WINNER, 2023 DORIS BETTS FICTION PRIZE

HOW TO GET STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

by Paul D. Reali

SHE GAVE HONDO WHAT HE CALLED *THAT LOOK* – A COMPLEX BLEND OF FONDNESS AND DERISION – THAT HE WORKED VERY HARD TO AVOID ELICITING.

Amanda Morris, having fought with her mother again just a few minutes earlier, was in no mood to take any shit from anyone, and especially not Hondo Bing.

She sat on the concrete front porch steps, wishing she had the guts to take up smoking, feeling the need to have a prop. Or something on fire she could threaten him with. Instead, she gave Hondo what he called *that look* – a complex blend of fondness and derision – that he worked very hard to avoid eliciting.

That day he earned it. He had just announced – or maybe confessed, since he knew he'd get that look – that he was going out to Hamdenville's old Babe Ruth field the next time there was a storm.

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The 2023 Doris Betts Fiction Prize competition final judge David Joy remarked that this story's author "wonderfully captures the know-everything, know-nothing-ness of high school coming-of-age. In short order, the story's lead is fully realized and fleshed out by voice, quirks, and flaws. But more than anything the author manages to execute the hardest part: sticking the landing. This ending feels pitch perfect."

with photography by Frank Hunter

"It's just a thing to do," he said.

Amanda blew imaginary cigarette smoke directly into his face.

She said, "That's the Hamsterville excuse for everything, isn't it?"

He said, "I wish you wouldn't call it that."

"There's not a thing to do in this boring-ass burg, so what the hell, let's *mana-facture* some excitement."

Hondo said nothing to this. Even he knew there was no point in it.

"I have standards, Hondo."

"It's nothing to do with you."

"A reputation to uphold."

"I repeat – "

But he didn't, because she threw him that look again. "Oh, you're such a *guy*. Every *guy* in Hamsterville goes and stands on that old ball field so they can say, 'Look at me, a manly man, not afraid to die.'"

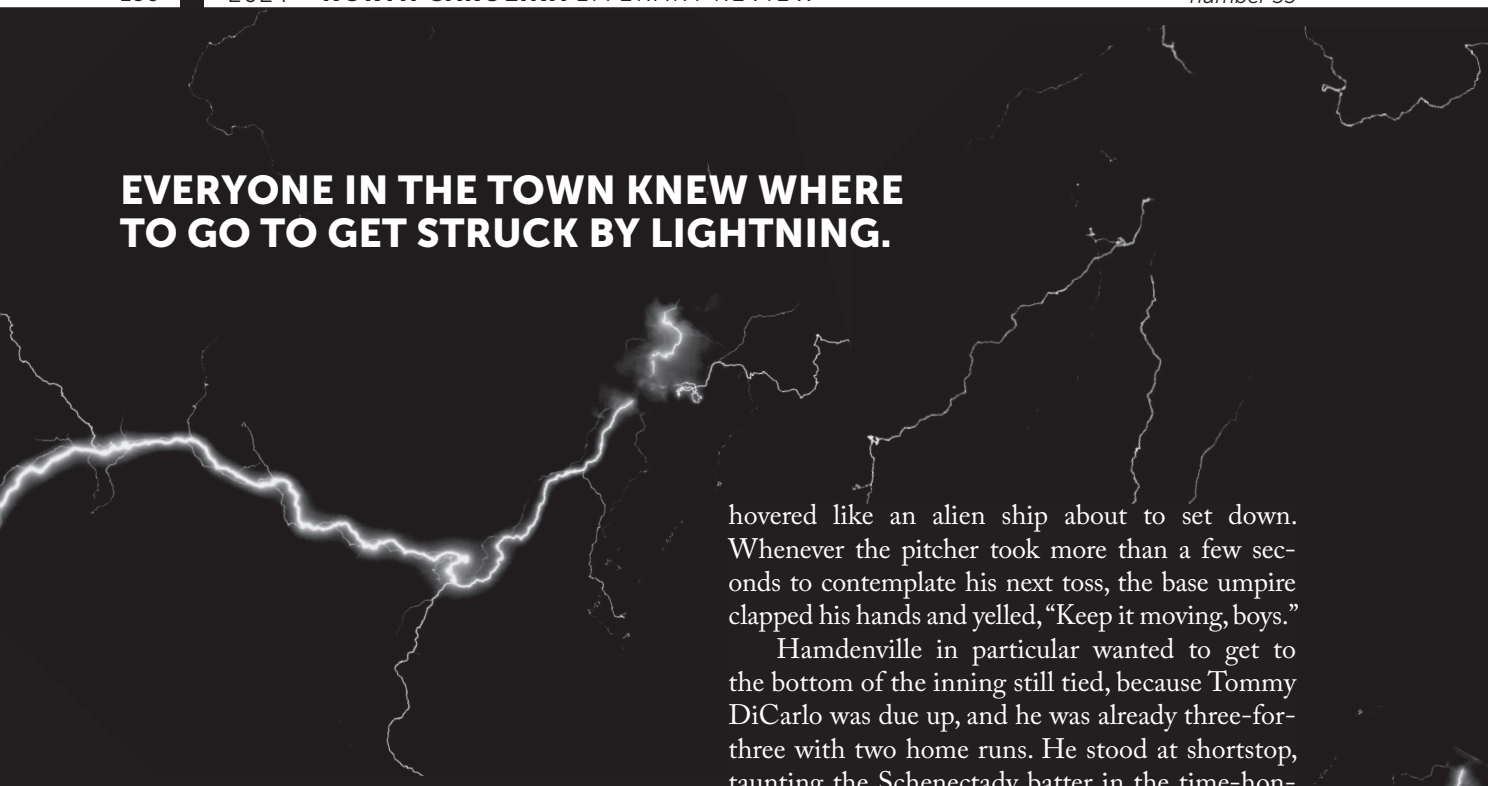
Hondo's face hardened, and Amanda read something else there. She swatted at some imaginary dirt on his shoulder to give herself an excuse to smack him. "You mean to actually get struck, don't you."

"Well, of course," he admitted. "Otherwise it's stupid."

"*Otherwise* it's stupid? Geez, Hondo. And for ever and ever people will say, Mandy, how were you stupid enough to date a boy that got himself electrocuted."

FRANK HUNTER was born in El Paso, TX, and grew up in the desert southwest. He has an MA in Communications from the University of Colorado and an MFA in Photography from Ohio University, where he was a John Cady Fellow. He has received grants from the Berheim Foundation, the international Polaroid Corporation, and Light Works at Syracuse University, as well as support from the Fulton County and Georgia Arts Councils. Hunter is best known for his large-scale platinum/palladium works. After many years teaching at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, he now lives and works in Santa Fe, NM. These photographs were part of the *Bull City Summer* series, a collection of works by ten acclaimed artists, and were featured in an exhibit at the North Carolina Museum of Art.

EVERYONE IN THE TOWN KNEW WHERE TO GO TO GET STRUCK BY LIGHTNING.



Hondo stood and walked down the concrete steps. He'd said to her more than once that given the option, he'd spend every minute of every day with Amanda Morris, but even he had his limits. "Give me some credit, would you? I plan to live to tell about it."

Everyone in the town knew where to go to get struck by lightning.

It began in another August, nearly thirty years earlier. Hamdenville was hosting Schenectady in the Eastern New York Babe Ruth playoffs. The teams were made up of the best players from thirteen to eighteen, the local league all-stars.

The game was tied in the top of the fifth, and they had to get through five full innings to be official. Schenectady was desperate to get the game completed so they wouldn't have to ride the bus back to Hamdenville the next day to finish it, so everyone ignored the cloud bank moving in from the west, even as it created a wall of night behind the outfield fence. The Hamdenville water tower, bulbous and baby blue in the adjoining field, hovered like an alien ship about to set down. Whenever the pitcher took more than a few seconds to contemplate his next toss, the base umpire clapped his hands and yelled, "Keep it moving, boys."

Hamdenville in particular wanted to get to the bottom of the inning still tied, because Tommy DiCarlo was due up, and he was already three-for-three with two home runs. He stood at shortstop, taunting the Schenectady batter in the time-honored way, and snapping his fist into his glove. Every team had three or four kids with Major League ambitions, but everyone knew Tommy was the guy, the only one with a real shot at it. Tommy had once hit that water tower with a home run ball, some five hundred feet from home plate.

There would be a dispute later and for years whether anyone heard thunder. Thunder stops the game, league rules, for thirty minutes. By then it would be dark. There were donated lights on Hamdenville's Babe Ruth field, but they were barely making it through the storm-dark sky. There was no way they'd work in actual darkness. The stands were packed, the crowd raucous – baseball was the sport in upstate New York at the time – so it was possible the fans drowned out the thunder, and in any case, they had to get this game in.

Except for any ignored thunder, there was no warning, no flashes off in the distance. The bolt, when it came, was Zeus-worthy, striking the water tower at the same moment thunder tore open the sky. In the stands, people screamed, clapped hands to their ears. Babies cried, feedback roared from the speakers.

COURTESY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Light in a Summer Night, #2 (photography, 8x10) by Frank Hunter

When the sounds faded and people looked around them, three ballplayers were lying on the ground. They were several feet from where they'd been, a hint of smoke rising from their bodies: the right fielder, the second baseman, and shortstop Tommy DiCarlo.

No one ever figured out how the lightning traveled through the ground in just the way it did, striking those three boys. When they recounted the story later – the right fielder and second baseman never tired of telling it, as in never in their lives – they described what they felt and what they saw, but struggled to articulate what it meant. One later became a Catholic priest, one a drug addict.

Tommy DiCarlo never spoke of it. He never went to the Majors, either.

Since second grade, Amanda Morris and Laura Leandro had filled the necessary role of best friend for each other. It was only in the last year, as she'd started to imagine a life away from Hamdenville, that Amanda began to subtly separate from Laura, to make the leaving easier.

But for now, they continued to do what they always did, which today meant sitting on the grass outside after lunch period, a privilege reserved for juniors and seniors. Amanda needed to tell someone about her boyfriend's upcoming attempt at entering the local lightning lore, and Laura was still her person.

"All of which means," Amanda said, as a way of concluding her story, "that Hondo's an idiot."

Laura slowed her gum chewing, as she did when she was thinking, a tic only Amanda noticed. "Does anyone actually get struck, or do they just say they do? Running around out there in the rain? Isn't it just a *look-I-tempted-God* kind of thing?"

Amanda shrugged. No one really knew. People claimed to be struck, others disputed the claims. "I think they're all liars, except for the original ones."

"Then what's the worry?"

"Hondo, the idiot, expects to actually get zapped. He *wants* it."

Laura chewed slowly. "And if anyone can figure out how to do it, it's Hondo. Like the way he fixed up that Mustang?"

"That would be Hondo, for sure."

"And no one has ever died, right? Struck or not?"

Amanda sighed. "You're missing the point entirely." Of course she was; Amanda wasn't telling her everything. She didn't, anymore, not like when they were younger. She hadn't told Laura about her father and the lightning. And she wasn't telling her this: that the thing she was most afraid of was what Hondo would see in the lightning.

Laura said, "Don't you think it has some, I don't know, attraction to it? Like a big roller coaster, or – bungee jumping? Like you're testing death."

Laura's accent, which Amanda had no idea as to the source of, made it sound like *tasting* death.

"This is why I don't ride roller coasters."

"You throw up, is why."

"It's existential vomiting."

"What's really bugging you about this?"

Amanda plucked blades of grass, one at a time, and tossed them away. "It's moronic, is what," she said. "It's childish. He's supposed to be a man."

"He's seventeen."

"He's supposed to be *my* man."

Laura's pace of gum-chewing slowed even more. "It makes *you* look bad."

"Now you're getting it. I'm sleeping with a moron. That's what this says." She wasn't sleeping with Hondo, had never slept with anyone, but this was another of the things she kept from Laura. No one took Amanda Morris for a coward, and this was a step she was simply afraid to take.

Laura tipped her head, studying her friend. "No, that's not it."

"It is if I say it is."

"Nope. That's what you're saying, because you don't know what it is, exactly. You can't put your finger on it. I can't either, but I will."

"Whatever. But tell you what, he goes through with it, he's not putting another finger on me."

The lightning strike that jolted the three kids in 1994 was put off as a fluke of nature or an act of God, depending who you asked – until it happened again. Two years later, some kids were horsing around on the field after practice had ended, putting off going home, when the rain came. The coaches didn't ever bother to lock up the field like they were supposed to, didn't worry about leaving the kids behind after they left. The kids took off their shirts and kept going, running the bases and getting soaked. When the lightning struck the tower, the player who was between second and third ended up near the pitcher's mound.

A month later, the bleachers were relocated and a new Babe Ruth field was laid down. The fence around the old park stayed. The gates were repaired and padlocked. Enough "No Trespassing" signs were hung so that anywhere you stood outside the old field you could see two of them.

Of course, anyone who wanted to could get in.

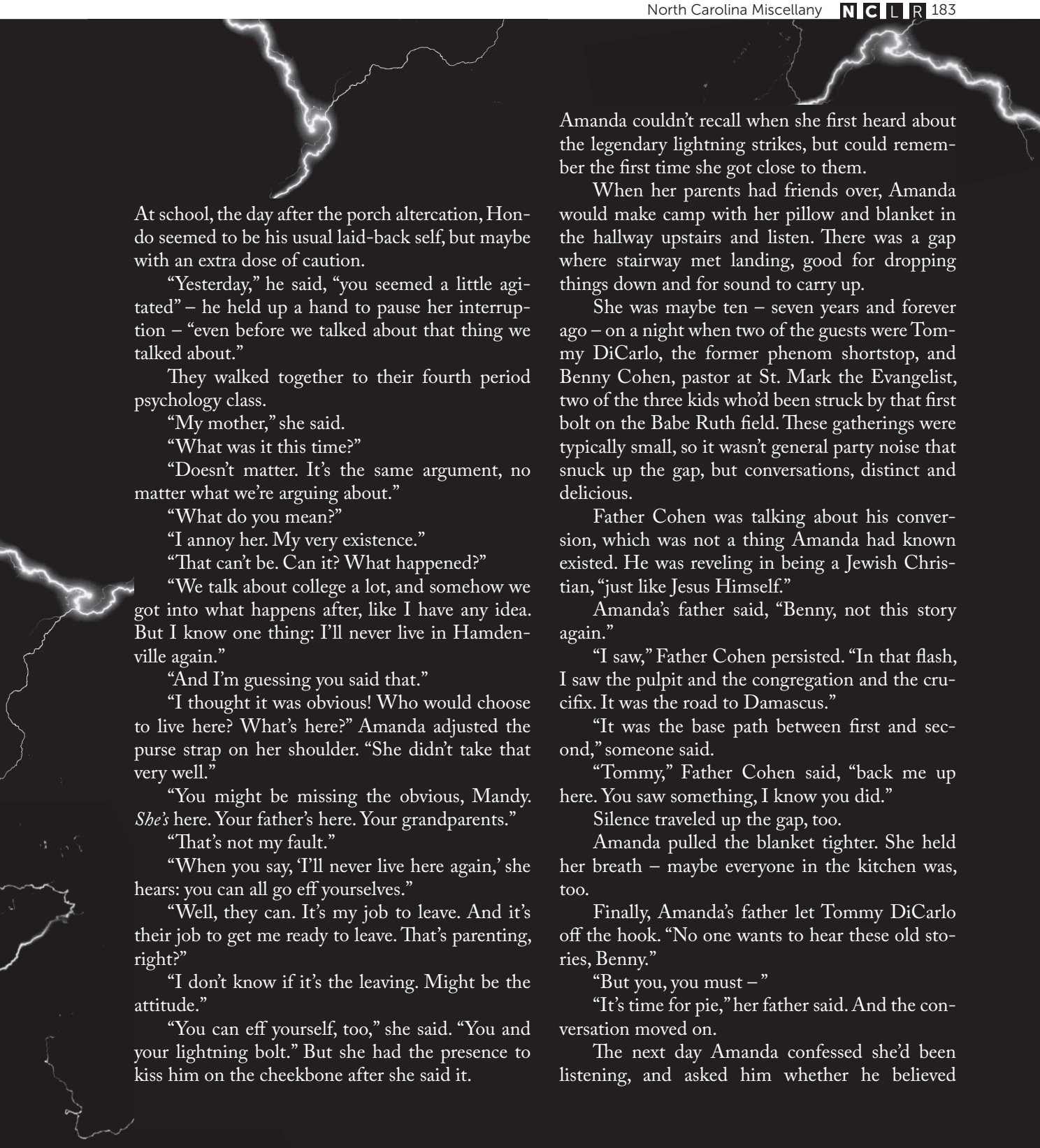
And ever since, whenever the forecast called for wicked thunderstorms, the boys in town wanted in.

It became Hamdenville's rite of passage. You only had to do it once, to stand on that field between second and third (all these years later, you could discern the outline of the infield) and wait. Maybe you'd get struck, maybe you wouldn't, but you'd stand there, and you'd wait. And later you'd tell your tale, which might or might not include getting struck, and which might or might not be true.

Amanda knew something that maybe no one else did: that you could tell if someone had been struck by observing their eyes when they talked about it.

She'd learned this from watching her father.

AMANDA KNEW SOMETHING THAT MAYBE NO ONE ELSE DID: THAT YOU COULD TELL IF SOMEONE HAD BEEN STRUCK BY OBSERVING THEIR EYES WHEN THEY TALKED ABOUT IT.



At school, the day after the porch altercation, Hondo seemed to be his usual laid-back self, but maybe with an extra dose of caution.

"Yesterday," he said, "you seemed a little agitated" – he held up a hand to pause her interruption – "even before we talked about that thing we talked about."

They walked together to their fourth period psychology class.

"My mother," she said.

"What was it this time?"

"Doesn't matter. It's the same argument, no matter what we're arguing about."

"What do you mean?"

"I annoy her. My very existence."

"That can't be. Can it? What happened?"

"We talk about college a lot, and somehow we got into what happens after, like I have any idea. But I know one thing: I'll never live in Hamdenville again."

"And I'm guessing you said that."

"I thought it was obvious! Who would choose to live here? What's here?" Amanda adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder. "She didn't take that very well."

"You might be missing the obvious, Mandy. *She's* here. Your father's here. Your grandparents."

"That's not my fault."

"When you say, 'I'll never live here again,' she hears: you can all go eff yourselves."

"Well, they can. It's my job to leave. And it's their job to get me ready to leave. That's parenting, right?"

"I don't know if it's the leaving. Might be the attitude."

"You can eff yourself, too," she said. "You and your lightning bolt." But she had the presence to kiss him on the cheekbone after she said it.

Amanda couldn't recall when she first heard about the legendary lightning strikes, but could remember the first time she got close to them.

When her parents had friends over, Amanda would make camp with her pillow and blanket in the hallway upstairs and listen. There was a gap where stairway met landing, good for dropping things down and for sound to carry up.

She was maybe ten – seven years and forever ago – on a night when two of the guests were Tommy DiCarlo, the former phenom shortstop, and Benny Cohen, pastor at St. Mark the Evangelist, two of the three kids who'd been struck by that first bolt on the Babe Ruth field. These gatherings were typically small, so it wasn't general party noise that snuck up the gap, but conversations, distinct and delicious.

Father Cohen was talking about his conversion, which was not a thing Amanda had known existed. He was reveling in being a Jewish Christian, "just like Jesus Himself."

Amanda's father said, "Benny, not this story again."

"I saw," Father Cohen persisted. "In that flash, I saw the pulpit and the congregation and the crucifix. It was the road to Damascus."

"It was the base path between first and second," someone said.

"Tommy," Father Cohen said, "back me up here. You saw something, I know you did."

Silence traveled up the gap, too.

Amanda pulled the blanket tighter. She held her breath – maybe everyone in the kitchen was, too.

Finally, Amanda's father let Tommy DiCarlo off the hook. "No one wants to hear these old stories, Benny."

"But you, you must – "

"It's time for pie," her father said. And the conversation moved on.

The next day Amanda confessed she'd been listening, and asked him whether he believed

Benny Cohen's story about his electrified vision of the future. Her father shook his head. "He believes it," he said. "And that's all that matters."

At the time, she didn't know her father had a role in this drama as well. That would come two years later.

Everyone in town knew the names of the "founding fathers." Kids – boys especially – would begin to circulate the names about the time they started thinking about getting "God-smacked" themselves. Amanda hadn't been prepared to hear her father's name on the list.

He was not one of the first three; he was the fourth, the kid running the bases two years afterwards, but royalty all the same. Once the boys in her class realized she was a daughter of royalty, they treated her with a kind of reverence. One asked permission to touch her, as if she herself was electrified.

At home that night, Amanda didn't waste words. "The kids said you're one of them."

That's when she first saw it, a look in her father's eyes she'd never seen in anyone else's. The closest thing was when her third-grade teacher had come to class with dilated pupils after seeing the eye doctor.

It was there for just a moment, then gone. (Or, as she thought about it later, *he* was gone for a moment, then back.)

Her father admitted he was one of the boys who had been struck.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to learn it from those boys? They looked at me like I was stupid not to know."

He shrugged, palms out. "There are a thousand things we have to tell our kids. When and how, those are easy things to get wrong."

Her curiosity tamped down her embarrassment. "They said you see things, when it happens."

"That's true, at least it was for me. It's like a whole movie in a fraction of a second."

"Like a dream?"

COURTESY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Light in a Summer Night, #1 (photography, 8x10) by Frank Hunter

"That's very perceptive. Like REM sleep. A whole story that covers hours, but it's only a few seconds in the real world."

"Dad, what did you see?"

He didn't answer right away, just looked at her – or past her, or through her, she couldn't tell – with a second's flash of those dilated-like eyes.

"I saw you," he said. "Years before you were real, you were real to me."

"What *about* me?"

"They say the things we see come true. So, I'm sorry Mandy, but I'm not going to tell you."

Something flared in her she was too young to name. Not anger, not frustration – something. She pushed it down, for now. Knew from his tone that she couldn't change his mind.

"Is there anything else you saw that came true?"

"Not yet," he said.

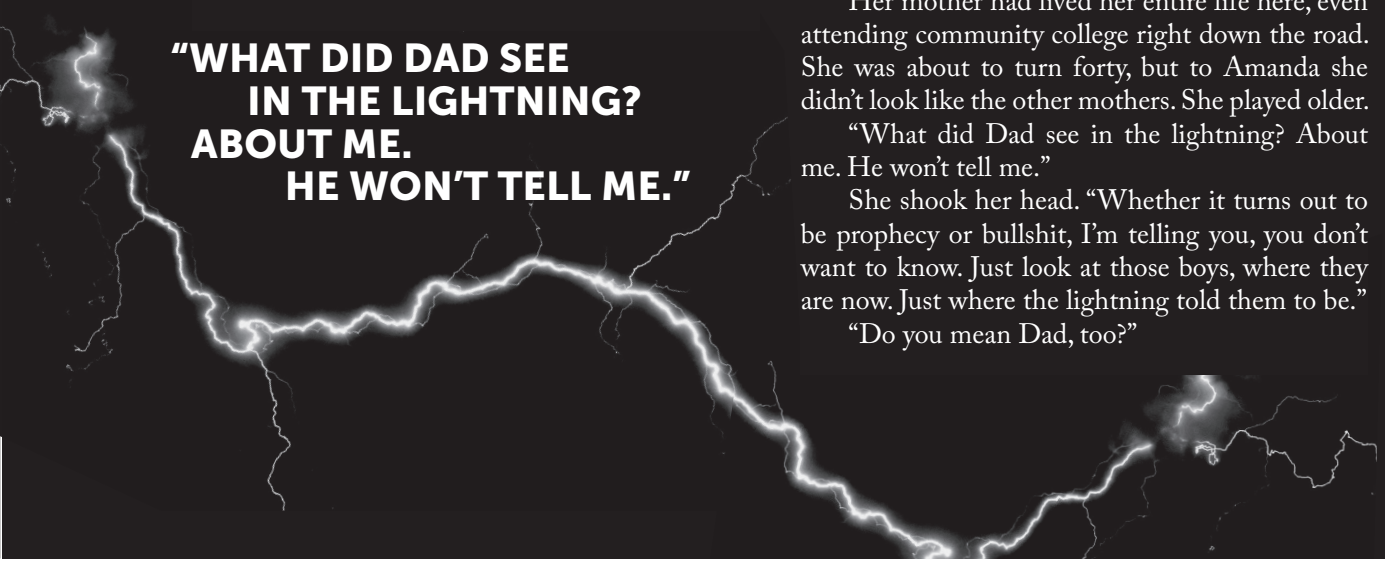
He had hesitated just enough that Amanda knew her father had just lied to her.

The doctors who examined the first struck boys didn't find anything unusual. They did EKGs and stress tests and anything else they could think of. It wasn't a direct strike, and should have been equivalent to touching a switch with a loose wire beneath, becoming the conduit to the ground. But those who would speak of it swore that for a moment they were not *there*. That for a moment they were witnessing their future.

Benny Cohen saw himself preaching from the pulpit of a Catholic church.

Jimmy Orlando saw clearly his wedding day, the bride *not* his three-year high school girlfriend but a different girl who had never given him a second glance. Two years later he married her, relentless in his pursuit of making the vision true. But once he'd achieved his foretold future, he stopped working so hard at it. He thought he was set for life. They divorced after three years.

"I always wanted to know," his ex-wife said once, "if a second strike would have shown him *that*. If I thought there was something else to see, I'd have dragged him out there myself." She never forgave him for listening to the lightning.



"WHAT DID DAD SEE IN THE LIGHTNING? ABOUT ME. HE WON'T TELL ME."

When she got home after school, Amanda's mother was at the kitchen table, a magazine opened in front of her, eyes glassy. She looked up when Amanda came in, but didn't say anything, her eyes returning to not reading the magazine.

"What's up, Mom? Why are you here?"

"I live here."

"You know what I mean."

"I took the afternoon off. Not that it's your concern."

Her mother worked in an office, did something – office-y. Amanda had no idea exactly what. There was accounting involved. She'd asked, but her mother didn't like to talk about it. "It's too boring to bore you with," she'd said once. Amanda didn't know what she wanted to do after high school, what she might want to major in, but she was very sure it wasn't accounting.

"I'm sorry about what I said yesterday."

"No you're not. You're just like your father. You say what you think. 'I'll never live *here* again.'"

She hadn't said it like that, with a judgy snarl. But she let her mother's interpretation go. She wouldn't win that one.

"I probably won't, though. It's pretty common, right? Kids go off into the world."

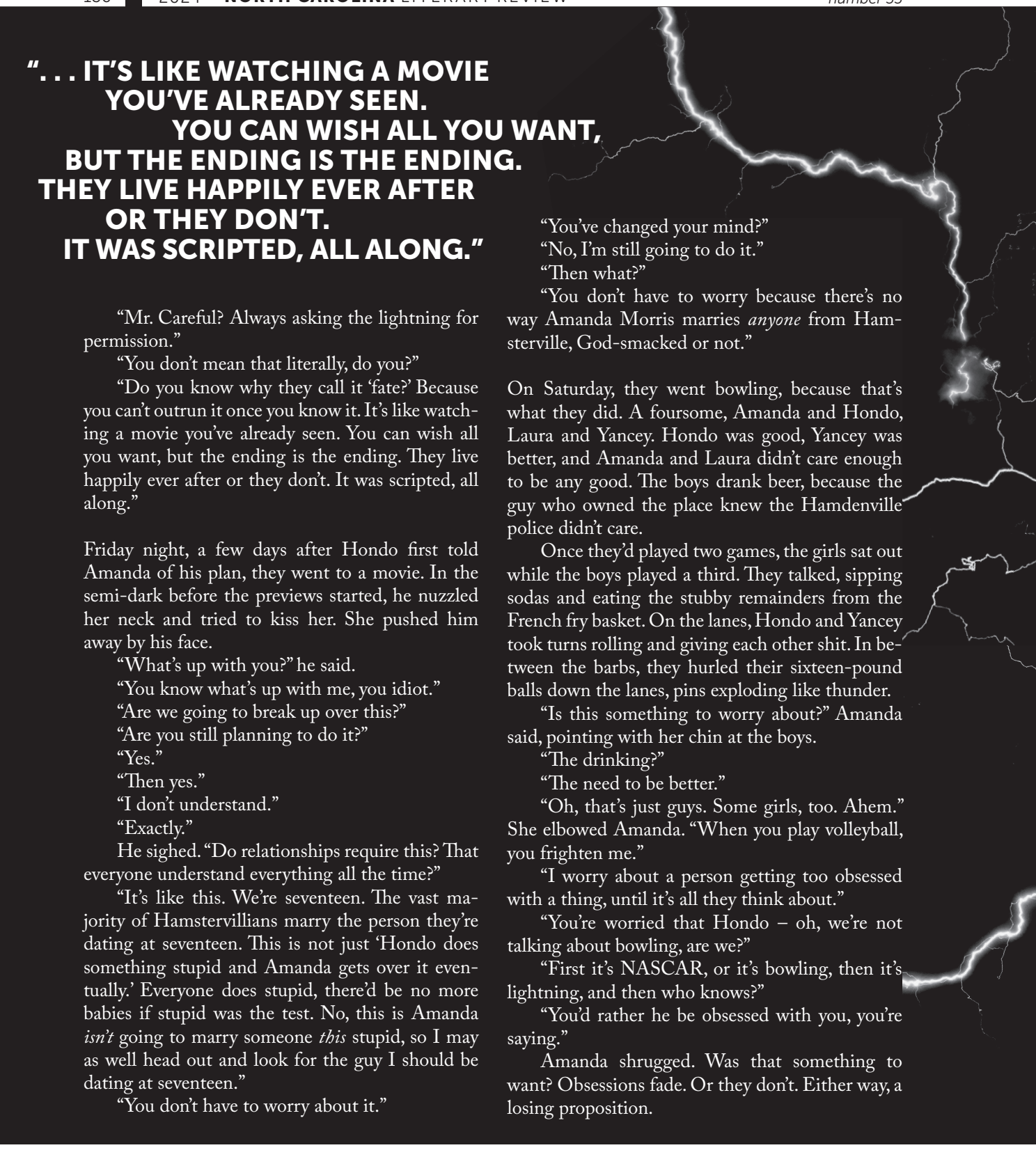
"Look, you don't have to move back to Hamdenville after college. But you don't have to make the idea sound so toxic, either."

Her mother had lived her entire life here, even attending community college right down the road. She was about to turn forty, but to Amanda she didn't look like the other mothers. She played older.

"What did Dad see in the lightning? About me. He won't tell me."

She shook her head. "Whether it turns out to be prophecy or bullshit, I'm telling you, you don't want to know. Just look at those boys, where they are now. Just where the lightning told them to be."

"Do you mean Dad, too?"



"... IT'S LIKE WATCHING A MOVIE YOU'VE ALREADY SEEN. YOU CAN WISH ALL YOU WANT, BUT THE ENDING IS THE ENDING. THEY LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER OR THEY DON'T. IT WAS SCRIPTED, ALL ALONG."

"Mr. Careful? Always asking the lightning for permission."

"You don't mean that literally, do you?"

"Do you know why they call it 'fate?' Because you can't outrun it once you know it. It's like watching a movie you've already seen. You can wish all you want, but the ending is the ending. They live happily ever after or they don't. It was scripted, all along."

Friday night, a few days after Hondo first told Amanda of his plan, they went to a movie. In the semi-dark before the previews started, he nuzzled her neck and tried to kiss her. She pushed him away by his face.

"What's up with you?" he said.

"You know what's up with me, you idiot."

"Are we going to break up over this?"

"Are you still planning to do it?"

"Yes."

"Then yes."

"I don't understand."

"Exactly."

He sighed. "Do relationships require this? That everyone understand everything all the time?"

"It's like this. We're seventeen. The vast majority of Hamstervillians marry the person they're dating at seventeen. This is not just 'Hondo does something stupid and Amanda gets over it eventually.' Everyone does stupid, there'd be no more babies if stupid was the test. No, this is Amanda *isn't* going to marry someone *this* stupid, so I may as well head out and look for the guy I should be dating at seventeen."

"You don't have to worry about it."

"You've changed your mind?"

"No, I'm still going to do it."

"Then what?"

"You don't have to worry because there's no way Amanda Morris marries *anyone* from Hamsterville, God-smacked or not."

On Saturday, they went bowling, because that's what they did. A foursome, Amanda and Hondo, Laura and Yancey. Hondo was good, Yancey was better, and Amanda and Laura didn't care enough to be any good. The boys drank beer, because the guy who owned the place knew the Hamdenville police didn't care.

Once they'd played two games, the girls sat out while the boys played a third. They talked, sipping sodas and eating the stubby remainders from the French fry basket. On the lanes, Hondo and Yancey took turns rolling and giving each other shit. In between the barbs, they hurled their sixteen-pound balls down the lanes, pins exploding like thunder.

"Is this something to worry about?" Amanda said, pointing with her chin at the boys.

"The drinking?"

"The need to be better."

"Oh, that's just guys. Some girls, too. Ahem." She elbowed Amanda. "When you play volleyball, you frighten me."

"I worry about a person getting too obsessed with a thing, until it's all they think about."

"You're worried that Hondo – oh, we're not talking about bowling, are we?"

"First it's NASCAR, or it's bowling, then it's lightning, and then who knows?"

"You'd rather he be obsessed with you, you're saying."

Amanda shrugged. Was that something to want? Obsessions fade. Or they don't. Either way, a losing proposition.

She said, "How's it going with Yancey?"

Laura smiled, impish. "Oh, the things he's teaching me."

"Just be careful."

"Yes, Mom. I won't get knocked up."

"I was talking about your heart."

"*Aw*," Laura said, and smiled at her.

They sat and watched their boyfriends bowling and taunting.

Amanda's fingers searched for one last fry but the basket was empty. "I need to confess something."

Laura sat up. "Okay, what did you and Hondo do? Speak."

Amanda looked down, suddenly embarrassed. "Nothing. That's the confession. We don't do it."

Laura chewed her gum more slowly, thinking. She could have berated Amanda for misleading her all these months, and Amanda would have accepted it. But she'd already moved on to diagnosis. "Who doesn't want to? Him or you? No, you don't have to answer that. It's you."

"What happens after? How does he look at you after? Like you're a goddess, or like you're a slut?"

"Goddess slut," Laura said.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Amanda sighed.

"Ah," Laura said. "That's it."

"What's what?"

"The real reason. About the lightning. It's not because you don't want to be seen with someone stupid. You're worried people are going to think, how dull is that chick, her dude has to go get himself struck by lightning?"

She was fun, wasn't she? Interesting? But Amanda couldn't remember the last time she did anything that wasn't perfectly safe. She didn't drink anything, smoke anything. Didn't go to parties she wasn't supposed to go to. Didn't ever sneak out after curfew and have to climb back in a window. Didn't have sex. Didn't blow off a day of school.

Was it her father who had made her so cautious?

Was it really the *lightning* that had made her father so cautious? Or was that just his natural wiring, and now hers?

She didn't know if she'd want to marry Hondo, but for the sake of whoever did marry him, she couldn't let him acquire those dilated see-the-future eyes.

Three nights later, thunderstorms gathered in the western sky.

Amanda called Hondo at home but no one answered, and she didn't know what to do. She went downstairs and sat with her parents in the living room. The TV was on, but as usual they didn't seem to be watching it.

"Hondo's going to do it," she said. "Tonight, I think. Dad, how do I stop him?"

"Do what?" her mother said. But Amanda was sure she knew what.

"Lightning. How do I stop him?"

Her father said, "This rite of passage – I'm not sure you can."

"Come with me to the field. You can talk to him, explain what happens."

Her mother cleared her throat.

"Are you under the impression that your father is somehow damaged from his experience?"

"What did you see, Dad? What did you really see?"

"I saw you," he said. "I've told you that."

"You didn't tell me any of the details."

"And I still won't. I've told you why."

"Then tell me something you *can* tell me."

Again, her mother cleared her throat, but this time she didn't speak.

"YOU'RE WORRIED PEOPLE ARE GOING TO THINK, HOW DULL IS THAT CHICK, HER DUDE HAS TO GO GET HIMSELF STRUCK BY LIGHTNING?"

Amanda said, "Can I get you a drink of water, Mom? What don't you want me to know?" She turned to her father. "Tell me what you saw!"

"Don't," her mother said.

Her parents glared at each other and a whole conversation passed silently between them. After a moment, her mother looked like she'd been struck by lightning herself. Her father had won.

"Your mother's funeral."

"OK. And?"

"And you're not there."

She hesitated, not sure what that meant. "I'm dead before her?"

He shook his head. "I don't know how I know this, only that I do. You're alive, but you're not there. I'm there. And it's here, in Hamdenville. We're here, you're not."

"You know I'm leaving. For college next year. But I would come back."

"Unless you can't, or won't."

"Estranged," Amanda said. "That's what you're saying. From one of you, or both."

"That's how it feels. Felt."

"So you're trapped here in Hamdenville because the lightning told you that you'll never leave. And you've been waiting all my life for me to disappoint you."

"We're not trapped here," her father said. "We chose to stay."

Amanda turned to her mother. "Did you, Mom? *Choose* to stay?"

Her mother stared at Amanda, then at her husband, then at the wall opposite him.

"And this," Amanda said to her, "is why lately you can't stand the sight of me. You've been waiting for whatever it is that's supposed to pull us apart."

Her father put his heads in his hands.

"Do you think maybe," Amanda said, "that *this* is the moment you've been waiting for? That *this* is what drives me off? That you're making this happen, right now?" She stood and tried to get either one to meet her eyes. "Did it ever occur to you that the lightning was *playing you* all along?"

With no word from Hondo, and no chance her father was coming with her, Amanda crept out, hoping the increasing wind covered her departure sounds. She couldn't bear the thought of talking to them any longer, and in any case, she didn't have any more time to waste. She climbed on her bike and headed to the old Babe Ruth field.

When she got there, she couldn't find Hondo. She laced her fingers through the chain-link, peering in as if watching a game, ghost players on a long-dead ball field. Wind whipped at her jacket, spun her hair like cotton candy. The words thrown about at home tonight seemed borne on the wind, slipping inside her clothes, drumming in her ears. *Waiting all my life for me to disappoint you.*

When the wind slackened for a moment, she called out for Hondo. Maybe he was there, hiding from her. Maybe he'd lost his nerve. Maybe she'd nagged some sense into him.

Maybe the prospect of what he and Amanda could become was more important to him than whatever the lightning would show him.

Or maybe he was afraid of what the lightning would show him.

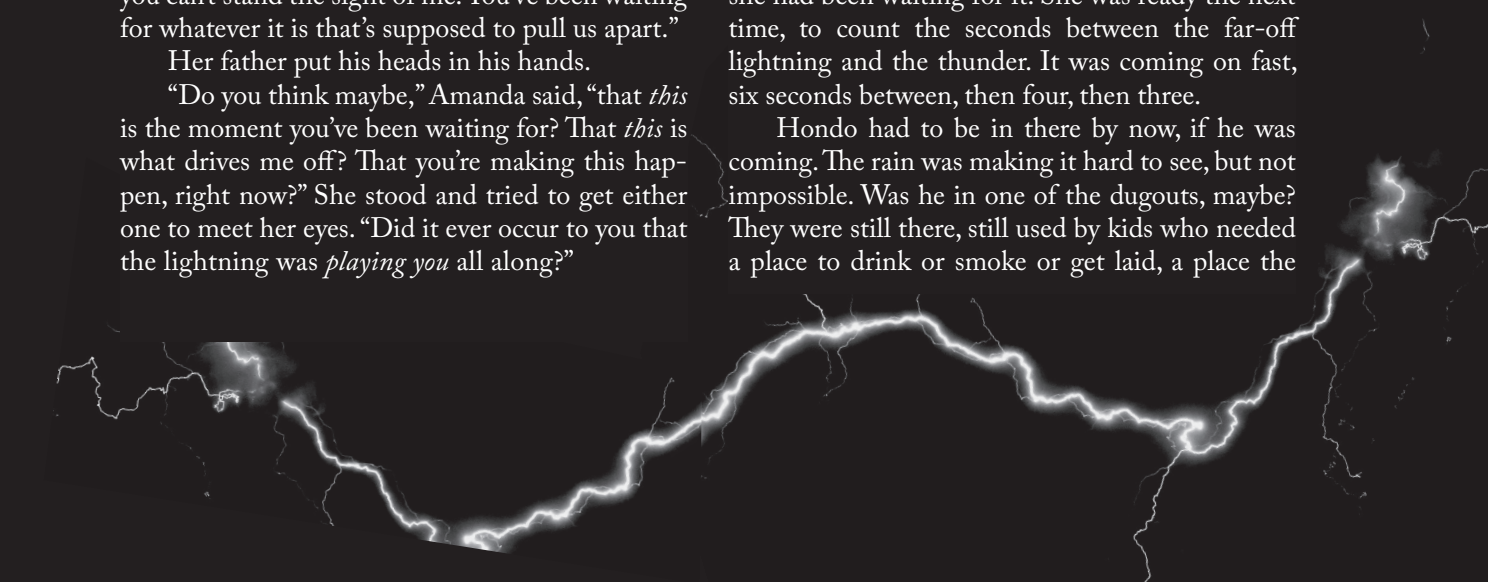
Amanda walked the perimeter of the field, outside the fence, fingers dragging along the chain-link. The rain started, the wind tossing it carelessly about. She put her hood up, pulled the drawstring.

She had dressed appropriately. Of course she had.

Why had Hondo wanted to do this? He had to know what the struck boys had reported, how they'd lived all their lives in the shadow of *knowing*.

The first burst of thunder startled her, though she had been waiting for it. She was ready the next time, to count the seconds between the far-off lightning and the thunder. It was coming on fast, six seconds between, then four, then three.

Hondo had to be in there by now, if he was coming. The rain was making it hard to see, but not impossible. Was he in one of the dugouts, maybe? They were still there, still used by kids who needed a place to drink or smoke or get laid, a place the



COURTESY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Light in a Summer Night, #3 (photography, 8x10) by Frank Hunter

police never came – not even to stop the kids tempting God. They had been boys in this town once, too.

When she found a gap in the fence, she squeezed through and stepped onto the field. She had never stood there before just now. Had never wanted to. This obsession was a boy thing.

One turn around the place, that was it. Then she was headed home. To face whatever was left for her there.

The home dugout was in better shape, had more of its roof intact, so she sat there, mostly protected from the rain. Hondo wasn't going to show. Somehow this was worse than him being here and going through with it. Somehow – she wasn't sure why she felt this – Hondo backing out was worse.

She knew then she wasn't going to marry Hondo Bing, but it wasn't his fault. Just as he had said, she wasn't going to marry anyone from her hometown. Not anyone who would try to get struck by lightning – and not anyone who refused to try, in a town where it was expected. She liked the idea of a man who would defy convention, but not if the gesture was cowardice over conviction. And she'd never know for sure which was driving Hondo.

Her father was a coward. She knew that now, too. He'd let the lightning's revelations control him, even as it began to tear his family apart. All he had to do was move from Hamdenville and he could prove the lightning wrong.

Inside her sleeves, she felt the hair on her arms rise.

It was coming. The lightning. The future. Her future. It was all coming.

Amanda had one chance to save her family. Once chance to prove the godforsaken lightning wrong.

She leapt from the concrete bench and up the three steps, and ran across the field toward where Tommy DiCarlo had stood, where her father had been running. She held out her arms as she ran, her mouth wide, a sound like a scream coming from her, not words, a rush through her limbs she might have called joy.

When the bolt hit the tower and traveled down its steel legs and connected with the vein of iron ore beneath the field, Amanda was in that stretch between second and third. For a moment that felt endless, she was borne aloft, feet churning air, running already from the future the lightning wanted to reveal to her, running from its traps and tendrils. Running headlong into her own life. ■

IT WAS COMING. THE LIGHTNING. THE FUTURE. HER FUTURE. IT WAS ALL COMING.