

CLAY

From my first breath in this world, all I wanted was a good set of lungs and the air to fill them with—given circumstances, you might presume, for an American baby of the twentieth century. Think about your own first gasp: a shocking wind roweling so easily down your throat, and you still slipping around in the doctor's hands. How you yowled! Not a thing on your mind but breakfast, and that was on the way.

When I was born to Helen and Jeremiah Land, in 1951, my lungs refused to kick in.

My father wasn't in the delivery room or even in the building; the halls of Wilson Hospital were close and short, and Dad had gone out to pace in the damp September wind. He was praying, rounding the block for the fifth time, when the air quickened. He opened his eyes and discovered he was running—sprinting across the grass toward the door.

"How'd you know?" I adored this story, made him tell it all the time.

"God told me you were in trouble."

"Out loud? Did you hear Him?"

"Nope, not out loud. But He made me run, Reuben. I guess I figured it out on the way."

I had, in fact, been delivered some minutes before. My mother was dazed, propped against soggy pillows, unable to comprehend what Dr. Animas Nokes was telling her.

"He still isn't breathing, Mrs. Land."

"Give him to me!"

To this day I'm glad Dr. Nokes did not hand me over on demand. Tired as my mother was, who knows when she would've noticed? Instead he laid me down and rubbed me hard with a towel. He pounded my back; he rolled me over and massaged my chest. He breathed air into my mouth and nose—my chest rose, fell with a raspy whine, stayed fallen. Years later Dr. Nokes would tell my brother Davy that my delivery still disturbed his sleep. He'd never seen a child with such swampy lungs.

When Dad skidded into the room, Dr. Nokes was sitting on the side of the bed holding my mother's hand. She was wailing—I picture her as an old woman here, which is funny, since I was never to see her as one—and old Nokes was attempting to ease her grief. It was unavoidable, he was saying; nothing could be done; perhaps it was for the best.

I was lying uncovered on a metal table across the room.

Dad lifted me gently. I was very clean from all that rubbing, and I was gray and beginning to cool. A little clay boy is what I was.

"Breathe," Dad said.

I lay in his arms.

Dr. Nokes said, "Jeremiah, it has been twelve minutes."

"Breathe!" The picture I see is of Dad, brown hair short and wild, giving this order as if he expected nothing but obedience.

Dr. Nokes approached him. "Jeremiah. There would be brain damage now. His lungs can't fill."

Dad leaned down, laid me back on the table, took off his jacket and wrapped me in it—a black canvas jacket with a quilted lining, I have it still. He left my face uncovered.

"Sometimes," said Dr. Nokes, "there is something unworkable in one of the organs. A ventricle that won't pump correctly. A liver that poisons the blood." Dr. Nokes was a kindly and reasonable man. "Lungs that can't expand to take in air. In these cases," said Dr. Nokes, "we must trust in the Almighty to do what is best." At which Dad stepped across and smote Dr. Nokes with a right hand, so that the doctor went down and lay on his side with his pupils unfocused. As Mother cried out, Dad turned back to me, a clay child wrapped in a canvas coat, and said in a normal voice, "Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe."

The truth is, I didn't think much on this until a dozen years later—beyond, of course, savoring the fact that I'd begun life in a dangerous and thus romantic manner. When you are seven years old there's nothing as lovely and tragic as telling your friends you were just about dead once. It made Dad my hero, as you might expect, won him my forgiveness for anything that he might do forever; but until later events it didn't occur to me to wonder just why I was allowed, after all, to breathe and keep breathing.

The answer, it seems to me now, lies in the miracles.

Let me say something about that word: miracle. For too long it's been used to characterize things or events that, though pleasant, are entirely normal. Peeping chicks at Easter time, spring generally, a clear sunrise after an overcast week—a *miracle*, people say, as if they've been educated from greeting cards. I'm sorry, but nope. Such things are worth our notice every day of the week, but to call them miracles evaporates the strength of the word.

Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature. It's true: They rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in. Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave—now there's a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time. When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up. A miracle contradicts the will of earth.

My sister, Swede, who often sees to the nub, offered this: People fear miracles because they fear being changed—though ignoring them will change you also. Swede said another thing, too, and it rang in me like a bell: No miracle happens without a witness. Someone to declare, Here's what I saw. Here's how it went. Make of it what you will.

The fact is, the miracles that sometimes flowed from my father's fingertips had few

witnesses but me. Yes, enough people saw enough strange things that Dad became the subject of a kind of misspoken folklore in our town, but most ignored the miracles as they ignored Dad himself.

I believe I was preserved, through those twelve airless minutes, in order to be a witness, and as a witness, let me say that a miracle is no cute thing but more like the swing of a sword.

If he were here to begin the account, I believe Dad would say what he said to Swede and me on the worst night of all our lives:

We and the world, my children, will always be at war.

Retreat is impossible.

Arm yourselves.

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