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God of thunder

BY ANNE BOKMA

My mother could sense a storm coming long before the clouds would gather. Her ritual began with shutting the windows and drawing the crushed-velour drapes. She'd go around the house and unplug all the appliances, from the toaster to the TV, the stereo to the stove. My brother and I only cared about the TV. Once when we protested because she ripped out the plug in the middle of *The Gumby Show*, she explained she was protecting us from the possibility of having a great ball of fire come hurtling out of the console to fry our young faces. We never complained after that.

If the telephone rang during a storm, we weren't to answer it. We were also to avoid the sink in the kitchen and bathroom. Everybody knew water and electricity didn't mix. Only the fridge in the corner of the kitchen was left untouched. Despite her fear of electrical currents shooting out like missiles through the sockets of our house, my mother was far too practical to risk having the ground meat go bad and the milk turn sour.

Once all the lights were turned off and a candle lit, she'd gather my brother and me on a small telephone bench in the front hallway, and we'd huddle there on either side of her. Each time there was a crack of thunder, she seemed to crumple a little more.

I was raised in a fundamentalist Dutch Reformed church where the idea of a vengeful God striking you dead with a fickle bolt from the blue wasn't far-fetched. My mother's faith in God was as certain as her belief that hard work was the backbone of character. To me, that faith seemed out of whack with my mother's fear of lightning, of the white heat in the flicker of God's eyelid. Perhaps my mother was burdened by an adult guilt we children couldn't understand. More likely, though, her anxiety was an unlucky inheritance.

Psychiatrists call it astraphobia, a pathological fear of thunder and lightning that's usually rooted in childhood trauma. My grandfather had been hit by lightning when my mother was a young girl. Although it didn't seem to damage him in any permanent way, the event left a lasting impact on the family. My grandmother could be fierce if crossed, but when the rains came, she melted into something softer. At the first sound of thunder, she'd gather up her daughter — my mother — draw the curtains, unplug the appliances and light a candle. Sometimes the two of them ended up on the floor of the front hall closet, their heads poking through the winter coats that hung above them. There, they'd wait it out, my grandmother rocking back and forth with her fingers in her ears; my mother with her nose buried in her mother's skirt. I picture them sitting there, praying for God's mercy.

By all rights I should be terrified of thunderstorms, but somehow I escaped this generational curse. When I was a teenager, I'd tell my mother that storms were exciting and beautiful, a scientific marvel. I don't think it helped. Perhaps my words made her feel small, as small as she once felt in that hall closet.

After leaving home, I left the Dutch Reformed church too and spent many happy years in the United Church, something that pulled me apart from my family. In my 40s I became a Unitarian, which seemed to seal our estrangement.

Today, the first sound of a far-off rumble always makes me think of my mother. I imagine her still shutting the drapes and unplugging the appliances. As the thunder builds and the rain beats down, I'll look toward the heavens. I don't believe there's a God up there who wants to strike anyone dead, but I do respect the power of nature, its beauty and, yes, sometimes its horror.

As I marvel at the force of the rainstorm, I'll wish my mother wasn't afraid. And be thankful that I am not.

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