

*"Eye of the Storm" by Gabe Rodriguez*

Stormchasing has been running in my family for far longer than it had any right to. Back in the 1980's, my great-great-great-grandfather started cruising around Tornado Alley in an old pickup truck, with sheets of metal nailed in front of the tires and stacks of concrete mix weighing him down. His son struck several deals with news stations from Florida all the way to Virginia, providing up-close footage of hurricanes, cyclones, and every natural disaster no one else had the nerves to capture on camera. Eventually, he made enough money playing daredevil to retire early and raise his two daughters, one of which went to school in Idaho for geology, where she ended up meeting her college sweetheart. They had twins not long after moving to Washington—that'll be my grandfather and granduncle—who, in an attempt to follow the same call their ancestors once heard, drove out to Wyoming during the dry weeks of May, 2065, drunk on youth and hoping to feel the thrill of our forebears.

My grandfather never told anyone how exactly his brother died during that trip. Could have been a flying piece of debris, could have been getting struck by lightning—could have just been the old man getting mad and killing them with his bare hands. No matter the case, Grandpa dropped all dreams of stormchasing right there and then, taking up the life of a church-going farmer only a few years before meeting my grandmother, and soon enough, had my father just outside of Cheyenne where we've lived since. Ironic, considering that the year prior saw the worst tornado the world ever saw. Calling it an F5 barely did it justice, and it carved a line through Kansas like the finger of God. It was labeled as the first "megacyclone" to ever strike, and it marked the time that everyone, from the thawing mountain peaks of Yellowstone in June, to the poor, frostbitten souls celebrating Christmas in Texas, began to realize the same truth: Mother Nature was finally out to get us.

Near the end of 2079, droughts were becoming as commonplace as floods, even in the same region, and not long after, taking place within the very same

year. And it wasn't just in America: the equator was practically inhabitable at the height of summer, and any outposts still stationed at the poles were shuttered and gutted by frozen winds before anyone inside had the chance to call for rescue. Worst of all were the storms. It would be considered a miracle if a town was anything but flattened ruins, the rest strewn across the countryside like bird feed in the wake of even the tamest tornado. Typhoons and hurricanes would drag the ocean with them, draping long strips of sand, coral chunks, decaying seaweed and fish carcasses over the coast; in some places, you could smell the rot before you ever saw the sea. And they kept getting bigger.

At the turn of the twenty-second century, the Fujita scale needed to be expanded, storm shelters needed to be reinforced, and to many, a clear sky had begun to prove as much of an omen as a cloudy one; that was, if you were lucky to live somewhere that let you see the sky at all. The centermost parts of the US became choked in "haze": a thick layer of silt and dust kicked up from the lack of rain and obscuring anything beyond a hundred feet or so behind a faded veil of tan brown. On a good day, you could look up and almost see blue. You'd risk UV poisoning if you stay out there for too long, of course—my mother always loved feeling the sun on her face, even when it ended up killing her—but life on my grandfather's farm kept me busy, so there were weeks where I didn't bother to look outside at all.

One night, after my dad had gone to bed, I went to the kitchen for a packet of water and found Grandpa sitting at the dinner table, staring at an old photo album with an expression on his face I've never been able to place. It was there that he told me about my legacy, about where the unnamed rush of breathless anticipation that passed over me hearing the winds howling outside our shelter came from; even as he talked about his brother's death, I could see that glint of long lost, logic-defying love in his eye. Deep down, I knew he wanted me to carry on in his footsteps, to rekindle the torch he had abandoned in Wyoming all those

years ago, and it was with that mission in heart that I entered adolescence, then adulthood.

After six years of daydreaming, my dream became reality when I volunteered to be a signal driver for storm watches. Thanks to the haze, most radiowaves could only exist in shortform, reducing widescale communications to twenty or so miles per broadcast; it was the signal driver's job to carry those broadcasts into proximity of neighboring towns, where their own signal drivers would do the same. My role meant that when the weather started to turn, I served as a modern day Paul Revere, helping daisy chain storm warnings as I drove from one rural, backwater town to the next and diving into a local's bunker once the broadcast was received. This made for dangerous work, but being able to see those walls of rolling dark clouds in the distance, looming over the haze and closing in like a wave of liquid night... I couldn't get enough. My father disapproved of it, telling me that I had no right to play with my life, but all I needed to do was look at Grandpa, and see that same expression on his face from that fateful night in the kitchen to refuel my resolve.

Eventually, my knack for avoiding death, paired with my willingness to risk it, earned the respect of nearly every news outlet in the area, but after three years, the thrill soon lost its luster. I was expected to retreat to safety the moment my job was complete, but no one understood that I needed to be up there, to ride alongside a cyclone as it idly tore across the earth. So I waited for my chance.

The signal driver that crashed their van just outside of town wasn't broadcasting anything on the storm watch channel. Heavy winds since that morning were likely culprits, but the station didn't want to be responsible for missing an alarm, so I was sent to confirm if there was a threat before making my rounds, calling the station in case anyone was injured. The driver was Gene, a portly, round-faced man out from Evanston who thought mullets were making a comeback, and I found him running down the center of the road, no mask, arms frantically waving above his head when he spotted me. We had met last year

while holed up in a shelter together, which meant I knew his route meant that he should have stopped three towns back, so after letting him down a couple packets of my water, I asked him if there was a storm coming. As he looked at me for the first time since picking him up, I immediately recognized my grandfather's expression looking back.

He was visiting family in Salt Lake City earlier that day when he heard they were trying to contact stations about if the haze was damaging or blocking their satellites at all, as communication with California had fallen off entirely. He had made the drive with his van, so he went to the station for them to take a look at his equipment. It was as his satellite was being uninstalled when they spotted it. At this, he went very quiet, staring back out through the haze. I asked what it was that he saw, and he spoke without turning to face me:

“It was the end of the world.”

He laughed a little at this, like the sound of his own voice was the joke. He told me that it swallowed the horizon, forming what almost looked to be a clear line between day and night. Except it wasn't night on the other side. “It kept going”, he said, his finger tracing a slow line in front of us over the haze, from one corner of my vision to the other. “It wouldn't stop.” When I offered to drop him off at my family's storm bunker, he just laughed again.

The drive back was silent. I didn't ask about why he didn't decide to stop for shelter sooner, and he didn't question why I was searching for directions to Utah. After I came back from telling my supervisor that I was going to check in with the stations along Gene's route, he was gone, so I refilled my tank, got some road candy, and headed out onto the open road, already feeling the breathlessness taking its hold of me. I ended up passing by his van on the way; swerved into a ditch, the satellite was gone, and smoke rose from under the hood. My handle on the wheel tightened, as if I could ever hope to keep it from blowing away.

The drive there was unremarkable. I tried playing some CD's to pass the time, but the music seemed grating, filling the stillness like summer heat. I tried to imagine my grandparents driving alongside me, cheering me on, but whenever I looked out the window to picture their faces, the only one I could see was Grandpa's, staring me down with an all too familiar look. A pit stop in Rawlins told me that Gene hadn't bothered slowing down at all. The station there asked if they needed to send out a signal driver. All I could tell them was to stay on standby.

I was thirty minutes out from Rock Springs when I saw it. At first, I thought it was a patch of darkly colored haze, but as the peaks of tenebrous clouds rose up to fill my windshield, I had to pull over. From where I was parked, it almost resembled the silhouette of a tsunami, but at least tsunamis didn't reach that high. Tsunamis didn't curve out of view, like giant arms moving in to hug a trembling leaf. Putting on my mask, I braced against the howling winds, stepping out into the empty country road and watched as the billowing wall encompassed everything in front of me, stretching in both directions for as far as I dared to look. I had only been to a city once in my life, and the sense of vertigo from craning my neck up at a skyscraper was the same that now froze me in place. The air felt tense in my lungs, charged in a way that only storms could charge it, but as I stood there, I noticed a subtle tugging at my feet, the sensation a combination of wearing metal boots near a magnet and a tide pulling me towards an oncoming wave. The haze protected me from bearing witness to the land beneath it, yet I knew there would be nothing besides remains miles from where they should be. I heard it then: a deep, faroff roar, like a waterfall, getting closer.

It was getting closer.

I nearly blew a tire speeding back to Rawlins. Rock Springs was closer, but I knew that even the deepest shelter there wouldn't be enough. By the time I arrived, signal drivers with warnings from Idaho and Arizona were already waiting for me. One look at their faces told me everything I needed to know: we

had seen the same storm. It was out of sight for now, but I could still feel it on my heels, its course already charted. So I kept driving. I drove through town, signal blaring, picking up the signals of frantic drivers reporting both Montana and New Mexico going radio silent. Breaking in Cheyenne for gas, I took the time to dot each report on my map, then paused, linked them, then laughed.

It was a circle. An eye.

I was there for less than an hour until I saw it again, leering at me from above the haze as I sprinted to my car and peeled off. More signals rose and fell as I entered Colorado: South Dakota going dark, as well as Texas and Louisiana. Evening fell, and I wanted to weep, knowing my home was lost. When my car broke down, a full day of overworking the engine catching up to me at last, it was barely a thought to steal another. A part of me wanted this one to stop, turn off the ignition and wait for the edge of the storm to pull me inside. Then I would look into the rearview mirror and, seeing my grandfather looking back, press harder on the gas.

Based on my hasty calculations and the occasional signal from the car's radio, the storm was pushing me southeast, towards the coast. I never heard of a storm lasting longer than 24 hours, but if it hadn't slowed down by the time I ran out of road...well, there wasn't much else I could do. That's the funny thing about stormchasing: at some point, you lose track of which one is doing the chasing.

For now, though, the eye of the storm is on me, and I can only pray that I don't escape its gaze.