

## Welcome to Kansas!

When I was 8 years old, some sirens went off in my edge-of-suburbia Kansas neighborhood. My parents and I didn't know what was happening, so we went to a neighbor's house to find out. Our neighbor, Barb Ritter, knew some sign language, and she wanted to give us a helping hand. We stayed in her basement with a sliding-glass door where we saw the beautiful monsters.

Back in 1980 before the monsters appeared, I was riding around on my bike after school one late afternoon. I noticed that the clouds were starting to turn green. I started to hear some sirens in different locations. They sounded different than any sirens I had heard before. I dutifully went inside and told my parents. I didn't know what sirens going off in Kansas meant. My parents were Deaf and didn't know what was going on either. Plus, they moved here 9 years ago from New Mexico. They both signed maniacally, "S. I. R. E. N....MEAN WHAT? SOUND-LIKE WHAT?

(Dad) HEARING-AID, EEEEEEE?

(Mom) TELEPHONE?

(Dad) POLICE CAR?

I said, "Maybe it's an ambulance or fire truck."

(Mom) ???HOUSE ON-FIRE? DOUBT.

(Dad) WHERE? NEAR-HERE OR FAR-AWAY?

"Sort of both," I answered.

(Mom and Dad) WHAT MEAN BOTH?" I tried to explain it, but I didn't understand it myself.

Just then our neighbor, Barb Ritter, an older skinny woman from across the street, told us we'd better go inside. "It doesn't look good." Other neighbors who were squatting in their front yards were heading indoor as well. My parents had a ton of questions, so I became the interpreter. Barb could sign a few things and finger spell, but it wasn't enough in a time of emergency. Barb was no fool to stay and try to communicate under a boiling, bubbling, soupy sky. She told us that a tornado was coming and offered her basement as shelter.

Immediately we followed her through her house of ashtrays, down a spiral staircase to her basement where we stood in front of a sliding glass door that faced west...the direction the tornado was sighted. There was a television in the corner with rabbit ears that she touched to improve the reception. "Kester, I'm glad you're here to translate this, cuz I dunno how I'd communicate holding onto these antennas." She proceeded to explain where and how we should take cover if a tornado hit. The weatherman on the TV kept telling those folks in Olathe that they, "Need to find shelter immediately."

Suddenly, My mom cried out, but the words were unintelligible. She went down on her knees and started praying. We looked out the glass doors and saw a terribly beautiful sight. A small funnel cloud came bouncing along with a huge cloud of dust at its feet. The setting sun was illuminating it from behind. Soon we could see objects whirling around in the cloud, flashes of barn-roof silver, uprooted trees. The got spit out

and floated away on convection currents. We could clearly see all this destructive activity happening, yet not to us. It was as if we were living through it vicariously, from a front-row seat in a movie theater.

However, as the twister got closer, I could feel a wave of panic grab hold of us all. Unbelievably, the tornado split in two and became twin tornadoes bounding in our direction. The wind simultaneously went from absolutely still to roaring in the course of about 10 seconds. Barb smashed her cigarette down and screamed, “We’re in its path. Take cover!”

In the next moment there was an awesome roaring and pounding sound. We all ran away from the doorway, as Barb had instructed, and covered our heads. We cowered along a wall, and protected our bodies with thick comforters. I wondered what that deafening sound was. It was as if a million midgets were tapping and scratching their canes on the house. It couldn’t be rain. That was too soft. This was pounding and pelting. The house creaked several times under the weight of the million midgets. They were all screaming, knocking, begging to get in. That was a moment that I wished I were Deaf too, free from the frightful flurry. In about three minutes the midgets all flew away.

Slowly, we lifted the blankets from our bodies and tapped each other alive. We couldn’t believe our eyes. We didn’t understand what our eyes were telling us. “They just missed us!” Barb cried. The sun was shining and the ground was littered with a three-inch layer of twigs and ice cubes! My dad said the hail was from the sky, but that the twigs

were from the woods between the tornados and us. My mom said that each of God's hands had reached down and pulled the tornados back into the sky.

We all went outside to see if there was any damage to the neighborhood. I started collecting the golf-ball sized hail to put in the freezer to keep for show and tell. I collected about ten of the biggest hailstones I could find under a three-quarter rainbow that evening. I thought it wry to see so much beauty come out of such destruction.