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# — THE TORNADO — AND THE TOME

by Helen Walsh Folsom

We'd just come home from church, my daughter Bettse and I. We dropped our purses on the dining room table, ate some pizza for lunch, and sat down on the couch to watch TV. I looked out the window. The sky was a sickly gray, the horizon almost yellow. We'd made it back just in time.

But then a loud wail started up in the distance. "The sirens!" Bettse exclaimed. A second later, an alert flashed on the TV. A tornado was heading right toward us. "Quick, come on," I shouted to Bettse. Living here in Kansas, we knew what to do. We dashed to the sturdiest part of the house, the bathroom. No time to grab anything. I didn't even have time for prayer. We barely shut the bathroom door when the whole house started to tremble. The air rushed out of the room. I crouched on the floor and shut my eyes, holding onto a water pipe with all my strength. With a loud roar, glass shattered and wood cracked all around us. Dust and debris rained down on top of me. Wind and rain whipped

I looked at that empty space where the bookshelf once stood. The news reports said that people were finding shredded objects picked up from the tornado almost a hundred miles away. Was there any hope of finding my beloved book? I went outside and wandered around aimlessly. I walked past our battered cars, stumbling over broken tree limbs.

For some reason I looked up at a tree not too far away. I walked over. Something white was dangling from a branch, oddly as if it had been placed there. A shirt maybe? I extended my arms as far as they would go. I could just reach it, and gave it a tug. It came tumbling from the tree, right into my arms. It wasn't a shirt. It was a pillowcase, *the* pillowcase, the book nestled securely inside! The *Annals* was still whole and undamaged! As safe as the day I got it.

There's an old Irish saying—"May you be poor in misfortune and rich in blessings." Standing there that day in the midst of all that misfortune, I felt so very, very rich.



We all watched the news that night and saw the destruction the tornado had caused —the worst I'd ever seen, like a huge buzz saw had cut across our county.

We couldn't get to our house for two days. All the while I prayed, *God, give me some sign that there's still hope*. Finally, Bettse and I went back with my son, Bill, my nephew and his wife to salvage anything we could find. I stood outside. It didn't seem like much was left. My nephew found our door frame and a piece of the wall three blocks away, in the woods. His wife plucked a few ruined shirts out of the trees. *It looks like I've lost everything, Lord*.

“Mom, look!” Bill called. I made my way inside the house. He was holding two purses, Bettse's and mine, found under the broken dining room table. Elsewhere in the rubble we found my file cabinet, mangled, drawers jutting out, empty. Except the top one. It was shut tight. I opened it—my insurance papers and bank records! *Thank You, Lord*.

“Yes!” I heard Bettse shout from the other room. She held up her watch, bracelet, and ring looped together, found lying on the floor in the debris.

at my face. Then, as quickly as that, it was all over.

I opened my eyes. Through the dust I saw the cloudy sky above, peeking through a gaping hole in the roof. I tried to stand, but pieces of the wall and ceiling pinned me down—I couldn't move. “Don't worry, Mom, I think I can get help,” Bettse said. She stood on a stool and shouted out the hole to some neighbors. They came running, and carefully lifted the bathroom wall off of me so I could scoot out. *It's a miracle we're alive*, I thought, looking at the house. The southwest corner was gone. My checkbook and credit cards, my important files! Then it struck me: My bookcase was nowhere to be seen. *Dear Lord, no. Not the book too!*

Not just any book, mind you. It was my most-prized possession. Five years earlier, after a career working as a newspaper columnist, I decided to devote myself to writing full-time about Ireland. It felt like a calling to me. Nothing fascinated me more than my family's Irish heritage. My great-grandmother Lizzie Walsh came over from Ireland in 1849, part of the great tragic wave from the Irish famine. My grandfather's Scotch-Irish family came to the US before the Revolutionary War. I scrounged used bookstores and garage sales for old volumes on Irish culture and history, the older and

more tattered the better.

One day I dropped by a small, friendly bookstore I'd been to often. "Have you got any more Irish books for me?" I asked. The little lady smiled. "Well, we have this one; we're not sure what to do with it. It needs repairs."

She brought out a large box. Inside was a book about the size of a VCR, and even heavier. I lifted off the loose cover. The illustrated color frontispiece was still bright; the pages were yellowed but intact. My heart soared when I recognized the title—it was a book I'd seen referenced in so much of my research: *The Annals of Ireland of the Four Masters*.

In the year 1632 three Irish writers and one monk in Donegal risked their lives to secretly record Ireland's history, an act forbidden by the conquering English who were determined to assimilate them. The writers and monk recorded names, dates, and facts from long before Christ, rich with descriptions of Ireland's people, their legends, and culture. The book in front of me was a first edition of the translation into English, printed in 1846. A treasure that had practically fallen into my lap, right here in the middle of Kansas. It was

as though God were blessing me in my new career. I bought it on the spot.

With the help of my treasured tome, I wrote two books over the next four years about Irish history and culture. When I wasn't using it for research I kept it wrapped in a white pillowcase on the top shelf of the bookcase.

But now it was gone. And almost everything else with it. My late husband had built this house with his own two hands, and my daughter and I still lived here, in a deep, wooded valley on the outskirts of Kansas City. Now I sat on a broken chair, staring at the remains. The gas heater had ripped off the pipes and had been thrown over the house onto the hill. The TV, beds, and an armoire were gone entirely. Bedding and clothing were scattered into the trees off to the northeast. Broken gas lines hissed and torn wires sent flashes of sparks wherever they touched. *Where do I begin, Lord?* I wondered. It was as if some ancient giant of Celtic lore had reached from the sky and torn my life asunder in a matter of seconds. Police, firemen, and rescue workers came and went. But they had six hundred other homes to cover, victims of the same tornado. Still in shock, Bettse and I went to my brother-in-law's place.