

WHAT WAS THAT?

“Yes,” I said as I pumped my arm in the air in emphasis because now I could go visit Karin.

Mom and dad had finally pulled from the driveway going to southern Ohio. I watched the white Ford Fairlane as it made its way along the city street until it faded from view.

It was going to be a long walk because Karin lives on West 44th Street and I live on West 11th, but what the heck. Mom and dad were gone and I had a couple of hours to get there before it would even begin to get dark.

I looked up at the sky and noticed rapidly moving clouds. I should be able to get there before it rains, I reasoned, if it rains at all. Cleveland being located on the shores of Lake Erie sometimes had to endure rapidly changing lake-effect weather, but that usually happened in the winter time when mountains of snow would cascade down on the city hiding all of its blemishes under a pristine blanket of white fluff.

I walked and walked, glancing at the sky as it seemed to be changing colors from gray to a bright orange to yellow and back to gray. The clouds were stacking upon each other. The wind began to blow and I saw the heavily leaved limbs of the trees nearly touching the ground.

I didn't think it was supposed to rain, I thought as I held my eyes to the sky.

I was not a gazelle so I wasn't surprised to find myself struggling to maintain my balance on the cracked sidewalk.

I'm so clumsy, I must have tripped on a crack, I thought, as I felt myself redden with embarrassment. I looked around me but I saw no one who might have seen me trip and almost fall on my face.

I noticed no one outside milling around which I thought was odd.

There was absolutely no one out here. What is going on? I wondered as I turned my body a complete three hundred sixty degrees looking for people.

I continued to walk without any thought that I might be headed for trouble.

Up ahead I could see the sidewalks clearing of people who were running for cover into their houses. *Cover from what? What was happening?*

I knew I must continue to walk. I was only about half way to Karin's house so deciding to turn around and head back home wasn't an option. Besides, the clouds were building up and changing colors in both directions. There was no escaping whatever temper tantrum Mother Nature was deciding to pull right now.

The thunder started. That rumble explained the light show that had been taking place behind the clouds.

I started counting, 1-1000, 2-1000, 3-1000, 4-1000, 5-1000 - that was supposed to tell me how many miles away the actual storm was.

I stopped walking so I could hear another rumble start up.

1-1000, 2-1000, 3-1000, 4-1000 – *it was almost here,* I thought, as I looked around me for shelter. *Trees - don't stand under the trees, don't stand near the metal fence, where could I go to get shelter?*

Most of the houses in the area where I was walking were abandoned because the City of Cleveland in all of its power and glory were tearing down the neighborhoods that I had grown up

in and building freeways. The structures standing on each side of the road were physically unsafe, but they were also dangerous in other ways. Anybody could be hidden inside them in the darkness waiting to spring out at some poor unsuspecting souls to rob or kill them where they stood. I didn't want to be one of those poor unsuspecting souls.

I continued to walk.

I saw the trees swaying back and forth furiously, angrily, like they were trying to shake every leaf off of their mighty limbs. One tree was bent over so far that I thought it would break. Instead, the mighty tree popped back up and continued to try to shake itself free of the wind.

Snap, crack, boom!

I spun myself around to see a huge tree I had walked passed moments before fall across the street crushing everything in its path.

“Oh, God, where can I go?” I screamed as I started running.

Tree trash and debris started blowing about in front of me. I could hear wood cracking and breaking behind me. I was afraid to look back to see what was being destroyed. It really didn't sound like the tree I had heard previously. I knew it was a house being blown apart by that terrific force of the wind as it traveled along the same street I was traveling on.

I finally reached West 30th street. Fourteen more blocks, that's all I needed to go to get to the safety of Karin's house.

I hadn't asked dad and mom to drop me off at Karin's house as they left town, because I knew the answer would have been “no”.

Dad always told me that I don't need to go bothering those people. He would add with emphasis that I should stay home or he was going to make me go with them the next time.

I was thirteen years old. I didn't need a baby-sitter and I surely didn't want to go on that long drive and be bored out of my mind for two days. There was no television or anything to do when we went there to check on the house that mom and dad planned to retire to some day.

Of course, my older brother Lee was supposed to keep an eye on me and see that I didn't get into trouble, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. He actually disappeared from the landscape to go hang out with friends before dad and mom pulled out of the driveway.

I didn't want to be alone. I was afraid of being alone. So – I was going to visit Karin.

I couldn't stand it any more. I had to look behind me. The noise was getting louder and louder with the sounds of lumber crashing against the pavement or perhaps against other houses.

My eyes stared in terror at what I was seeing. I continued to walk in the direction opposite of where I was seeing the destruction with my head turned as far around on my shoulders as my neck would allow.

There was a roof from a house stationed in the middle of the street. The shingles were still in tact. It looked as if the wind had slid its mighty fingers beneath the eaves, gently lifting it up, and carefully setting it down on its new location. I didn't see the structure from which it has been removed.

I saw doors and windows and gutters and anything and everything that could be pulled away from its moorings by the wind, strewn on the ground next to and in front of the roof. It looked as if pieces of glass were spinning around in the wind cutting into and slicing all objects in their path.

I snapped my head around to see that there wasn't any flying glass in front of me. I tried to run faster. I had to get away from this destruction that might lead to my death.

How was I going to explain that I was sliced to ribbons on West 31st Street when I was supposed to be on West 11th Street? What a stupid question, I would be dead. I wouldn't have to explain anything. Mom and dad would feel really sorry that they had ever trusted me. Would they get into trouble for leaving me at home while they went out of town?

The sound, what was that sound?

It sounded like a freight train. I was not walking close to any railroad tracks.

What was that?

I looked up and I saw what appeared to be a huge spinning top dipping its tail down to the ground.

“A tornado!” I cried as I tried to run faster to get away from the tail that was dancing around just behind me.

The rain that had only been wind driven splashes suddenly came down with such a force that I covered my head with my arms to keep that damage down to a minimum. I needed to look up to find a street sign but I was afraid the rain would put out my eyes.

My run was just a walk as I forced myself forward against the wind that was now in front of me. I could feel small pieces of debris flying against me banging me everywhere.

Then it stopped, it was quiet. No wind was blowing, actually the sun was trying to shine.

I pulled my arms down to my sides and stood still with my mouth hanging open.

There was absolutely no movement going on around me.

I glanced at the street sign, West 44th Street, was displayed in bright white letters against a Christmas green background.

The silence was eerie. I knew I had to get to Karin's house fast, really fast.

Not much further, I prayed as I tried to encourage myself to press on to the safety and warmth of Karin's family and house.

I saw a tree that had fallen across West 44th Street exposing its gigantic roots to the air. I made my way around the tree and walked on to the beckoning safety.

There it is! I shouted as I started running again.

I reached the front porch and started banging on the front door.

"Ellen, where did you come from?" asked Karin's mom as she opened the door wide enough for me to enter into the living room.

"I walked. I didn't know there was a tornado coming. Can I stay here for a while?" I said as I sobbed in her arms.

"Sure, sure, come on in. Karin's not here. She went to stay with her brother. You should have called, you know."

"I don't have a telephone."

"I'll get you a towel. You can sit here and dry off for a while. After all of the wind settles down, I'll have the mister drive you home."

"Thanks," I said softly.

I wasn't really that disappointed when I didn't find Karin at home. It wasn't specifically her company I was seeking. I was seeking the comfort and safety of her home that was filled with the warmth of a family.

I didn't want to be alone. I was afraid to be alone.