

AUDREY

AND THE

SUMMER

OF

STORMS

BY

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THIS SHORT STORY IS DEDICATED TO MY
PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS
OPAL ROGERS HENRY AND DAVID LAMAR HENRY

AUDREY AND THE SUMMER OF STORMS

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“STORIES HAVE TO BE TOLD OR THEY DIE,
AND WHEN THEY DIE, WE CAN’T REMEMBER
WHO WE ARE OR WHY WE’RE HERE.”

— SUE MONK KIDD

AUDREY AND THE SUMMER OF STORMS

I WATCHED AUDREY from the seats in front of the picture window in my grandparent's store. The single row of old theatre seats were bolted to the concrete, the backs to the large, plate glass window. Audrey hadn't answered when I called earlier. No one answered, but I knew they were there. I had seen them walking in the yard, and the car was parked in front of the house. The only person I hadn't seen was Audrey's mother, Sister Jenkins. That's what everyone called Pastor Jenkins' wife, Sister.

I had been sitting there for a while, watching. I wasn't really sitting. I was draped over two seats so I could see out the window—still able to see what was going on in the store. I would think about it later when Granddaddy was talking with the sheriff's deputy.

I spotted Audrey as she sat in front of the little church, crying. The sun was bright and glaring. It created spots in my vision, making me blink to recreate the figures I searched

for in the shady entrance to the church. Audrey was tucked into a shadow at the top of the steps, away from the pulsing heat surrounding the small wooden church. She backed herself into the darkened places, as if she were hiding there—rubbing her eyes with her fists, her knees pulled to her chest, her arms wrapped around them. I could smell the heat and the iron in the red dirt—red, iron, blood, the same odor.

There were red dirt fields, freshly plowed, surrounding the little structure with a steeple. It sat at the intersection of two farm to market roads, twenty miles from the nearest town. It was an innocent building, small and quiet. The parsonage and church were kitty-cornered from my grandparent's store. The only other structure for miles was the Lutheran church behind the store.

A couple of trees and those buildings were the only things in the red dirt for as far as I could see. The crossroads divided the land, separating Audrey's house and the church from the store and the Lutheran church. I thought of it as a barrier, something was there blocking a welcome to the place, just a small spirit of something.

I glanced at Audrey again. That's the way I would remember her when my grandparents told me what happened. We were all there at the crossroads, in the heat,

no other structures or bumps in the landscape. It was desolate, but not uncomfortable. The advantage was, a person could see things coming from a long way: storms, vehicles, people on foot, but there were other things, things no one could see. Those things didn't walk upright; they slithered, working their way quietly into crevices, or sometimes, they winked, said hello, and walked right past an unwary person.

An old water cooler air conditioner hummed in a smaller, sagging window at the end of the row of theater seats. It added moisture and cool air to the dry, panhandle heat. My nose would bleed a little every time I visited my grandparents. My mucus membranes were more familiar with gulf coast moisture and the mildew that grew in the air before it attached itself to anything. Panhandle heat was dry, desert dry, making my skin itch if I didn't put lotion on after a bath. My grandmother bought Avon from a local saleslady and kept *Skin So Soft* on the back of the toilet. She used it for moisture but it was her signature fragrance. I liked it. It had the added benefit of repelling mosquitoes, but I don't recall seeing a mosquito around the store. They needed water to lay their eggs and water was scarce. The red dirt could attest to that.

Farmers often sat in the theatre seats to drink coffee, or a cold drink on their way to or from their fields. Sometimes they stopped there for lunch. My grandmother would make them a sandwich, picking up slices of bologna or salami with white paper lining her hand. She stood behind the refrigerated meat counter, slathering white bread with mayonnaise and mustard before layering the meat, and maybe a slice of cheese, topping it with lettuce, tomatoes, and onions. If they wanted to take it with them to the field, she would wrap the sandwich in wax paper, fastened with a toothpick, and put it in a brown paper bag with a dill pickle and a bag of potato chips. I watched her build the sandwiches, looking through the thick glass of the meat counter. She moved behind wavy lines on the other side of the glass, careful to follow the directions from the customer about what to include in the condiments. If Granddaddy was outside pumping gas, she would glance at the door from time to time, ready to greet anyone who might be approaching.

There were two men sitting across from me on a low bench, talking with my granddaddy as I watched Audrey stand, wipe her eyes, and walk toward the little white house beside the church. She lived in the little house with her mother, an older brother, and Pastor Jenkins. There was a

sign in front of the church listing the pastor's name and times of service—some of the letters faded away.

The men sitting with Granddaddy, drinking coffee, laughed, and I turned in the chair to face them, wondering what was so funny. Granddaddy was holding his pipe, stirring the tobacco with the small knife he carried in his pocket. His dog, Tiny, was rolled over on her back on the concrete floor. Tiny was following Granddaddy's request to roll over and show the men her operation. Tiny did this at least five times a day. The men would laugh and Granddaddy would always stir the tobacco in his pipe, grinning, trying to suppress his own giggle.

I wondered if he would figure out it was a courtesy laugh. Surely, the men who witnessed this dog trick several times a week, expected Tiny to do it. Then I wondered if Granddaddy's grin wasn't the sly look of someone who could manipulate the men to laughter. I suspect Tiny was the one laughing at us all.

Tiny was devoted to my granddaddy. She followed him wherever he went, her short legs running to keep up with the shuffling khaki pants in front of her. I'm not sure where my grandparents got Tiny. She was just always there, a little weenie dog, Chihuahua mix, red/brown, with silky ears framing her pointed nose. When my granddaddy died in the

late 1960's, Tiny went into mourning. We couldn't bear to watch it. She wouldn't eat or move around, and her eyes were sadder than sad. I remember my aunts and father talking. They believed Tiny was watching us, sad for us. Aunt Maxine asked Lilly, her housekeeper, if her family could take Tiny, and they did. Lilly reported she started eating and smiling. I believed that, but Lilly may have said it to ease our minds. My cousin, Judy, said it was true. Tiny was revived.

“Lamar, there is someone out there at the gas pumps,” my grandmother said from behind the cash register. She was ringing up the sandwich while one of the farmers selected a drink from the cooler. He pulled out a chocolate crème soda. Granddaddy put his pipe in his pocket, stuck his straw hat on his head, and walked out the door, the bell ringing as it opened and closed. I always wondered why his shirt failed to catch on fire from that pipe. Sometimes he would stuff it in his pants' pocket, trudging off to pump gas. I expected a fire. He bent to talk to the lady behind the wheel, then went to the other side of the car to pump the gas. He pulled a squeegee out of a bucket of water and cleaned her windshield.

The lady came inside while Granddaddy cleaned the windshields. “Good afternoon. How are you?” the lady said to my grandmother. She turned to me and said, “Are you still visiting, Gail? I thought you might have gone home by now. Isn’t it nice to have her for the summer, Lucille?” She didn’t expect me to answer. All these comments were directed to my grandmother. Children were to be seen and not heard. I didn’t mind. I didn’t have anything to contribute to the conversation, and I knew bullshit when I heard it. I wasn’t much on the wasted words of congeniality or forced smiles. I was often reprimanded for rolling my eyes or smirking. Grandmother would say, “Don’t do that. Your face will stick like that.” Then she would laugh.

“We enjoyed her visit,” my grandmother said. “She has to leave in another week or so. Sonny is coming to get her so she can go back to school. We’re going to miss her. It’s been fun.” My grandmother looked at me, smiling. Her smiles weren’t forced. They were genuine. I could tell by her eyes.

The lady, Mrs. Franklin, walked closer to my grandmother and started talking in a low voice. They were gossiping about something I couldn’t hear. I glanced down and Tiny was still rolled over on her back on the cool, concrete floor, waiting for Granddaddy to come back inside.

I turned around in the chair, back toward the window and watched my granddaddy at the gas pump.

He had on a pair of khaki pants and a short-sleeved, brown plaid, button down shirt. He was wiping sweat from the top of his head with a handkerchief he kept folded in his back pocket, holding his straw hat in his other hand. I noticed the heat was rippling up from the asphalt in pulsing waves. When I looked down the road, it looked like the road was covered with water, but Grandmother said that was a mirage. Mrs. Franklin's car was blocking my view of the church and Audrey's house. Tiny and I stayed put, enjoying the air conditioning.

Afternoons at the store were quiet. After the lunch crowd left, Granddaddy usually took Tiny into the living quarters behind the store and took off his shoes. He sat in a recliner, reading the paper until he fell asleep. He would get up about three p.m. and make coffee, glancing through the window over the potato bin as he filled the metal pot. That window, over the kitchen sink in the living quarters, was their view into the business.

Grandmother and I would sit in the store and watch her favorite soap operas, *The Doctors* and *Days of Our Lives* on a tiny television hidden under the counter. There was aluminum foil wrapped around the little antennae.

Grandmother would move them around until the picture on the screen didn't have wavy lines. I sat on a quilt on the floor and Grandmother sat on a red kitchen stool with pull-out steps. Bebe would curl up under the stool. Bebe could have been on the quilt with me. I tried to coax her several times, but she was my grandmother's dog, a little skittish, preferring adults to children.

"That Julie is such a sight," Grandmother would say about her favorite character on the soap opera. "She gets herself into some real messes." I didn't know what such a sight meant, but I think it meant Julie was trouble. She seemed to be the one running off with different men and getting all the other females on the show mad at her. I never considered these stories could be based on reality. They seemed too salacious to be true, but I would learn that the tales on these soap operas were nothing compared to the real lives of some people.

When the stories were over, we could have a soft drink from the cooler. Sometimes, stragglers would come in and out, but not very often. The next flux would be when people started heading home from work, then there would be nothing until the next morning.

The store was two rows of shelves and one aisle in front of the meat counter. The counter with the cash register was

on the wall directly opposite the meat counter. There was a telephone on the wall behind the cash register. The shelves there held the medicine.

“Well, this summer has gone by quick,” Grandmother said. “It seems like just yesterday we were living in town, and you and I were headed to El Paso to visit Bobbie. That seems like a long time ago now. Who would have thought that Lamar would have found this store out here in the middle of nowhere while we were gone?”

I was remembering the beginning of my summer—the annual trip with my family to visit my grandparents. My family stayed a week. Mother ironed our clothes, folded them and stacked them on the suitcases. We were instructed not to wear them; they were for vacation. My sister and I dug in drawers to find something suitable to wear up to the time to leave. Sometimes there were new outfits for the trip, but not often. There were three of us and that expense added up. Everything had to be ironed in those days. Well, it wasn’t a have-to-thing, but we were always pressed and starched. Wash and wear may have been more comfortable. Every grown woman I knew spent the better part of her day standing beside an ironing board, the steam and starch rising up to heat the room, adding the scent of fresh laundry to the house.

A road trip, no matter what the destination, required us to rise at four a.m. This was Daddy's decision. The drive to my grandparents' would take nine hours with a brief stop for lunch. Mother would have snacks, color books, and car bingo loaded in the back seat. There were no requirements for seat belts, and sometimes we would crawl onto the shelf under the rear window and lay in the sun.

I can't remember riding in very many cars on those road trips with air conditioning. By the time we arrived at our destination, in the heat of the afternoon, there were snack crumbs ground into our bare legs, our hair was plastered to our heads with sweat, and the crayons were soft and melting. My grandparents greeted us as if we looked fresh and rested, but I remembered us smelling like a kennel of wet puppies.

In my recollection, the house where my grandparents lived in town was large, but I can only recall two bedrooms. There was a large screened deck on the back covered with some kind of opaque plastic. It made strange noises flexing with the breeze. I think that's where the kids slept on cots.

Grandmother's little white poodle, Bebe, had her nails painted and a bow in her hair. She would run and hide under the bed when we arrived. Granddaddy called her a little sissy dog.

We swam at the city pool, picnicked in the big back yard, where we threw sheets over the clothes line to make tents, and we visited my daddy's cousins, but I can't recall that we did anything else. There wasn't anything to do in the town, which still had many streets that were unpaved, dusty red dirt, billowing up and into the yard when a car drove by. Grandmother always insisted the afternoons were too hot to go outside. Temperatures would be in the hundreds, and the dry heat took my breath away. We would sit in front of the window cooler at the kitchen table and play Old Maid or Go Fish—Bebe curled up on the floor under the table on the cool linoleum.

My grandparent's house, in town, was across the street from the First Methodist Church. It was a large, red brick building with a tall bell tower. The bells rang every Sunday. I would dress in the only dress I brought for going places and attend Sunday school there. My grandparents didn't attend church, but my father was a devout member of the First Methodist Church in our hometown. He was regular about attending services and served as an usher every Sunday.

There was an incentive to attend Sunday school in the form of pins at that Methodist Church. A person would receive a pin for the first year of perfect attendance. A bar was added for every year after that. Attendance in another

town was permitted if you brought a note from the teacher. I can't recall that anything else could excuse a person, so one miss and your chances of getting that next bar were gone. It never seemed that important to me, but Daddy always made a deal of it, so I think all of us pretty much went along with it. I wonder if any of my siblings still have those pins and bars.

The quest for those bars is how I met Audrey, because when my grandparents moved to the store in the country, that's when I would put on my one dress with my pin and bars pinned to my chest and walk across the road to explain that I needed a note to prove I attended Sunday school. Audrey's mother, Sister Jenkins, thought the pins were a wonderful idea. Audrey stared at them, stony-faced. I thought she felt about them the same as me—take it or leave it.

My parents and siblings left me at my grandparents for the summer and headed home. I loved it. I was an only child for the summer and although my grandparents didn't have many material things, they doted. Daddy would fly back at the end of the summer in his Cessna and pick me up. I can't remember what Granddaddy did for a living, but I think he did small jobs at the airport, filling up crop dusters and such. Between smoking and those harsh chemicals, I'm sure that's

what caused his lung cancer and emphysema. The little store was his chance to slow down.

There was a Lutheran church behind the store with a small parking lot. No parsonage sat beside it, so there weren't people there unless it was Wednesday afternoon, a bible study group, or Sunday morning. People from the church would usually stop by the store for milk, bread, or snacks. It was almost like a convenience store, but there were only a few items stocked, mostly things someone might not want to run into town for, aspirin, laxatives, chewing gum, candy, soft drinks, toilet paper, a few canned goods and the makings for sandwiches. There was no alcohol, like beer or anything like that. Cigarettes seemed to be a big seller.

My grandparents managed a store years earlier, before I was born, in my hometown. It was my Granddaddy's sister's store, Jack's Variety. They seemed to like retail and visiting with customers. I must have been four or five when they stopped running that store. I remember the penny candy apothecary jars lining the counter. We could choose candy at the end of our visit there. The floor boards creaked when people walked across them and it was not air conditioned. I'm not sure if the building still exists.

A couple of days after the family left, Grandmother, BeBe, and I headed for El Paso to visit Aunt Bobbie Sue and

her family. I remember riding in the passenger seat of Grandmother's white station wagon, chatting and playing I Spy. We stopped in Floydada to visit Aunt Dee, one of Granddaddy's sisters. She had an apple pie waiting for us when we arrived. I can't remember spending the night, but maybe we did, because it seemed like we would have been driving at night otherwise. I'm sure we didn't do that—drive at night.

That was the only time I had ever been to El Paso. I remember the yards were rocks, no grass. There was lightning every evening, but no rain. Grandmother called it heat lightning. I had a good time with my cousins and I recall Grandmother and Aunt Bobbie Sue giggling.

While we were in El Paso, Granddaddy called about finding a store in the country. I can't remember if it was a sale or rental, but he thought they should look into it. We talked on the way back about going to see the property and Grandmother told Aunt Dee about it when we stopped in Floydada again. There was no calling back and forth for information. Each phone call cost money, so phone calls were brief and few, especially long distance.

By the time we were back, Granddaddy had an appointment to view the property, and we were headed over hilly roads through red dirt fields, no trees.

The property was barren, one lone tree in the back of the store, an out-house belonging to the Lutheran church, and asphalt. The inside looked like a great place to play grocery store. Before the week was up, we were making trips with their belongings to set up shop. People started dropping in to tell my grandparents they were happy someone would be there running the store.

I saw Audrey across the road that afternoon. Grandmother said, “You’ll have to introduce yourself to that little girl, Gail. She looks to be about your age.”

I watched from a distance. Audrey swayed on a single swing from the only tree in the parsonage yard. Her brother rode a bicycle up and down the road in front of the house. Audrey’s brother’s name was Alex. He was not a happy person. I couldn’t blame him, stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no one his age to play with or visit.

Their father went off to work at a regular job every day. He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. Sister Jenkins was a housewife. She didn’t smile much, and when she did, it was not natural, a forced movement of her lips over her teeth. I thought she could have been pretty, but she looked a little tormented. Audrey wasn’t very affectionate with her, talking in quick unemotional responses back and forth. I thought they were a strange little family.

I had an idea what life in a parsonage would be like if your father was the preacher. They were supposed to be happy, smiling, stardust and rainbows painted on the walls, but Audrey's house seemed bleak. My grandparent's living quarters at the back of the store was homey and warm, filled with pleasant odors. Audrey's house was missing something. I couldn't say what.

Audrey walked to the store with me one afternoon on my grandmother's invitation to come have an ice cream bar. I had one every afternoon, but for Audrey it was a real treat. My grandmother set some chairs in the back yard and served us, pouring us cool drinks to go along with the ice cream. Audrey commented on this when my grandmother went back to the store. She said her parents would never do such a thing.

We talked about it briefly and I remember thinking the Jenkins didn't value their children. From what Audrey said, Pastor Jenkins seldom paid attention to his wife or the children. He came home, demanded supper, and stayed to himself. Audrey also admitted there were significant money problems, and her mother often cried, complaining there was no money to buy groceries or necessities. They seemed a little sad, not good role models for spiritual uplifting.

After our ice cream party, I walked Audrey back across the street and took her mother some banana bread my grandmother had made to share. Pastor Jenkins came home while we were standing in the kitchen. He became angry when he saw the bread and found out my grandmother sent it.

“We don’t need charity,” he said. “What are you telling the people around here? If you would just cook something, we would have plenty to eat. Here,” he tossed the bread, wrapped in plastic toward me. I left, not wanting to experience any more of his anger. I told my grandmother about the scene when I got home. She frowned and shook her head.

“I don’t guess I’ve been around him much to see such behavior. We will have this bread for breakfast in the morning.”

My grandmother made good banana bread. She also made the best cornbread I’ve ever eaten. She said it was the seasoned skillet that belonged to her grandmother. She gave me the recipe, but she said the key to the crunchy bottom was to melt the shortening in the skillet in a hot oven before adding it to the batter, then pouring the batter into the hot skillet. She made cornbread every night. We ate most of it with supper.

Before Granddaddy went to bed he would crumble the leftover cornbread into a tall glass and pour buttermilk over it and eat it with a spoon. He called it “kushkush”. I suppose it was good, but I never tried it. The buttermilk threw me off.

I slept in one of two twin beds in what should have been the dining room. In the evening the temperature cooled and the air was dry. Grandmother turned the water coolers off and raised the windows. I could look out the window over the red plowed fields behind the store. The sky was full of stars. I wondered about Audrey. She slept in a room with her older brother. I wondered what they whispered back and forth to each other in the dark about their parents and their lives.

The day Pastor Jenkins refused the banana bread was three days before I watched out the picture window, trying to catch a glimpse of Audrey. I decided her father didn’t go to work that day because the car had not been moved. If he had a different temperament, I might have headed across the street to see if she wanted to play, but I was a little worried about how he would react. I asked Grandmother if I could use the phone again to call Audrey and see if she wanted to come play with paper dolls. Audrey’s brother answered the phone.

“She’s not feeling very good,” Alex said.

“Is she too sick to come to the phone?” I said.

“Lemme see.”

“Hello,” Audrey said in a quiet voice.

“Are you sick, Audrey?” I asked. “I wanted to see if you wanted to come play paper dolls.”

“No, I’m not sick. Wait a minute.” I heard some commotion behind her and then heard her brother say something. At the same time, I noticed her father backing the car out of the drive and driving off. I stood behind the counter at the store, talking on the wall phone. I had a clear view of the church and parsonage.

“Okay, Gail. I can come over for a little while.”

As we sat with paper books full of dolls, clothing and accessories, Audrey admitted her mother was gone. She left shortly after the incident with the banana bread.

“She’s not really my mother,” Audrey said. “My brother and I have not seen our mother since I was a baby. She left too. We haven’t heard from her, and Daddy won’t let us talk to her parents. We call Sister Jenkins, ‘Mother’ because she is the only one we have ever known.” Audrey sat quietly, pressing the white paper tabs over the arms of the flimsy cardboard doll she held in her hands.

“There is something going on. I don’t know what it is. Alex and I think Dad is acting weird. We believe he leaves

every day, pretending that he is going to a job, but he doesn't work. He just goes off somewhere. There is no money. The preaching job doesn't pay anything, according to Mom. We just get to live in that little house. I don't know what's going on.

"Maybe she left because Alex and I are too much to take care of," Audrey said.

"I don't believe that," I said. "From what I've seen, you two pick up after yourselves, help with the dishes, and do your chores. I don't think it's you at all. I think maybe she was just not getting along with your daddy. He seems like he wouldn't be easy to live with."

"He's not," Audrey admitted. "He's moody and he goes off and doesn't let us know when he'll be back. Mom thought he was having an affair. I could hear them talking loud at night after we went to bed. She would cry, asking him what job he had, and he wouldn't answer. Sometimes, he unplugs the phone and takes it with him when he leaves. Do you know what an affair is?"

"I only know that from the soap operas I watch with my grandmother. I never thought people actually did that, especially a preacher. So, how long have you lived out here in the country in that house?" I asked.

“I’m in the fourth grade now, and I’ve been riding that bus from out here since the second grade, so almost two years. That’s longer than we have lived anywhere. We move around a lot, but Dad likes it out here. He may change his mind now that this store reopened. He liked it when we were the only ones here. Dad doesn’t like people to know our business. He smiles at the people who come to church, but he doesn’t want to see them otherwise. I think he just wants to make sure they drop something in the collection basket. He’s never been a preacher before. This is just something he does so we can live in that little house.”

Grandmother was ironing, just inside the screened door. I could smell the odor of fresh starch, wafting through the door on the heavy, humid steam of the iron. She mixed up blue starch in boiling water, stirring to dissolve it. She put Granddaddy’s pants and shirts in the pan of starch, then squeezed them out, rolling them up, and putting them in the refrigerator until she was ready to iron them. I never could figure out why all that was necessary, but there were always more clothes in the ice box than food. My mother did the same thing. I guess everyone in 1961 did that.

Later, Grandmother admitted she overheard our conversation, and she felt sorry for Audrey and her brother. I heard her telling Granddaddy that Sister Jenkins had left,

and there was talk among the farmer's wives about where she might have gone. I had not ever known a family with such problems.

I suppose I had been sheltered from such things. There was a strange feeling about the situation. It made me wonder about what it took to become a preacher. In my mind, the preacher's family should have been happy, carefree, better than normal. This family didn't resemble the normal I knew nor the normal my grandmother knew. There was something off about the whole thing.

It would take a storm from the heavens to reveal the truth, a storm full of angry, green clouds, cloaked in a sickening Sulphur odor.

I experienced such a storm that summer. A tornado, dropping from bilious, olive green clouds and picking up iron red dirt from the farmer's fields. The dirt was sucked into the air as I watched out the window before the lightning, thunder, and pouring rain arrived. The wind swirled, throwing things around in a circle, then spitting them out when the tentacles would retreat into the cloud, only to drop again and move across the field. I could hear my grandparents, calling me into the store and away from the windows.

“Come here, Gail,” Grandmother said in her squeaking voice, trying to make herself heard over the noise of the storm. She asked me to get into a wooden box she slid down the only aisle in the store. “Get away from that phone, Lamar,” she called out to my grandfather. Just as she said the words, there was a loud crack of thunder, and the phone began ringing. My grandfather gave a sheepish grin and moved away. The dogs paced and whined. Grandmother put them in the box with me, while she and my grandfather stared out the front of the store at the storm.

I heard my grandmother talk about the possibility of running to the storm shelter behind the church across the street. Granddaddy nixed that, saying it was too late to try to make it to the shelter. It was Saturday afternoon, and he was sure the Jenkins family was probably already there, waiting for the storm to pass.

When the rain slackened and the threat of the tornado was gone, I crawled out of the box with Tiny and Bebe. Water had seeped under the front door and Granddaddy was sweeping it out onto the parking lot, edging Tiny over to dry concrete.

Traffic began arriving, the electricity was off and people were moving around, trying to determine if any damage had been done. There was a story of one family, three miles down

the road, opening their storm cellar doors to find a den of snakes curled up in the bottom. I looked toward the Jenkin's house. Pastor Jenkins car was there, but I couldn't see movement. Other than a few branches down from the tree, there didn't seem to be any other damage.

When the electricity was finally restored, the Oklahoma station my grandparents relied on for weather and news maintained a storm warning until further notice. According to my grandmother, the weather systems responsible for such violent weather seldom held just one tornado. These systems were often followed until they moved out of the area.

"This is the storm season," Grandmother said. "Usually the spring and the early fall is when we get this bad weather. There will be a string of these storms now until it starts getting cooler."

I kept watching the road, looking for any sign that Audrey or Alex were stirring. I eventually saw Pastor Jenkins get in the car and drive away. I telephoned the parsonage and Audrey answered. "Did you go down into the storm cellar earlier?" I asked, excited to hear what that might have been like. I imagined people could hear the wind and rain swirling above their heads while they were sitting, waiting for the racket to stop.

“No, Dad said we didn’t need to use the shelter,” Audrey said. “Alex and I begged when it got so scary, but he said no. We were huddled in that little hallway between our bedrooms, scared. Dad was scared too, but he refused to use the shelter. That made no sense to me.”

“Have you heard from your mom?” I said, wondering if her mother might have called to check on them.

“No, Dad said to forget about her because we wouldn’t be seeing her again. I don’t know what’s going on. He won’t talk about it. He gets upset every time we bring it up. I wish I had a grandmother alive, I’d go live with her and not worry about all of his problems.”

The following day, a sheriff’s deputy stopped in the store for a soda. He took his hat off and sat in one of the theater seats. He said he was driving around to see if there was damage from the storms. The deputy asked my grandmother about Sister Jenkins. He said her brother reported her missing. He wanted to know when the last time my grandmother had seen her.

It turned out, I was the last person in our household who saw Sister Jenkins, the day of the banana bread incident. The deputy asked me to repeat what happened, so I did. I also recalled going to Sunday school the day after the tornado. There was no one there to give me a note for the bars I could

earn for my pin. I decided that day, it might not be that important. I suspected Sister Jenkins had bigger problems than my perfect attendance pin.

After that Sunday, Pastor Jenkins wasn't around much, in fact, Audrey and Alex were living in the house by themselves. His car was often gone over night. My grandmother began to get worried about them. A group of women from the church took them food and told them to call if they had any problems. The kids didn't want to leave the house, in case their father returned, letting them know they would be moving or that he found their mother.

Audrey was preoccupied, no fun as a playmate. She stared off into the distance and wouldn't talk about her thoughts. I couldn't breach the barrier she put up to keep people out. Alex sat by the phone, waiting for Sister Jenkins or the pastor to call and let them know everything would be okay. But Audrey must have had a feeling that things wouldn't be okay. She had already gone to the recesses of her mind, the dark corners where she knew nothing would ever be okay again.

The following Friday we went to town for a barbecue with Granddaddy's nephew, Aunt Dee's son, Buck. He and Ginny planned a dinner to celebrate their son, Jimmy going off to college. The weather was threatening, but Ginny was

determined they would celebrate that evening. We left Bebe and Tiny closed up in the kitchen, a room where they would be safe from water or wind. The weather was pleasant during the week, but the weekend predictions were full of possibilities for tornadoes. I watched as Granddaddy turned the sign on the door to “Closed”, before he locked the doors and got into the truck to drive us to town.

We barely beat the storm to the city limits. There were garbage cans, pieces of tin roofs and other debris swirling in the air when we reached Buck and Ginny’s. We were some of the few guests who braved the storm. They were hunkered in the den, sitting without electricity. Ginny was not happy, but there were food and drinks, and everyone was making the best of the situation. The violent weather continued throughout the night. Other guests left, but Buck insisted we spend the night. I remember the adults played cards at a table lit by a Coleman lantern. I had a quilt and pillow, hidden by the back of the sofa where I was to sleep.

I’m sure my grandmother assumed I was asleep. She began telling Buck and Ginny about Pastor Jenkins and the troubling visit by the Sheriff’s deputy. Ginny was aware of Pastor Jenkins’ reputation as a philanderer. Women in her bridge group knew the woman he was cheating with, a thirty year old wife with two children. The couple had rented a

cabin for the summer out by the reservoir. Ginny suspected that is where he was staying during his recent absences from his own children. The woman's husband learned of the affair and was threatening divorce. Ginny didn't know Sister Jenkins. She said the rumor was, when they lived in town, Mr. Jenkins did not allow her out of the house.

"According to my sources," Ginny said. "Sister Jenkins was none the wiser to his adultery. She thought he was working long hours, but Ruby Stiles says that man hasn't held a job in several years. He's damn lucky that little congregation out by you allows them to live in that house beside the church. Ruby also said there was some question as to the whereabouts of those Jenkins kids' mama. No one has seen or heard from her since that little girl was an infant. There's something fishy about that.

"You know, before they moved out to that parsonage, Jared Jenkins was a deputy here in town. He only worked there for four months. Right after he married his current wife he got on with the department. Something happened. It was all hush hush. Ruby couldn't even find out what it was. They slipped out of town, quiet like, and he started preaching out there by you all. Someone in that congregation is looking out for him. There is a story there, I'll guarantee you," Ginny said.

Drama, I thought. The adults in Audrey's life were messing her up. It made me angry to think about it. She was probably out in that little frame house, she and Alex alone with no electricity while their father made a mess of his life. I was snuggled under a quilt on Aunt Ginny's sofa, comfortable, listening to gossip.

The following morning, Jimmy made us breakfast on Ginny's fancy slide out stove. When it was not in use, the burners slid up under a stainless steel counter. I haven't seen a stove like that since then. We had sausage and pancakes. There were still a few clouds, but the threat of tornadoes was past.

Heading down the farm to market road back to the store, we were passed by two official cars with their lights flashing. The closer we came to the intersection, the more cars and lights we saw. "What in the world is going on?" Grandmother said. "Lamar are they at the store or across the street?"

"I believe they're across the street, Lucille. There's Leonard Wilke." Granddaddy pulled up beside Mr. Wilke and rolled down the window. "What's going on Lenny?"

"Well, seems those kids over at the parsonage decided to use the storm shelter last evening. They climbed down in there in the dark, noticing a horrific odor. They must have

sat huddled together for most of the night and fell asleep. Early this morning, that boy, I believe his name is Alex, recalled where the matches and lantern were kept. He reckoned there was a dead rat or something in there. When he got the lantern lit, he discovered their mother, Sister Jenkins. They got people over there talking to those kids now. Can you imagine, Lamar?”

“No, no I can’t. Where’s their daddy, Pastor Jenkins?” Granddaddy asked.

“They have an All-Points Bulletin out for that character. Sister Jenkins was bludgeoned to death, and he’s the prime suspect. Even the kids believe he did it,” Mr. Wilke said.

My grandmother sat quietly, listening, motioning to my granddaddy not to talk so freely in front of me, but I was bound to ask, and they were bound to make something up to try to make it sound okay. There was nothing they could say that would make it sound okay, or take my mind away from Audrey.

Two days later, Daddy arrived to pick me up and fly me back home. The parsonage was shut up and Audrey and Alex were taken to a foster home, according to my grandmother. She told my Daddy an abbreviated version of the drama that occurred across the street. I wondered if that would pass as an excuse for me failing to get the note from the Sunday

school teacher. I would try it out and see. I suspect he didn't want me standing up in front of the Sunday school class to explain what happened to the teacher.

It wasn't long before we were planning for a storm ourselves. Hurricane Carla was heading across the Gulf of Mexico, heading right for us. I remember days of talk about how powerful the storm could grow.

My parents decided the five of us would go to my aunt's house, a more substantial structure than the oil field camp building we lived in, built on pier and beams. My maternal grandparents joined us there. The adults played dominoes and cards while the storm raged outside, pounding against the house. I crawled under a throw on one of the many beds in my cousin's dormitory of a room, thinking of Audrey and the storm we endured before I left my grandparent's store.

We left my aunt's home and drove through flooded streets with bright sky above us. There was no electricity in town. Large utility trucks were staged in the parking lot of the grocery store, but they weren't for us. They were headed to Corpus Christi, a larger city apparently needing more assistance.

What we didn't know was we were directly in the middle of the thirty mile wide eye of the storm, the calm middle, where birds fly and all is well. It wasn't until we were home,

our bags unloaded, and the food we hauled to Aunt Maxine's in an ice chest was placed in the kitchen, that we realized there was more to come. The wind began to howl, another round of whistling, swishing noises plundering the windows. The little frame house swayed and moaned. It went on through the night, swirling noises were all we had. There was no light to illuminate the trees bending or the waters beginning to pool and bog. We were hostage to the turbulent atmosphere.

By mid-day the calm arrived again. We stepped out into the humidity, mud, debris, and leaves scattered everywhere. We drove to the park where the river was roaring out of its banks, flooding the houses in low lying areas. Those families had been evacuated in the middle of the storm, ushered out with the few items they could carry. We viewed the devastation then went home to clean up our own property and collect things to take to the flood victims.

By evening, we were tired and dirty. We took sponge baths, dipping water from the bathtub we filled before the storm.

I don't remember how many days we were out of school, but it was a few. I sat in class, fourth grade, distracted, thinking of the people out of their homes due to the storm, thinking of Audrey and her brother, wondering where they

were living. Did Pastor Jenkins go to jail? Did they ever find him after the storm? I think these worries kept me from dealing with long division.

When I reflect on that summer, the summer of storms, I have fond memories of the store, the drive to El Paso with my grandmother, Tiny doing tricks for Granddaddy, playing paper dolls with Audrey, eating that wonderful cornbread, and watching Granddaddy drink his morning coffee from the saucer rather than the cup.

I actually knew someone who had been murdered. The violence of the atmosphere could be matched by the violence and instability of the people, not all of the time, not all of them, but they were there, the bad guys, and what I knew for sure was they masqueraded as the good guys sometimes.

END

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Summer of Storms*

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what I can improve. I would appreciate any
comments you are willing to share. Thank
you.

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