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**"Heavenly Father!" "I love you all!" "I love everyone!" "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" "I love all of you!"**

**On May 22, a three-quarter-mile-wide tornado carved a six-mile-long path through Joplin, Missouri, killing 160. Unable to escape, two dozen strangers sought shelter in a gas station's walk-in cooler while the funnel ripped apart every building, car, and living thing around. This is their story.**

**By Luke Dittrich, *Esquire* Magazine, Sep 22, 2011**



Tornadovideo.net/AP Photo

**Ruben**

As he rushes from the rear to the front of the store, Ruben Carter leans on the half-moon cash-register island with his left hand, using the island as a sort of crutch and springboard to propel himself along. He could cover the distance without support, but his cerebral palsy, the damage to the parts of his brain that control his coordination and balance, would make him do so with his usual stiff plod, and there is no time for that. When he reaches the door, he unlocks it, then pushes forward. Since he doesn't have much authority over the muscles of his arms, he pushes this door like he pushes most doors, shoving with the weight and strength of his entire body. The accelerating wind shoves back, but Ruben wins out. A father and three children stagger through the opening, slipping and almost falling on the wet tiles. When Ruben stops leaning into the door, the wind slams it shut.

Except for the wan and skittery illumination of a few cell-phone screens and the intermittent flash of lightning, the inside of the store is very dark. The power went out several minutes ago, and though the sun should still be shining, the storm has blotted it out. Ruben orders the newcomers to join the others crouched against the back wall, using words that, in another context, could have been the lyrics to a disco song.

"Everybody back, back, back, way back!" he says. "Everybody get down, all on the ground!"



Portraits by Matt Eich  
**Ruben Carter. He plans to resume work at the Fastrip when it reopens.**

He's wearing clothes that conform to the Fastrip employee dress code: black shoes, khaki slacks, and a green polo shirt with a little name tag pinned onto it. The pants and shoes belong to him. The polo shirt belongs to Grace Energy, the parent company that owns the Fastrip chain. Every week, a $1.25 uniform fee is deducted from his paycheck. He once calculated that his immediate supervisor, who has been working at Fastrip for thirteen years, had spent more than $800 for the privilege of wearing her polo shirt. Ruben has been working at Fastrip for only seven months, but the uniform fee is among the many irritations that make him feel as though he's been here seven months too long.

Last year, he was living a thousand miles away, in Salt Lake City, had a solid job working for the state of Utah. Foster-care case management. He helped get kids back home to their parents, or, if their parents were incapable of parenting, he helped them find new ones. Ruben majored in psychology in college, has a half-completed master's degree in counseling, and though foster-care case management is hard, draining work and burns a lot of people out, he was good at it, and had been doing it for six years. Then one morning he got a big speeding ticket, 75 in a 25-mile-per-hour zone. No excuse, really: Sometimes he just likes to move fast. He couldn't scrape up the money to cover the $400 fine, so the DMV suspended his license, which resulted in an automatic dismissal from his job with the state. He'd been living paycheck to paycheck, and with his job gone, he didn't have enough money to cover rent. He left Utah last July, came back home to Missouri, where he was born. He's applied for dozens of new jobs since getting here, casting a wide net, hitting up everything from video stores to child protective services. Fastrip is still the only place that's called him back.

So he's thirty-five years old, living with his parents, working at a gas-station convenience store. He's usually not the self-pitying type, really, but it's pretty much a literal fact that he's way overqualified for this gig. Sometimes he finds himself wondering just what the hell he's doing here. In his darker moments, the self-pity can turn into a sort of all-purpose irritability directed at humanity in general. Like when a customer complains that she can't pay at the pump and Ruben has to go out and demonstrate that you have to slide the credit card into the credit-card reader, not the receipt dispenser. Or, just about a quarter-hour ago, right after the tornado siren began to blare, when one of his regulars rushed in to stock up on Marlboro Special Blend Gold 100's. Ruben smokes, understands the craving, but still: There's a tornado warning, people! Like most folks who've spent any time in this town, he knows that almost all of these sirens are false alarms, and he expects that this one is as well, but he also knows that even a bad thunderstorm in Joplin can easily generate dangerous, glass-shattering winds. Everyone should know that. But just a couple minutes ago, when it was clearly getting really bad outside, Ruben still had to tell some members of the burgeoning crowd inside his store to move away from the big sheet-glass windows that look out onto the parking lot, where rain was falling nearly horizontally and the high-tensile-steel canopies over the gas pumps were beginning to flap vaguely up and down like giant wings.

What the hell is Ruben Carter doing here, renting a polo shirt, working this dead-end job, spewing common sense into a vacuum?

That's not the important question right now.

Ruben stands in the darkness, in front of two dozen people huddled together against a wall covered with little bags of cheap candy and nuts, a wall that he hopes is far enough away from the windows to provide them shelter from the storm. A strange sound, a sort of piercing roar, has been building in the background for a while, and now seems much louder, much closer.

"Is that the tornado?" a woman asks. "Is that what that roar is?"

Which isn't the important question, either, since its answer, in just a few moments, will become blindingly, terribly obvious.

The important question is what is Ruben Carter going to do next.



**From left: Rick, Abby, Hannah, and Jonah Ward. Rick's apartment was completely leveled by the tornado.**

**Rick and Jonah and Abby and Hannah**

"Is pink bad?" Hannah Ward shoots off the text to her friend Cindy, who's a bit of a weather geek. It's late Sunday afternoon, and Hannah's dad, Rick, is in his easy chair, dozing off to televised golf, his favorite soporific. A tornado warning is scrolling across the bottom of the screen, and in the lower-left-hand corner there's a Doppler radar image of southwest Missouri. The radar shows an amorphous, multicolored blob moving slowly from west to east. The blob is mostly blue and green and red and orange. Occasionally, however, right in the middle of the blob, in the part that seems to be heading directly toward Joplin, Hannah has been noticing flashes of hot pink.

Her phone vibrates, and she looks down and reads Cindy's response.

"Yes," it says. "Pink is very bad."

Hannah is sixteen years old. She and her younger siblings, fifteen-year-old Jonah and nine-year-old Abby, arrived in Joplin on Thursday, three days ago. The plan is to stay here, at their dad's place, for a monthlong visit, and then go back home to Wellington, Kansas, to their mom's place. For the first six years after the split, they did things the other way around, with their primary residence at their dad's. But their dad has started going back to school, studying drafting and design at Missouri Southern State University, and now they're trying a new arrangement: a full month in the summer here with him, then just one weekend a month during the school year. It's been a good visit so far, playing epic games of Settlers of Catan, watching all three hours and fifteen minutes of *The Green Mile* on DVD, trying to teach Abby how to solve sudoku puzzles, gorging themselves on Rick's familiar goulash...

Hannah looks out the window of the second-floor apartment. It's sunny and cloudless, just like it's been all day. Jonah is in the next room with Abby, trying to get her down for a nap.

One of the things about kids who grow up shuttling between two different households, between two different authority figures, is sometimes they can become pretty self-sufficient, and a bit precocious about exercising their own authority and trusting their own instincts.

Hannah takes another look at the blob on the screen, with its coruscating flashes of pink.

"Dad," she says, loudly and firmly enough to rouse him from his golf-induced stupor. "We've got to go."

And so they go, piling into Rick's '98 Pontiac Grand Prix just as a light rain begins to fall, heading east out of the Hampshire Terrace apartment complex, down Twentieth Street, planning to drive to their uncle Dave's house, out of town. Uncle Dave has a basement.

Ten minutes later, after the storm overtakes them, after they decide they need to find immediate shelter somewhere, anywhere, after they pull into the parking lot of the Fastrip at the corner of Twentieth and Duquesne, after they bolt through the buffeting winds and pound on the glass door, after the terrible moments that elapse before Ruben Carter materializes out of the darkness on the other side of the glass and lets them in, after they rush inside onto the slippery tiles, after they crouch down with all the other refugees against the back wall — after all of that, Hannah, being the sixteen-year-old girl that she is, realizes with a sudden gut-roiling jolt of loss and disconnection that she doesn't know where her cell phone is. She wonders if it's back at her dad's apartment.

By the time this thought hits her, her dad's apartment has already ceased to exist.



**Carl and Jennifer and Trace and Cory**

The Fastrip is just down the street from their home, so that's a big part of its appeal, but what really hooked the Hennings on the place, what keeps them coming back two, three, four times a day, is the soda. The price of it. Cheapest in town. Seventy-five cents for a refill. And if you bring your own cup, even the first fill-up of the day is considered a refill. Doesn't matter the size of the cup. Carl uses a mammoth sixty-four-ounce insulated one he purchased years ago from Fastrip's biggest local competitor, Kum & Go, which charges $1.29 (!) for refills. His wife, Jennifer, has a similar Kum & Go cup, but only half the size. She drinks Coke and Carl drinks Mountain Dew. And the boys? Fifteen-year-old Cory's a Fanta man, and eleven-year-old Trace is currently on a Dr. Pepper kick.

They know all the employees, of course. Spacey, good-natured Jake, who works the morning shift, and Diane, the manager, energetic as a coiled spring, who usually works the same shift but spends a lot of time in the back office. They know Ruben best, have even become Facebook friends with him. He's a good listener, always seems interested in what's going on in their lives, which means, especially this time of year, that he spends a lot of time listening to them talk about Little League baseball. The boys are fanatical about it, and Carl and Jennifer are probably even more so. They're both members of the board of Joplin South Little League, which means they've always got lots of baseball-related business to attend to on top of the games themselves, which have recently been numbering ten or eleven a week. It's a lot of work, a lot of driving, a lot of cheering, a lot of laundry, a lot of fun.

Both boys played in tournaments earlier today. Trace's team, the Joplin Sliders, won one and lost one against the Lamar Tigers. Cory's team, the Joplin Miners, played only once, losing to the Black Sox. It was bright and clear but windy, and the wind made hitting and catching extra challenging. You could smack a ball straight up and it would trace a curve like the St. Louis Arch.

  
(Aerial) GeoEye; (Detail) MJ Harden  
**The tornado touched down just outside the western edge of Joplin at approximately 5:41 p.m., then moved east for more than six miles, destroying one third of the city's buildings and killing 160. Based on the damage left in the tornado's wake, the National Weather Service labeled it with its highest possible designation — EF-5 — which means that it had wind speeds of at least 200 miles per hour. The rubble at the bottom of the inset is where the Fastrip stood. The two piles above it are where the gas pumps were located.**

Not long after they got home from Trace's second game, the Hennings found themselves standing in their living room, staring at their television. The television was tuned to the local news on KSNF, channel 16, and KSNF was streaming a live feed from its tower cam. The feed showed something gray and dark approaching Joplin from the west. The image was a bit blurry and rain spattered. The thing moving toward the city looked almost a mile wide, and there were occasional bright flashes of light on its periphery. At first the news anchors were saying that the flashes might be lightning. Perhaps whatever they were looking at was just a huge thunderstorm. But then the flashes continued, one after another, a regular rhythm almost, and the anchors finally recognized what was causing them: power lines rupturing. They stopped sounding like anchors then. They began talking over one another in an emotional jumble, as though speaking directly to whatever friends or acquaintances or loved ones were within digital earshot of their voices.

"Take cover!" one said.

"Yes, please!" said the other.

"Right now!"

"Please do!"

"I'm telling you to take cover!"

"Take cover!"

"Right now!"

The Hennings live in an A-frame, lots of glass, no basement.

They've lived there together for six years, started dating four years before that, back when Jennifer was Carl's boss at a McDonald's in the local Walmart. She's thirty-six and Carl's twenty-seven. The boys are from her previous marriage. Though the Hennings no longer work together — Carl's now a forklift operator, Jennifer a medical assistant — sometimes, when they have to make a decision, their old boss-employee dynamic flares up. But standing in their living room, watching the monster approach, listening to the news anchors lose it, the decision they made was entirely mutual. Ruben had always told them that if something big was ever heading toward the neighborhood, they should come to the Fastrip, ride it out there. It's a sturdier building than their A-frame. Plus, he'd told them, if things ever got really bad, there was always the walk-in beer cooler.

The Fastrip was five blocks down the road. Their Mustang covered the distance in less than a minute. Jennifer drove.

And now here they are, huddled with the others against the rear wall, listening to the awful roar get closer. Trace is still wearing his sweat- and grass-stained baseball uniform. Suddenly the rear wall begins to move, swelling out and then sucking in and then swelling out again. There's a high-pitched chiming and crackling sound as glass bottles begin rattling and rupturing against one another.

"Ruben," Jennifer says, "stuff's breaking in the back!"

"Yeah, I know, I know," he says.

"Should we go in the cooler?"

"Ah," Ruben says, but before he can finish his thought he hears a sharp sound and looks over at the big windows at the front of the store, which are spidering with cracks.

Then the windows explode.



**Donna Barnes. One of her best friends was killed when her church collapsed.**

**Donna Barnes**

She believes in the Pentecost.

She believes that a bowl of Multi Grain Cheerios with low-fat milk is a good breakfast, and there's no reason not to have it every single day.

She believes that seven weeks after the Resurrection the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles, and she believes that it happened just the way the Bible describes it in chapter 2 of the Book of Acts: *And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.*

She believes that a sliced banana is optional.

She believes that ever since the day of the Pentecost, people like her, who have been baptized into the Pentecostal Church, have the Holy Spirit inside them, literally.

She believes that the work she does, cleaning houses, is good for her degenerative spinal arthritis, because it keeps her moving, which keeps her vertebral column limber and lubricated.

She believes that sometimes, when the spirit overflows, people can speak in a language they themselves do not understand, the same language that angels speak.

She believes that the one-dollar boxes of Little Debbie cakes she buys most Sundays at this Fastrip are the best deal in town.

She believes that the Joplin Full Gospel Church, which departed the physical world approximately two minutes ago, is as much her home as her thirty-year-old Solitaire trailer.

She believes that the roar that fills the Fastrip as soon as the windows explode is one of the worst sounds she's heard in all of her sixty years.

She believes that the sound of the screams of the two little boys next to her is even worse.

She believes that Ruben, though she can't hear his shouts very well above the screaming and the roaring, is commanding them all to pass through a silver doorway by the potato-chip rack.

She believes that God has already chosen the time and place of your death before you are born.

Donna Barnes enters the cooler on her hands and knees.



**Chris and Lacey and Nathan and Jarrett**

Lacey Little was almost hit by a tornado once. She was in kindergarten, she thinks. The sirens went off and they all hid under their desks. She remembers seeing the sunlight outside turning murky and green. She remembers hearing the wind, and she remembers hearing the ambulances afterward. Her mom ran a daycare out of their home back then, and Lacey remembers worrying about the kids her mom was caring for, and hoping they were all right.

That's the closest she's come. But she's been through tons of other warnings, tons of what people who don't live around here would call close calls. Sometimes she talks to people who don't live around here, and they ask her why she or anyone would raise a family on this wide plain, this alley that stretches through Kansas and Oklahoma and Missouri, this land where the monsters roam. She just asks them why anyone would live on the coast, with its hurricanes. Or in the north, with its blizzards.

There's always something.

She's a mobile phlebotomist. She works for a company called Boyce & Bynum Pathology Laboratories. She does most of her work in nursing homes. She goes and she takes blood and she leaves, and sometimes they make vampire jokes. She split up with Nathan and Jarrett's dad a few years ago, but he's still involved. He's a musician. He tours. Her boyfriend, Chris Carmer, is a solid guy with a steady job. He gets up at 4:00 A.M., works at Able Manufacturing, manages a crew of twenty industrial painters. This morning both Chris and her ex attended Nathan's baptism. Nathan's seven. His uncle, Lacey's brother, did the honors, just like he did for Jarrett a few years ago. Jarrett's eleven. Afterward Lacey and Chris and Jarrett and Nathan went to McDonald's for a celebratory lunch, and then they went and fooled around at the batting cages, and then they went to Petland to pick up some stuff for Chomper, their bullmastiff.

It was while they were driving back from Petland that they started hearing the warnings on the radio. They turned on Twentieth, thinking they'd ride it out in the Home Depot. Something made them decide against it. Just a feeling they had. They kept driving. By the time they got to the Fastrip, it felt like driving farther would be suicide.

Chris kind of settled into the role of Ruben's deputy as soon as they got inside. That's just like Chris. When Ruben went up to the front, to let in Rick Ward and his family, Chris was following right behind, using a flashlight app on his cell phone to help light the way.

He's a good man.

But while Chris is on the outside of the huddle, helping Ruben manage the crowd, Lacey has the kids to herself. They're both crying. They started crying even before they reached the Fastrip. They heard what the people were saying on the radio. There's nothing scarier to a kid than a scared grown-up. Nathan, freshly baptized Nathan, is the younger of the two, and so most of Lacey's attention is on him. As the back wall begins to breathe in and out and the roaring gets louder and you sort of know in your bones that it's coming, Nathan starts sobbing that he doesn't want to die, and you can't imagine what it feels like as a mother to hear your seven-year-old saying that. She's doing her best to hold herself together while she holds him, and she's grateful to the woman next to her, who's squeezing Jarrett's hand and telling him that everything is going to be okay, that it's just like tornado drills at school, that they just have to stay down low and cover their heads. The woman has a fancy camera with a long lens. Lacey wonders if she's a storm chaser.

The windows spider. The windows explode.

Lacey's boys start screaming.

It is a terrible sound.

  
**Stacy LaBarge, Aaron Frost, and Allie Pederson.**

**Stacy and Aaron and Allie**

What you do on a job like this is you make sure you get two good shots of each graduate. One just before they start walking across the stage toward the little podium where the principal stands, and the other when they're actually taking the diploma into their hands. GradImages, the company that hired Stacy LaBarge to shoot this graduation, also hired another photographer, and the two of them have split their duties. It's Stacy's responsibility to get the second shot, the last shot, when the graduate receives his or her diploma. She's set herself up just below the stage, about six feet from the podium. She's got a Nikon D3000 with an 18-to-105mm Nikkor lens.

When Stacy graduated from high school, nineteen years ago, she already knew she wanted to be a photographer. She imagined herself drifting through the grittiest parts of America, documenting the real lives of real people, taking pictures that revealed the rough beauty of the everyday. She loves the work of Dorothea Lange. She sometimes wishes, in a half-serious way, that she had been alive during the Great Depression, when the government would pay people like Lange to travel through hardscrabble communities and just shoot and shoot and shoot. The photography Stacy does now, it's not like that. She makes a living. She shoots graduations, weddings, babies. She has three children. This is the fourth year in a row she's made the three-hour drive from Kansas City to shoot the Joplin High School graduation.

  
Stacy LaBarge  
**When the tornado ended, Stacy LaBarge began taking photos. From left: The eerie darkness in the cooler after the tornado; likely the only reason the cooler didn't collapse completely was the heavy-duty shelves, which ran down both sides of it; the lower half of Chris as he helps push someone out of the cooler. By his feet is a pyramid of cans that were used as a step stool.**

Stacy keeps her left eye on the viewfinder and her right eye closed. It's a long gig, 429 graduates, and after a while her subjects lose their individual contours altogether and become simply fleeting microchallenges — smiles are good, blinking eyelids are bad. These kids here this afternoon, balancing on their high heels or tugging at the too-tight neckties that their fathers helped cinch, are practically exploding with promise, though the precise nature of their promise is hidden from Stacy's lens. The beauty and the limitation of photography is that it can show only the present moment, without context. So when a graduate named Aaron Frost grins and gives the principal's hand a vigorous shake, Stacy's lens captures an image of a tall, blond, handsome boy but doesn't see the star quarterback of Joplin High, the one with NFL dreams, a football scholarship to Missouri Southern, and a beautiful girlfriend, Allie Pederson, who's sitting in the audience in a black strapless dress, clapping her heart out. Similarly, when another grad, Will Norton, receives his piece of paper, his ticket to the next stage of his life, the lens sees just a mop-topped cherub, not the burgeoning Internet celebrity known as Willdabeast, who has five thousand subscribers to his YouTube page, where he chronicles the ups and downs of teenagerhood in charming little fast-cut vignettes.

And Stacy's lens is, of course, as blind to where these kids are going as it is to where they've come from.

It doesn't show Will Norton beginning to drive home after the ceremony ends or the moment when the vortex overtakes him, shredding his seat belt and yanking him out through the sunroof into the maelstrom, where the flame of his promise is snuffed out in a terrible instant.

Nor does it show Aaron and his girlfriend, Allie, at about that same moment, scrambling to get inside the beer cooler of the disintegrating Fastrip, right behind Stacy herself. Like Stacy, Aaron and Allie will find shelter at the store, and then they will find that their shelter was no shelter at all.



**Sandy and Matt and Michaela**

Sandy Latimer has always been unusually terrified of thunderstorms. And not big ones, either. Just a little rain, a little lightning, a few claps and rumbles in the middle of the night, and she'll tumble out of bed and head straight to her living room and sit in the middle of it, on her carpet, which she realizes is probably no safer than staying in bed, but still feels safer for some reason. She's fifty-four years old, and this phobia has followed her around her entire life. Her mom thinks it may have been passed down to her like a virus, from a storm-phobic older cousin she played with a lot as a toddler, but to Sandy the fear seems like something innate, something integral to her being.

So the terror she experienced even before she pulled into the Fastrip, even before the lights went out, even before she huddled in the back with all the others, was raw and potent.

Then Sandy felt the wall behind her begin to move, in and out, as though it were breathing, as though she had taken shelter against the chest of some enormous creature and the creature was now waking up. The sensation kicked her terror up to another level.

When the windows explode, Sandy's mind is already incandescent with panic.

She can't make a sound, and when she tries to stand up, she finds she can't do that, either, but instead falls to the ground. She tries to crawl toward the opening, toward the door of the cooler that someone has just yanked open, the opening that all these people are now rushing toward. It's not working. It's like her body has abandoned her. It's like it won't do what she wants it to do, like the air, now full of flying glass, has become soupy, heavy, quicksandish, like the air in a nightmare. You hear about people falling and being trampled all the time for the stupidest reasons: Black Friday sales at Walmart, when all that's at stake is a discounted television. The stakes here are much higher, as high as they get, really. There are at least a dozen people behind Sandy, desperate to pass through the door. Sandy lies helpless before them, flopping on the wet tiles like a fish in a boat.

Michaela Sieler and Matt Doerr are right behind Sandy. They are both third-year college students at Missouri Southern, but have been a couple since sophomore year of high school. They came to Joplin from Yankton, South Dakota, by comparison with which Jop-lin is a metropolis. Matt is studying accounting and Michaela is studying early-childhood education. Michaela is holding her dog, a six-year-old dachshund named Tinkerbell. Matt is holding Michaela's purse. They have never seen Sandy before in their lives, and now she is blocking the way to the only hope they have of extending their lives another minute. It would be easy to step over her, step around her, step on her. Neither one of them wants to die.

Along with the howling of the wind and the roaring of what's approaching behind the wind, along with the screaming of the children and now the screaming of the adults, there is the sound of Ruben Carter's voice. He's repeating a phrase, over and over. It's a phrase that's both familiar and unfamiliar, because it's a phrase that everyone hears all the time in movies and on television, but almost no one ever hears in real life.

"Women and children first!" he's saying. "Women and children first!"

And he's standing there, to the side of the door, and Matt and Michaela know he could have been the first one inside but instead he's out here with them, in this terrible blizzard of flying glass, shouting those words over and over, his voice insistent and strong and somehow calm.

Matt bends down and hoists Sandy up a bit, and Michaela bends and helps also, holding on to Sandy with one arm and Tinkerbell with the other, and the two of them, Matt and Michaela, half guide and half shove Sandy ahead of them, pushing her forward, into the chilled darkness of the cooler.

  
**Isaac Duncan, Corey Waterman, and Brennan Stebbins. Isaac's** [**video taken from inside the cooler**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQnvxJZucds) **has been viewed more than four million times on YouTube.**

**Isaac and Corey and Brennan**

Isaac Duncan has a YouTube account, but it's kind of dead. Like everyone else in the world, he has a video camera on his phone, but so far the only thing he's shot that has been worth uploading is a short clip of a drunk girl outside a bar kicking the side-view mirror off a cop car. That was four months ago. Still, whenever anything halfway interesting is happening around him, he tries to make a habit of documenting it. So today, at a little after 5:40 P.M., Isaac points his phone at the windshield of his buddy Brennan Stebbins's Ford Taurus and starts recording, capturing the rain-smeary taillights of the vehicles ahead of them, stopped at a red light.

"Jesus, people, c'mon," Brennan says.

Isaac is in the front passenger seat, Brennan's driving, and their friend Corey Waterman is in the backseat. The three have been driving around all afternoon, sort of aimlessly, listening to baseball on the radio. It's the I-70 series this weekend, the St. Louis Cardinals against the Kansas City Royals. They all like baseball, but mostly this afternoon has just been about hanging out. They're in their early twenties, best friends, and this might be the last summer they spend together. Isaac's probably going to move away soon, to Austin, to kick his music career into higher gear. Brennan just graduated earlier this month from Missouri Southern, was the editor of the school paper, has started applying for journalism gigs all over the country. Corey's thinking of maybe enrolling in film school, but he's not sure where yet.

Around the fifth inning, severe weather warnings start cutting into the game. They don't pay much attention at first. It's summer in Tornado Alley. They know the drill. But the warnings keep coming, and eventually they switch over from the Kansas AM station carrying the game to a local FM news station, which for the last little while has been just one extended warning, growing more and more urgent. By the time Isaac starts shooting video, the radio reporters sound kind of helpless. The power has gone out at the station, and though an emergency backup generator is allowing them to broadcast, they no longer have access to radar or to their computers, so their storm-tracking capabilities have become extremely primitive.

"Right now at the KZRG twenty-four-hour storm center, it is impossible to see," one reporter says.

"It's cloudy," says the other. "You can't see anything out the windows."

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" Corey says.

The light turns green and they drive south down Duquesne Road, and just before they reach Twentieth, one of them notices something both beautiful and dreadful: a veil of wispy clouds just above the tree line, rotating and congealing like sugar strands in a slow-motion cotton-candy machine. They decide they need to get off the road right away. The Fastrip is just ahead, and they pull up near the front and sprint through the quickening rain to the door. Ruben lets them in. He leads them to the back wall, where they hunker down with the small group that has already gathered there. Isaac aims the camera lens of his phone back toward the front windows, out at the parking lot, which in a matter of seconds has transitioned from a dusky twilight gray into a midnight black. The canopy above the gas pumps has just begun to flap. Soon the final refugees, Rick Ward and his three children, will arrive and start pounding on the glass outside, and Ruben will rush forward and unlock the door and force it open against the wind, and by that time it will be so dark that the camera will hardly register the scene at all.

"Man," Isaac says to no one in particular. "Shit is getting real."

The phone will continue to record for the next five minutes and seven seconds, though by the two-minute-twenty-second mark, when Isaac is scrambling with everyone else to get inside the cooler, he is no longer trying to aim it at any particular thing and has, in fact, forgotten that it is recording at all.



(Top) Stacy LaBarge

**Ruben**

Once almost everyone has made it into the cooler, Ruben glances to his right, back toward the Fastrip's front entrance.

He sees inventory — newspapers and breath mints and chocolate bars and cheap sunglasses and twelve-packs of Coke — leaping through the open maw of the window frames and vanishing into the blackness. Then he sees the entire front of the store — not just the window frames and the door but the wall containing them — jerk forward, off its foundation, as though a monster truck with chains affixed to all four corners of the building had suddenly floored its accelerator.

Chris, who's been helping Ruben get everyone inside, is in front of him. Ruben can see debris beginning to pelt Chris's back. He places his hands on Chris and shoves forward, and once Chris is all the way inside, he steps in after him and turns and grabs the edge of the cooler door and gives it a yank. The door has no latch or handle on the inside, to prevent people from locking themselves in. He closes it as far as he can, and as he's turning away from it, he sees one more thing through the opening.

He sees the entire front of his store, now that it's been unmoored, suddenly shoot skyward, like a rocket.

Then something, the wind or a flying object, impacts the other side of the door and slams it the rest of the way shut.

**The cooler is** about twenty-five feet long and seven feet high, though a pair of suspended air conditioners makes the ceiling about two feet lower in places. It is approximately eight feet wide, but most of that width is taken up by heavy steel shelving, leaving only about three feet of space between them. The shelves support cases of Miller Lite and Budweiser and Keystone Light and Busch and Busch Light and Coors and Coors Light and Milwaukee's Best Premium. Of the eleven Fastrips that the Grace Energy company owns in the area, this one is the oldest, and it has the biggest beer cooler.

The roaring outside escalates, and there are other sounds, too, the sounds of metal tearing and wood cracking. The cooler begins to shake. Objects pummel its walls.

Some of the people in the cooler are screaming and some are crying and some are completely quiet. There isn't much room. It's cold, but nobody notices. Some are squatting, and some are on their hands and knees. Some are calling out in a panic to the people they came with, unsure if they made it in. Eleven-year-old Jarrett Little wonders if they are flying, if they have been picked up and are being transported somewhere new, like Dorothy's house was. Tinkerbell, the dachshund, whines and whimpers.

After a few seconds things quiet down. The roaring eases off. The cooler shakes less violently and the pummeling slows.

"Dude," Isaac says, and the relief in his voice is as thick and sweet as honey. "We're good. We're good. We're good!"

And then the tornado, and not just the storm preceding it, crests the hill and hits them with its full force.

**When the roof collapses,** it hits Chris Carmer in the head and he drops to the floor and he's on his knees and now the wall with the shelves full of beer is falling toward him and then the roof opens up above and behind him and it sounds like the devil is shrieking in his ear and he feels his legs being sucked up toward the hole and he knows that Rick Ward is squatting next to him and so he grabs Rick Ward's belt with one hand and the falling shelves with the other and he buries his face in Rick's soft back and he tells himself that although he is about to die he should just hold on for as long as he can, because it is better to go down fighting.

**Tinkerbell is** squirming and twisting in Michaela's arms, trying to look up at the widening holes in the roof. The tornado, unlike the storm clouds that shrouded it and

concealed its approach, is not entirely dense and black. Dim, green, aquatic light, like the light scuba divers see, brightens the cooler a bit even as the cooler is being torn apart.

The tornado stretches twenty thousand feet into the sky. It is three quarters of a mile wide. It is not empty.

It is carrying two-by-fours and drywall and automobiles.

It is carrying baseball cards, laptop computers, family photo albums.

It is carrying people, as naked as newborns, their clothes stripped away like tissue paper.

It is carrying fragments of the Walmart where Carl and Jennifer met, of the church where Donna worships, of three of the nursing homes where Lacey works.

It has traveled six miles through the city, and now it is carrying a great deal of the city within itself.

Michaela pushes Tinkerbell's head down, but she can feel her squirrelly little neck straining against her hand, wanting to look up, wanting to see.

**She believes** in the Pentecost.

She believes that it happened just as the Bible describes it in chapter 2 of the Book of Acts, and she believes in something else that is written in the same chapter, about the end of the world: *The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

She doesn't know who is on top of her, and she doesn't know who she is on top of.

She knows that what was outside has come inside.

She hears the impossible wind, and she feels it trying to carry her away.

"Heavenly father," Donna shouts. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!"

**Corey Waterman is sprawled** across Jennifer Henning and her youngest son, Trace. Jennifer's husband, Carl, is on the other end of the cooler, too far away. Corey has never met Jennifer and Trace. To Jennifer it feels like Corey is intentionally shielding them with his body, protecting them. Corey himself isn't sure: He thinks maybe he just fell and landed this way when the cooler wall fell and knocked him over. A hole is tearing open in the roof above, and he feels pellets of debris beginning to hit his back and he knows that bigger and heavier debris will follow. The cooler has become a jumbled tangle of people, but within the tangle certain units remain intact. In the gray-green aquatic light of the vortex Corey sees Aaron Frost, the high school quarterback, embracing his girlfriend, Allie, a few feet away.

Corey wishes he had someone who loved him holding him during these last moments of his life.

But he does not. So he holds, instead, these strangers. The breach grows wider. He feels the wind. He knows this is it.

Isaac, Corey's oldest friend, has been thrown forward and is lying across the legs of someone next to Jennifer and Trace. Corey reaches out and places a hand on Isaac's shoulder and grips it tight.

Isaac looks at Corey. There is a piece of debris lodged in Isaac's throat and he chokes it up and spits it out.

"I love you," Isaac says.

"I love you, bro," Corey says.

"I know," Isaac says, and then he looks away and shouts into the wind.

"I love everyone. I love everyone, man."

**It spreads.**

The wind permits Isaac's words to travel only a few feet before it whips them into oblivion, but that is enough to reach the ears of several people here on this far end of the cooler, including those of Matt and Michaela, who are squeezed against the rest but still squatting together, Matt holding Michaela, Michaela holding Tinkerbell. They are praying silently, preparing themselves to die.

They look up.

"I love you all," shouts Matt.

"I love everyone," shouts Michaela.

And then the people around Matt and Michaela hear the words, and so on, and the words travel in this way down the length of the cooler, and even the people who don't repeat the words hear the words.

Finally, at the far end of the cooler, the words reach Ruben Carter. The roof just inside the door of the cooler has collapsed almost all the way to the ground and somehow instead of crushing him it has simply pushed him forward, like toothpaste at the bottom of a tube. He doesn't know who said the words. The wind has stripped them of even their sex, leaving behind only their sentiment.

Ruben raises his head.

"I love all of you!" he shouts back into the crowd.

Then he drops his head again and closes his eyes and waits for whatever comes next.

**Trace, eleven-year-old** Trace, with his buzz cut and his grass-stained baseball uniform, is looking up at Corey, smiling, showing him something cradled in the palm of his hand.

It is a hailstone the size of a golf ball.

The wind is still howling and the cooler is still shaking and Corey's back is still being pelted with debris and he wonders if the kid is in shock.

But Trace, who used to be kind of obsessed with tornadoes, who spent fifth grade exercising his library card to learn everything he could on the subject, who knows that hail is associated with their edges, and that therefore, if you are hit by a tornado, hail is a sign that the worst is over, continues to smile up at Corey, showing off his melting jewel.

More hail falls around them now, bouncing and pinging and ricocheting, making a joyful noise.

**"Is everyone okay** below me?"

"I'm okay!"

"I'm trying not to lay on someone."

"Somebody is on my back."

"Am I hurting anybody?"

"Who's under me?"

"Is anyone under me?"

"Everybody stay calm. It's over."

"Are you okay back there? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Be careful, there's glass on your back!"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm great."

"I'm okay. I'm okay."

"I love you, Mama."

"I love you, too. I love you."

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Is that you right below me?"

"Yeah."

"That's not someone else?"

"No."

There is the rich smell of upturned earth, like the smell of a freshly plowed field. There is the yeasty smell of spilled beer and the thick smell of wet plaster and the sharp smell of split wood. There is the faint smell of something burning, and the strong smell of gas.

There are a number of holes in what remains of the cooler's roof, but the biggest is on the end farthest from where the door used to be. The wall there is tipped at a steep angle, and there is a ragged gash near the top, where it should join the ceiling. Corey, who likes to scramble around the cliffs south of Joplin, climbs up the slick aluminum slope and pulls himself up over the lip and looks out over the edge and takes in what he sees, but when he looks back down he doesn't tell anyone, because there isn't really anything he can say, so he just tells them the most important thing.

"We can make it out."

**Michaela gives** Tinkerbell to someone to hold, and then she climbs up a pyramid of Miller Lite cases that Carl has built at the base of the tilted wall. She reaches up to Corey and Isaac, who are balancing together at the top of the wall, and then they pull her up.

She looks around.

The skies above are still cloudy, but it's no longer dark and she can see plenty far. About thirty feet away is what used to be a maple tree. Most of its bark has been stripped off, along with most of its branches, and so the tree looks sort of like a gnarled and lumber-colored telephone pole. High above the tree's base, wrapped around its trunk, is a crumpled mass of gray and black metal. This used to be a pickup truck or an SUV, but it is impossible to tell which. There are other vehicles and parts of vehicles scattered everywhere, including an upside-down maroon Hyundai sedan that lies on the rubble of the Fastrip, maybe three feet from the edge of the half-collapsed roof of the cooler. Beyond the stripped tree, Michaela can see a small field with cows in it. Pieces of wood and metal are sticking out of the sides of some of the cows and others don't have all of their legs and the ones that aren't already dead will be soon enough. Where houses should be, for as far as Michaela can see, there are just stone foundations, stubbly with splintered wood. Here and there, against the backdrop of white sky, pockets of fire and smoke rise.

For the past couple of weeks, there's been a lot of talk on the news about some preacher in California who'd been predicting that the end of the world, the Rapture, would happen on May 21. That was yesterday. Michaela hadn't paid much attention, because she believes what the Bible says, which is that even the angels don't know when the end will come. Now Michaela wonders if the preacher was only one day off.

She wonders if she has been left behind.

An empty lattice of wooden beams that must once have been part of a wall is wedged up against the other side of the cooler, and Michaela uses it to lower herself to the ground. She's wearing flip-flops, and she takes a few ginger steps forward, careful to avoid stepping on glass or nails or other sharp debris.

Then she turns and waits for Matt and Tinkerbell to join her.

**Some small chunks** of flying glass buried themselves deep in Ruben's right hand while he was helping everyone get inside the cooler, but during the long wait to get out, his hand doesn't hurt at all. His legs, though, are cramping up bad. He cramps easily. It's one of the symptoms of his cerebral palsy.

*Symptoms* doesn't seem like the right word, really, because it's not like it's a disease or sickness that comes and then goes away or a terminal condition that gets progressively worse. It's a static thing, with him since birth. It's possible it was caused by the manner of his birth, though nobody can say for sure. He was born wrong, feetfirst, and it took the doctors and nurses a while to get him free and breathing on his own, and maybe that's when the damage happened. Regardless, he's never known anything else, any other way of life, of living. He has damage to parts of his brain, and because of this damage he has trouble controlling his muscles, and when his muscles are forced into an awkward position for an extended period of time, as happened when the roof collapsed and pressed him down into this sort of fetal squat, they cramp.

He watches while the others crawl and scramble and are pushed out the exit. Eventually Ruben and Chris are the only ones left inside. Ruben makes his way to the leaning wall at the back. He steps onto the little pyramid of Miller Lite boxes and he stretches up and he grips the top of the wall and starts pulling himself up toward the opening. The wall is slick with rain and some blood is leaking down it from the wound in his hand and he is sort of kicking against the wet aluminum and his feet are slipping and he isn't making progress and so Chris comes up behind him and takes a hold of his legs and pushes.

Ruben emerges headfirst, blinking in the brightening sun.

**Ruben, Matt and Michaela,** Rick and Hannah and Abby and Jonah, Stacy, Aaron and Allie, Donna, Jennifer and Carl and Trace and Cory, Lacey and Chris and Jarrett and Nathan, Sandy, Isaac and Corey and Brennan. They wait till they've all made it out, and then they pick their way through the debris to Twentieth Street, and they know that it is Twentieth Street because they can see the concrete roundabout at the corner, and it's still the same even if nothing else is.

They get their bearings. The orange and beige ruins on the left side of Twentieth, about three quarters of a mile from where they are, must be the Home Depot, which means downtown lies that way.

They begin to disperse, walking away from one another, alone or in small groups, every destination different.

http://www.esquire.com/features/joplin-tornado-stories-1011