

# On the Edge of the Storm

## Julie A. Sellers

Aimee knew instinctively she was on the edge of an approaching storm the instant she stepped outside the Kansas City airport. The strange mix of sadness, solitude, and rejection alerted her as it had since she was a child, even before she looked to the sky. Nothing, not even all the years she had lived so far from the inclement summer weather of the Midwest, could erase her uncanny sixth sense. It was something visceral that took her back to her earliest memory of cowering underground in total darkness while wild winds shrieked, glass broke, and her mother sobbed. Aimee shook the cobwebs of memory from her mind as the thunder boomed. She dashed through the first drops of pelting rain to the rental car shuttle, tasting the bitter irony in the thunderstorm that was her prodigal's welcome.

By the time Aimee had waited in line for her rental, completed her paperwork, and maneuvered out of the airport, the storm had passed, leaving downed leaves and branches in its wake. She rubbed her throbbing forehead, her finger glancing across the scar, as she continued west, relieved to be alone at last. The solitary three-hour drive through Kansas would be her only respite for the next two weeks while she helped clean out the family farmhouse and prepare her mother to move into a nursing facility.

"Mom's mind is going," her brother, Brad, had told her over the phone. "She's really confused—sometimes thinks I'm Dad. And she keeps asking for someone named Angela. Any idea who that is?"

"No, none."

"We had to take her keys. She'd drive into town and couldn't remember how to get home."

Aimee knew she'd regret the question before she even asked it. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come back and help me and Jenny clean out the place." Brad's voice showed irritation. "Mom's in

line to go to assisted living, and we're ready for a bigger place now that the kids are in their teens. The house has been in this family for four generations, and it's only right since we've worked this farm since Dad died. You need to come do your part."

She'd wanted to tell him "no"; she felt she had every right to tell him "no", all things considered. It wasn't that she had a bad relationship with her mother; she had no relationship with her. Aimee's mother had always seemed completely indifferent to her, treating her more as a boarder than a daughter. The only time her mother paid much attention was when Aimee displeased her. Aimee had lived those eighteen years in the farmhouse feeling as if she tiptoed along the edge of a precipice, always one misstep away from her mother's disapproval.

Now, she was headed back to that uncomfortable setting, even though her better sense told her to stay as far away as possible. But even she could recognize that it was one thing to stay away with only an occasional visit under the guise of study and work all these years; it was another under these circumstances. She was teaching no summer classes at the college, and her exhibition, "Arches", had closed following a successful run. She had to go; there was no excuse—at least, no excuse she would offer.

The sky was still gray as Aimee turned south, and although her gut told her the bad weather had passed, coming back to a storm, being hit by that awful barrage of emotions that always foretold severe weather, had her out of sorts. She hadn't felt this way in years—fifteen, to be exact. She had been hanging out with a group of grad students one afternoon in May when the tornado siren went off. A rarity at that altitude, the others rushed nervously to look out the windows. But Aimee sat unperturbed.

"What, too cool to look at a tornado, Kansas?" Rick teased her with the nickname.

"There's no tornado."

"How do you know?"

"I get a feeling when there is."

He looked doubtful. "What kind of feeling?"

She shrugged. "Just a feeling. I can't explain it." But she didn't want to explain it. She knew the group and drunk on the infinite wisdom of twenty-something graduate students, they would have to analyze her. She knew she was damaged goods; she didn't need her friends to diagnose all her issues.

"Sounds intense. Can you predict the winning lottery number, too?" Rick joked, his dark eyes shining.

Remembering, Aimee sighed. "Ah, Rick," she said. Even this many years later she still regretted cutting things off with him when they'd barely even gotten started. She just never seemed able to trust someone enough to give romance a real shot. She was always sure that, just at the moment when she felt most vulnerable, she would be rejected.

She had spent the evening being asked—though it felt like an interrogation—about tornadoes.

"Have you ever seen a tornado?"

"Yes, of course."

"What was it like?"

"Greenish black skies. Rotation, a funnel. And it was loud."

It was always the same thing: anyone who did not grow up with them was fascinated by tornadoes, while Aimee knew to respect them. It was one of her least favorite topics, and it always came up whenever anyone learned she was from Kansas. That evening, with the storm as a backdrop, the questions had come rapid-fire. And of course, there was always the question of whether she had gone storm-chasing. Her response that no, they had gone down the cave, was followed by the requisite explanation of what she meant; didn't her family have a basement?

"Not in a farmhouse built in 1870," she answered, explaining as best she could the underground limestone storm shelters known as caves built by settlers in the Flint Hills. The big blocks of stone that formed the cave's walls, arched ceiling, and steep steps had been cut out of the pas-

tures in the surrounding hills. A wooden shelter with a window at one end covered the descending limestone stairs accessed through a door from the living room. At the bottom, a wooden door latched from the inside as the final barrier against a storm. It was always cool, dark, and damp there in the belly of the earth. Shelves lined the back wall where the women of Aimee's family stored home-canned goods. A long-forgotten bench was the only seating available to wait out a storm, but Aimee had preferred to sit on the smooth stones of the floor and press herself against the rough walls, willing herself to sink into the coolness and darkness, searching for some distant point of beginning where she still belonged. Despite what had happened there, she was never afraid of the cave.

Aimee glanced out at the boundless horizon, watching for her turn. Within moments, she had left the highway for a dusty county road. She slowed as she drove past what had been the Jones's farm, now owned by her older brother. Josette Jones had been much more than a neighbor to Aimee; she was her self-proclaimed godmother, her confidante, and her friend. A war bride, the Frenchwoman was linked to Aimee's earliest memories as someone who cared unconditionally for her. Josette loved to tell the story of how she was given the honor of choosing Aimee's name because she stopped by to visit and ended up driving Aimee's mother to the hospital to deliver her. Aimee always loved how Josette pronounced her name, and more so when she learned it meant "beloved" in French. At least she had been that to Josette, if not to anyone else.

It was Josette who discovered Aimee's bleeding forehead the morning after the tornado when she came over to see what damage they'd sustained. No one had realized Aimee was injured, and then they all assumed she'd cut herself on the broken glass littering the cave stairs from the shattered window above. Josette had asked for details, but Aimee couldn't speak over the lump in her throat. But Josette was gone now, Aimee reminded herself as she pulled into the long laneway leading to her family's home. And for the next several days, it would be just Aimee and her mother with no Josette to run to.

Brad and his wife Jenny were waiting impatiently in the kitchen with her mother when Aimee arrived. The tension in the air was palpable.

"Bout time you got here," Brad said.

"There was a storm..."

"Look who's finally here, Mama Caroline," Jenny interrupted her. Aimee cringed at the nickname and Jenny's and tone.

Aimee's mother turned to her. "It's so good to see you, Hannah," she said.

Aimee glanced at her brother with raised eyebrows, but he just shook his head.

"Look closer, Mama Caroline," said Jenny. "This is Aimee. Aunt Hannah passed away three years ago."

"Well, I know that," Caroline said. "But Hannah still comes to visit me."

Brad stood. "I gotta get back to the field. Jenny will tell you what needs to be done."

Aimee bristled, but she swallowed a retort, reminding herself that she was only back for two weeks; she could endure anything for two weeks, couldn't she?

"I have a list here for you," Jenny said. She handed Aimee her orders, explaining even the most obvious points as if Aimee were five. Being an artist and a college professor had long ago branded her as impractical and without common sense.

"Oh, Jenny. All that can wait," said Caroline. "I haven't talked to Hannah for ages."

Jenny patted Caroline's hand and shushed her. "But this isn't your sister. This is Aimee, and she needs to do her part. Brad and I can't be expected to do all the work around here forever."

Aimee gritted her teeth. "Well, considering you've already inherited the house and all the land, it doesn't exactly seem unreasonable," she said.

Jenny's jaw dropped. Aimee was relieved that for once, she was speechless.

Caroline looked confused and uncomfortable. "Oh, dear," she said, wringing her hands.

"You've upset your mother," Jenny accused her. "There, there," she spoke in a baby voice, patting Caroline's shoulder.

"Jenny, get Hannah a glass of tea. My goodness, she looks hot, and you're just sitting there."

Aimee smirked. "Thank you. I'd love a glass of tea. Now, give me that list, and let me take a look

at it."

Aimee spent the next five days cleaning every closet and drawer, each nook and cranny in the house, feeling the pull of the past with each item she uncovered. She had been gone for so long, had pushed thoughts of her cold childhood so far from her mind that everything seemed familiar and strange at the same time. She worked doggedly, separating out the items Jenny had designated for her mother to take to the facility from those that would be donated, burned, or taken to the dump. Jenny and Brad stopped in regularly to check on her progress and offer their critiques. Aimee was in a constant state of exhaustion from the mental and emotional strain, the physical work, and the weight of the heat of late June in the un-air-conditioned farmhouse. Her mother went by spells when she recognized her and was distant, and other moments when she confused Aimee with Aunt Hannah and was cheerful and even chatty.

"Aunt Hannah's gone, Mom," Aimee repeated on the fifth evening. She was sitting on the floor in front of the old metal filing cabinet, going through each drawer as sweat pooled between her shoulder blades. She begged her mother to let her turn on the window air-conditioner to no avail; money didn't grow on trees, after all.

"I know that. But where is Angela?"

Aimee had answered that she didn't know who Angela was so many times she'd lost track. She sighed. "Ready for bed? You look tired."

Her mother put up no resistance, so Aimee helped her into her nightgown and put her to bed. She glanced at the clock. It was still early; plenty of time to tackle the last drawer of the filing cabinet. It creaked as she opened it, weighted by yellowed folders. Aimee worked through the documents, the mantel clock above her marking time in the heavy, night air. Sweat ran down her neck, and the dust she stirred up clung to her arms. After two hours, she reached the last folder; it was unlabeled and thin. She opened it to find only a single sheet of paper. Aimee recognized her mother's handwriting, and in it, a list of names—girls' names. Almost half-way down the page one was circled: Angela.

"Who are these people?" Aimee said, exasperated at trying to understand all the family silences.

She tossed the single sheet of paper into the trash and rose. She wiped the sweat from her brow and climbed the stairs to her old room. Exhausted, she didn't even change out of her clothes before going to bed with the single fan trained on her.

It was 4:30 in the morning when Aimee awoke to the awful mix of emotions: incredible sadness, complete loneliness, and utter rejection. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled to attention, and her nose tingled at the scent of the storm. She rose and fumbled for the light. The feeling was dizzying and almost overwhelming, and Aimee knew a severe storm was approaching. The wind beat the branches against the house as she rushed down the stairs. She hurried to her mother's room, turning on the light even as she reached for Caroline's shoulder. "Storm's coming. Let's go." Disoriented, her mother looked at her with frightened eyes.

"We need to go to the cave."

Fear spread over her mother's face. "No, no, no," she wailed, grasping the covers. Ever since that long ago night, her mother refused to go down the cave during storms. Her father had finally given up trying to convince her, but Aimee wasn't taking any risks.

"We'll be safe, but we have to go to the cave," Aimee insisted.

"No, not there..." Caroline's voice trailed off into a wail.

The hail came, battering the house. Thunder rolled, shaking the structure to its foundations. The lights flickered. Desperate, Aimee reached under her mother's frail frame and raised her to sit on the edge of the bed. She coaxed Caroline's feet into a pair of slippers before lifting her to stand. With one arm around her mother's waist, Aimee led the sobbing, shaking woman to the cave.

Aimee opened the door and switched on the single unshaded lightbulb. Lightning shredded the sky outside the window at the end of shelter. The damp, musty coolness of the cave and the violent scent of the storm filled Aimee's nostrils, reducing her in an instant to the child of four who had sought shelter in that cave.

"I can't," Caroline insisted. She gripped the doorframe at the top of the steep steps.

Aimee pressed her body against her mother's,

blocking her retreat. "No time for that, Mom. Move."

Something in Aimee's voice broke through, and Caroline descended the steps as the storm lashed the house harder. Somehow, they made it to the bottom, and Aimee latched the rickety wooden door behind her. She led her mother to the wobbly bench. Caroline continued to whimper, and Aimee sat on the limestone floor with her back against the rough-hewn rock of the wall, tucked her knees to her chest, and rested her head on them. The rainwater had already saturated the dry earth, and in places, it trickled down the walls in cool rivulets and dripped from the arched stone ceiling, plinking off the lids of long-forgotten canned goods in Mason jars. A beetle scampered by Aimee's foot, and a spider web in the corner reflected the bulb's glare.

Another crash of thunder shook the house, and the light went out. Inky blackness enveloped them. The darkness intensified each sound: the wind and rain, the scurrying insects, the drops and rivulets, and Caroline's tears. Aimee knew she should try to soothe her mother, but she found herself unable to move. It was the same scenario, the same rerun that had been stuck on repeat in her mind since she was four: the storm, her mother's inexplicable tears, Aimee's childlike attempt to comfort Caroline, and those hands... Could she ever forget her mother's hands? Hands placed solidly, determinedly, and unequivocally on Aimee's little chest, shoving her back, telling her along with her mother's harsh words to get away from her. Every cell in her tiny, childish being had felt that rejection as she stumbled back through the darkness and into the sharp edge of a stone in the wall. Even now, she could remember the salty taste of the blood from her cut forehead as it mixed with the earthy rainwater seeping down the walls to the spot where she sat curled so tightly on the floor that not even her father or brother noticed when they came rushing down. That night had been the only time her mother said anything directly to her, but every little gesture, each slight, every single inattention after that: they all came back to that single moment in the cave. Aimee had spent her entire life slinking to the shadows, huddling in solitude just past the reach of the



light, filled with the precarious sense that she was on the brink of an abyss, on the edge of a storm, one solitary mistake from irremediable rejection. Caroline's wails intensified with the storm. At last, she drew a ragged breath. "I hate it down here, Hannah," she shouted.

The whirl of emotions inside Aimee collided with her mother's reproof. "Well, tough," she shouted back. "We're staying down here, because no matter how messed up my life is because of you, I don't have the slightest intention of dying in a tornado."

"Don't talk like that to me, Hannah. You of all people should understand why I hate it here. This place took my baby, it took my little girl, my Angela."

Aimee's breath caught. "What are you talking about?"

"You know I tripped coming down here in that storm. I fell, and I lost her. I don't care what anyone else says, I know it was my fault. It was my fault I lost my little girl."

Low moans of grief echoed off the walls and the arched ceiling. Aimee heard the old bench creak as her mother rocked back and forth on it in her misery.

Recognition pulsed through Aimee. She felt she should say something, but she was at a loss, torn between empathy for her mother's decades of self-reproaches and indignation that she had somehow been held responsible for surviving, for even existing.

"My little girl," Caroline repeated.

"You had another girl, you know," Aimee reminded her.

"I know that, but I never had the courage to love her. I never believed she'd be born. I was sure I'd lose her, too. I couldn't bear another loss."

Aimee rubbed her temples, her finger tracing the scar. She knew. At last, after so many years of asking what she'd done to merit her mother's coldness, she had her answer. And even though that answer could never erase all the effects of those years of pain, at least she knew the truth. And something about that truth was liberating.

"Mom... Caroline," Aimee said.

"Yes, Hannah?"

"You know Aunt Hannah... I mean, I'm gone,

right? I died three years ago."

There was a pause. "Yes, I know, Hannah."

"Well, I've seen Angela here, and... she says it wasn't your fault."

"You saw her?"

"Yes, and she told me to tell you it wasn't because you fell. To stop thinking that."

"Really?"

"Yes," Aimee whispered.

The single bulb blared back on. Both women blinked through the glare at each other. Caroline shaded her eyes and looked intently at her. "Aimee?"

"Yes, Mom." She stood slowly, stiffly, and sat beside her mother. Caroline patted her arm.

"I've just had the loveliest conversation with your Aunt Hannah."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She's given me some news that's made me very happy."

"I'm glad, Mom." She stood and stepped to the door, opening it a crack to listen, to sense the storm. It had passed. "Let's go upstairs and have some coffee and you can tell me all about it—that is, if you want."

Aimee reached for her mother's hand, and Caroline rose and took it. Slowly, Aimee led the way up the time-worn limestone steps and into the first gray streaks of the new day.