

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Tornado

In the summer of 1990, Jo's brother, Rein, and his wife, Nel, came from Holland to spend a month with us. They enjoyed the short canoe trips and drives across the prairies past huge fields to beautiful and interesting places in the province, among them Prince Albert National Park and Batoche, the historic site of the last battle of the Métis Rebellion.

At home, Jo and the two of them had a very scary experience. Just after lunch, the radio suddenly blared with a loud, two-tone alarm sound, a bit like that made by an ambulance rushing to an emergency. This was followed by an Environment Canada weather warning of a severe thunderstorm and strong winds producing a tornado heading south of the city.

We'd heard warnings before, so Jo, knowing what to do, grabbed a bottle of water, and the three of them headed downstairs, straight under the billiard table. Ten minutes later, they heard the sound of a howling wind passing close to the east, but the house didn't shake.

Meanwhile, I was on my way home from work and heard the same alarm blaring from the car radio. As I headed south on the gravel road, I only half registered that something was missing from the west side of the road.

As I opened the car door, Jo, standing by the stone steps near the garage, told me about the warning, the wind, and the billiard table shelter. There was no sign of damage, and the gorgeous red peonies in the flower beds nearby were fine.

We all headed up the track toward the paddocks and shed, hoping that nothing much had happened. We were disappointed. The tall wooden boards around the handling yard were lying askew on the ground like pick-up sticks, and several of the 10-foot fence posts stood at various angles as if they had been out on a binge. The shed itself was fine.

The shambles could be fixed in the morning by digging new holes for the posts, lifting and nailing back undamaged boards, and replacing the few that looked like good kindling material for a campfire. It was more important to head out and see how the animals had fared.

If the yards had taken a bit of a beating, what we saw in the paddock was a nasty shock. There were no cows. The whole lot were happy, grazing with their heads down, in our neighbour Don's field. The 500-yard boundary fence billowed inward like a huge spinnaker.

The tornado had picked up the alfalfa that Don had swathed but not baled and blown it south. It was jammed in a tight mass against the wire. Except at the ends, where strong tied and tightened strainers held it, the middle third of the fence lay flat. The staples holding it against the posts must have popped out like champagne corks. The animals, no fools, had stepped over it for a nice fresh feed.

It took but a moment to figure out the next move. Without even calling or disturbing the animals, Jo and I turned back to the yards where we hitched our 6-foot grey trailer to the quad, filled up all the 5-gallon pails full of oats, and headed down the alleyway with the normal daily ration.

We pulled up by the feed troughs as if it was a routine task and sat to watch what would happen. Within ten minutes, the entire herd had crossed back to get at their favourite food.

We needed to fix the fence right away. We picked up Rein at the house, turned, went back down the alleyway, and skirted, as if unconcerned, slowly around the field, away from the herd. I had loaded a good number of staples and a couple of hammers in the big wooden toolbox in front of the handlebars.

Between us, we lifted the top strands of the fence and nailed them back up as a temporary fix. We knew that the next morning we could return and do a proper job.

As we headed back toward the gate, I realized what I had missed as I drove home. A 10-foot section of corrugated iron lay in front of us.

It was a small piece of the just-finished Quonset from up the road. The several thousand dollars' worth of material and the work of putting it up had all been torn apart by the tornado and dumped downwind.

We'd been lucky.