

Riven

by Jennnifer Freese

Second Place

When people ask me about the evacuation, I tell them I don't remember most of it.

This is a lie.

The memories aren't lost inside my head – I know exactly where they are. Thinking about the day before we evacuated is like trying to touch opposing magnet ends together. My brain gets close to those memories and then hits a sort of impenetrable field that repels me back into the present.

Still, sometimes, when I'm by myself, I force myself to think about them, back before everything else began. I imagine I'm watching a movie, and I'm no longer trapped inside my own head but watching myself as if through the lens of a camera. This makes it a little bit easier. I focus on my house as it was before the storm – two stories, a large and comfortable suburban house with wood floors downstairs and pale carpeting in the bedrooms upstairs.

Summer was ending around the country when we left town, but at home it was still as hot and sticky as if the city had never heard of any other season. It wouldn't be cool until at least mid-November, and autumn felt farther away than Texas, which was where we were headed. That Saturday, cicadas were whirring in the trees outside my bedroom window as I stood in front of my desk, open suitcase on my bed. I could hear a newscaster blaring from the television downstairs, standing on a beach nearby, warning everyone that the hurricane was deadly, one of the worst in years. I debated whether I should take my U.S. History textbook in addition to my algebra homework, or just blow off all of the homework entirely.

I pulled out my phone and texted my best friend, Beth.

Are u taking hw w u?

She didn't answer. I wondered if she had already left with her family or not. They had a generator in their basement – we went to their house to ride out the last big storm. I'd already asked if we could do this again, but Dad refused, saying the storm was too big this time.

I looked at my tennis racket, leaning against the wall in the corner in its bag where I left it yesterday evening. I looked at my books, and then back at the racket. My tennis racket, my stuffed animals lined up on a shelf above my dresser, the formal dress hanging in my closet that Mom helped me pick out only the week before for the Homecoming dance. The dance was still two weeks away. If I tried to take everything with me, I had to admit that there was a possibility I wouldn't be coming back. Stevie, my little brother, wobbled into my bedroom dragging a suitcase bulging with toys, books, video games and stuffed animals. He obviously wasn't conflicted about what to bring with him. I hoped that Mom was packing his real suitcase.

From this point, I really do remember only certain parts of the afternoon. Mom and I fought about whether or not I could take my own car. She was taping up a box of photograph albums. Her blond, wavy hair had come out of the ponytail she had fastened it into that morning, and was now frizzed in a halo around her face. She couldn't find her and Dad's wedding album, and wondered aloud if she had ever gotten it back from the friend she'd lent it to last year. I argued that taking my car gave us more room for packing. That my car was my responsibility, and I couldn't leave it behind after babysitting all summer in order to make payments to Dad. She looked ready to come unhinged and ended the argument without a logical explanation.

“I just want you with me.” She was so upset that it came out more of a hiss than a shout. I dropped the subject.

Dad came back from the hospital where he'd been working since before dawn that morning. He spent several hours boarding up the windows with the plywood we kept in the garage. The staccato of his hammer played in the background as the house grew dim.

Mom and Dad went into his study to “figure out a plan,” and their voices grew louder and louder. Standing in the downstairs bathroom closest to the study, pretending to be looking for something when I was really just eavesdropping, I heard snippets of the argument coming through the door in frantic bursts. Apparently, Dad was going to stay and help in the hospital. Part of me felt that, if I stayed in the house with him, I would somehow be able to take care of it for them. I knew it was ridiculous, but I wanted to stretch myself across the roof like a giant blanket, protecting our lives with just the force of my wanting.

Mom cooked dinner, just some pasta with a bottle of sauce plopped on top. We ate our last meal at the dining room table instead of in front of the television, which was still airing nothing but hurricane coverage. Dad finally muted the television, leaving newscasters silently reporting on cloudless beaches that, I imagined, would be black with wind and rain by tomorrow night. Mom got up from the table intermittently when she remembered to put something in a box that was going with us, but mostly we ate in silence. Even Stevie seemed to be catching on that this was no ordinary evacuation.

“Did you fill up the gas tank in your car?” Mom asked Dad for the third time since he'd gotten home.

“Yes, Daphne, I remembered.” He looked exhausted.

They cleaned the kitchen together, Dad washing pots and pans while Mom loaded the dinner dishes into the dishwasher. I finally got through to Beth on my phone. Her family had decided to evacuate, as well. We talked about her Homecoming dress, and our next tennis tournament,

which was a week from the coming Monday. She guessed that the courts would be dry by then. It was against McKinley High, and we would probably lose, anyway.

After dinner, I closed the curtains in my bedroom—it was better than looking at the plywood covering the window— and made my bed, looking around one last time. I touched the walls, the frame of my door, telling myself I would be back soon.

Dad hugged me tightly on the front porch, and he smoothed my hair with his hand the way he used to when I was little. I wanted to hug him back, but I was angry, and pushed him away.

“Why can't you just come with us?” I asked, my eyes narrowing. I wanted to say something important, something adult. Something that would hurt him as deeply as I was hurting, knowing that he was choosing his patients at the hospital over his family. All I could do was look at my sandals as my eyes filled with angry tears. Through my tears, I noticed the chipped blue polish on my toenails and felt very young.

“I'll see you soon, Kate,” was all he said. It sounded like a promise. He was good at sounding sure when no one else was. I wished he was coming with us so badly that my chest ached. We all left the house together – Dad going back to the hospital while Mom, Stevie and I set out in Mom's SUV. Mom only got halfway down the driveway before she silently pulled the keys from the ignition and ran back into the house. I followed her, not sure what she was doing, and watched as she turned on the dishwasher in the kitchen.

“It'll be nice to have clean dishes when we get back,” she said, her eyes refusing to meet mine.

I ran upstairs and grabbed my tennis racket. I didn't need to explain.

That night, sleeping in Mom's car as we headed for Texas, I had my first dream about the hanging man. He wasn't actually hanging, just heading in that direction. It was green,

everywhere around me, hills and valleys as far as I could see. A small village like something you'd see in a movie. Wheeled in a simple wooden cart towards the gallows, hands bound behind his back, his eyes found me. Now that so many years have passed, I don't know if I was standing outside the town the first time I dreamed of him, or if I was in the crowd. Rather than hear him, I felt his words reverberate through me.

Help us.

His plea hit my body with intensity strong enough to wake me from my sleep, confused and blinking in the glow of traffic lights. My neck had a kink in it, and my mouth was cottony. I looked around, sure that something from my dream remained in the car – it was that powerful. The car was quiet, though, just the sounds of storm coverage on the radio. Stevie was asleep. My mom glanced at me and patted my hand.

The evacuation was only the beginning of my story. It alone is enough for a dozen stories that everyone would believe – stories belonging to thousands of people whose lives changed course that weekend. I wish I could tell that story to the therapist they made me see, or to my Mom, or Aunt Ruth. The changes that started inside of me after we left home – the ones that led to the other events, the ones no one would ever believe – they are the only story I have left to tell.

“Where does Aunt Ruth live again, Mom?” Stevie asked, his voice peppered with a whine. We'd left Texas and were driving north.

I rolled my eyes. “Aunt Ruth lives near New Paltz. Do you remember where it was on the map when we looked at it? A few fingers higher than New York City. We talked about it.” *Half an hour ago*, I added silently. I tried to remember to be patient (“Stevie is going through a lot,

too. You have to try and think of yourselves as a team,” Mom instructed me that morning as we packed up the car in the motel parking lot.)

“No,” he replied, sounding a little lost. I looked back at him, and he suddenly looked a lot younger than seven. Maybe Stevie didn’t feel like remembering right now. I could understand that, at least.

Up until two days ago, we had been staying in a little motel in northern Texas until it was safe to go home. It was filled with evacuees, and at night you could hear people’s dogs barking and babies crying up and down the rows of rooms. Every car in the parking lot was filled to bursting. Dad called the night before and had a conversation with Mom that Stevie and I were not supposed to hear. Mom talked in hushed tones on her cell phone, pacing outside the motel room door.

“... levees broke ... the house ...?” I heard her whisper. That was when she noticed me listening through a crack in the door and shut it, a stern look on her face.

“What are you doing, Kate?” Stevie asked me from the motel bed where he had been playing video games for what felt like hours. I shushed him with my own stern look, not wanting him to alert Mom that I was still standing with my ear pressed to the door. I kept eavesdropping, trying to understand what I was hearing. It was miserable, being kept in the dark like some little kid. She wouldn’t let us watch TV (“*It’s all depressing and sensationalized at this point, anyway,*” she muttered to me.) Instead, we went to the local movie theater and saw a stupid animated movie about carrier pigeons. Stevie didn’t even like it.

“What should we do?” I heard her say to Dad through the motel room door. Silence. Then, her voice, cracking a little bit: “That long? I don’t know if she’ll take us for that long ... I know

she's my sister, but ... yes, that's what family is for, but you know we don't exactly have a normal family situation ...”

Our neighbors to the left turned on their television, and the sounds of NASCAR through the thin walls drowned out Mom's voice. I closed my eyes in frustration and moved my head away from the door, noticing that Stevie was now simply lying on the bed, clutching one of the three stuffed animals he was allowed to bring with him when we left. He was normally so full of energy that seeing him just lying there, not doing anything, made me feel a little sick. I picked up the remote and found some cartoons. We both zoned out and stared at the screen. A few minutes later, Mom came back inside. Her eyes looked red, like she'd been crying. She tried to smile a hopeful, everything-is-going-to-be-okay smile, which just made her look more pathetic.

“Okay, guys. I talked to Daddy.”

“Daddy? How is he?” Stevie wanted to know, sitting up, looking a little groggy. If we were going to stay here, I thought, I needed to find him a playground or a park or something.

“Daddy is fine. There is some good news and some bad news,” she said. Mom explained to us that the storm passed, and the damage at the hospital wasn't too bad. Daddy was still at the hospital, and he was safe. Those were the good things.

“The bad news is that our neighborhood flooded. We don't know what happened to our house, but the water is deep enough that they're not letting anyone return home for now.”

“When are they going to let us go home?” I wanted to know.

“We just don't know anything else right now, Kate. Your dad and I think it would be a good idea for us to go stay with your Aunt Ruth -”

“In New York?” I gasped. It felt like the other side of the world.

“Yes, Kate. We don't know how long it will be until we can go back home, and staying in a motel like this just isn't good for you and Stevie. I've heard you tossing and turning at night.”

“I'm fine, really.” I didn't tell her the reason I was tossing and turning. The same dream, like clockwork, almost every night: the young man, his eyes magnetic and unforgettable, the crowd, the noose. I told myself it was just nerves. The last thing she needed was to worry about that, too.

“We'll leave tomorrow morning,” Mom said, her voice firmer now.

I started to feel a little desperate. New York felt a lot like giving up: giving up on home, and most importantly, on Dad.

With that, she stood up from the little motel room table. I sighed. I hate it when parents do that – just decide when the conversation is over when it so clearly isn't. I put my head down in my arms on the table and stared angrily into the darkness.

Mom paid our bill in the motel's main office while we packed our things. We climbed into the car, which was beginning to smell like fast food and Stevie's socks. Mom typed in Aunt Ruth's address on the GPS and away we went.

Now we were crossing the bridge from Poughkeepsie and heading into Aunt Ruth's tiny town, which wasn't really more than a blip on the map. I forgot about being irritated with Stevie and reached back to ruffle his sandy hair. Stevie looked just like Mom, with dark blonde hair and green eyes. His skin tanned easily, and as he spent so much time outside playing, his skin was smooth and brown as polished wood by April.

My similarity to Mom, on the other hand, ended with the fact that my hazel eyes sometimes looked a little green, if only in a certain light. If I was careless enough to sit outside without sunscreen, my skin went from white to red within minutes. My hair was dark brown but looked red in the sunlight, and was so thick and curly that it had a tendency to tangle by mid-morning

unless I tied it up, especially during the summer. I was in the habit of pulling it into a long braid down the center of my back every morning after showering, just so that I didn't have to deal with it. Back home, I would pull the braid out at night, damp and smelling like shampoo, and Stevie would climb giggling onto my bed where he would beg to be tickled, complaining that my hair smelled "like girls' hair." I think he secretly liked it, although he would never admit this.

I had questions of my own that had that popped into my head over the long drive north.

"Mom, what are we going to do about school?" I asked.

"I don't know right now, Kate."

There were other questions I didn't ask, although they burned inside of me until my head ached. *When will we see Dad again? Is our house still there? How long until we can go home?* I knew there weren't any answers for those questions yet. I wished I was little, like Stevie, so I could believe that Mom and Dad were in control of this situation.

"Why couldn't we stay in Texas or Alabama? It would be closer to Dad. Beth's family rented a furnished condo in Dallas."

Mom looked at me like I was suggesting we stay at Disney World until things cleared up.

"Kate, it's just not in our budget. Aunt Ruth already talked to Dad and offered her home to us. She has bedrooms for both of you, and I could use the support right now."

I thought about my Homecoming dress in my closet at home. I thought about my homeroom, English with Mr. Turner, and the hallways where Beth and I talked between classes. I wondered when I could see all of it again, and I felt a low ache in my chest.

When we finally exited the highway, it was too dark to see much of anything. We had no signal out in the country, so I slowly read aloud the directions Ruth had provided Mom, all the while trying to peer out the windshield in an effort to distinguish where we were. We followed

one small road for what seemed like eternity – literally, over a river and through some woods – until we saw the row of mailboxes and a small sign that read Ruth’s address. We drove for a few minutes on that road until we finally spotted the house up ahead.

“Oh, thank God, we’re here,” my mother sighed, pulling into the driveway. Stevie stirred in his sleep in the back seat. A light flickered on over the front door of the house, and the door opened a second later. A small collie bounded out the door with Aunt Ruth not far behind. I opened the car door and looked around.

We saw Aunt Ruth about once a year on average, usually at Thanksgiving or Christmas. She loved visiting the South, saying that the history was good for her writing. We had never visited her house, as far as I could remember. The air felt different. I shivered, squinting up into the darkness at Ruth’s big farmhouse. The windows were dark with the curtains drawn back. They looked like blank eyes staring back at me, keeping secrets.