thought the description fit the old man's homestead much better.

The housekeeper told him, "Your grampa's most likely out around the barn with them new lambs."

Fifty yards behind the house was the barn and holding pasture. David opened the gate and a ewe immediately tried to nose her way out. Although the size of the animal frightened him a little, it ran off into the pasture when he waved his arms and stamped his feet. There were a few more sheep by the water trough, but otherwise the pasture was empty. A little chill of disappointment shuddered through the boy. He'd been looking forward to petting the lambs. He kicked at the ground in frustration and noticed something odd. The barnyard dirt was littered with little blue marbles. He picked one up. They were damp, not quite round, and fleshy.

A familiar voice from behind the barn made him drop the curious object and follow. He dragged his fingertips along the barn's weathered siding as he followed the voice. The white paint flakes crumbled beneath his fingernails.

"Hold him still, Jack. I almost got 'em." The hired hand gripped the lamb tightly as the grandfather pulled down the scrotum and sliced it open. Another quick cut, a sharp bleat from the lamb, and two more blue marbles lay in the dirt.

"That's the last one, Mr. Sinclair." The hired hand stood up to stretch and saw a pale boy staring at him. "This the new hand you were expectin'?"

"Davie!" the grandfather smiled, stretching the white bristles on his broad chin. "Come here, boy. I thought you weren't due 'til tomorrow." The old man wiped the knife on his levis and put it in the belt sheath. "We're all done castrating these lambs. Come on over and meet Jack."

"You sure do favor your mother, boy," Jack said and shot a little stream of tobacco juice out of the corner of his mouth. "Spittin' image." The old man laughed. The boy neither moved nor spoke.

"Come to the house. I'll show you some pictures of your mother when she was a girl here." David still stared at his grandfather. Jack looked at his employer for a moment and then looked at the ground. The old man started toward the boy. David ran. "Wait a minute!"

"Let 'im go, boss. You chase a scared lamb and it'll run itself to death." Jack put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "He's a city kid, ain't he?"

"Born and bred."

"I don't think he understands about the lambs. Probably thinks it's cruel or somethin'." Jack kicked dirt over the lamb testicles.

The old man pushed back his thick white hair and looked at the sky. "Maybe the high country sun will clear up his thinking." He gazed into his friend's eyes. "At least that's what his mother hopes."

"Took his dad's death pretty hard, huh?"

"Never shed a tear. Denies the accident ever happened."

"Think you ought to go look after 'im? I can finish up here."

The grandfather slapped Jack on the back and strode out after the boy. The side door to the barn was ajar. Inside David sat on a pile of straw. He was petting the barn cat. "Well, I'm glad you calmed down and found a friend." The grandfather crossed toward him but stopped when he saw David stiffen. "Be careful of that cat, boy. She's about half wild. I can't even get near her." David held up a kitten, still wet from birth. "Well, look at that would you! Haven't been here an hour and you're already delivering new livestock!"

David looked at his grandfather. He was struck by the old man's eyes, pale blue as his own, the fires of a glacial lake shown from their depths. The metallic taste of the nightmare rose in his mouth.

The runt had been the last one born. As soon as he saw her, he was in love. Less than half the size of her littermates, she looked not quite finished. Her back legs were much longer than the front. She slanted forward like some of the cars in the hot rod magazines. It was this "jacked up" rear that gave David the inspiration for her name. "Dago," he said softly as he held the kitten to his cheek.

Dago was too small to fight his way to a nipple. David was afraid he would starve. "You could feed it with an eyedropper," suggested his grandfather, "but it'll take constant watchfulness for that bit of a thing to make it."

"Yer wasting your time, kid," Jack told him. "That little fly speck will be lunch for the first rat crosses its path."

"I'll protect Dago. I won't let anything happen to him."

He spent the rest of that day in the barn, caring for Dago. The housekeeper forced him to come in for supper.

"Davie, you ain't goin' out to fool with that kitten again!" the housekeeper called after him as he left the table.

"I have to go check on Dago."

"Mr. Sinclair, you better have a word with this boy. It just ain't normal the way he dotes on that animal. Besides, it's gettin' cold out there and he ain't used to this mountain air." The old man knelt to meet his grandson's eye level.

"Look, Davie. Why don't you check on your cat later? You come watch a little TV with me." He winked and inclined his head toward the frowning

housekeeper. "It'll get her off both our backs. Okay?" David wanted to shake his head no and run to the barn, but his grandfather's eyes froze his tongue, held his feet. He felt himself nod and take the calloused hand. It was the same hand that would tuck him in later that night, after he fell asleep watching television.

A single eye, trailing a short strand of ragged nerve and sinew, was all that remained of the kitten. The mother cat dropped that morsel when David screamed. The boy stared but did not see, contemplated but did not comprehend — until the shaking started.

It started in the hands, a few spasms of the fingers, spreading to the wrists and up the arms. In the shoulders they became heaving. David looked as if he were the epicenter of an earthquake but nothing else moved. The palsy shook his body until his knees buckled. As he fell, he grabbed out for support. His fingers closed around the weathered handle of the pitchfork. The shaking stopped.

In a single motion he lifted the fork from the wall pegs and spun around, flinging it the length of the barn. The pointed tines splintered into the sunlight, impaling the cannibal parent. As one voice, the screams of cat and boy rang against the mountain.

The barn door flung open, scraping up a cloud of dust. A towering silhouette shattered the bright sunlight into swirling beams. "What the hell was that scream!" The voice choked. The settling dust let him see his answer. "My God." It was neither shouted as an oath, nor whispered as a prayer. The words had no relationship to the ordinary flow of conscious thought. They arose from some chasm of the mind reserved for moments of high surrealism. He knew what he saw was impossible, the barn cat, crucified by pitchfork. Most unreal of all, his grandson, pulling the glistening pitchfork from the dying animal, was raising it to strike again.

The grandfather ripped the fork from the boy's hands, knocking him against the horse stall.

The giant was still a black silhouette against the sun-spun dust, but now he bore a lightning bolt. The fork gleamed in the grandfather's hand. "God damn you!" shouted David and charged.

It was just a slap, but the old man had hands like shovels. Everything went white for an instant. There was a sound like the ocean roaring. Then nothing.

"Davie? Please, son." The old man cradled the small head in his hands. There was a dark stain in the dirt where the blood dripped from his ear. The eyes fluttered open and glared at his grandfather's face, mouth opening and closing, lips working, but completely silent. The ringing in David's head was overpowering. All was lost in the howl of the storm.

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?" Like a spell to erase the horror, the old man kept repeating the question. David glanced down at the tiny blue orb. His grandfather picked it up. The eye glistened in his dirt-caked palm. "Dago," he whispered.

David saw the deep lines beneath the old man's eyes fill and flow with tears: One fell upon the boy's cheek and mingled with his own. The bristled jaw felt good against his face. "Help me," David heard a boy's voice say.

David's sleep that night was dreamless but for the vision of a white haired giant, down from the mountain to bring him peace.

