

Twisted

By Jessie Witherspoon

I clutched myself tightly as the wind howled, whisking away my town. The tornado was ripping through the streets like thousands of angry locusts as my family drove by, gazing over an unrecognizable world that was once home.

"We're almost out," Dad said nervously, whizzing down the road, far beyond the speed limit. The gray sky pelted us with raindrops the size of gumballs and branches of lightning streaked across the sky, unleashing a terrifying boom with each bolt. The funnel cloud set free roaring winds that filled me with terror. Silent tears ran down my cheeks as we passed familiar places - the farmer's market, my school, and the run-down arena. They were all ripped apart, like Godzilla had just walked by and stomped on them. It hurt me to stare, but I couldn't look away. It was like a terrible car accident that everyone stops to watch.

I felt like I was being strangled in the debris as we fluttered further and further away like leaves on a breeze. In the distance I could see the tornado, mutilating everything in its path. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat as we sped towards my aunt's house, wondering if we'd ever find "home" again.

.....

Aunt Winnie was a carefree woman. Dad used the word "boundless," as if she was some uncaged zoo animal. I didn't really understand that. She was sweet and always positive. She had three cats and had given them adorable names - Timothy, Johansen, and Catsby. She lived about an hour away in Guelph. We rarely got to see her, so I was a little (the key word being *a little*) excited about staying with her.

So as we sat in the pews at church at Dad's request, mere hours after we fled our hometown, Aunt Winnie scooped over to me. We met her that morning at her apartment, but we hadn't been able to talk much until that moment in the church.

"How are you doing?" she whispered. I melted into her but said nothing, which was an explanation in itself. I was never much of a wordsmith, so my action made more of an impact anyway. We continued to listen to what the priest was saying and we sang some hymns with about as much energy as a dead fly. Meanwhile, my mind was miles away, mourning the wasteland that was my home.

I zoned out a few times and Dad had to elbow me. Halfway through the service, I decided to actually pay attention. I thought I'd give this "God thing" a try. We needed it.

After another thirty minutes went by, I absently shook hands with the priest and we departed. We walked back to Winnie's Chevy and sped back to her flat.

"When are we going back?" I asked longingly, hoping someone would give me the answer I'd been waiting for.

Dad and Aunt Winnie exchanged glances and there was a hollow silence, which was also an explanation in itself.

We pulled into a parking lot and began the long walk up six flights of stairs. There were three eager cats waiting when I opened the door. I flopped down on Winnie's cushy couch and

Catsby jumped on me, kneading my stomach. Timothy was swatting furiously at a fold in the carpet and Johansen was pouncing at a bug on the floor.

Dad was humming and boiling some water on the stovetop. Winnie was prepping some veggies for pasta sauce. Something told me she wasn't crying because of the onions she was chopping.

To break the unbearable silence, Dad turned on the radio and the 6 o'clock news came on. "Breaking news!" An enthusiastic male voice roared from the speaker. "The Perringville Tornado is taking the nation by storm! Authorities declared it an F3 on the EF scale and is one of the worst ones we've seen in the past decade. The tornado fell silent about 12 hours ago but it is unclear when the area will be inhabitable again. For the full story and on-site coverage, go to Channel 6, CBC News."

Dad rushed to switch off the radio from across the room, but the damage was done. I lifted Catsby off of me and set him beside me, ashamed of the tears welling up in my eyes as I stifled a sob.

Aunt Winnie sat beside me, abandoning the pasta sauce to comfort me. "Oh, Rosa..." Her thick-lensed glasses made her sympathetic eyes look gigantic.

I sighed, pitying myself, even if I didn't want to be pitied. I wanted to be answered, and back in my bedroom where I belonged, before everything fell apart. I wanted to go home. I scratched Catsby under the chin, wondering if we'd ever go back.

Because I don't know what I'm going to do if we don't. I thought.

.....

In the agonizing few months that followed, life had returned to a twisted version of the norm. My new school was full of lots of clubs and nice people, but my friends from Perringville had scattered across the region. I kept in contact with my friend Marion from home and called her regularly. One of our deeper conversations went like this:

"It's all over the radio," she said, huffing. "It's everywhere I go."

"It's all my new classmates talk about," I said, bitterness lacing my words. "I can't forget, and I don't know if I want to."

"I've never experienced this kind of..." She paused.

"Devastation." I whispered. "You never think it'll happen to you."

"It's like they're looking through a window, while we're looking in a mirror," Marion said wisely.

I didn't speak, the words burning through me. Her thought etched a hole in my brain and it swallowed me up as I hung up the phone. I was angry at the tornado, at the wreckage, and at the town. But was there really a town to be angry at? My mind swirled over the thought.

Every day I slumped on Winnie's hide-a-bed, deep in periods of time that could only be described as uneventful. The insufferable wait had taken a toll on me. I could barely remember what it was like to be so incredibly "out there" like I once was.

Often, Dad would come home with some fragments of news. Nothing drastic, just saying that he visited Perringville and "The community centre was rebuilt" and "I've paid a builder to start on the frame of our house", for example. He didn't want me to go with him ever, because he claimed that I couldn't handle it. He said I could go when our house was completely rebuilt,

so I wouldn't have to see what it was like when it was demolished. I wondered how fragile he assumed I was, but didn't dare ask.

I kept myself occupied, checking the news every few days. One particular Thursday, I came home from school to find a note on the counter.

Finishing shingles on the roof today. We'll visit first thing tomorrow.

-Dad

I smiled, bathing in my newfound security. Home was no longer a false reality. I giddily jumped on the hide-a-bed, feeling what could only be known as true freedom. This euphoria didn't last long, and as my mind fluttered in the hours that followed, the truth settled over like a grey cloud.

Will it be everything I hope? The thought stabbed me repeatedly like a blunt knife, dull yet excruciating. I imagined my possessions, all gone with the wind, never to be seen. I thought of neighbouring houses, still ripped down to rubble. *Will it ever be the same? Will we never truly go back?*

Aunt Winnie came home and I shared with her my worries. I strung more words together in ten minutes than I had in weeks.

I finally fell silent, hoping Winnie would have some words of wisdom, but she just stared at me for a while. "Haven't you been dying to go back?"

"What if there's nothing to go back to?" I moaned, imagining a wasteland of rubble surrounded by my own house, a shell of what it used to be.

"It's your home," Winnie said as she set a warm hand on my shoulder and I leaned against her. I gritted my teeth, torn between my memories of the old Perringville and the mysterious prospect of the new one.

I thought of my conversation with Marion and the conflict in my head vanished. I gulped sharply and nodded. I thought about the funnel cloud, the roar of the wind, and the ruins of buildings in which my fond memories were made. But then I remembered the good old days, the childhood I spent in a world without pain. "We need to go back," I said for what felt like the millionth time, wondering if I could muster up enough courage to look at the mirror and break the glass.