

Libby is the one who came up with a name for our so-called party.

“We’re all just waiting for Monday, right?” She asked. We laughed. It was Saturday, 52 hours before the total eclipse.

I said, “It’s you, Stephen, me and a smoked rump roast!” We howled with laughter. “Girl,” I added, “we wildin’ now.” None of us drink alcohol, so...that was the joke, right?

After the laughter died down, we went back to being stir-crazy. The alleged throngs of visitors expected to take over the city, choking everything from highways to grocery stores, kept us home. Waiting for Monday.

Seventy-two degrees with a 15 mile-and-hour wind and almost no humidity in Austin, Texas can be chilly. So, no joy sitting by the pool. I could have been writing. She could have been weaving. But we weren’t. We walked the dogs. 15 minutes for Savannah, the super-sized Rhodesian Ridgeback who hated to walk; 45 for neurotic half-n-half boxer-pit-bull Manuka who would have walked all the way to Houston if no one turned her back toward home.

Libby and I moved lethargically from place to place around the house and talked about whatever passed through our minds. She showed me her weaving projects. We caught up on family and friend stuff. I talked about what I was learning about editing. And then worried I was boring her. I wound up staring at Stephen in his office cum man-cave room, leaned back in his plush corporate chair, surrounded by shelves of books and memorabilia. His usual deadpan self, a paperback in his hand, he remained unaffected by anything resembling stir-crazy. I envied him.

“What are you reading?” I leaned on the door, hesitant to step in without an invitation.

“My annual re-read of *The Exorcist*,” he murmured without looking up from the page.

“Ewe,” I turned up my nose; reared my head back as if I’d walked into a room full of stink. I hated that story. Got a severe case of PTSD watching the movie in the spring of 1975. I was a resident assistant in my college dormitory and didn’t have a room mate. I slept with a light on the rest of the semester.

Libby walked up behind me. “He does this every year.”

“Why?”

Stephen answered for himself. “When I was a kid, I read it for the first time about this time of year. Some weird shit happened.”

“And...?” I asked, waiting for one of his brief, dry responses to make the connection between then and now for me. Stephen’s affect was so flat I sometimes wondered if he knew he was being funny. Or not.

He looked at us for a second, then back down at the book. “Something weird could happen again.”

Libby and I looked at each other. As if deciding we were unlikely to get a more satisfying answer by questioning further, we turned, walked away, and went back to being stir crazy.

“You’d think the apocalypse was happening.” Libby said, glancing over at her loom with a mixture of longing and resentment. I knew how she felt. I’d ambled from the guest room where my stuff was, to somewhere else in the house in search of something to do, or the kitchen for something to eat, and looked at my laptop about fifty times. So far, I hadn’t even taken it out of the case. I met her at the door, where she was muttering.

“Shutting down schools? Telling us locals to get our milk, bread, and toilet paper before the weekend? People renting extra parking spots in their driveways and in front of their stores for two hundred dollars a pop?” She kneeled down to put Manuka’s forelegs into the harness leash. She looked up at me for a second. “The neighborhood is having its bi-annual yard sale today, just so they can take advantage of the influx of people.” She shook her head and stood up. “Good girl!” She said in dog-baby-talk voice. I followed her out the front door. It was something to do while we waited.

Manuka had a nose for interesting and led us only into yard-sale driveways that smelled like something she wanted to investigate. Libby knew all the neighbors, so whichever driveway Manuka chose, Libby chatted them up as I followed Manuka to specific items of interest. She found an old crock pot with some thick sticky stuff on it. You know: that brownish orange ick round the seam where the exterior metal wrap meets the interior metal that gets hot? Manuka nosed the ick, along with the long skinny lines of old dried-up liquid that ran down the side. It was just like the one my mom bought in the 1970s; the one that still lived in a high-up cabinet in my kitchen. Optimistic blue and yellow impatiens printed on the side identified it as so old and well-loved, that sticky ick was probably the only thing holding it together. An old toothbrush and some Barkeeps Friend would get rid of that ick, as the soon-to-be-former-owner of this crock pot likely knew as well as I. But neither of us had taken the time to use it.

While Libby and the neighbors talked about extra sales from Austin’s apoc-eclipse population explosion, I followed Manuka over to a pile of clothing. She uncovered a pair of

sweat pants. ‘Sweat’ being the key word, she dug her nose in and wagged her tail so hard and fast, I feared she’d sprain it.

“No, we’re just going to put on our glasses and sit in the back yard,” the neighbor said as Libby tugged Manuka’s leash and led us back to the street.

“Let’s hope the clouds disappear...” Libby said as we headed to the next stop on the sidewalk.

Forty-five minutes later, back at the house, inertia overcame me. I napped.

When I awoke, I lurched toward the kitchen for a bottle of water. Stephen, moving from his office to the living room recliner, held his copy of *The Exorcist* in front of him as he walked like most people do their phone. Transfixed, probably anticipating the head-spinning, or maybe the green pea soup vomiting scene in the book, I was invisible to him.

I opened a bottle and drank as Libby came back from somewhere.

“Help me with that cardboard will ya?” She pointed through the kitchen windows to a gigantic box, empty of the smoker it had contained. Lying on the patio, capturing the wind like a sailboat spinnaker, the box tacked closer and closer to the pool; styrofoam guts and closure strips falling away like its captain’s unbuttoned shirt, hat and flip-flops preparing for a swim.

“Oh no you don’t!” I grabbed one end and held it, while Libby put a foot down on the other. “You check the weather,” I asked. Hopeful.

“No change yet. Still says we’ll have a storm Monday afternoon.” She took turns folding and stepping until the box would fit in the recycle bin.

Ever the optimist, I said, “I read that sometimes, when the moon passes in front of the sun, the temperature drops just enough to dissolve the clouds. Maybe that’ll happen and we’ll be able to see some of it. Maybe even the totality.”

Ever the realist, Libby said “Maybe,” with a strong undertone of no effing way. She just hated to discourage me.

We stuffed the cardboard into the recycle bin in her garage and stood in the driveway. Watched a few bits of debris from a neighbor’s project tumble a wobbly wind-blown path down Amen Corner Road at 15 or 20 miles per hour. Then watched the sun go down. Had a desultory dinner. Only 40 hours more to wait. Amen indeed.

Sunday morning, Libby pulled the rump roast out of the fridge to check its progress thawing. Satisfied it would be ready for the smoker on Monday, she shoved it back in. I

stepped up and pulled a pork shoulder out and prepped it. Not enough time to smoke it, unless we wanted dinner at 9pm. Which, no, so, I set the oven for 295, put the meat in a cast iron dutch oven, placed the lid on it and set a 6-hour alarm on my phone.

“Morning.” Stephen ambled into the kitchen as I closed the oven door. He made a cup of coffee and took it right back to his office. I still wasn’t ready to face my laptop, so I followed him. But he sat down in his chair and picked up *The Exorcist*. He would be no source of conversation. Or entertainment. Again. I thought about washing my hair. But enervation...

Libby shouted, “Wanna do the short walk with Savannah and me?” She was clipping Savannah into a massive front-clip, no-pull harness. A Rhodesian, more Great Dane than hound, she weighed in at 128 pounds. Born to hunt, the extra control of that harness helped Libby walk Savannah, instead of the other way around. Most of the time.

I pulled my hair into a low tail, put on a ball cap, and out we went.

“What a relief,” I said, spreading my arms to take in the sun. There was very little wind.

“Better enjoy it while we can.”

“Still looking bad for the eclipse tomorrow?”

“Yep. Worse than clouds, the weather app predicts strong thunderstorms,” she said, pulling on Savannah’s leash. “Come on girl. You gotta potty? Come on. Go potty.”

I wondered if that high-pitched baby-voice of half-pronounced words with which Libby spoke to her dogs was the same one she used with her kids when they were little. Savannah paid about as much attention to it as Eric and Bethany would have. She ate some leaves growing in a neighbor’s fence.

I said, “You know, even though we’ve been planning this a long time, I mostly came here to spend time with you. I don’t want to two-hundred miles to get out from under the storm and see the eclipse. But I’ll go if you want to.”

Savannah stopped and scooped her belly up as if performing dog Pilates. But she wasn’t into fitness. Just crouching for a poop.

“I don’t know,” Libby said. “I think traffic might be as bad driving away from Austin toward clearer skies as it was heading into town a couple of days ago.” She pulled out a poop bag out and opened it. “I think.... let’s just stay here and hope the weather channel is drama-queening. Or that the storm hits and moves on before the eclipse.” She leaned over and picked up the poop. “Or after...” she sighed in disgust. Thinking about the five-year build up to this event, the planning, her prep work, grocery shopping, my flight, the careful calculation of arrival and departure dates to balance traffic, airfare and rental car costs, that

the next full eclipse visible in the US would be in 20 years — I was pretty sure her disgust had nothing to do with picking up poop.

Savannah turned back toward the house and looked at Libby, hope in her eyes. She was like a horse, eager to get back to the damn barn. Every. Single. Time.

Prep work for Monday got us through the rest of a lazy Sunday. Libby pulled out her electric blower and made the patio beautiful. She turned the smoker up to 1000 degrees and reduced previous drippings to ash. I did some laundry and organized my stuff; took a long walk and talked on the phone. My friend Tom was driving to see a childhood friend and watch the eclipse with him. In Vermont. No prediction of cloudiness there. Nor was he seeing any of the media's predicted apocalypse-level traffic snarls. We shared our mutual disdain of the news media's click-bait approach to reporting

Monday morning, I hung out in bed longer than usual. Finished reading a silly book. When I wandered out, Stephen sat in the recliner with his thumb between pages. On my way to get another cup of coffee, I leaned in close enough to check out the cover. He was reading a 2011, 40th-anniversary edition, acquired (I'd been told) a couple of years ago. He'd worn out an original printed in 1971. I guessed his thumb marked a position around two-thirds of the way through the book.

"Morning," he mumbled without looking up.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Getting there. I want to be near the end during the eclipse."

"Oh yeah?"

"If weird shit's gonna happen," he looked up from the pages. I think the slight upturn of his lips indicated a grin. "...it'd be cool if it happened during the eclipse." His eyes went right back to the book.

I nodded, headed toward the coffee maker, and said, "It's good to have a goal." I was thinking was more about my boredom than his reading. It was finally Monday. Now, we had only to wait for the afternoon. Then, it hit me. He was serious about this exorcist thing. Pouring coffee, I said, "But Stephen, nothing weird is going to happen just because you're reading *The Exorcist* during an eclipse. You know that, right?"

No response.

And I was right.

Right up until the moment I wasn't.

In April, Austin, TX typically gets 8 days of rainfall, with an average monthly total of 63 millimeters. That's only two-and-a-half inches, but the millimeter number sounds better to locals who sometimes lament water restrictions. So, most years, April averages 206 hours of sunshine. The drier conditions and milder temperatures make it a great time to visit Austin. Lots of 'chamber of commerce' days. The kind that make people want to move there. But, today? April 8, 2024? Eclipse day? Last total solar eclipse visible in the US until 2044? No such luck. I took my cup of coffee outside and looked around. Cloudy as hell. Humid too. But I didn't think this qualified as weird enough for Stephen.

The eclipse would begin at 12:17pm, end at 2:58pm, with the penultimate 360 seconds of totality between 1:35 to 1:38. Still a few hours for a weather-clearing miracle. I crossed my fingers but had little hope in my heart.

At noon, it started sprinkling rain. I checked again what we'd already checked and double checked: no change in the forecast. I stepped outside. It was windy, but not enough to compromise the smoker. The rump roast, co-star of today's party, had been cooking since 6am. It would be ready to eat by the time the moon finished transiting the sun. Sides were ready, except for the rolls, added to the menu for traditional southern boy Stephen, for whom a meal is only special when there are yeast rolls. They'll go in the oven while we set the table after the big event.

An hour later, I stepped outside to make sure the smoker temp was still where it should be. The wind had picked up. Significantly. Enough that the raindrops it blew around kind of stung my face. The temp was fine. I looked west as I scooted back to the house. Black clouds scudded east fast enough to be scary.

Stephen was at the fridge, the wait getting to him too.

"Whatcha looking for?" I asked.

His head moved left to right, then down and left to right again. He said, "Two-thirty is a weird time for lunch. I need a snack." I couldn't believe he'd left the book for a few minutes.

"You, uh, where you wanna be in *The Exorcist*?" I asked.

He turned toward me, something resembling excitement animating his features. "Page 375 of 422. It's the perfect spot, with the perfect level of suspense, to pause in my reading." He closed the fridge and grabbed a banana from a big bowl of fruit on the counter. Went back to the recliner.

Stephen might have been deadpan, but he was psychic as hell.

1:29pm, all dressed up with nowhere to go, the three of us stood looking out through the kitchen's bay window at increasing wind and rain. Only a few minutes before the moon would begin passing in front of the sun, we gave up.

"Well," Libby sighed, wagging a skinny black box at us. "At least I got a refund from Amazon on these eclipse glasses."

Stephen and I, too depressed to ask why, remained silent. Libby told us anyway. "They didn't make the list of 'certified' eclipse glasses. Maybe we shouldn't have used them even if we could've."

Stephen, now more deadpan than Mr. Spock at a Kevin Hart standup comedy performance, shook his head. "The weather and suspect glasses? Not weird enough."

Libby and I managed a grin.

But as if in response to his comment, the sky went dark. Black-ink dark. The wind blew harder.

"Here we go," Stephen said, and went back to the recliner. Picked up his book. I wondered if a little more reading was required to produce the 'weird shit' outcome he expected.

Libby said, "Is the smoker ok?"

I'm nine years older than Libby. She tells me I'm like a big sister. But in this case, the extra years were of no practical use. I'd never owned an electric smoker. I squinted my eyes. Examined it through the window, rain and growing darkness. This one had wheels. And it didn't take life experience to see that the wind intended to roll it into the pool. Libby saw it too and let out a squeal of panic.

I headed for the door. "Let's get our party meat back in the house. Now! It'll taste better without chlorination."

A quick glance at the clock on the microwave showed how close we were to totality. It was 1:32. Another six minutes, but the promised strong thunderstorms promised to not only hide it, but out-dramatize it, too. Libby grabbed a roasting pan and followed me out to the patio to save our supper.

The wind whipped cold rain so hard against our faces and arms that it hurt. We both cried out in shock. But Libby got the meat off the rack. I unplugged the smoker and pushed it into an alcove under the extended eave of the roof. Thick smoke billowed into the storm making it hard to see. I tripped on a dog toy but caught myself. Clothes heavy with water, I got back in the house right behind Libby and the rump roast.

“Stay there. I’ll bring you a towel,” she said, as she slid the roast into the oven to rest. I looked out the bay window again. The pitch black had taken on a greenish cast. I looked at the microwave, 1:34. One minute to totality.

Stephen said, “Hear that?”

Libby grinned as she handed me the towel and rolled her eyes. I grinned back and dried my hair. Then, two seconds later, our grins disappeared. We heard the distant roar of a train.

Libby, confused, said, “There aren’t any train tracks near here.”

My mom had survived not once, but twice; and had described to all six of her children, on multiple occasions, the train-like roar of its approach. So, I knew exactly what it was. But before I could say ‘tornado’, Libby and Stephen’s phones screamed out high-pitched Wireless Emergency Alerts.

Stephen threw his book down and got out of the recliner faster than I’d ever seen him move. Jogging toward us, he looked at his watch. “1:35 on the dot.” With a smile bordering on manic, he said, “It’s happening.”

By the time he finished those two short sentences, the tornado was upon us.

I know now how people in steerage on the Titanic felt. We could run, but where to? Like lifeboats situated too far away to be useful on a fast-sinking ship, any tornado protection helmets, padded body suits and underground rooms we could have used at that moment were a thousand miles away in Tennessee’s tornado ally. Not on Amen Corner Road in Austin, Texas.

Libby yelled, “The bathroom!” We ran into and bounced off each other as we scrambled toward the center of the house, then screeched to a halt when something crashed through the living room window. Electricity and lights were still on, and we watched the top half of the smoker, stuck in the glass but shaking, wiggling and inching in little by little, as if it were trying as hard as we were to get to safety. The tornado train screamed. The noise was deafening. We ran.

The dogs, smarter and faster, beat us to it. And by the time we joined them in the bathroom, yelling about whether to lie down, huddle together, or climb under the counter, the train faded and a silence scarier than any I’d ever experienced settled over us like a thick wool blanket.

Stephen was the first to move, eager to see whatever weird shit he’d been hoping for. He opened the bathroom door and headed out.

“Is it safe?” Libby stuck her head out and shouted, “Is there still a house around us?”

No answer from Stephen, but the dogs pushed at her, wanting to follow him. I said, “If the dogs want out, I think it’s safe.”

The house was still standing, so we headed for the back door. Stephen, already outside, left it open. Libby and I stepped out into absolute chaos.

Uprooted broken trees littered the golf course behind the house like matchsticks. Shingles, bricks, solar panels and stones scattered around them like ginormous chess pieces tossed by an ill-tempered loser. The wrought-iron fence torn apart, some sections lay flat; other bits were driven like spears into the ground at terrifying angles. An inexplicable number of patio umbrellas from neighboring houses lay helter skelter around the pool as if they’d all drunk too much at the party and passed out.

“What an excellent day for an exorcism.” Stephen quoted that famous line of dialogue with such awe, it settled like a priest’s confirmation on the surroundings.

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?”

Libby and I yelled at the same time; adrenalin overload fueling irritation at what seemed a non sequitur.

He nodded toward the pool. The water had changed from bright sparkling blue to a thick algae-bloom colored mess. We frowned and inched our way around debris toward the coping.

Several small bushes floated in the sloshing water, their roots contributing to the muddiness, while their fresh green springtime limbs and leaves brushed against something dark. And huge. At the pool’s edge, the detail became clear. Libby gasped. I lost the ability to speak.

Under water, centered in the pool, all four wheels on the bottom — as if one could open the driver’s side door, get in and drive it right out to the street — a green 4-door sedan.

Libby and I looked at each other, perplexed, and turned to Stephen for an explanation.

Steady as ever, he stared down at the pool and said reverently, “Uh huh. Right where I stopped reading. Green pea soup.”

The End