

Tornadoes

If you put on your best Howard Stern-esque voice, and say, “Goooooooood Mooorning!” to me or any of my siblings, we will break into character and complete the monologue without missing a beat:

“Well it WAS a good morning until my boss *DRAGGED* me out bed to do double duty as...that’s right...your Saturday *morning* talk show host. It’s ME! Cryin’ Bryan Dern! With you...*all morning*.”

The monologue opens my family’s favorite episode of our beloved Christian radio drama series, *Adventures in Odyssey* titled “Tornado!” We had the whole series on cassette tapes which we would listen to in every car ride, or on our boomboxes to sleep to at night. Odyssey was a small town in a never-mentioned state where characters went through all kinds of adventures and learned important Bible lessons along the way.

In “Tornado!” the citizens of Odyssey are hit with an unexpected storm, leaving the conniving and greedy Rathbone family with a tree through their home. Mandy Straussberg, the daughter of the Rathbone’s neighbors, knows their family has robbed the good people of Odyssey by exploiting their needs for batteries and flashlights to make a quick profit at Bart Rathbone’s Electric Place. Regardless, Mandy ends up selling her most prized possession to make a donation to the Rathbone family when their insurance won’t cover the cost to repair their

home. The story teaches us to be generous with our neighbors even if they have wronged us because of course, that is what Jesus would do.

We focused on the climax scene of the episode when the storm finally hits. Although it is a radio drama, the sound effects are so powerful it felt like we, too, were caught in a turbine from the backseat of our conversion van. Having heard the episode every day for years, we knew no one was going to be hurt, but we clung to the edge of our seats as if the suspense itself could sweep us away.

It started as a kind of infatuation. Perhaps even as a child, I knew it was better to know your fears inside and out. As soon as I learned what a tornado was, I was sucked in, and not exactly in a scholastic way. *Lilapsophobia*: one of my biggest, and arguably most irrational fears for as long as I can remember. The fear of tornadoes. I am confident in a past life I witnessed or fell victim to at least one funnel, but also for whatever reason I had this connection to the phenomenon since I was a child.

When I was 5 or 6 years old, my family went on vacation to Orlando. We did all the parks at Disney then moved on to Universal Studios. At every amusement park, my family split into two groups—my elder siblings, Kari and Zack, went with my dad to ride roller coasters and thrill rides; my sister, Kassidy, and I stayed with my mom to explore the kids' sections. In Universal, however, a lot of the rides were motionless enough for my mom to stomach, safe

enough for me and Cassidy, and exciting enough for the thrill-seekers. Consequently, they were also horrifying for a 5-year-old me.

I screamed and cried so much on *King Kong* they had to stop the ride. We waited hours in line at *Jaws* to give me the experience of melting down on a boat. I drew the line at *Twister*. My mom went off on her own to complete a survey, while my dad took us kids to the *Twister* ride. They tried to convince me. “It’s not *that* scary!” said Zack. “It’s not *real*!” explained Kari. But my fear was real, and I did not want to risk my life for an amusement ride. I fled the scene, and luckily ran into my mom outside of the ride. The rest of the family joined us later and talked about how exciting and fun the ride was. This may be where I developed my fear of missing out.

I fixated on the idea of tornadoes. They fueled my nightmares and lingered in the back of my mind every time a strong gust of wind shook the house. I experienced Tornado Warnings while visiting my grandma in Indiana. My mom braided my hair while we sang, “It’s a twister! It’s a twister!” à la Dorothy in Kansas. Dorothy’s tornado was a magical experience. But the tornadoes I imagined were terrifying.

My own scientific musings combined with limited knowledge of how things work led me to believe that if you are sucked into a tornado, it deposits into a black hole. Honestly, I thought a *mobile, destructive vortex of violently rotating winds* would bring a human to a *region of space having a gravitational field so intense that no matter or radiation can escape*. Yet, I had little to

no reason to be afraid of such an occurrence. Sure, when I visited Grandma, we would run into these storms with Tornado Watches every now and then, but I never even saw a funnel cloud. I lived in New Jersey my whole life—not exactly “tornado alley.”

One September day I was in 2nd grade, the clock struck 3pm, and kept ticking onward, though we weren't allowed to leave the classroom to go home. No one said anything and it was some time before I even noticed we were standing in a line ready to leave, but for some reason Mrs. Smith was keeping us late. When we were finally dismissed, I found my best friend and neighbor, Marie outside the school, and we started home together, when our mothers greeted us on the sidewalk. We usually walked home by ourselves, so I asked “What’s going on?” My mom explained there has been a tornado.

“You didn’t hear it?” she asked.

“I saw a tree fall from my classroom!” Marie insisted.

“We just wanted to make sure it was safe for you to walk home.” Marie’s mother told us.

A tornado was seemingly forming in my brain. There was a *tornado*? Here in *Lawrenceville*?
And I missed it???

We walked home and gawked at the trees and debris lining the streets. Our quiet suburb fell quieter than usual. The storm was declared an F1 on the Fujita Scale, only one level worse than the most moderate level. The damage was still magnificent, though. We arrived at my home

to see a tree had fallen from our backyard. Luckily for us, it fell away from the house and into the cat lady's yard behind ours. It did little damage beyond some broken windows. It left a gaping hole in our yard. I have an image in my memory of my dad standing in the hole when they were getting ready to remove the fallen tree. It could have swallowed him, it was so deep.

My siblings and I sat on the curb outside our house while our parents talked to our neighbors. The Red Cross pulled up in a white food truck, and asked if we were okay. The lady gave us all hot dogs, and wished us luck in our clean up. We spent the night gathered around a lantern-style flashlight playing card games and listening to the radio.

Years later I still have dreams about tornadoes somewhat frequently. When my dad passed away, my sister's school gave us a tree with their condolences. We planted it where the old tree fell, and my mom laughed at the idea of us raising an infant tree. It took root and has grown and bloomed every spring. I watch *Twister* every time it's on TV.