

A Good Storm

I crouch, silent, under the dark rattan kitchen table and listen to the roar of cold water filling the bathtub in the next room. My knees are pulled up to my chest, or at least as far up as my belly rolls will allow. Too many Little Debbie snack cakes and *I Dream of Jeannie* reruns this summer, I guess.

I have a companion down here with me, in the back corner under the burnt orange Naugahyde booth—a dead cockroach, belly up, spindly legs dangling up over its body. It's one of the big ones, a Palmetto, about an inch or two long and brown like dark chocolate, the ones who live with us and around us despite Daddy setting roach motels around the house for them. Momma says that having palmetto bugs live with you is okay, and that it doesn't mean your house is dirty. They were here first, so we agree to live among them. She says that only if you see those little light brown cockroaches running around, the German ones, that's when your house is dirty. But Momma says a lot of things.

Right now, she's telling me about the storm that's on its way.

"This one came up quick, Amy Lou!" She shouts over the constant crash of the bathwater. "You stay under there until we see what these winds are going to do!"

My whole family loves a good storm, but no one more than Momma. Every time it rains, she takes my hand and pulls me onto the front porch right when it's at its worst, letting the rain ricochet in a spray onto our faces, letting the thunder roll through our bones, letting the wind pull my long black hair to the side.

"Isn't it wild?!" Momma would scream into the wind, her wet face upturned to the blackened sky. "Isn't it glorious?!"

I pick at a corner of the worn linoleum underneath me, and stare at its yellow and brown pattern until my eyes go out of focus. Stale crumbs of French bread, like dry shards of glass, stab at my black-bottomed bare feet. Momma makes masking tape Xs on the windows so when they shatter, the glass will catch inside the X.

It's lunchtime, but the skies get dark like midnight. Lightning flashes through the sky, and the room around me lights up white-blue like a camera flash that quick-fades to pure darkness as the power blips out.

"Here we go!" Momma shouts.

There's no room for fear as I scoot out from under the table. Momma rushes to the dining room, yelling, "I've got the front one!" She flicks off that window air conditioning unit as I sprint for the back room. I stand on my tiptoes to turn off the unit in the high window at the back of the den. My fingers stretch past their limits to reach the power button at the very top.

Click.

We did it. Daddy will be proud when he gets home and sees we didn't blow another fuse when the power pops back on.

Momma pulls out the large box of matches, labeled "TOP" with black marks-a-lot on one side, my daddy's handwriting preventing me from sliding it open upside down and spilling the matchsticks all over the floor. Digging in the bottom kitchen drawer, she finds one pink and three purple tapered candles, half-spent leftovers from Lent. I grab the stack of small, dusty plates from the back of the cabinet and hand her one by one. She lights the candles then tilts them to let some wax drip onto a plate before standing the candle up in it. As far as I know, this is the only use for these plates. They are painted with pink and gold roses. They are chipped around the edges.

The thunder comes cracking fast and hard now, and the windows start shaking. A terrible sound comes from our yard that isn't thunder at all. Momma pulls open the greasy yellow curtain at the back door just as our sheet metal carport crumples in half, then lifts off and flies into the air, like it's a napkin somebody dropped on the sidewalk on a breezy day.

I don't know why, I will never really know why, but I slide open the glass door, and run outside after our flying carport, sheets of rain soaking instantly through my cutoffs and plastering my shirt to my belly rolls. The winds grow fierce and wild, and push against my face and up my nose until I can't breathe, like I've stuck my head out the window of a moving car.

Momma screams for me to come inside, but for the first time in my life, I don't listen to her. The storm falls down around me and I feel alive and full and free. I stand in the rain, I stand with the rain, I melt into the storm, I become the wind itself. Maybe this is what it feels like to be strong.

The rain goes into a pitter patter and then out. The winds stop screaming and the gusts turn into warm, gentle breezes that feel like Momma's fingers running through my hair at bedtime. I am quite sure I've chased the storm clear away all by myself. I open my eyes—I didn't know I had ever closed them. A big orange sky sits right above me. The still, wet air cradles me like a baby, swaddles me in quiet. I stand, soaked to the bone in the shambles of my backyard, and stretch my hands up to the sky. I turn my face to meet the hazy sun, both of us just come out of hiding. I can see the passing storm clouds in front of me, and more deep gray ones coming behind. This must be the eye of the storm, I decide. I wait inside this stillness and draw in a deep long breath of soft, calm air.

Isn't it glorious?