



# Child Roland

Steven O'Brien

**Y**ou must first pass the sentry geese. How they clack and hiss on the quilt of green meadow that slants up to Coombes Church. The Tapsel gate spins on a central pivot, so that when you enter the graveyard its other half opens to the World and closes back on your heels in a completed curve. From the trees comes only rusty crow chatter. The Saxons liked their chapels to be intimate, and Coombes is suitably tiny, so it takes no more than thirty seconds to trail your fingers along all sides of the slick flint walls. You are back at the porch before there is time to think. Would that it had been this way for Burd Ellen all those years ago.

Daffodil yellow laughter in the green meadow. A boy and girl are playing at ball. 'Duff' is the sound it makes when it is kicked. Burd Ellen is older than Roland. They both have chestnut hair, but she is tall and her shadow licks long across the grass. They would call the boy Roland a 'kiddy' here in Sussex, meaning not that he is a child, but instead that he has yet to go out into his wide future. His sister too is nearly a woman.

'Duff', the ball pitches down to Roland. He laughs in the May morning, and he kicks it high. Over his sister's head it flies. Over the Tapsel gate and then high, high into the blue above the church roof. Burd Ellen *yaahs* him for an oaf and hitches her skirts. She runs up to the gate. Her shadow reaches the rails before she does. Then she is through the gate, with her long hair streaming as she runs to the back of the church.

Roland waits but Ellen does not re-appear. After a minute he calls her name. Then he calls it again. Nothing. Just the elms creaking and the wind souging. Nothing. Then he too pushes the gate, which spins and nearly catches the back of his legs.

He runs past the porch and into the shadow on the north side and sees nothing. Nothing save long grass parting in the wind and white irises, and beyond the graveyard bare downland where the sheep graze. She has gone, snapped out of the day completely.

Then it comes to him – *widdershins!* She ran the wrong way, against the course of the sun! Widdershins. He wheels about and calls her name, although he knows she is not there. He bolts away from the church, across the downs. An hour later and bent double with wheezing, he is on top of the giant hill that was a fort before the Romans came. The sea is distant to his back. The wind blusters loud. He looks across the hills to a coven of trees hunching on the horizon. Smoke wavers above the trees.

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Merlin's hut is wattles and slubbed clay. Smoke seeps from chinks and cracks in the walls, and out of the door. Smoke fumbles up to a mossy hole in the roof. Merlin lives alone on top of Chanctonbury. People leave him be. But Roland once brought him mushrooms. He is not afraid of the old man, for all his odd blether and scratching.

'Widdershins?' Merlin coughs. Between his fingers he rubs thyme and lovage into a boiling pot. 'By Cerunnos and Aeron, why?'

Grave Merlin with his twig-threaded beard, his bare ankles and flapping cloak. His eyes seem to spin crazy when Roland looks into them, like mackerel lures paid out into the past. Old eyes. Winter eyes. 'Has Adze-Head made the sign on your brow?' Merlin's accent is strange, not from here.

'What?'

'Ach, the Adze-Head – the Priest!' Merlin sputters with irritation. 'Did the priest bless you when you were a baby?'

'Yes, we were all christened.' Roland can hardly breathe for the smoke in the hut.

'Widdershins. Your mother often told you and your father too, before they died. Told you not to run widdershins around the church.' Merlin's voice is all up and down. 'She has been stolen. Taken by the King of Elfland into his Dark Tower.'

'Where', Roland asks, 'is this dark tower?'

'Far away.'

'How are we to rescue her?' Roland's eyes stream with smoke and anguish.

'Christendom.' Merlin's accent is like a crust of snow breaking. Like a cough before a song.

'What?'

'Only the boldest knight in Christendom can rescue your sister Burd Ellen.'

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Ham is Roland's hot-headed eldest brother. He back-hands the boy across the room where he falls in a clatter of pewter and treen bowls. In his rage he calls Roland every name he can think of for not taking care of their only sister. Just as Ham is unbuckling his belt to give Roland another lash Aelfred, the next oldest, steps between them. 'Peace, Ham. Peace.'

'Peace?' Shouts Ham, his mouth is like a red forge. His temples are crimson. 'I must away to the Dark Tower to find our Burd Ellen. Make sure the boy does not lead you too into peril.' Ham grabs a blackthorn stick and walks to the door.

'Boldest knight in Christendondom. *Pah!*' He gives Roland a furnace look and is gone.

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They wait. All through the summer they look to the chalk path that Ham trod into the woods. He never returns.

When the harvest is in and the cattle are in the winter byre Aelfred begins to grow restless. Aelfred, the handsome one whose name indeed means Elf- Kissed.

One day Roland finds his brother stuffing bread and cheese into a bag. Aelfred hoists the bag over his shoulder. 'I am off to find Ellen and Ham. I do not know if I am the boldest knight in Christendom, but I must try to rescue them.' Fair and gainly, Aelfred walks the chalk path into the woods, over the hill.

He doesn't return.



Roland stands on the springy downland grass outside Merlin's door. 'Gyre and gyre,' the old man laughs. 'I have stepped into your story. Come along inside.'

Roland sits on the bare earth floor, his chin resting on his knees. The wizard faces him from the other side of his crackling fire. 'How do I get to the Dark Tower?' He asks.

'Any direction will take you to Elfland, but you may as well walk the path your brothers took.'

'You said it was far away. How far?'

'Very far.'

'How will I know the place when I see it?'

'You will know when you draw near to the Dark Tower.' Merlin stirs his bubbling pot.

'Well I must go.' He rises, but Merlin stretches his arm fast and grips Roland's wrist in his long tight fingers.

'Wait. There is more.' Merlin's grey eyes fix him.

'What more?'

'Only the boldest knight in Christendom can rescue your sister.'

'I know that.'

'Well, if you make it to the realm of the King of Elfland you must eat nothing and drink nothing. When you are in his realm you must speak to all who you meet. However, you must then kill all to whom you speak.'

Roland swallows hard. 'Kill?'

Long fingers tighten around Roland's wrist. 'Yes, behead them.' Then Merlin reaches up to the rafters of his hut and takes down a long, smoke-blackened sword. 'Here,' he says in his wheedling rasp. 'This was your father's. He gave it to me and told me to give it to you. This is a sword that never strikes in vain.'

Roland stands with the too-big-for-him sword. 'Is this all?'

'All?' Merlin's eyebrows rise high up on his forehead. 'All, he says. All? Let me tell you, boy, the King of Elfland is a fearsome fellow to go against. He is bitter and hard. Suppose you win through to his dark tower, you will find a cunning and merciless enemy.'

Roland stands, a youthful and naive haughtiness flushes him. 'Is this all?'

'Yes. Go.' Merlin rubs herbs, sage and thyme into his simmering pot.

'Just one more question.'

'What?'

'Are you making a spell in that pot?'

'No, it is my dinner.'

On the brow of the hill of trees called Chanctonbury, Roland shoulders the long blade and pauses. He turns back to look, but Merlin's hut is gone, as if it had never been.



Inland from the South Down lies the Weald, which in Roland's morning all those years ago is a belt of forest, miles wide, miles deep. His chalk path leads down into the green shuddering light. Small against the first trunks Roland soon passes among the tall oak tribe and is lost.

He walks until his legs are sapped. He walks until the day begins to dim. He sleeps in a ferny hollow and awakes to shake off the leaves and insects. He walks the forest alone with only the litter of unseen birdsong in his ears. He sleeps and wakes again.

Days pass in the forest. He walks until his shoes split open. He leaves the forest and skirts a great grey lake in the shadow of a high mountain. He climbs the mountain, leaning on the sword when the fatigue overcomes him. Weeks pass and still he tramps the track. His chestnut hair grows long around his shoulders. He never looks behind in case his heart fails him. His eyes are forever narrowed to the way ahead. The wind whistles into his eyes. He walks until there comes a time when all he knows is that he must walk and his sister is only a grudging memory in the deep of his mind.

One day at sunset he walks across bare, gravelly ground and finds a place to sleep on the banks of a stream that flows away into a cleft between the rocks. He awakes to a dim dawn and rouses himself as he has done a hundred times before.

A cool wind blows the dock leaves away from him as he begins his journey and the half-light seems to prickle his skin. He walks for an hour but the pearly morning grows no brighter. There is no sun in the blank low sky, but far to the north a handful of pale stars glimmer.

Roland looks about himself and notices how darkly green and luscious the foliage has become. How slow the breeze feels on his face, and he begins to realise that he must have passed into Efland.

He walks through a sweep of buttercups and up into a cleared pasture. Horses graze there. Horses the like of which Roland has never seen before. Beautiful white creatures, with red manes and silver hooves. They have necks like swans and tipping spouts of milk as they bend to the deep emerald grass.

In the midst of the horses stands a herdsman with a clutch of halters in his hands. 'Here, sir,' says the boy breathlessly. 'I have come to find the king of Elfland.' He is relieved at last, after so many weeks on the road alone, to meet someone. The herdsman faces him. There is a steady champ as the horses pitch and dip. The stranger is clothed in rags the colour of new nettles. His face is dark under his hood, but his eyes glitter like sixpences in a well. He says nothing, but he holds out his hand and a red shiny apple sits in the palm.

'No thank you sir.' Roland's shrunken stomach yearns for the apple. 'Where is your king's dark tower?'

The herdsman turns away and in a voice as bleak as grey sleet he says, 'I don't know.'

Roland looks across the pasture and sees a gap in the spinney, where his path leads. He goes to walk on, but stops when he remembers the sword on his shoulder. His father's sword; the sword that never fails. The herdsman is still standing with his green back to him. Roland grunts but the blade whispers, and in a blink, a breath, a twitch, the stranger's head rolls into the grass.

Beyond the spinney is a hedge with a heavy gate. Roland swings the gate and enters a field where the wet clover reaches his thighs. Cows of the like he has never seen before raise their heads. They are great tall beasts, white with splashes of red across their flanks, like bloody banners. Their ears twitch redly and their wide horns are silver. When they start lowing the clover spills from their slack mouths.

A cowherd in a green cloak, hardly older than Roland himself, steps through the cattle. He smiles broadly and swishes the grass with his stick. His hair is red as embers and his eyes glitter silver like scraped salmon scales. He says nothing but offers a piece of yellow cheese to the famished traveller.

Roland declines, although for an instant his hand half reaches for food. 'Where is the King's dark tower?' He asks the smiling boy.

A troubled change like a melting candle passes across the face of the cowherd. He turns away and in a voice as sour as spoilt milk he says, 'I don't know.'

The blade never fails. A whistle in the morning. A slick polishing arc. A scything tear underneath the wind and the cowherd's head leaps from his body. Roland walks on.

By a bank of bluebells a cottage of rough slapped daub stands with a crazy chimney. Next to the hovel is a yard where chickens pick. Roland has never seen fowl such as these. The cockerel's comb is silver. His spurs glint like red thorns. Boldly white is this little emperor's plumage. Around him his crimson hens scratch with beaks like silver clasps.

A henwife in a tattered green bonnet is tending the chickens. She casts yellow vetch flowers and seeds across the yard. She is as twisted as an old yew and as she looks up at Roland her eyes glitter silver like new cobbler's tacks. She smiles toothlessly and reaches into her patched coat. She holds out an egg, newly boiled and peeled. Roland's hunger cries in his belly, in his legs and his mouth, but he shakes his head.

He places the tip of his sword into the gravel at his feet and coughs, 'I am seeking the king of Elfland and his Dark Tower. Can you give me the direction?'

The henwife's face seems to crumple inwards like an old leather bucket, but she nods and raises her arm. Her hand is like a clump of fresh-dug burdock root. She points a crooked finger and says, 'That way.' Her voice is dry, dry as an ungreased hinge, as though she hasn't spoken for a long, long time.

Roland draws a small circle in the gravel with the point of his blade. 'How far?'

'Not far.'

'How do I enter the Dark Tower?'

The henwife shifts from one leg to the other. She groans. 'You must say three times "Open Tower!"' Then she turns her back to him and pulls the green bonnet over her face. Roland sees that she has dropped the seeds and yellow vetch flowers, as if she knows what is coming.

Sweep, snick, sheer. Keen as ice water bites the blade that never fails. Roland leaves the henwife's head rolling towards a bowl where the chickens drink.



So Roland follows the slant of the old woman's direction and this leads him across some scrubby hills where ox-eye daisies nod at him in the thick air. At last he comes to a stone wall and over it he sees a narrow valley just like the one he left in Sussex all those weeks ago.

Just like? No. Instead of a Saxon chapel, in its place stands a green mound, grown all over with knotted brambles. The light, such as it is, has grown so murky that the mound looks as if it is choked below stagnant pond water. When he comes to stand before it he marvels that it is only twice his height. He walks around it and quickly arrives back at the place of his own beginning. So is this the Dark Tower?

He looks for a door, but all is wet grass and nodding brambles. Chestnut-haired, like a colt, and made small against the weight of his father's sword, Roland takes a deep breath and shouts wildly, 'Open door! Open door! Open door!'

The mound shudders. Clods of grass tumble from the mound. There is a grinding clamour below Roland's feet and the centre of his vision is suddenly blurred. A cold wind comes, a shrieking wind that plays his ears badly. Soil and stones spatter his face, his arms, his chest. He throws down his father's sword and stands before the rending earth, rubbing his eyes and muffling his ears.

When the wind tails away Roland rubs the flung dirt from his face and looks up. Above and through and in the mound, but not of it, has risen a glassy black tower; yet tiny, as if seen from a great distance. It stands for an instant – arches, buttresses and turrets, all picked in sharp lustre, then it fades and Roland sees that the mound is open. A stone lintel, all spiral-carved, frames a black passage into the ground.

When the boy crosses the threshold he is stung by a chill catching his neck and a gust that passes over him like a sigh. Darkness. Now he walks a blind and narrow passage. The polished floor slopes downwards, as slick as a frozen stream. He touches the close walls and his fingers graze etched lines that flow forward, ever forward. He treads unlit, eyes gaping on the dark, like passing into a fearful sleep.

He has walked for weeks to find the door into the Dark Tower, but now he walks until he forgets that he is walking. He forgets his eyes. He forgets his own name. The memory candles of his sister and two brothers have guttered out. He still holds the sword that never fails, his father's sword, but he has forgotten it. He wades the darkness and for all he knows years could be sweeping by him. He walks ...



... Until, at the end of the black, down in the very deep, after his timeless pacing, Roland's sword scrapes against a door. He trips and falls against it. The door swings open and he staggers shivering and wordless into the hall of the Elf King.

The vault of the roof rears into gloom. The floor, like the sheet of a black lake, skates away from him to a throne between two pillars of stone. And his sister, Burd Ellen, is seated there. His sister who was forgotten on his long trek downwards.

Her name breaks from his lips. He runs to her across the fathoms of the shining floor. When Burd Ellen sees him she stands and steps down from her dais. She wears a velvet gown, the colour of mulberries, such a garment as she could never have hoped to wear in the mortal world. At her throat is a silver pendant. It flashes as she rises. He draws near and sees, not joy, but a pinch of pain in her face, as if she is snared in a burl of thorns. 'You should not have come.' Her voice is lower than the voice he knew. There are tears in it.

'I have come to save you.' He reaches his fingers towards her, but she shakes her head.

'Brother, this cannot be.' Burd Ellen retreats to the dais. 'You must go back, before the King finds you here.'

'But I have come so far. I cannot go back without you.'

'You must.' The pale look of pain seems to be growing on her face. Roland feels his legs giddy and finds that his head has become as light as kindled leaf. Thirsty. He realises that he has not drunk a drop since he entered Elfland.

'Water.' His voice is dry as ashes.

Burd Ellen looks at him with her tear-heavy gaze and turns to a silver ewer. She pours water and hands him a wide earthen cup. He takes it and looks down into the water. His face billows there, haggard and famished. Cold water, like the spring near Coombes, where the water will numb your teeth and slice any thirst.

His sister waits as Roland raises the bowl. Spring water, like the icy cry of a hawk on the Downs above Coombes. Spring water, like a spear of memory. Spring water. Merlin's words!



Burd Ellen screams as Roland dashes the cup to the floor and it jumps into many shards. 'Go,' she begs. 'I am held here by a spell of the King, but you must go.'

Before Roland can reply, at the far end of the hall, a door flies clean from its hinges and in bursts the King. Fast he is, like a long black hound. He leaps across the floor and his eyes glitter like shattered flint, like beetle shell, like ink on a silver nib. He cries at Roland in a strange language, all upside-down and back-sprung.

And then he is upon him. When the Elf King strikes, Roland is tossed in the air like an empty jacket. He lands in a clump and his father's sword, the blade that never fails, skitters away on the polished floor.

The King rages at him again. White face, like a youth. Old eyes and black curls. Such fury, as he works his red mouth. A back-handed swipe and Roland is flung to the steps of the dais. The Elf King stands over him. His armour is as black as a swallowing, moonless night. His tingling, piercing, unintelligible words glance every shining surface, but there are no echoes in his Dark Tower. He raises his right hand and a flock of silver darts rain from the unseen roof. He spreads his left hand and the throne frets into a million splinters. Roland thrashes. His clothes are shredded. He is slashed and pierced.

The king bends. His left fist is drawn back, clenched for a killing blow. His shadow spiders across the youngster. Triumph kindles darkly in his ancient eyes. But Roland swims his arm across the fathomless floor and his fingers reach for the pommel of the sword, his father's sword, the sword that never fails.

Hiss breathes the blade, a wintry curse, a tang of iron. And now Child Roland is up, and the long nip of the sword is at the white throat of the Elf King, and he quails for he cannot abide the forge-chimed steel.

Down he is forced, on to his knees. Bleeding and bruised Roland holds the king fast at one glistening shoulder; for he has found a steady Sussex courage in himself and he sees how his enemy frets under the blade. 'Yield!' he cries. For he remembers how the Sussex men say 'We wun't be druv.'

A smudge of agony passes over the face of the Elf King, and an uncertain look, like an infant roughly woken. He glances to the right and to the left of him.

'Free my sister. Free my two brothers,' commands Roland.

The King's white face is that of a tormented child. He wails in anguish, old wild words, syllables coughed from deep black corners. To Roland they are tongue-thorns; spite-lashes, vex-hatched grudges. Yet at last he submits, trembling, with his black eyes on the long sword that never fails. He opens his mailed fist and stars his fingers. He whispers a quick tracery of sibillance and in an instant he grows dim against the sheen of the floor. Then he is gone. Roland's sword that pricked against Elf flesh now ponders on nothing. All that is left is a flurry of white hawthorn petals floating on the polished onyx floor.

Heaving and shaking, Roland looks to his sister Burd Ellen, who steps from the dais in her mulberry gown with tears like pearls on her cheeks. As she walks between the two stone pillars they smoke and water into the forms of the brothers, Aelfred and Ham.



At the far end of the hall a door is ajar. Child Roland drops the blade that never fails and it clangs like a mass bell. The four of them walk outside to a sunlit morning. An oaky slam, a sound fettered with bands of Wealden iron, makes them turn. They see to their astonishment that they have just stepped from the door of the church at Coombes.

How can it be that the King of Elfland's Dark Tower stood unnoticed and masked in the Saxon knapped flints of the church? Child Roland creaks open the latch and pokes his chestnut head into the familiar nave. He sees the murals, the font and the rood screen. The Bible lays shut and clasped on the lectern.

Before they step through the Tapsel gate they run the small circuit of the church, letting the wind wash the fug of the under-place of Elfland from their limbs. Their laughter is sieved through yew and elm branches and then into the naked downland air. Burd Ellen runs ahead of her brothers and as she comes back to the porch her mulberry gown fades to original brown.

The astonishment of their deliverance passes from them quickly and they are untroubled by the time they step through the Tapsel gate. All except Burd Ellen. For as the last patch of mulberry scarlet blotches across her breast she looks for an instant as if she is struggling to recall a lost dream.

What is certain is that none of them will ever run widdershins around the church again. However, the next morning the verger is most truly perplexed to find a sword, twisted and strained and mangled, flung into the graveyard among a scatter of white hawthorn petals.



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