Wheel of Fortune

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Decimated. I am blurry-eyed from watching tornado reports from Joplin, Missouri. Joplin is the last exit I take as I turn south on Highway 71, the final pit stop for what have become my twice-annual visits from Nebraska, where I now live, to my childhood home in the hills of northwest Arkansas. Joplin is my own dividing line between north and south, between the flat prairie of the northern plains and the foothills of the Ozarks, and between salad greens: north—romaine, spinach and iceberg; south—poke, mustard, and collard. And between road kill: north of Joplin it's mostly deer; south of Joplin, mostly armadillo. The farther south I go, the more dead armadillo in the road, though once in Arkansas I did hit a doe head on, killing it instantly and breaking my front undercarriage. A live-dock worker still wearing his rubber boots from the chicken plant up the road, shirtless in blood-stained overalls, stopped and asked if I was going to keep it, eyeing the dead deer. "Take it," I said. Grasping the deer by the hind legs, he hoisted the carcass into the bed of his rusted Chevy. My husband loves to tell this story—about the redneck begging for my road kill, though hearing it always makes me a bit uneasy.

I roll my panties into a hot dog. They pack better in rolls, as do the socks and t-shirts. Rolling keeps t-shirts from getting that deep double-

cross crease across the front and back, gives me more room for shoes. I've got packing down to a science. So many trips south from Omaha to the homestead in the Ozark hills I could drive it blind. After twenty-five years, I sometimes drive it so mindlessly I lose chunks of time and space. Did I pass Trail's End truck stop in Rock Port, Missouri? Did I miss the Dairy Queen exit at Lamar again? I'm at Precious Moments Chapel exit already?

Most of my trips back home to the bible belt of the Ozarks are planned. I used to come down almost every other month, "every whipstitch," my mother says, but work, school, and family obligations smother my youthful impulsiveness. This trip is different. I post on my Facebook wall, *I'm running away*. I had planned to go later in the summer, but a sudden and serious illness put my mother-in-law in intensive care for three weeks on death's door, and in the midst of the stress, my own body gave out, becoming almost immobile from pain. "What your brain can't handle will manifest in your body," my massage therapist, Linda, tells me. After two weeks of excruciating pain, blood tests reveal positive ANA antibodies—lupus. On the phone the nurse's sentences run on—*don't want to alarm you . . . don't worry yet . . . need more tests . . . see a specialist.* I have to wait two months to see a specialist. "Two months?" I ask, "What am I supposed to do for two months?" The doctor prescribes muscle relaxers and pain pills and says to keep in touch.

I take a good three days to catastrophize every possible scenario. I spend my days and most nights surfing "lupus" on the internet. *A chronic inflammatory disease that occurs when your body's immune system attacks your own tissues and organs.* Most sites repeat the same words. *Diagnosis difficult. At times, severe. Other times, subsides completely. ANA: Anti-nuclear antibody. Ten million Americans test positive for ANA antibodies; fewer than one million of those have lupus.* One in ten? I consider whether these are good odds, or bad. I learn Flannery O'Connor died at thirty-nine from lupus she inherited from her father. *Diagnosis once grim, now improved with treatment.* I search hours on end for something specific, something I can grab on to and hold like a life raft, but every description or explanation is vague, imprecise. *No two cases of lupus are exactly alike. Signs and symptoms may come on suddenly or develop slowly; may be temporary or permanent. May* be

this or *may* be that. You *may* feel this but *might* feel that. Lupus doesn't even know what it is. I need to analyze the specifics to know exactly what state of dysfunction to set my mind to. My mother has suffered with polymyalgia rhuematica, another type of autoimmune disease, for years. The Mayo Clinic's website says they are unrelated, but I'm sure I've inherited this from my mother. Just like her to hand me down something like this.

My need to control the outcome of this half-ass diagnosis overwhelms me for days. I want hard statistics. What are my chances of having it? What are my chances, if I do have it, of it being the severe kind? How can I play the odds if I don't even know the cards I'm holding? If I can just gather enough information. If I can control the pain. If I can avoid any more stress. I grasp at invisible straws. I don't tell my husband for a week but analyze every confrontation, disagreement, or argument we've ever had in the twenty years we've been together to decide whether or not he'll stick around or bail if and when the going gets tough. I have myself in a wheelchair and diapers living in a group home by the time I decide I have driven myself sufficiently crazy and need to get out of town. Just my luck a tornado tears through my route before I am to leave. I'll go home to stay with my mother a few days, or at least long enough to blame her for my faulty genes.

"Decimated." The only word the storm chasers from The Weather Channel can use to describe the massive tornado's destruction. The word, in quotation marks, scrolls across the bottom of the screen.

"Maybe I should pack the chainsaw," I tell my husband.

"Chain's broke," he says.

I watch the television reports as the storm chaser at the scene pleads for help: "Please send help. It's . . . it's total destruction." As he holds the mic, he turns toward what was once, he says, St. John's Hospital, the same hospital where my father had quintuple bypass surgery twenty-some-odd years earlier. I had traveled from Omaha and stayed in a motel across the street from the hospital to be close. Though the doctors said the heart surgery might last him ten years, he lasted another eighteen. Bad odds, but he beat the house. Toward the end I made this trip what seemed like every other week. Every whipstitch.

The amount of devastation in Joplin slowly unfolds across every network and cable channel over the next few hours. Words like "catastrophic" continue to scroll across the screen, though abstract words do little to describe the destruction. I can only watch so much and turn off the TV, only to turn it back on minutes later. The Weather Channel is soon reporting it was an F5 tornado—the worst. What are the odds, I wonder? Chances of your home getting hit by an F5: about three in ten million. Chances of surviving an F5 tornado outside of a secure, underground shelter: *statistically unlikely*.

On Facebook I post on my wall, asking my high school friends if everyone is okay down south. A few reply—some minor damage in southwest Missouri. Across the border in Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, my hometown and where my mother lives, is okay. Kellee, a friend in Omaha and supervisor for a chain of hair salons I once worked at, sends out a request for clothes, shoes, anything for one of her employees whose home in Joplin was a total loss. I post I am heading down and I'll take what I can. Kellee calls, "She has two kids. She's lost everything." In a daze, the single mother tells Kellee, "I can't go to work. I don't have any makeup. . . . "

As I listen to Kellee, I scan the Facebook posts, joke after joke of Christian radio host Harold Camping's Rapture prediction from the day before. Rapturists believe Jesus will return to Earth and the righteous will fly up to heaven, followed by five months of various fire, brimstone, and plagues. Vegas oddsmakers estimated the probability of the world ending on Rapture Day to be one in five billion. Although Camping's previously predicted Raptures of 1988 and 1994 failed to materialize, he and his followers were adamant this was the year. Fran posted on Facebook she is baking Rapture cookies. Teez' Salon is offering a 20 percent off Rapture sale on all hair products. Rebecca is just too damn busy to be included in Rapture this go-round. Earlier this morning I posted, "Whew, that was a close one. I'm still here."

Still, some take the Rapture seriously. Westboro Baptist Church, the church group best known for picketing military funerals, claims the tornado is punishment for the rampant homosexuality in Joplin and

other alleged random sins. "Thank God for 125 Dead," the words in bold on the group's website, godhatesfags.com. During a confrontation at Joplin's memorial service for the victims one week later, a Westboro protester will be pulled to safety from a mob of angry bikers by police as they try to hold the bikers back. "Run, you stupid motherfucker," police reportedly tell the protester. I scroll through the Facebook pages of Rapture admonishments, briefly considering if my recent diagnosis is punishment for my own past sins. God knows there are plenty.

As I watch The Weather Channel's Mike Bettes, star of *The Great Tornado Hunt*, I feel the pain creeping back into my neck, which reminds me to pack the muscle relaxers and pain pills the doctor prescribed. I take another Aleve as Bettes explains he came upon the tornado after chasing storms across the state line in Kansas for the past three days and was exasperated nothing was happening. He reports from a location in front of the severely damaged St. John's Hospital. Bettes turns from the camera, crying, a scene that will be replayed on every nightly news channel for the next two weeks.

Joplin was where, as a new teenage bride, my ex-husband took me out for my sixteenth birthday for a seafood dinner on Rangeline Road. I brought a fake ID so I could order a drink for my birthday. After dinner, he wanted to take me to the movies. We pulled into a small drive-in off Rangeline with individual screens for each car, laid out in a circle, with the projection and concession in the center, giving it the appearance of a flying saucer. The movies showing were XXX—porn. They studied my ID closely at the entrance and let us pass. In the cover of darkness, my nineteen-year-old husband held my left hand to his crotch as he watched the small screen intently while I munched popcorn and watched the cars to both sides, couples disappearing and reappearing, heads up and down, tangled heaps of limbs sweating in the heavy Ozark summer air.

Joplin was where I fled twenty-some-odd years ago with my three-year-old daughter to escape my husband's alcoholic outbursts when I finally decided to leave. I knew he'd come looking for me, and Joplin was fifty miles away from home, a safe enough distance, I thought. I had

$500 to get a motel, food, and pay deposit on first month's rent once I got out safe. The sign on the Motel 6 billboard said $34.99 a night, but when I checked in, the motel manager said it would be $58. All those cheaper rooms are gone, he said. I took it anyway, as it was too late to turn back.

I've all but stopped packing and can only watch The Weather Channel from four hundred miles away as the mega-storm that just destroyed Joplin moves south toward my elderly mother's. I have never been one to panic in tornados, usually riding out warning sirens from the comfort of my bed, though in Omaha I have the luxury of a basement if needed. Sulphur Springs is a community of six hundred, give or take, twenty-five miles from the nearest Wal-Mart. There are no basements or underground shelters, and the storm alert system is a pre-recorded, automated phone call from the county notifying those who have signed up that a tornado warning has been issued. My mother is eighty-five, uses a walker and oxygen, and wouldn't leave her home if Jesus Christ himself came knocking. My mother and I both know the probability of a tornado directly hitting her trailer home are slim—specifically a three in ten million chance of a direct hit, and a one in four million chance of death, if hit. The probability of my eighty-five-year-old mother dying within the year: one in seven.

Anytime I travel, I take great care to watch the weather as it is a running joke with my husband that tornados seem to follow me wherever I go. He calls me "the tornado whisperer." I once drove clear across Iowa unknowingly in the midst of tornados while I listened to *David Sedaris Live at Carnegie Hall* on CD. When I stopped for gas, I learned a tornado had touched down just north of the town I had passed through earlier. "I thought it looked like a wall cloud, but where was I going to go?" I explained. I suppose I get my nonchalance regarding tornados from my mother. Most people who grew up in the Depression era and lived through the World War II years like she did have endured so much devastation, suffering, and loss—two siblings died from whooping cough and dysentery in childhood, teen brothers were forced to

leave home because there wasn't enough food to feed them, and she had to quit school in the seventh grade and work to feed the family—how bad could any other misfortune be? She comes from a generation of risk-takers. I suppose the greatest generation has the wisdom to understand what can be controlled and what can't, so why worry about those things out of your control?

I often wonder though if her casual attitude toward life's crises masks a potent underlying fear. Her Sunday morning devotion to Oral Roberts Ministries on local television, what I call her armchair church, was costly, as she wrote out a check each time the televangelist solicited tithes warning of some phantom doom his visions forewarned on a weekly basis. Fear of death is a strong motivator.

"Mom, you having some weather down there?" I yell into the receiver, my nearly deaf mother's TV blaring in the background.

"Oh, yeah. I've had two calls from the county so far. I guess a tornado is right over us about now. When will you be here? You packed yet?"

"Don't you think you better get somewhere, maybe the bathtub?" I ask, but we both know what a silly question this is. She would play her odds.

"I'm hangin' on good to my armchair. I'll be fine," she says, adding, "I wish these weathermen would get off the TV so I can watch *Wheel of Fortune*."

With forecasters warning of an even bigger system approaching the same area in the next twenty-four hours, I head down the next morning. Torn between the desire to get away or to avoid getting caught in a deadly tornado, my desire to go outweighs the risk I perhaps too easily dismiss. My husband suggests I wait another day. "I'll be fine," I say, the pain still stiff in my joints, feeling the need to stay with my ailing mother but seriously doubting my own words. Perhaps I have inherited, along with her diseased genes, her propensity to take risky chances—or her aptitude to camouflage fear.

Once on the road, I drive for hours in a heightened state of awareness as I pass all of my familiar landmarks. South out of Kansas City, my half-way point from Omaha, the traffic is heavy for a weekday. I soon

realize I am surrounded by a convoy of rescue workers and supplies headed toward Joplin. I pass semi after semi of flatbeds loaded with massive floodlights, generators, front loaders, and dozers. I pass utility linemen in electric company trucks and State Farm vans. I pass a motorcade of white US Government vans, suits inside. "Must be FEMA," I say aloud to break the silence. Across the interstate heading north, I notice a Red Cross van off to the side of the highway, the driver standing outside his door, reading a map. He only had to look up to see the caravan heading south to find his way.

Driving past the thirty-foot tall giant morel mushroom on Highway 71 about forty miles north of Joplin, I see nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to make me think a few miles to the south lay devastation. I begin to notice debris accumulating the farther south I drive, though it looks no different than the roadside trash I usually see. Coming up to the first of Joplin's exits, I begin to see bits of debris: sheet metal, insulation, drywall, but little else. As I approach Joplin's main exits, I slam on my brakes to avoid rear-ending the line of traffic trying to get into the city with supplies and manpower. Off to the side of the highway rests a lone forty-foot light pole, lying abandoned as if it fell off the back of a truck. A grey sedan sits wedged between the poles of an exit sign as if driven there and parked. A thirty-foot sheet of metal roofing hangs to the top branches of an oak tree, folded like a closed book. More drywall, more sheet metal. Bigger chunks the closer I get to the twister's path. Trees stripped of bark. Little else is visible from the main highway, the rolling Ozark hills shrouding the destruction just over the western hill from prying eyes.

Rounding the final bend south of town, I come upon a small group of young men, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old, picking up debris on the side of the road. A Scout troop maybe, or high school team. As I slow to witness what I can from my car, one dark-haired boy holding open a black trash bag by the side of the road looks up, staring back at me. Holding a piece of drywall in his hand, expressionless, he watches me watch him. Embarrassed for staring, I look away and speed up. I press hard on the gas, barreling down the highway as Patsy Cline plays on Sirius radio.

The sun is shining but dark clouds are moving in from the west as I arrive at my mother's home in the afternoon. The pain in my neck and upper back is a seven on the one-to-ten scale I learned at the doctor's office, meaning "intense"; to me it means time for drugs. I see little damage from the night before except for a few small tree limbs taken down by the wind. Leaves and twigs lay scattered across the front porch; rain still rests in the seats of the plastic lawn chairs. The booming volume of the TV cuts through the metal shell of the trailer. I walk to the front porch where I notice a new sign, "Warning! Oxygen in Use!" taped to the top of the screen door. I wonder how much this alters her one in seven chance of dying this year.

We watch TV reports on the cleanup in Joplin the rest of the afternoon, and by dinnertime the skies are smoky black and weather warnings interrupt *Wheel of Fortune* again. At the bottom of the TV screen a scroll runs continuously, reminding residents in warning areas to go to their "safe place" away from windows and outer walls. Children should wear bike helmets, it says. "That's a new one," I half laugh to my mother as it scrolls across the screen. The next day, reports will show a child surviving the tornado by wearing his bicycle helmet in the bathtub as a toilet flies at his head, smashing the helmet in two but the child survives with merely a scratch. What are the chances?

Not to be outdone by my mother's lackadaisical attitude toward the impending mega-storm, I deadhead the wilting begonias on the front porch, pinching the dead flower buds off the leggy plants. "You've got to pinch off the dying blooms so the plant can rejuvenate itself," my mother always taught me. Too bad this doesn't work for humans, I reason. I welcome the approaching storm, now visible to the west, a reprieve from the egocentric turn my life has taken. I'm sick of the worry, sick of pouring over medical statistics and probabilities. Sick of myself. Something, anything, to take my mind away from my body and how it seems to be turning on me.

I am making a mental checklist of my safe place when the phone call we've been expecting comes. The pre-recorded woman's voice on the other end repeats without passion, "A tornado has been spotted in extreme Northwest Benton County Arkansas. Please seek shelter

immediately." My mother shrugs and goes to bed, leaving me in front of the TV. I consider taking my pillow and blanket to the bathtub, but figure if a tornado does hit, a bathtub in a rickety trailer won't provide much protection anyway. The pain in my upper body intensifying, I take another muscle relaxer and switch back and forth between the local weather and now-continuous coverage from Joplin with Anderson Cooper on CNN. The Weather Channel's Mike Bettes moves on to Oklahoma once Cooper, Diane Sawyer, and Brian Williams—who continually reminds viewers he once lived in Joplin—descend on the scene. Odds of a tornado in Oklahoma causing one death: one in thirty-nine.

Within twenty minutes, the drugs begin to do their work. Out the front window, I can see a haze of yellow light engulfing the valley. The hummingbird feeders knock against the front porch posts with the increasing wind. I doze on and off, the drugs weighing me down like a cast of cement. Anderson Cooper interviews four people who rode out the Joplin tornado in a convenience store. As the tornado bore down, one survivor used his cell phone to record what he thought to be his last moments. Screams of "Heavenly Father! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" from one woman are the only audible words heard over the cries and roar of the wind. This is the last lucid moment I remember.

I hear the storm build outside the thin paneled trailer walls. Or is it calm? Maybe all I hear are the semis heading north toward Joplin on the highway above the hill. Or is it the train that rides through town every hour on the half hour, twenty-four hours a day? My head is throbbing, though I feel no pain; my back spasms, but my mind doesn't react. I am somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, between earth and sky, between hanging on and letting go. Through my heavy eyelids, I watch as the sky detaches from the earth with each lightning bolt. Or is it the flash of the TV screen? The probability of getting struck by lightning: one in three million. How do I know this? Outside the window, the sky has lost all color and trees bend and twist from the force of the wind. In the dust of the wind, I see an ice skater. She spins in place, bringing in her arms to tighten her spiral. The closer she draws in her arms, the faster she skates. Soon, she becomes a blur. I hear screams. I force my

eyes open to see myself sleeping on the couch below. I wonder if the person I see can feel any pain. I am Dorothy, but I'm not in Oz. I am sane but drugged, but not too drugged to forget I'm in Arkansas in a paper trailer with a possible tornado over me. What was the probability of death in a tornado? Three in ten million? One in four million? The probability of surviving an F5 in a mobile home with no storm shelter: *statistically unlikely*. Finally, I let go and give in to the rapture. I am powerless. Nothing I can do now.

Slowly I wake to the rumble of the train moving through town, and finally, its whistle as it approaches the crossing. The skies are clear through my bedroom window. I have no memory of turning off the TV or getting into bed. Nine more have died from overnight tornados to the west in Oklahoma and to the south in central Arkansas, but the massive storm promised for our county never materialized, no tornados touched down, and as luck would have it, our trailer, once again, escaped unscathed. I dress and drive the half mile to town for breakfast at Cowboy Cafe, one of only a handful of businesses in town. The cafe is busy for a weekday and I sit alone at the only open table. By now my drugs have worn off, but I notice the pain in my neck and back have lessened. Usually the diner is bustling with discussion, but today the mood is somber and people keep to themselves, reading the latest weather-related news in the morning paper, still full with stories of the Joplin tornado from two days earlier. I can read the paper's headlines from a neighboring table: "Death Toll Reaches 127." Other lone diners enter and soon I am sharing my large table with three men. All seem to know each other and look in my direction as they talk so as not to seem rude. Two younger men, one with a beard and strong resemblance to Jeremiah Johnson, have been to Joplin, an older one on his way after breakfast to help in the cleanup. The younger men tell of pulling a man, barely alive, from the rubble of a house that had been checked once and deemed empty. "He was buried pretty good. Don't know how much longer he could have survived," the bearded man glances at me while telling his story. The older man says, "We got lucky," and we shake our heads, referring to our escape from the tornados the previous night.

Soon the cafe erupts in conversations across tables, diners rehashing Joplin's storm from every angle. The storm percolated five miles west of the city as an F0, and within minutes became a 250-mile-per-hour F5. The hook echo spanned for miles, surrounding Joplin in its circling claw. Once the cyclone came down, it was just west of the heart of the city. Unless one is underground, it is *statistically unlikely* one could survive an F5. The power of the tornado speared a piece of wood through solid concrete, stripped bark from trees, stripped asphalt from Walmart's parking lot. Patients' IVs were ripped from their arms at St. John's, the nine-story hospital shifting four inches from its foundation, patients sucked from the ER, people sucked out of the sunroofs of cars, sucked up and out of their cradles and couches and dinner tables. One survivor, a teenage boy, crawled from the wreckage of his home after riding out the tornado in a bathtub. "It looks like Armageddon," he said after surfacing.

The diners talk of the storms that missed us the previous night, attempting to reason how this deathly mega-cell that was headed straight for us lifted and blew south, leaving our town untouched, but leveling another. They rehash Joplin's earlier storm that whisked half a town away. One leaves me sleeping on a couch, and the other rips a toddler from his mother's arms. Upon finding her baby in a local morgue, the mother posted on the Facebook page created to help find the child, "Skyular has been called home to be with the angels," a simple declaration to answer all the demands of why.

Irritated, I listen to the diners' conversations as they grapple with questions they are perfectly aware have no answers. So why ask? Anger rises in my stomach as I listen. To try to reason out the unreasonable is fruitless. Probabilities and statistics seem spineless now. I drink my coffee and eat my biscuits and gravy, but remain silent. Occasionally the men at my table look my way, allowing me the opportunity to join their philosophizing, but I have nothing to offer. I can't make logic from something illogical. They clamor for answers to something we have no business questioning. My agnostic Christian Buddhist beliefs tell me it's all a crapshoot. Shit happens. People die. Tornadoes. Lupus. Old age. Lightning strikes. Car wrecks. Natural disasters. Unnatural disasters. It is out of our grasp, out of ordinary reasoning. Out of our hands.

My mother is up when I arrive back home after breakfast. The stifling pain in my neck and back subsides, and my preoccupation with my diagnosis lessens. We watch Diane Sawyer interview a Joplin survivor on *Good Morning America* when a brilliant double rainbow appears in the sky overhead, and they stop to appreciate the sight. "Hope shows up when there's no earthly reason for it," the survivor says.

"Did it storm last night?" my mother asks as she divides her myriad of medications and herbal supplements into their daily dispenser cups. Her arthritic fingers, stiff and red, gingerly work to twist open each bottle.

"The tornados missed us. Went west into Oklahoma, and south," I yell over the TV. "Killed quite a few people over in Oklahoma."

"Guess we got lucky again," she shrugs, unfazed.

I watch my mother methodically fill each of the four plastic cups from a shoebox full of prescriptions, vitamins, and herbs. She carefully taps out each dose into their rightful cup, then lifts and shakes each cup as if mixing some secret potion. At eighty-five, my mother performs the same ritual every morning, trying to find the perfect tonic to squeeze just a bit more life out of her failing body, betting against her one-in-seven odds. I've often thought she could stop all her meds and herbal remedies and feel little effects. But here at her breakfast table, sitting over her collection of medicinal concoctions, she is in control, still working to increase her odds. She's nothing if not an optimist.

She shrugs her shoulders and straightens her back as if bringing out the big guns against some invisible enemy. "That oughta do it," she says.

By the time I'm ready to drive home on Sunday, the pain that has consumed my mind and body for days has all but disappeared. Maybe, I speculate, it was simply strained muscles, a bout of the flu. I kiss my mother goodbye and she holds on a bit longer than usual, but just as quick, she shoos me out the door. I pull north onto the highway that will take me back through Joplin and home. I honk and wave to my mother, who stands on the front porch in her housedress, picking the dying blooms from the begonias. ◆