

## **WinkWorld July 2003**

### **To Lasso a Tornado By Dawn Wink, June 2003**

"Mom, come help me lasso this tornado!"

My then three-year-old son, Luke, busied himself roping the nearest tree in the park behind our house. Strawberry blonde hair gleamed in the sunlight as his sturdy body ran back and forth, holding the tree from escaping. His shirt now shed as an encumbrance, his pale torso held his tiny shoulders aloft. Jeans slung low under his little boy's belly, rolled up as he fits the waist of his older brother's hand-me-downs, but not the length. Enchanted with his capture, Luke became Pecos Bill, lassoing a wild, swirling tornado whipping its way across the plains.

"Mom, make sure this tornado doesn't get away!" he called to me, handing me the rope and circling the end around his waist. Together, we held the swirling tornado pinned down to the ground.

To be able to lose yourself so completely in play is a gift. As I watched my son hold that rope, his eyes seeing a rip roaring tornado in the puny tree still staked in the ground, my worries about work, finances, and life in general melted away.

"Do you remember the tornado at Bop-Bop and Grammie's ranch this summer, Luke?"

"Yeah, Mom, sure I do," he leaned his little body into the rope away from the tree, as if the tree were trying to get away.

"Where did we go when the tornado came?"

"We went down into the cellar until the rain stopped."

We spend every summer on my parent's cattle ranch on the vast prairies of South Dakota. One evening two years ago forever changed my vague understandings about how quickly a tornado can appear and how terrifying it can be.

We'd had dinner, the kids were safely tucked in bed, and I went outside to watch the storm clouds in the distance. An old wheelbarrow around served as my chair. I reclined into it, settling in to watch the horizon. To the northwest, a mountainous dark cloud billowed up from the prairie, bounded on either side by crystal clear weather. Sunrays broke through the outer fringe of the cloud, ringing it in an aura of light yellow and pinkish hues, and shining down and speckling the prairie with shafts of light. I relaxed comfortably in the wheelbarrow.

A huge, billowing black cloud appeared, hugging the horizon, small clusters of clouds protruded from its interior. Spats of lighting danced about the center, illuminating the entire formation from within. Each flash of lighting highlighted the various levels and extensions comprising the immensity of the cloud. Still relaxed, I leaned my head against the back of the wheelbarrow. My legs crossed beneath me with my hands folded behind my head, I was able to scan the entire horizon in just a movement of the eye. The storm cloud no longer contained the lightning flashes, which now jetted and wrinkled across the sky, turning the

area above the clouds into patterns of electric lace bordering the blackness below.

A slight breeze began to pick up and felt refreshing in contrast to the stifling heat of the day and evening. I felt the wind lift my hair and blow it across my face. I tucked the loose strands back behind my ear, still enjoying the play of nature before me, feeling very much a part of the storm.

I looked up and realized the cloud had now drifted directly above the ranch. It occurred to me sitting encased in a metal wheelbarrow was probably not the best place to be. A cooler wind picked up, emitting a low howling sound amidst a quick, sharp whooshing I could hear zipping around me. I noticed the wind blowing the blanket to the boy's room in and out of the screenless window I'd opened earlier to let some cool air into their stale and stuffy room. I glanced back up at the cloud and in that instant, as suddenly as the slamming of a door, it had gone from something abstract and beautiful to be observed from afar, to something ominous and extremely present. The shift took no longer than a second. The entire atmosphere of the prairie changed.

By the time I took the ten steps from the wheelbarrow to the boys' room, the wind had picked up so much that the paintings the kids had made and taped to the wall flapped frantically back and forth. Luke sat up in his bed, "Mommy, the lighting scared me!" The blanket I'd originally seen swinging back and forth was now jerking and flailing in the window. I closed the window, tucked Luke back into bed, smoothed his hair and kissed him goodnight, and went to go close all the windows.

I made it to the third and then heard the roar of a pickup as it came flying down our little lane and slammed to a stop outside our house. Dad and Mom ran in the door and Dad yelled, "Tornado's coming. Grab the kids!" Tears instantly sprang to my eyes even though I wasn't crying. We each sprinted for a child. Dad ran into the boys' room and scooped up Luke off the bed. I bent down to pick up Wyatt, hauling his long body up against me.

"Mommy! Mommy!" He woke up scared and clung to me.

"It's okay, Wyatt, it's okay." I grabbed his special blanket and threw it over his head, trying to bury his head into my body as I ran. Out through the backdoor, through the mudroom and down the steps, out into the popcorn sized hail coming down on us. We ran through the headlights of the truck that illuminated the rain and hail driving down into the ground. Everything was dark, wet, and loud.

I opened the truck door against the wind and threw Wyatt into the cab. Luke and Dad were already there.

"Where's Joan?" Dad looked at me from the driver's seat, ready to drive. I pushed Wyatt farther into the seat and ran back toward the parlor. Mom had Wynn against her chest and shoulders, coming down the steps off the mudroom. We ran together to the truck. Dad threw open the door, we pushed the boys over and climbed in. We gunned it back down the lane, now set and covered with slick gumbo, the truck fishtailing and spinning back and forth. Bouncing up over the embankment to the main road, we skidded toward the cellar, scanning the skyline during lightning flashes for funnel clouds.

Sliding to a halt we ran through the baseball sized hail into the storm cellar my great grandparents had also used during storms. The smell of musty dank earth hit us like a wall as we hurried down the old cement steps. How many times have people run down these

steps wondering what would greet them when they walked up them again, I wondered as I hugged my two-year-old daughter close to me and followed Dad down the narrow concrete passageway into the earth. Once under ground, we were like the animals of the prairie, peering through the door's opening up into the night sky, full now of wind, rain, and hail.

"Listen for the sound of a train", my mother said, "That's what a tornado sounds like, a train thundering past."

The violence of the storm we could hear outside only lasted a short time. Soon a quiet settled over the prairie. "That's either really good or really bad," Dad said. We waited a while and then cautiously walked up the steps. Bright stars winked from a crystal clear sky surrounding a huge black void, where the storm still raged to the south.

That night we were lucky. The tornado passed four miles west of my parent's ranch. We emerged from the dirt cellar to find a few windows broken by hail, but all buildings and animals doing fine. The next couple of hours, we spent circling the upstairs windows, waiting for a lightning flash so we could quickly so we could check for tornadoes sneaking up on us in the darkness. Dad spent the rest of the night circling the house outside, scanning the horizon for signs of a twister as we slept inside.

One year later, back in the park, Luke remembered it all. No longer hiding in the dark under the earth, he had the tornado by the tail now and controlled its every move.

"Mom, help me lasso this tornado!"