

A Northerner gets the wind knocked out of her

Creators Syndicate

It was kind of near Kansas, so I figured there might be some tornadoes when we moved to Texas.

When you come from the northeast, New York in particular, weather isn't a scary thing. You get hail every now and then, but that's more of a curiosity, a spectacle, than a threat. When the funny ice balls hit the roof, you point to the ceiling and say, "Ooh, listen," and that's about it. No need for canned goods.

Here, in this wide place with no hills, the elements are monstrous. Malevolent, even. When it drizzles, I fear for my life.

I hear the siren for the first time on Tuesday. It pierces the air and bellows into a wail that moans for minutes in an unfamiliar key. Shaken, I run to the window and look on the lawn for some 60-foot loudspeaker. An air raid, maybe. A test, and just a test, of the Emergency Broadcast System. It doesn't seem likely.

And then I see the sky. It is heaving and full of doom, the color of a shiner on the third day. My God, it's a tornado, I say out loud. This is it, my first natural disaster.

I pounce on the phone and call the police.

"There's a siren blaring," I inform the dispatcher, in case she weren't aware. "What does it mean?" I ask. "I'm from New York."

"We're watching some storms in the area," she tells me.

"With tornadoes," I clarify.

"Yes, though none have touched down."

"What should we do, then?" I ask, foraging in the garage for the bicycle helmets.

"You should take cover," the woman advises, in a serious voice,

**PAMELA GWYN
KRIPKE**



info@creators.com

the voice of someone who knows something. Someone who knows something bad is about to happen.

I am shocked. Safety is not top of mind for Texans. These are the folks who ride motorcycles with their hair blowing in the wind. They don't think children should have to wear seat belts on school buses. They keep guns in their broom closets.

So I figure the policewoman would tell me to gather up the patio cushions, at most. People here don't run inside for anything. They go out to see.

"What do you mean, 'Take cover?'" I ask, never having taken cover before. If this woman is telling me to put a frying pan over my head, then I am in for Texas-sized trouble.

"Go to a safe part of your house," she says, calmly.

I press my face to the window to get a look at the sky. "And stay away from the windows," the voice warns.

I jump back and race up the stairs to corral the kids.

"Girls, you need to come with me."

"Where are we going? We're in our pajamas," they protest.

"We're going under the staircase."

"We are?" my husband asks.

"Yes, now. Right now," I tell him with my eyebrows, "we are going to sit under the staircase because there is a storm and the lady said so."

"Can I bring a book and a doll under the staircase?" my 4-year-old wants to know.

I herd them all into the crawl space. They get on their hands and knees like little goats and position themselves among snow boots and ski hats and other winter accessories from New England.

"Why do we have to sit in the closet?" my daughter asks. I explain that if it gets gusty, the windows might crack, and we wouldn't want to be near cracking windows.

"Will they crack in here?" she persists.

"No, there are no windows in here."

"But will they crack and then come in here?"

I convince her that she is safe next to the boots, though I am not entirely sure. After a half-hour spent wrapping the doll in scarves and answering a semester's worth of meteorological questions, I creep out of our shelter to take a peek. Miraculously, the blackness had turned to gray. The wind had subsided.

The kids go off to bed, spelling new words such as "twister" and "atmosphere" and "relief." I flip on the news and find out that we were sandwiched between two storms, and came out lucky this time.

Pining for a plain old 17-foot snowstorm, I ask around the next day where people holed up the night before. From what, they asked. It wasn't as if there were freezing rain on the road.

Now *that's* when they should sound the siren.