

A.M. Gwynn
Shelter

Unable to sit still, we bounced from window to window, scanning the horizon for the first sign of the black funnel reported to be tearing its way across the western plains. Mother paced the floor wringing her dishpan hands until little cracks opened up and bled in her palms. She must have thought it would alter whatever destiny had in store for us that day.

Mother was a worrier by nature and wouldn't be expected to behave any other way, especially when she had something to worry about. She hated the open plains. From the day Daddy settled us here, she never let us forget it. Whatever went wrong, she blamed it on God's forsaken country. She said the devil favored the open plains, Nebraska most of all. What made her worry the most, more than likely, Daddy wasn't on his way home.

In twister weather, the field hands would hunker down in the nearest shelter at whichever farm they were working on that day, Daddy explained. The field boss wasn't going to be responsible for a twister picking up a man and dropping him off in Oz or worse - *pass some more of those potatahs*. Every man would stay put until it was over, it would be up to Mother to get us all into the shelter at the first sign or sound of it. As she passed Daddy more of the potatoes, she reminded him how perfectly safe and comfortable we were back home; he had brought her straight to the gates of hell.

Mother kept watching the road, believing she would see Daddy's truck on the horizon any minute then would take up pacing again, the worry rubbed deeper into her hands. My sister, Sarah, worked on her puzzles at the table while the baby gurgled to herself in her crib. All the pacing and hand wringing made me nervous so I decided to keep watch outside for the beast.

"Jeremiah, go on and get upstairs. Open up all them windows, every one."

The pressure of the wind could shatter glass, and Lord knew, Daddy couldn't afford to replace the windows. I did as she told me, trying to think of all the things Daddy would do in this situation. About mid-way back down the stairs, it got dark, as if a shadow had just sat down over the house, the temperature dropped to an eerie chill. Mother yelled for me and my sister to get out to the yard. I reached the porch at the same time Sarah did. Mother had baby Cissy on her hip, and Sarah ran over and clung to her dress. We all headed to the shelter.

Mother handed the baby to Sarah, and I helped her try to lift the heavy door. That's when I felt the rumbling locomotive inside of me. When I looked up, that twister was spinning towards the house. Mother started screaming. Somehow, we got that door up and she pushed me in so quick I tumbled down the stairs. Sarah carried Cissy down while Mother fought to get the latch secure. All we could do when we got down there was huddle together and wait.

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After we settled down from the initial panic, I asked how long we would stay in the shelter. We would wait on Daddy, Mother said, he would know where we were and he would get us out when it was safe. If need be, the shelter had been prepared so we could stay down there for days. I opened up a can of Beanie Weenies and gave one to Cissy. She had just started chewing soft foods.

We tried not to dwell on the idea we might not have a home to go back to after we got out of there. Sarah took out the crayons while I pestered Cissy until she laughed. I never could pass up the opportunity to make that baby laugh. Mother was cursing the plains and the devil again. It seemed as if we had been in the shelter only a short time when she tilted her head and jumped up from the bench.

“You kids hear that? Jeremiah, you hear it?”

She said she could hear pounding on the door, that it must be Daddy. I reminded her it was only the debris the twister was tearing up and throwing around. She swore it was him. He was trying to get into the shelter and we had to help him. She climbed up the stairs to the storm door. I was scared then, I knew she meant to open that door.

Mother started working on the latch. Daddy had warned me many times to never open a storm door if you hear any noise outside. Sarah climbed the stairs with the baby who had started to cry. Then Sarah started crying. I wanted to cry, too, but I yelled as loud as I could, *get away from the door!* Just then, the door-latch was free and the door broke off with a blast. My mother, Sarah, and Cissy were sucked up out of the shelter like paper scraps.

I was in the shelter by myself after, a couple of hours or it could have been only a few minutes. I became aware I was standing outside and it was raining. It was a soft rain, everything quiet, as it is after violence ends and everyone hushes to reflect on it. The roof of the house was gone though the house still stood. Debris from all over the county, it seemed, littered the yard: a bathtub, someone’s porch swing, a green pick-up with one wheel, entangled in pole wire. I went up to the house and sat down on the porch. It was well after dark when I heard Daddy’s truck racing up the dirt road.

Three days later, they found my mother. She lay two miles away in Carson’s field. It took a week to find Sarah. She had gotten wedged up under a rusted field plow in the Dockers’ backyard. No one ever found Cissy. Some people whispered that the force of the twister must have torn her into so many tiny pieces she was probably scattered across Nebraska. I hated them for thinking of my sister like that. I wanted to remember her as she was, eating her Beanie Weenies with her two-toothed grin and soft blonde curls.

Mother always had so much faith in Daddy, just as she had in the Lord, but a year after the twister, Granddad found Daddy swinging from a rope in the barn. He looked peaceful, Granddad said. *Jeremiah, life gives and takes, and the giving and taking won’t be equal.*

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The pain was too big for my father. Sometimes you can outrun the twisters, take shelter until the storm passes. Sometimes the twisters live on inside you, tearing up everything you got left. I still live out on the plains. In defiance of the twisters, the ropes swung over the rafters, and because I can still hear them whispering to me in the Autumn wheat.