

Night of the Twister

by James Michael Ullman

ALL AFTERNOON THE AIR had been humid and oddly still, with the temperature hovering in the nineties. Old timers, wiping their brows and gazing at dark thunderclouds gathering in the southwestern sky, knew they were in for trouble.

At dusk, as thunder cracked and rain pomed down in sheets, the trouble came in the form of whirling, funnel-shaped clouds. One tornado ripped through a mobile-home court, killing five people. Another flattened every structure in a small town on the Saint Louis-San Francisco Railway, and a third blew a sedan off a country road, fatally injuring its occupant.

At least a dozen funnel clouds had been sighted by 9:08 P.M., at which time a tall, dark-haired woman walked from the kitchen of a remote farmhouse into the parlor. She thought she'd heard a car in the front yard. Her imagination probably. Nobody in his right mind would be out driving on a wild night like this.

She started toward a window but never made it. Someone kicked the front door open, springing the lock, and two men stumbled in. Both carried pistols.

The taller and older of the two pointed his gun at the young woman's midsection and said, "Freeze, lady. Anybody else here?"

Wordlessly she shook her head.

"Okay. You can sit down now. But be nice and quiet, and keep your hands at your sides."

Slowly she eased into a chair.

The room's only light came from kerosene lamps. The power had gone out long ago. From the kitchen, music drifted faintly from a transistor radio.

The two intruders, bareheaded, with crew cuts, were dressed in soaking wet blue-denim uniforms.

"Jerry, close that door," the older man ordered. "Then see if there's anyone else in the house. She might be lying."

Jerry, a thin, short youth of about twenty, hesitated a moment to stare at the young woman. Then he slammed the front door, braced it with a table, and took off to search the house.

The other man walked around behind the woman. He had dark rings under eyes that burned strangely bright. His age could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty.

Placing the pistol's muzzle to the woman's head, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Karen." Terrified, she worked hard at keeping her voice steady. Her instincts told her that any display of panic might trigger physical violence against her. "Karen Smallwood."

"Who lives here with you?"

"I don't live here. My parents do, but they're away. I'm a teacher—I live in town. I came out here to straighten up for them and got caught by the storm."

"We're lost. We were on the County B road, headed for Hanks-ville and the Interstate, when we hit a washout. We had to detour onto the cowpath that took us here. Where's it go?"

"Same place as County B—to Hanksville—only it takes longer."

"Any bridges in between?"

"No, there'll be no more washouts."

"Driving to this farm, we were going up a hill. What's on the other side? Another farm?"

"Not right away. Nobody lives within three miles of here."

"If you been listening to that radio, you must know who we are. Except for the tornadoes, we been the big story."

"Yes," she said. "I know. I don't remember your name."

"Garth," he said pleasantly. "Ben Garth."

"You and your friend broke out of prison yesterday. The police in half the country are looking for you."

She didn't bother adding what they both knew very well: Since breaking out, they had killed a motorist and a waitress. The news-caster had called it a "senseless killing spree."

Jerry came back. "Nobody here," he said, "but I found this." He held up a faded photograph of Karen, then a lanky teenager, and a middle-aged couple. The man in the picture wore a state police uniform.

"The cop your father?" Garth asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "But he isn't a trooper anymore. He was hurt chasing a speeder, so they made him retire."

"Where are your folks now?"

"At a flea market in Canton, Texas. They won't be back until next week."

"A what?"

"A flea market," she repeated. "A place where anyone can go and sell anything. My folks barely make out on my father's pension. As a sideline, they sell antiques, just look around."

Garth studied the house more closely. She was right. The parlor and dining room looked like an antique store. Pictures in old frames hung on the walls; shelves and cupboards were filled with china and glassware; the floor areas were jammed with heavy old chairs and tables.

"You're pretty cool about all this," Garth said. "I admire women who don't lose their heads and start hollerin', like the one in the diner did this mornin'—the one we had to shut up."

He didn't admire her. He was testing her, wondering how much she could take.

"There's no point in screaming," Karen said as casually as she could, "if nobody but you two would hear."

"Smart girl. Just in case the storm gets worse. You got a storm cellar in this place?"

"The door's in the kitchen floor."

Jerry went to the kitchen, lifted the door, and swung a kerosene lantern down for a better look. "It's no fancy hotel," he called back, "but we could sweat it out if we had to."

"Any guns in this house?" Garth went on. "If your old man was a cop, he must have some guns."

"Two hunting rifles, a shotgun, and two revolvers," she replied without hesitation. "They're locked in a case upstairs. My father has the key, but you can just break the glass."

"We'll take 'em when we leave."

"You were wise," Karen said. "Ditching your car to find shelter. A car's the worst place to be if a twister hits."

She said that to get Garth's mind off the guns. She didn't want him thinking about guns, because there was one she hadn't

mentioned, an ancient double-barreled shotgun hanging in plain sight on the wall over the mantel in the dining room.

It looked like nothing more than a decorative but useless antique; it hung so high that to get it, she'd have to climb up on a chair to lift it off its brackets. But while it was an antique, it was far from useless. She knew that her father kept it loaded and in perfect working condition.

At the moment, though, it seemed the shotgun would not do Karen much good. It was hard to imagine the circumstances under which Garth would allow her to climb on the chair, reach up, and turn the weapon on him and Jerry. . . .

Garth took the pistol away from Karen's head and jammed it under his belt. "Okay," he said, "we ain't ate since mornin', and I never been fed by a lawman's daughter before. So you just get into that kitchen and fix us somethin'—fast."

The men drank beer and watched her every move as she prepared a quick supper. As they ate, they made her sit across the dining-room table from them—the shotgun on the wall behind them.

When they were through, Karen cleared the table and brought more beer. On the radio, the announcer reported the sighting of more funnel clouds.

"I don't suppose you've ever seen a tornado," Karen said.

"No, I ain't," Garth said. "And I don't want to."

Jerry asked, "Have you?"

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

She thought back to that terrifying day so many years ago. "It's a black, whirling piece of hell, that's what. They say the wind moves so fast it can drive a splinter of wood into your brain like a high-powered bullet. And pieces of glass—God help you if you're near a window. You'll be cut to ribbons."

Jerry glanced nervously at the many windows in the room. "Then we should be down in the cellar like the radio said."

"Yes, it's dangerous just sitting here," Karen admitted. "If a twister dipped down from the sky to exactly this spot, we'd be finished. But if it's already on the ground and moving toward you, you'll probably know it and have warning. Even if it's night and you can't see the twister, you can hear it."

"I read about that," Jerry said. "They make a noise."

"Yes. Like a freight train. The time I heard that sound I was in open country. I looked up and there it was, heading for me.

There was a ditch nearby, and I dived into it. Even so, it's a miracle I lived through it. Sometimes the funnels pick people up and pull them so high into the sky that when they drop down, they're frozen solid. And then at other times they simply—"

"That's enough," Garth frowned. Apparently the talk about tornadoes was making him nervous. "I don't wanna hear no more."

Again he looked around the house. This time his inspection was slower and more thorough. His gaze even paused briefly at the ancient shotgun before moving on. He asked, "Any money here?"

"Only a few dollars in my purse."

"Uh-huh," Garth turned to Jerry. "Get it. Then go through the rest of this place. See if there's more stashed away."

Searching through Karen's purse, Jerry came up with a few bills and coins. "Four dollars and thirty-five cents," he said in disgust. "That won't take us far."

He shoved the money into his pocket and began ransacking the house, sweeping shelves clean, pulling out drawers, and dumping their contents onto the floor. It was part search and part pure vandalism, needless destruction for its own sake. Karen pressed her lips together to keep from crying out as the boy smashed the collections of porcelain, glassware, and other delicate objects her parents had spent so much of their time assembling. When Jerry was through on the ground floor, he went upstairs. They could hear him tramping around, smashing more things.

Watching Karen while sipping from still another can of beer, Garth smiled coldly. Even the small amount of alcohol in the beer seemed to be having a bad effect on his mood. Clearly she was dealing with a highly dangerous psychopath, likely to go wild at any moment for little or no reason.

Jerry returned with only a few more coins for his efforts. "I could have told you," Karen said, "my father never leaves cash in the house when he's going out of town."

"Yeah." Garth was looking at her in an odd way. "Too bad. If he had, we'd be more friendly inclined. We need money to get out of the country."

"I'm sorry."

"Teacher, you just *think* you're sorry. But before we're through with you, you'll *really* be sorry."

He was tormenting her with words. She had to stall him as long as possible. "Why would you want to hurt me?" She tried

to sound friendly and reasonable. "I've made no trouble. I've done everything you asked."

"Maybe just because you're a lawman's daughter. We got a real dislike for lawmen and anyone connected with 'em. Matter of fact, we don't much like teachers either. Do we, Jerry?"

The boy grinned at her stupidly. She'd get no help from him. "It wouldn't make sense anyhow," Garth went on, "leavin' you here alive. The police think we're a couple hundred miles north of here. But the first thing you'd do after we left would be to put 'em straight."

"You could lock me in the storm cellar. That'd give you plenty of time for a head start."

"Nope. Can't take chances. We'll lock you in the storm cellar, all right, but when we do you won't be in no condition to climb out. Not ever. That way, we know we'll have a head start. It might be a long time before anyone gets curious enough to bust in to see why you ain't been around lately."

Despite the fear tearing at her insides, Karen managed a smile. "You're just trying to frighten me. You're playing games. Well, sure I'm scared: Who wouldn't be? But you know you don't have to kill me, Garth. If you don't want to leave me, take me along. I won't try anything stupid. I'll. . . ." She paused. "Just a minute. You hear that?"

Garth stood up. "Hear what?"

"Shut up," Jerry broke in, his grin gone. "I think I hear it, too." Then there was no doubt. They all heard it, far off but coming closer, a growing clatter and roar like that of an approaching freight train.

Karen rose. "I don't know about you," she announced, "but while there's still time, I'm going into that storm cellar!"

She took a step forward, but Jerry lunged ahead, shoving her aside. Garth hesitated a moment and then, as the sound grew louder, he plunged after Jerry.

As they scrambled for the door in the kitchen floor, Karen climbed up on the chair. She lifted the shotgun down from its rack, stepped down, cocked the gun, aimed it while shoving it tight against her shoulder, and braced herself against the wall. As Garth looked up and clawed for his pistol, she squeezed one trigger and then the other. . . .

At dawn, her face expressionless, Karen watched from a parlor window as the two criminals were taken away in an ambulance.

Standing beside Karen, a state police detective said, "I know how you feel. No matter how justified, it's terrible to shoot someone. But you had no choice. If you hadn't stopped them, they'd almost surely have killed you and others."

"I know. Thinking about that is the only way I'll be able to live with this."

"Anyhow, either you were mighty lucky or they were mighty careless, allowing you to get your hands on the gun."

"Oh, that." She smiled faintly. "At the time they were trying to get into the storm cellar. I'd told them how a tornado sounded like a fast freight train." Her gaze strayed beyond the yard to the other side of the hill and the main line of the Saint Louis San Francisco Railway. "So when the night freight came high-balling by a little before ten, like it always does, I made out like it was a twister."

THE END

(Now that you have read "Night of the Twister," turn to page 7 in your ACE 501 SKILLS BOOK to check your understanding of what happened.)