

Countdown

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3 hours left. Sunlight welcomed the newest high school graduates as they left their school one last time. They were surrounded by their families and loved ones. Cameras flashed, hugs exchanged. “College won’t get in the way of our friendship,” was the promise of too many hopeful, ignorant teenagers that day. Ignorance is bliss. But at least today they still shared their vibrant friendships. Today they were on top of the world only to start over as freshmen in the fall. It was an interesting transition to fall from the top and work your way back up.

I was at the graduation. My cousin Audrey wrapped her arm around my shoulder. I tried to pull away. I didn’t like pictures. She was stronger and taller than me.

“Come on! Take a picture with me. You know you’re going to miss me this fall,” she laughed as she posed and gave a goofy grin. She bent down so she wouldn’t be too tall next to me. Her graduation gown matched my red hair. The tassel on her hat tickled my nose. I almost sneezed. But I held it back and smiled like she asked. She wanted a picture of me, which was nice. The camera flashed.

Audrey grabbed the camera, looking at the picture. She said, “It’s perfect! This is going up on my wall. You are my favorite cousin, of course.” She ran off to take more pictures with her friends. I could hear her chatting with her classmates. There were a lot of cameras flashing. Mom and Dad took me to the car. I would see Audrey at the BBQ at her house.

I liked the picture though. We were both smiling big. It was the last picture I ever got with Audrey.

2 hours, 50 minutes. My family and I went to the BBQ at Audrey’s house. My Aunt Karen and Uncle Robert threw the graduation party. Audrey was their only child. They didn’t cry even though they would miss her. I was going to miss her too. Even with weather reports of an approaching storm, people were everywhere. Thunderstorms were common here in the Midwest. No one paid attention to the clouds in the distance. We were used to them.

There was lots of food. I sat with my parents and my two younger brothers, Riley and baby Charlie. We ate slowly because we had on nice clothes. Mom and Dad smiled as they talked to people who were also our neighbors. I watched all the graduates as they took even more pictures and played in the pool. The boys would push the girls in the pool even though the girls said no. The girls would yell as they hit the cold water. It was funny.

Audrey opened up gifts while saying “I love it” a hundred times and blew out candles on a yummy cake. Aunt Karen took a piece of cake and put Audrey’s face in it. Everyone laughed at the blue icing hanging on Audrey’s nose and forehead. She laughed too. She posed for pictures with her closest friends and then her parents. Audrey with her blue face. She wiped it off, and the cake was passed out. She gave me an extra-large piece, and she handed it to me with a wink.

Her birthday was tomorrow. She would have turned 18.

1 hour, 45 minutes. Baby Charlie started crying so we had to leave the party before it was over. I waved good-bye to Audrey as we climbed in our gray minivan, and she got into a car with some friends. Her mom needed more tea, so Audrey left her own party to get it. I don’t know why tea was so important. But hanging out at Walmart was what teenagers did for fun. She was sent to get tea, but she would buy other things: probably candy, an energy drink, and a new sun hat. They would look at dorm stuff, dreaming about what the future should hold. They would forget about the tea, and the party, while they hung out at Walmart.

She shouted through the open window, “BYE, STEVEN!” I waved again as our cars turned away from each other. Our house was only a few blocks away. We visited each other a lot, especially



during the summer. I would swim with Riley while Audrey “worked on her tan.” She always complained about sunburns.

I heard the music booming as they drove away to the Walmart across town. Her brown hair flew around her as Audrey stuck her head out the window. She yelled some lyrics in her bad singing voice. But she didn’t care. She was like a queen. It was the last time I saw her. The Walmart didn’t stand a chance.

1 hour, 30 minutes. Mom took a screaming Charlie to his room upstairs. I went to the room I shared with Riley, and we changed out of our nice clothes. I passed by the door, and Mom was rocking Charlie in a rocking chair. She smiled at me.

Riley and I sat on the couch with Dad and watched television. I was tired after sitting through a long graduation. We were watching cartoons when the news came on. It was a weather report. It said there was a big thunderstorm coming our way. The lady on the television talked about high winds and hail. The red warning on the screen scared me. Dad told me that we would be alright. The really bad storms missed us a lot for some reason. I believed him. He was a smart businessman. He lived here a long time, so he knew what he was talking about. This storm was supposed to miss our town.

50 minutes. We ate dinner early. We sat around the dinner table, the five of us eating some leftover BBQ from the party. It was still sunny outside, even though the lady on the television said storms were coming. There was a lot more wind, though. It whistled while we ate. Dad talked about watching the storm come in. Mom left the table to help Charlie who had just woken from his nap. We could hear him yelling again. We finished eating and cleared the table. Riley and I cleaned the dishes, and Dad put them away because he was taller. The wind continued to rattle the windows while we cleaned.

10 Minutes. Riley and I stood side by side on our house’s small porch. I used to be afraid, but now I could watch the storms. Dad joined us like always. Watching storms had become a tradition at this house. I felt safer with him here. I wished Mom could watch too, but she was with Charlie. He cried a lot. But that was okay. There would be more storms to watch. This one was slow anyway. Nothing was really happening. But the wind made me squint my eyes. It was hot.

180 seconds. The sun was shining, but clouds rolled in the distance. They were galloping like a herd of angry gray rhinos towards our little house. Too quickly. I had never seen them take over the sky so fast! I looked up at Dad to see what he thought. His eyes scanned the clouds, a frown wrinkling his forehead. I looked at Riley who wouldn’t stop staring at the wall of clouds. I couldn’t stop staring either. I almost asked for someone to get the camera.

120 seconds. Then the sun hid. A cold wind hit us. My heart began running, and I put my hand on Riley’s shoulder. His eyes didn’t move from the sky. It started swirling, looking like a lead ice-cream cone. Sirens yelled at the clouds as a gust blew straight for us. Lots of rain fell, moving sideways and making us wet.

80 seconds. Dad turned, his arms forming a castle over us. He pulled us over the doorframe. We went through the door. Hail the size of golf balls beat the roof like a drum. We were in the hall. We weren’t supposed to run in the house. Dad grabbed bicycle helmets from the closet. There was some pressure on my head. The straps hung loose, tickling my wet cheeks. Dad yelled for Mom. Riley cried. She appeared at the top of the stairs with baby Charlie. Charlie was crying, too. A freight train screamed outside. There were no trains here.

50 seconds. Windows burst. I think my heart did, too. Everything was too loud. Mom flew down the stairs with Charlie. I fell to my knees. Dad scooped me up. The walls leaned in for a hug. The house danced, twisting and shaking. We skipped down the basement steps onto soft carpet. The bathroom door swung open and shut. Mom got on her knees in the tub with Charlie wrapped in her arms. Riley and I got in, too. Our heads were tucked under. Our hands were on our necks. Dad



crouched nearby.

Ten seconds. A rock band crashed their instruments together upstairs.

Nine. Shattering glass sang along with the awful song.

Eight. The bathroom's roof danced to the beat.

Seven. Water dripped slowly from the ceiling.

Six. Drip, drop, drip, drop, drip.

Five. Clang, clang! Crash! Tumble.

Four. Rip, Twist, repeat.

Three. Bang! Bang!

Two. Thud.

Silence.

