

Braving Hurricane Hazel, with a little sister in tow

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August, hurricane season. We're all out on the porch with a pile of steamed crabs, swatting mosquitoes and telling stories. I tell the one about Hurricane Hazel in 1954, and how I had to walk a mile through 50 mph wind gusts with my little sister Corinne in hand. Corinne, who is a grandmother now, rolls her eyes and accuses me of "creative recall." Everyone laughs. My husband quips that I've joined the ranks of oldsters who tell exaggerated walking-miles-in-bad-weather stories. Everyone laughs again, my children the loudest.

Really, I tell them, it's true.

You could look it up: On Friday, October 15, 1954, following a freakish heat wave with temperatures well into the 90's, Hurricane Hazel struck South Carolina and turned furiously north, up the coast toward Maryland. I was eight years old at the time, in the third grade at St. Anthony's in Baltimore. Back then, the Sisters of St. Francis were of the opinion that children were quite sturdy, and therefore they did not often close their schools in inclement weather. The sisters had a name for sissies who stayed home when it rained or snowed: Sugar Babies—afraid of melting.

And so, as the rains began to fall that October morning in 1954, my mother was wrapping sandwiches in waxed paper and packing the lunch boxes as usual—one for me and one for Corinne. Perhaps she was relieved to see the rain, a break from the oppressive heat in those days before air conditioning. Did she make us pull on our rubber boots? I know she handed me an umbrella.

I picture my mother waving to us from the porch of our house on Woodlea Avenue. No doubt she was more concerned about Corinne than she was about the weather. The first few weeks of school, Corinne had about wrung my mother out with her kicking and screaming at the door to the first-grade classroom. It was only recently that Sister Therese had tamed Corinne to the point that she would now walk to school with her big sister. My mother was still on tenterhooks.

My mother would have watched as Corinne and I turned the corner onto Eugene Avenue, as we passed the house where we were *never, ever* to accept so much as a glass of water because it was rumored a child who lived there had contracted polio. She would then have gone quickly inside to check on my brother Stephen, who was four years old and full of mischief. Corinne and I trudged on, straight to school.

At what point that day, as Hurricane Hazel screamed toward Baltimore, did the good Sisters of St. Francis attend to the menace in the darkened windows and decide to send the children home? Did Monsignor run over from the rectory to advise them? Did the parents arrive unbidden, dripping their umbrellas along the squeaky, waxed corridors, asking at the classroom door for little Mary Sue or little Joseph?

I only know that suddenly I was outside in the rain again, holding Corinne by the hand, heading home—quickly, because that was what Sister told me to do.

But in a hurricane one cannot walk quickly. Nor can one easily keep a grip on a little sister with short, fat legs. Down Frankfort Avenue to Belair Road, across Belair to Biddison Lane—I remember the moment I realized it wasn't about the rain anymore, but about the wind. Most of all I remember the umbrella—how it was spectacularly yanked inside out, the spokes flipped all wrong, not unlike the sickening tricks of the boy down the street with the double-jointed elbows.

I don't remember being afraid. I think I must have been awe-struck, by the power of that wind, by the recognition that I was out there *in* it. It wasn't about the rain anymore, but I'd no more have abandoned that fractured umbrella than I'd have abandoned my wailing little sister. I held on, and dragged both of them straight home.

The distance from St. Anthony's to our house on Woodlea is just shy of a mile. Wind gusts on October 15, 1954 were clocked at as high as 100 mph in the Baltimore area, but I'm giving the Sisters the benefit of the doubt, and granting that they sent us home before it got half that bad. Still: When I was eight years old, I walked my sister home through the hurricane they named Hazel. It's true. You can look it up