

RUIN

By Melissa Fraterrigo

No one sees her slip out back wearing one of Daddy's shirts as a nightgown. They think Luann's in bed even though there's much to do. Pulls the wagon best she can, her doll, Tracey, inside it.

Maneuvers around a busted footstool, plastic milk crate, things spit from the sky three days past.

Tracey won't sit upright on purpose, doesn't want to be here, keeps toppling over, air full of smoke, rot. Luann finds a bodiless Barbie face down in news- paper, yellow hair neon in fading light. Tries to hide it from Tracey but it's no use. Tracey begins to shake, demands they return home. Luann picks her up, looks deep into her fear-globed plastic eyes. It won't happen again, Luann tells her.

Tries to soothe her voice. Repeats what her daddy has said, that a storm like this only happens once a lifetime.

Tree fell on the train crossing now the bell rings constant, three days since it struck. Piles of boards, collapsed fence, uprooted trees. Has to bump bump, stop the wagon. Dented cans of pineapple from Welmann's, a busted birdcage, arm chair with its price tag still affixed. Nothing they could afford but now it's theirs. All of it. Anything Luann wants is for the taking. Daylight has given way to that blue plumy color. Things underfoot snap and crackle. Tracey, never fond of the dark, pleads for them to turn back. Aren't supposed to be here, she is saying when Luann notices a furrow in the river grass, gouged up trees, cardboard heaped in a sudden clearing.

She sees a twisted hand. Thinks she hears a voice. Bends down, lifts the cardboard. That first look of him sucks her breath away. Grass stuffed mouth, blue-tinged face lifeless and still. Tracey buries her face in Luann's shoulder, howls.

Let's go back, Tracey pleads through her unmoving mouth. Be quiet, Luann says. And then the boy speaks. It's okay, he says, words coughed out like pebbles. Don't need to be afraid.

Leave him, Tracey says. There'll be trouble.

Hush now. Quiet. Luann repositions Tracey, pivots her legs on her hip. Give me think, Luann says, and knows these are her mama's words. Rubs her lips so they'll stop. Doesn't want to consider her now.

Help me, says the boy.

Tracey's the one who is confused. But he's dead, she says.

Moments before it struck the cows grazed in pasture. Horses in the barn. Her daddy put halters on them and then opened their stalls, all the interior gates. Would have remained in the barn if Grandma had let him. "Go on, Go!" he yelled.

They huddled in the root cellar just off the basement and listened to it all roll down and hit. Screams pierced the ground, everything toppling. Luann's breath coming uneven, jittery. Beets jellied purple, shivering in their jars. Not quite fear inside but curiosity. Steady lowing of the cows, her dad's face stony. Hands breaking open and shut. Knew if it were up to him he'd lead as many of them as he could into the basement. But it's Grandma's house and Grandma's rules and no matter how often he spoke of them getting their own place again Luann knows now that will never happen.

It was not just the tops of houses but cars and trees, tractors, combines. Red Arrow Bridge snatched up, its pieces scattered like toothpicks on Route 26. Luann imagined the sky whirling with everything she could dream up; even after it stopped all that whupping rushed on. While her grandma cried Luann waited for the cellar roof to crash, bury them. Never saw her grandma cry. Now not sure she'll ever stop.

All day her daddy heaved loosened boards into a pile, started a great fire in the pasture. Mr. Sparkman and a few other men came over day after the tornado, tied bandanas over their mouths, dragged the cows and horses, the ones that didn't make it, into one fly-swarmed pile. Found one of the horses ten feet up in a sycamore. Took two of them more than half an hour to get it down. Her daddy steels his face. There is work to be done. Daddy adds more wood. There is plenty of it from the busted machine shed. Now the fire burns and snaps, black smoke rises. The stench bites her nostrils. She's supposed to stay away.

Stuff that's never had a smell stinks. Rots from the inside out. Her great-grandmother's Windsor chair, dresser from her daddy's room on the second floor is without drawers and backside up on the front yard. The mattress from her own bed is lodged in the window frame, bent like a hook. Walter Sparkman said they were lucky, said nearly twenty people died in Pruewood, where it first touched down. Ingleside was already flat, he said. Tornado just further that.

The people from church brought food, blankets. Daddy didn't want to take it but Grandma said they had no choice. Don't be stupid, she said, already wearing a donated Mickey Mouse sweatshirt despite the heat, unseasonable for spring. Luann stood there, listened to them, traced the kitchen table with two fingers. Someone gave them a tent and blankets and her grandma set it up in the living room, on top of the rug. Refused to go outside. Darkness puddled her eyes. Cried and cried, hands trembled her face. Said they are forsaken.

Crying won't help, Daddy said, We need to focus on rebuilding, cleaning up—

Grandma threw back her head, spoke the most words she's said in days— You're crazy, Teensy. Bulldoze the whole thing. If you don't, I will. Her grandma's been sad forever. Hates Ingleside despite being here so many years. Waited until Teensy went outside before speaking again,

this time to Luann. What do you care? She said, jutting with her chin. Isn't your house. You don't like it go back to your own.

Luann's reflection deepened in the old woman's cataracts. She waved her hand manically, that old person smell wafting off her as she shuffled to a cabinet of broken dishes, began to wipe the inside door with a rag. Winter grass pushed flat. Corn stalks tilled to the ground. Rotting smell. Train crossing bell in the distance.

She doesn't favor either of them right now, which is why she and Tracey snuck out. Land chalked with things. A hairbrush, books from the public library, a boy's biked curled up like a potato chip. Desk miles from school. Everything suddenly spilled out on their land, handle on the wagon crooked but wheels moving just fine. It's like the whole world has been shaken and turned upside down. Smoke rises, burning stench masks air.

He's not right, Tracey says about the boy. Maybe he's even diseased. And Luann who has had things building in her for days says, Enough! Takes Tracey with both hands and sets her firm in the wagon. Get me out of here, she screams, pounding her feet.

I am the big person, Luann announces. You'll do what I say or I'll throw you away like all this other junk, gestures at the land.

Tracey quiets and Luann leaves her, lifts the boy from his cluttered grave. She cradles him like a baby, although he's not, he says; legs dangling over her arm, much heavier than he looks. She stumbles beneath his weight, clears the grass from his mouth and carries him to the river. Water beats white and restless, churns with torn branches and garbage; a lawn chair does cart wheels farther downstream. Cups water and lifts it to his lips. So cool. Go on, she says. Drink. His hair

fritters in the breeze, smell of ruin; she combs the hair with her fingers, soft and fine as rain.

Something scurries across her foot.

I need to get home, he says, and his words seem to tilt, slant sideways. She holds him steady, and while she does so he speaks. Tells her how the wind burst in the apartment, blew the door off the pantry where they crouched, snatched him from his mother's arms, that dizzy grey choking light ripped off his clothes and he saw a car lifted hundreds of feet in the air. Screams bore his bones, body battered by glass and heavy moving things. The pop of power lines caught his breath—slit of his rump cupped air—tasted damp wool and old milk, whimpered hot and cold all at once, heard screaming in the wind, everything swirling, growing thick, smothering his face. He threw up his arms, tried to find her, hit air and jagged things—bones buckling beneath, cardboard draping him, black pressed flat. Those screams, he says, were mine.

She feels his tears; only they live deep, deeper than the space on his face, the eyes that remain open, glazed. It's over now, Luann whispers. How rough he's been worked. She pets his hair real nice. Water rushes past. Tells him to cry all he wants, wobbles as she rocks him. Tracey in the wagon waving her fist in the air, pounding her feet on the hollow wood, yelling for Luann to pick her up right this minute, to take her home goddamnit! And then she says what Luann already knows: the boy has begun to smell unkind. Still, she swings him in her arms. Daubs his face clean with the hem of her daddy's shirt. Thinks of his mother ranting the loss. Wonders what that must be like. Knows it does her no good to think of her own mama, the one in the ground, so she considers the one who birthed her, the one she knows nothing about. If Luann missed her hard enough she wonders if she might return, claim her. Thinks of this as she rocks the boy. His loneliness, his stillness. Does anyone even know she's here? I'm not going anywhere, she promises. He cries and she holds him.

Moon brightens up high. Smoke scrolls the distance, her daddy's work. And this, this holding on,
hers.