

Bride of the Tornado
By James Kennedy
On sale: August 22, 2023

THE TORNADO KILLER

They called it Tornado Day but none of us knew what it was about. Mom and Dad wouldn't tell us. Neither would our teachers.

I never remembered having a Tornado Day before and neither did Cecilia or any of our friends or anyone at school.

All that week leading up to Tornado Day, Mom and Dad didn't let us eat much. I wasn't even supposed to feed Nikki. Breakfast was, like, one piece of dry toast. Lunch was a hard-boiled egg. Dinner was nothing. Late one night Cecilia and I were so starving we snuck some blueberry Pop-Tarts to eat in her bedroom, but they tasted wrong. I felt guilty somehow and ended up throwing most of mine out.

I fed Nikki anyway.

All that week we weren't allowed to watch TV. We couldn't even listen to the radio. Dad unplugged everything—the VCR, the stereo, the microwave, the alarm clocks, all the way down to the toaster and the coffee maker. He and Mom took the batteries out of the flashlights, the boom box, my Walkman, and even old toys Cecilia and I hadn't touched in years. They unscrewed the light bulbs and put them in a box along with the batteries. The refrigerator was cleared out.

Mom and Dad stopped talking to us. It was the same with everyone else's parents. Someone said it's what you had to do to prepare. Prepare for what?

Nobody would tell us.

A killer was coming to town.

That's what we heard from the other kids. We were all scared. We asked, is the killer coming for us?

The adults wouldn't say.

The day before Tornado Day all the stores closed early. We didn't have to go to school.

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The house was quiet except for the patter of rain and Nikki meowing in the kitchen.

It wasn't much of a holiday.



Growing up, when there were tornadoes, Mom and Dad and Cecilia and I would all run down to the basement with candles and food grabbed from the kitchen, and when the electricity blacked out we'd light the candles and set them all around the cold gray basement until it flared up like a cathedral. The candles pushed back the darkness and made it dance, colors multiplied, became richer and warmer. We'd hear the tornado raging outside, pounding at the doors and windows, shrieking like it was mad at us personally, but I felt safe, locked down in the concrete basement, cozy and cared for, but just dangerous enough for me to feel a thrill.

I liked the tornadoes because they forced Cecilia and Mom and Dad and me to hang out together. We played Monopoly and Clue, we listened to our little transistor radio, Dad told funny stories—I wanted more tornadoes, more thunderstorms, because I wanted us to be close like this all the time.

But when the lights flickered back on, when the all-clear siren sounded, Mom and Dad would get up from our game too quickly, “Finally!” they'd say; Cecilia, too, would bolt up the stairs, and then I would be left alone on the basement's concrete floor with the abandoned game, surrounded by old exercise equipment and Halloween costumes and yellowing paperbacks, feeling a little disappointed because it was finally my turn and nobody wanted to play anymore.



It was still dark outside when Mom woke us up. It was a raw April morning, black and wet. Drizzle and fog and low, heavy clouds.

It was four a.m. Way too early. The electricity was back on, but after a week without it the light from the hallway looked jarring on the carpet, it cut too bright and hard through the dark. I stayed under my blankets. I had secretly put new batteries in my Walkman and it was under my pillow and the headphones were still on my ears. I'd fallen asleep with it on again. Nikki was awake but she was just staring at me with her yellow slit eyes. I

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stroked her and she purred but I already knew it was going to be a bad morning. Rushing my shower while Mom banged on the door. The bathroom stinking of Cecilia's toxic hair spray. Everyone fighting.

A normal day.

Not normal, though. Usually, Dad was already off to work before any of us woke up—I never saw him in the morning, I'd just come into the kitchen and see his bowl of milky cereal dregs in the sink, which always depressed me for some reason. But this morning was wrong, everyone's schedules collided. Dad was clunking around in the kitchen, blinking at us like he was still half asleep. Mom usually slept in, but this morning she was up and ordering us around, looking frazzled in her ratty blue robe and huge curlers.

She'd laid out two dresses for Cecilia and me to wear to school for Tornado Day. I'd never seen these weird dresses before. They were old-fashioned flower-print things with puffy sleeves and lace trim. Like something a pioneer girl would wear in an old movie.

Cecilia slammed her bedroom door. There was no way she'd wear that crappy dress to school, she shouted at Mom. Everyone would make fun of her, she said.

I didn't want to wear mine either. The dresses smelled sour, like they'd been boxed up somewhere for a long time. But I put it on anyway. I cleaned out Nikki's litter box as Mom and Cecilia yelled at each other. I kind of hated myself for it, but whenever Cecilia fought with Mom, something in me wanted to be really good, to balance the family out.

Cecilia won. Mom said go ahead—fine, don't wear the dress! But you'll be sorry! Now I was the only one wearing an ugly, stale-smelling dress but the bus was already pulling past our house, way too early. There wasn't time for breakfast, not even to grab a bite on the way out. Cecilia and I had to run to the corner to catch up with the bus. We got on and its doors hissed shut.

The morning was still as dark as night.

It turned out everyone had dressed up for school that day. All the boys wore awkward suits and all the girls wore old-fashioned dresses. Cecilia stuck out in her normal

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jeans and her pink sweater. She went to the girls' bathroom and stayed there. Mr. McAllister asked Mrs. Bindley to go in and get her. Some of the popular girls were snickering at Cecilia. I happened to be standing near them when Mrs. Bindley came out of the bathroom, pushing Cecilia along by her elbow.

As they walked past us Cecilia said to me, "You just keep on laughing."

We were going to meet the tornado killer.

What tornado killer? None of us knew about any tornado killer. That's how you know he's a good tornado killer, the teachers said— when's the last time you even saw a tornado? We had to admit, not since we were little. But, we said, you always heard about tornadoes in other towns! Exactly, the teachers said. But not here. Would we recognize the tornado killer? They said no, it's against the law for the tornado killer to actually come into town. He does his work outside city limits. But today is a special occasion, they said. Today is Tornado Day.

Some of the younger kids were scared. They begged their teachers, please, please, no, we don't want to meet the tornado killer.

Everyone meets the tornado killer, was the firm reply.