

An Act of God

On Tuesday June 13, 1939, in a small town called Avalon, Tom Hart's 1935 blue sedan was lifted one hundred feet into the air by a tornado.

This would have been an unremarkable occurrence except for the fact that he was inside the car at the time of its unscheduled departure into the eye of the storm.

What made it an extraordinary story was that he somehow miraculously survived the misadventure.

The Anglican priest immediately pronounced it an Act of God, while the Baptist minister (always at odds with his spiritual counterpart) shortly thereafter denounced it as the work of Satan. The townspeople were divided on where they fell theologically, but were all equally awestruck by the unnatural event.

The storm should have in all probability destroyed the vehicle, thus killing Mr. Hart. Instead, it plummeted from the sky down through the roof of a ramshackle shed on a neighbouring farm several miles away from the site of the initial absconsion.

For weeks following this day, Tom would wake up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat. As though he were still in the front seat of the sedan, foot desperately rammed against the gas pedal; seeing his own terrified eyes reflected back in the rear-view mirror as despite his best efforts, the dark

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menacing vortex slowly overtook his car. The memory of the metallic shrieking and the frenzied shaking and shuddering of the sedan as its wheels lost traction and it was lifted into the air made him grind his teeth in his sleep.

He would be on his daily rounds, scattering feed to the chickens, or hammering a loose nail into a board and suddenly his vision would darken and he would once again see the thick grey looming mass of swirling clouds as it met the ground and enveloped him. Falling on his back in the grass, he would be brought back to consciousness by the sound of his own ragged unfamiliar screams, his German Shepherd Duke laid down beside him, gently licking the palm of his hand.

The afternoon of the storm began beautifully; all lush green fields and never-ending bright blue skies. When the wind rose up and began violently whipping the stalks of the wheat crops into a frenzy and dust clouds began to swirl in concerning patterns, Tom threw his tools into the trunk of his weather-beaten car, abandoning work on the splintered fence posts he had been out mending. Only a few minutes later, he was chased down and wrenched from the ground by the tornado. Stomach lurching, white-knuckled hands gripping the wheel for dear life, Duke cowering on the seat next to him with his ears peeled back against his head in fear.

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Billy Flannigan, racing over the fields from where he had abruptly pulled to the side of the long trailing dirt road - silently thanking his doting grandparents for gifting him with a new portable folding camera on his birthday - shot the remarkable photograph that made the front page of the local newspaper the very next day.

The editors at the *Avalon Revelation* lit their pipes, and patted one another on the back when they saw the final edition. Yes, the black and white photograph was a bit blurry, but it was a once in a lifetime shot. There it was in all its glory: the car hovering as if by magic in the midst of the twister, high above the ground, farmer Tom Hart's pale face just visible behind the windowpane. Before the sun rose the next morning that photograph lay on the threshold of every home in the county.

Slowly but surely the spell it cast crept through the community.

On Sunday, Tom accidentally left his handkerchief behind on the pew where he had been sitting. He quietly slipped out of the church, unnoticed, before the end of mass. He had been caught off guard when the priest declared his run-in with the tornado a "miracle". He stared straight ahead at the stand of flickering votive candles to the left of the pulpit, his neck and face flushing red as he heard the creak of bodies shifting in their

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seats, felt dozens upon dozens of eyes as they turned to gawk at him.

The elderly widow Mavis Wardle, disregarding the eighth commandment, covertly tucked the handkerchief into her purse as she made the sign of the cross upon exiting the church. Making sure to keep her trembling hands steady, she carefully sliced the handkerchief into evenly sized pieces with her sharp silver scissors. Bent over her sewing machine late into the night, she stitched the edges to make a small pile of fabric squares. The ladies of the All Saints Anglican Church began wearing the patches pinned to their chests, close to their hearts to protect against evil. The God-fearing women of the Baptist congregation turned up their noses at this symbol of false idolatry and crossed the street whenever that devil Mr. Hart was headed towards them on the sidewalk.

The conspicuous staring and loudly whispered conversations whenever he visited town for supplies became commonplace. But the final straw came when Roger Greely commissioned a piece of canvas painted with a replica of the image from the newspaper, displaying it in his shop window along with an assortment of his hardware and the slogan "TORNADO-PROOF GUARANTEE!" As marketing campaigns go, it was an incredible success. Mr. Greely sold forty percent more of his overall stock that month. Tom Hart

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turned on his heel in front of the store, returned to the farm, and stopped going into town entirely. That was the last time anyone could recall seeing him - at least, it was the final sighting confirmed by the authorities.

Tom's neighbour from across the road, Daisy Sprouse, became concerned when his dog, Duke, began showing up unaccompanied at her doorstep at all hours of the day and night. She visited his home early in the morning as usual, Duke trotting along beside her, and found the front door locked and a basket of eggs left on the steps for her to retrieve. Prior to his unexpected journey into the center of a whirlwind, she would deliver several bottles of fresh milk from her dairy farm every day in exchange for eggs from his chickens. They would sit on the porch swing and chat over a cup of coffee - and every now and again her home-baked goods - as the sun rose, putting off their daily chores as long as possible for the sake of good conversation, before reluctantly heading off in opposite directions. She had once presumed it to be more than neighbourly affection, but now something had intrinsically shifted in the minutia of their daily routines and the previously amiable manner of their interactions.

Walking around the farm, she found half-disassembled pieces of machinery left to rust under the mercy of the elements. The

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tractor had been gutted, as had the combine, like animals slaughtered in the field. The most unsettling change was that she never physically saw Tom anymore - she thought she caught a glimpse of him here and there, always from a distance - a piece of a flannel shirt disappearing around a corner or a denim-clad leg vanishing into the woods. It was as if he was purposely avoiding seeing or speaking to her when she came around. She stood on the porch knocking on the front door and called his name from the outside of the shuttered barn but he either didn't hear her, or more worryingly, was ignoring her distress.

There was more too - Tom's house was now always dark and shuttered, and thin streaks of light emanated from between the slats in the boards of the barn all night long. The chickens ran wild through the fields and the egg basket on the porch remained empty, the untouched milk Daisy left the day before curdled in the bottles. His neglected crops began to wilt and shrivel as the unencumbered weeds overtook every inch of free soil, choking out the sunlight and guzzling up the rain. Daisy began waking up two hours early in order to tend to his fields as well as her own.

While weeding Tom's vegetable gardens, in between the rows of tomatoes, she discovered empty moonshine bottles. Half-buried in the thick soil and still reeking of their recently consumed

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contents, they appeared to have been carelessly tossed there from the nearby barn doors. A teetotaler all his life, this disturbing discovery was about as far from the picture of the man she once knew as she could have imagined. Apprehensive, but unsure of what to do, Daisy simply gathered the bottles up and threw them down the pit in the outhouse.

Farmers like them were not born or bred into fame or fortune. They repaid one another in acts of kindness, exchanged good deeds, without any thought of taking credit for their actions. Daisy missed the early days of spring when Tom would ride over in his rumbling tractor to help plow the fields on her land, preparing them for planting. They would run frantically for cover as they used small sticks of dynamite to dislodge particularly stubborn boulders, cheering when the immovable hunk of rock erupted into fragments of stone and grit. As the sun set, they would sit in the grass together, sharing cold bottles of soda in celebration of a small victory.

Despite all the gossip, whether glowing with praise or riddled with condemnation, Daisy had only ever known Tom to be a simple, hardworking and gentle man. She was troubled by all the recent talk in town about his character and reputation, the mark that the tornado seemed to have left on Tom and the locals. It was as if they had all been swept up in it somehow and carried

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off to another, more twisted version of the world they had once inhabited.

Finally, after weeks of fretting and fussing, spending late nights peering through the curtains across the road and fields at the unnaturally bright barn, and wearing holes in the carpet underfoot as she paced, Daisy eventually confided in the priest over tea and scones. His wife, listening in on the other side of the doorway, as she regularly did when the townspeople unburdened their souls to her husband, promptly shared this privileged information to anyone with a set of even moderately functioning ears. Soon the entire town was abuzz, wondering what Tom Hart could possibly be up to all alone on his farm in the middle of nowhere.

There was much humming and hawing over far-fetched theories such as the discovery of gold in his water well or bank robbers hiding out on the property engaging in vague yet nefarious criminal activity, but these wild tales were soon abandoned. Eventually the idea that caught on and through rumour was passed along from person to person, becoming solidified as fact in the minds of the townspeople, was that Tom Hart was building a flying machine. Not just any regular run of the mill aircraft, but a flying car. It was the bit about the farm machinery that clinched it; something mechanical was being invented and

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engineered in that barn. Everyone knew that Tom Hart had had the broken-down sedan pulled from the wreckage of the busted up shed and moved into the barn for storage after its one-time flight and subsequent crash. They couldn't wait to see what he came up with. They were all bursting with excitement.

Another miracle! In such a short space of time! How blessed they all were to experience it!

Daisy had begun spending her nights in a rocking chair on her screened-in porch keeping an eye on Tom's barn. The priest hadn't had much useful advice or words of wisdom to impart besides to pray. She was also fairly certain that he hadn't been listening to her very closely, as he had quickly ushered her out the door before her tea was cold to make it to Widow Wardle's house in time for their weekly game of bridge with the other old biddies. She wasn't convinced that spending every waking hour on her knees asking for forgiveness for sins either real or imagined would be of much help to Tom. But she also didn't have any better ideas other than watching over the unusual activity at the farm, and being available at any time in case she was needed. As it turned out, she was needed that night. She awoke in the early hours before dawn to Duke whining and scratching at the door. He turned and bolted down the road towards Tom's farm.

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Sensing the dog's panic, Daisy took off after him, losing both her slippers along the way.

Coming upon the farm house, she could see smoke billowing out from between the slats and underneath the closed doors of the barn just beyond it. She grabbed a nearby shovel and pried open the doors as thick clouds of foul-smelling gas spewed into the crisp night air around her. Coughing and hacking, moving slowly forward through the acrid haze, Daisy found her way by sliding her hands along the side of a hulking metallic shape. As she grew closer and the fumes dispersed, she recognized the battered sedan somehow still running despite its fall from great heights, exhaust pouring from the tailpipe. Panic overtaking her body as realization dawned on her far too late, she fumbled to grasp the handle. Opening the driver's side door, a pale motionless body fell to the ground.

The Avalon fire department received a call several hours later from a concerned neighbour about a fire at Tom Hart's farm. The trucks were quickly dispatched and arrived to find the barn consumed by flames. Before the volunteers could disembark to fight the blaze, the entire building exploded in a blast of noise and debris. The only thing recovered the next morning was the burned out wreck of the car, sole survivor of a brief flight above the world, in the midst of a tornado.

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Tom Hart was never found.

Following these strange and unlikely events, the legend of Tom Hart, his miraculous flying car, and his astonishing disappearance continued to live on through generations, even as everyone alive at the time eventually grew sick or old and died. The remains of the barn rotted away into the soil, the wilderness overtook the field and the once-blue, now scorched and rusted sedan was soon surrounded by a forest of trees. The story was passed down, dredged from the recesses of memory while sitting around a crackling campfire or in the corner booth of a local dive bar. The mystery was wondered at, pondered over, and never completely satisfactorily solved. Tom Hart's name was one of the few that was never forgotten.

Nothing exceptional ever happened again in the town of Avalon.

Although, oddly, soon after the fire, I did notice that Daisy Sprouse began buying bags of dog food.