

Enlightening

“Help me with this!” Donny called out. A rumble of thunder added urgency to his words. “Quickly! Please?”

Eight-year-old Donny planned to watch the approaching thunderstorm through the kitchen window. His big sister Claire, ten, reluctantly put her book aside, grumbling as she helped him push the heavy wooden table to the window.

Donny dragged two chairs over to the table. He and Claire climbed up quickly and knelt across from each other, elbows on the brightly patterned red and white oilcloth. They watched in awe as the storm threw off random bolts of lightning. A clap of thunder followed each a few seconds later.

Donny peered out the window of their two-story clapboard farm home. Across a rough-hewn gravel road was a dense forest some 200 feet away. It consisted mostly of tall ungainly poplar trees, interspersed occasionally with graceful cone-shaped evergreens and bushes that bore wild berries in season.

Donny jumped down and helped their little sister, Susan, six, push a chair over beside Claire, away from the windows. She climbed up and tucked her head and shoulders under her big sister’s left arm for comfort.

It was Saturday afternoon in the middle of summer, but the dark storm clouds had spread tentacles of gloom inside the big kitchen. Occasionally, a bright flash lit up the room for an instant. Donny would look at Claire. Their eyes would meet,

subtly challenging each other, searching for hints of fear. Both would chuckle with faux bravado, trying to mask their apprehensions. Susan would shudder.

The storm grew more intense. Heavy rain began to fall. Suddenly, a magnificent flash of lightning was followed closely by an especially loud crash of thunder.

“That’s a close one,” Donny heard Claire shout excitedly. “Close, too!” He was annoyed by Claire’s attitude, a contradictory blend of presumptive age superiority and ill concealed unease. Another brilliant flash of lightning was followed almost immediately by deafening thunder.

“That’s even closer,” Donny challenged, feigning calm.

It probably wasn’t, he thought. But I’ll be darned if I’m going to let her outdo me... again!

Donny and his sisters watched as the wind-driven rain began pouring down with even greater intensity. Suddenly, waves of hail joined the rain, rattling against the kitchen windows.

Their mother, hearing the pounding hail, came to check on them, drying her hands on a worn dishtowel. Satisfied for their safety, she reminded the children of a game she’d taught them earlier about thunderstorms. They were to count slowly, waiting for the sound of thunder after the lightning. “Remember how it goes?” she said: “We’re counting v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y... one, one thousand... and then we’re counting two, one thousand... and then we’re counting three, one thousand...” Their mother had explained that for each five-second count the lightning strike

was one mile farther away.

As the storm raged outside the children concentrated on the game, impatiently counting after each boom of thunder to guess the distance. Susan showed little enthusiasm for the game. With each clap of thunder her eyes would grow big. She'd glance out from behind her big sister's arm, first at one sibling then the other, watching for any signs of fear. None came. From time to time she'd glance around for the reassuring presence of their mother, busily generating tantalizing food aromas on a cast iron woodstove behind them.

Donny noticed his little sister's growing unease.

"Look, little creeks on the road," he said, trying to distract her. He pointed outside as rain and intermittent hail splattered against the windows. The heavy downpour had created zigzag rivulets in the sand and gravel on the road. Shallow ditches on both sides had filled with rainwater. Here and there puddles encroached on the narrow public thoroughfare.

C-R-A-C-K!

A brilliant bolt of white lightning suddenly flashed. A deafening crash of thunder instantly followed.

Donny and his sisters jumped off their chairs, near panic from the flash and the concussion that followed immediately. Powerful sound waves shook their aging two-story home. Glass in the double pane windows rattled in their frames. Susan looked ready to cry. Donny was relieved when Claire pulled their little sister closer, hoping she could keep Susan from a meltdown. The last thing he

wanted just now was a screaming little sister.

Their mother rushed over. She checked each of the children quickly and the windows, then instinctively swept a towel carefully across the table's patterned oilcloth, checking for broken glass and rainwater. She found neither. Their father raced in from the living room, eyes wide, a farm newspaper in his right hand, still wearing his faded blue bib overalls. He looked around hurriedly for signs of danger and damage.

Donny assured both parents they were fine, although shaken. Claire nodded. A bewildered Susan said nothing, sobbing quietly and wiping tears from her chubby cheeks with both fists.

Curious, Donny and his sisters climbed back up on their chairs. Donny pulled back their mother's homemade printed cotton curtains to give the family a wider view of the storm raging outside. They were astonished by what they saw.

A large old poplar tree almost directly across the road had towered over the rest, standing guard on the edge of the forest for years. Donny, his sisters and visiting children had been drawn to it by an abundance of sturdy low branches. They loved playing made-up games climbing up and down on its huge welcoming arms

The tree was gone!

Their favorite tree, some 200 feet away and perhaps 100 feet tall, had been transformed within an instant into a stump surrounded by a wide scattering of wood shards, big and little, fat and thick, blunt and sharp. Strips of bark had been

peeled from the sides of the seven-foot stump and were curled in the underbrush, looking like tangled shiny ribbons. Out of the center of the stump a few long thin spikes of buff-colored wood poked six feet in the air.

The tree's lower branches had been transformed into abbreviated versions of their former grandeur, the stubs reaching out awkwardly in all directions from the battered trunk.

"What happened to our tree?" Donny asked.

"The tree exploded," their father explained. He told the children that lightning sometimes flows up from the ground to the clouds, causing trees and even buildings to explode upward and outward. He said it was lucky that no cows, horses or other animals, or people, had been out there when the wood spears went flying in all directions.

"Look!" Donny said, looking closer through the window. "The road's buried with wood slivers and broken branches and leaves. What a mess!"

Leaves, branches and shards of wood had formed a rain-soaked matt covering almost everything in sight.

Eventually, the storm passed and sunshine returned. The children, permission granted, scrambled eagerly outside in their bare feet, jeans rolled up, excited to inspect the debris.

"What's this?" Donny said, showing his father some pieces of wood with dark bluish streaks.

"Electricity from the lightning caused those marks," he said. Donny's mother

didn't care; her concern was the children getting slivers in their feet while running around in the muddy terrain, potentially resulting in infections.

“Lock Jaw!” she counseled them earnestly, invoking her strongest go-to warning reserved for times like this. A troubled frown crisscrossed her work weary face. She applied this favorite admonition to a range of potentially horrendous physical catastrophes, real and imagined – whether animal-born, earth-born, or vegetation-born – each being a disaster of such gargantuan proportions they defied description even with her impressive vocabulary.

Donny and his sisters never quite understood what dire consequences this obscure ailment might visit upon their young healthy bodies. (In the urban world, Tetanus might be the nearest kin.) Regardless, they thrived despite these looming perils, basking in the love evidenced by their mother's uncompromising devotion to their wellbeing.

For now, Donny's attention and those of his sisters were on the tree stump. It was at least one meter across and even more awesome close up.

He glanced at his little sister.

“Know what I think, Susan?” Donny said as they stood looking up at the stump. “I think an angry dinosaur did it! I think he came stomping up in the storm and chomped through the trunk. Then he tore the tree away and left behind those slivers of wood sticking up.

He knew that dinosaurs and other pre-historic creatures fascinated Susan even though they frightened her.

With inspired eloquence, he added: “I’ll bet those slivers of wood slid out from between his enormous sharp pointed teeth as he was ripping away the tree. My guess is that gigantic prehistoric lizard chewed it up and spit out pieces in all directions.”

“Stop that, Donny!” Claire said. “You’re frightening Susan.”

She squatted down and held Susan’s right hand, “He’s just fooling, sweetie. Tell her, Donny.”

“How can you be sure?” Donny teased, chuckling.

Their parents smiled at each other, shaking their heads at their son’s latest mischievous behavior.

As much as Donny relished sharing his fictional account of what happened to their tree, a few minutes later he would roundly curse that single bolt of lightning. So would Claire. Susan was too young to have learned any really good swear words just yet.

Their annoyance at the lightning was not confined to the destruction of their favorite climbing tree, but also for its other side effect. They were assigned by their father to clear all of the debris off of the road.

So, on that day not only did they come face-to-face with the awesome power of Nature, but they were also confronted with the unwelcome job of harvesting an impressive amount of firewood it had generated for their mother’s cook stove.