

Going to the Hole

Sometime during the late afternoon of what has been a baking summer day, I notice a subtle change in the light, a shift from brittle white toward a softer blue. Without my notice, clouds have materialized in great billowing towers, flattening at their bases and growing darker, their tops soaring higher and higher. The air goes still; there is a sudden quietness, and I feel an indefinable, electric sense of an impending... something. Far away, jagged ribbons of yellow and violet flash through the clouds, then disappear to be followed by more flashes. Many seconds later, it seems, the rumbling bass notes arrive. Now the sky darkens to the color of gunmetal, tinged with a green hue that is ominous and almost black. The charged air swirls and stirs. It is noticeably cooler, now. The lightning flashes are closer, and soon they are directly overhead. The lightning and thunder come in simultaneous flash-bangs, now, blinding and ear splitting. I run to the house and leap onto a covered porch.

Fat drops of icy rain, like small stones, begin to hit the ground hard, the first ones raising tiny puffs of dust from the road in front of our house. The rain intensifies until it is falling in blowing gray sheets. From the porch I watch with my brothers as the rain turns to hail. Hailstones bounce crazily off the ground and the porch roof. Leaves and the ends of branches are clipped from the trees. The world roars.

Mixing with the screams of the storm, a distant siren wails, its warning rising and falling with the howling wind. My mother comes onto the porch and tells us to come into the house. She walks around inside, peering out windows in each of the rooms to scan the sky, nervous and worried and fidgeting. Outside, the wind whips the trees that are planted along the line between our house and a neighbor's. Thunder rattles the windows.

I am looking out such a window when the old man who lives on the other side of the blowing trees drives his car into our driveway. He sounds the car horn in two long blasts. He gets out of the car and clambers stiffly up our steps on bowed legs. He is wearing a yellow rain slicker that shines wetly in the light of a bare bulb next to the door. He smiles beneath his hood, the slicker dripping water onto the porch floor, and tells my mother that she and her kids had better come with him to the cellar right away. My brothers and I hurry as best we can into our coats, which we have not worn for months. We run with our mother and the old neighbor down the steps and pile into his car. It is dark, but in the lightning flashes I see my mother's taut profile, the old man's nose protruding from the hood of his slicker. In the beam of the car's headlights, I watch our house recede behind streaks of silver as the man backs out of the driveway.

The man says, "It's probably just some straight wind, nothing to worry about, probably. Probably won't last long. Probably blow over." He keeps saying "probably." He turns the car into his driveway next to the bending trees. The headlights sweep across the backyard and I see another man motioning to us from beneath a half-open door placed into the ground. As the car is stopping, my mother tells us to run like the dickens to that hole in the ground and stay in front of her and don't stop no matter what, or else she will tan our hides. She is using her serious voice. She pulls my smallest brother into her lap and hugs him tightly to her chest. She opens her door. In the back seat, I reach across a brother and push the door open, and we scramble out of the car. We are off and running.

We run through the rain and wind and the flash-bangs, and down the steps leading into the hole. The old neighbor's wife is there, sitting on a wooden bench. She jumps up and is saying breathlessly, "oh my goodness," and "can you believe this," and "oh my, oh my," and "I told Henry you better go get them kids, oh goodness." A lantern burns dimly on another bench. The old neighbor and the other man have flashlights. The flashlight beams jump around the little space, illuminating shelves that are covered with dust and the remnants of spiders' webs. Unlabeled jars and cans are placed here and there on the shelves, some of them lying on their sides. Rainwater has mixed with dust to form muddy islands on a dark cement floor. We are in a cramped dirty box, I realize. The rain drums loudly on the tin sheet that covers the wooden door. I feel squeezed by the small space and the people in it. I try to take slow, deep breaths. I am afraid.

The two men stand on the steps, and whenever the rain slackens for a moment, they push the door open a little and peer out, but I don't know what they hope to see. Maybe they, too, are bothered by the close confines, and just need to know that they can get out if they need to.

One time when the door is open the old neighbor announces, "Someone's coming." Automobile headlights arc onto the half-open door and cascade partway down the steps. I hear a car door slam and then my father is pulling the shelter door open a little wider and jumping into the hole with us.

I don't feel afraid anymore. I see that my mother feels the same sense of relief. She is asking how did he know we would be here in this hole, and he is asking her where else would he expect us to be. She is telling him how bad it had been, and my brothers and I are jumping up and down, pulling at his wet pants and shirt, pointing and telling with big eyes and excited voices our own harrowing versions of nearly being killed, and my father is laughing and saying how this "isn't anything" and "it's just a little rain" and he's "seen a lot worse." I see his face in the dim light of the lantern, backlit by the moving flashlight beams, and I can see that he, too, is relieved. He is happy to have found us here, safe in this cramped dirty hole.