

**Salina, and God's Angry**  
Eric Hoefler

Salina sits almost exactly in the middle of Kansas along Route 70. It grew up in the late 1800s because of its excellent location in the midst of this nation's famous amber waves of grain, and as a result, grain elevators and flour mills jut out of the flat landscape every few miles. Many of these looming structures appear old or unused, discolored by weather and rust. I know of at least four prominent schools that claim Salina as home, and I'm sure this attracts a large, diverse, and interesting crowd, but I will always think of Salina as a flat, tree-pocked and mostly empty place full of green death and God's fury. I'm probably not an accurate judge, though, because when I passed through Salina I was panicked and half-blind by rain and hail.

I was traveling with two friends from college, Jarrett and Anne. We were returning to the Navajo reservation in Arizona to continue work from the previous summer, editing bi-cultural curriculum documents for the school district. It was our second day of travel. On the first day, we'd driven from Fredericksburg, Virginia to Olathe, Kansas—which sat just inside the border along Route 70. We took two cars between the three of us, which meant that Anne took turns between the two cars, keeping either Jarrett or me company and occasionally relieving one of us from driving duties for a few hours.

We used the same strategy that we had used the year before: start around 8:00 am, drive until noon, eat, figure out which KOA campgrounds seemed to be about eight hours away, pick one, drive until we got there, eat some more, pitch our tents, sleep, repeat. It was an effective strategy. We always made good time (two-and-a-half days from Virginia to Arizona), and KOAs were cheap and usually pretty nice. They all had showers and most included a complimentary pancake breakfast. And when you're splitting the cost of a tent site three ways, hotels don't stand a chance.

We'd eaten our pancakes and taken semi-warm showers and were busy rolling sleeping bags and tents and packing them into the cars. We'd decided that Anne and I would start the day together in my car, and she'd drive the first shift. Jarrett would follow until we hit Colorado, and then we'd switch. I stuffed the last of the gear into the rear of my hatchback, slammed it shut, and then heard Anne calling to us.

"Guys, guys! Come listen!" She was waving us over to the driver's seat, where she sat with her head pointed at the radio and her fingers on the volume. The weatherman was discussing strong storms that would be moving across the state and the "chance for possible tornado activity later in the day." Anne turned to us, looking from one to the other, her eyes big, her mouth half-open, and her short blond hair pulled back into a stubby ponytail. For a moment, she looked like a frightened bird of some sort. She may have been thinking about last year. I know Jarrett and I were.

Last year, Jarrett and I had taken Route 40, a more-southern path that led through Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and the panhandle of Texas. He sat, cramming his long legs into my tiny car, bright red hair bopping to the Red Hot Chile Peppers as we crossed into Texas. We were fifty miles outside of Amarillo when we were forced to the side of the road by rain and hail that pounded the car for ten minutes. At the time, we thought it was just a severe storm and were impressed by the show. It wasn't until we reached the KOA in Amarillo that we learned we'd been only a few miles from a category two twister. We laughed about it, but only because it was already over.

Anne didn't drive with us last year. She had flown out. Now she was glaring at us, as if we were responsible for the weather.

"What are we gonna do?" She asked this as if there were something Jarrett and I *could* do about it, but were just too lazy to act.

"Well, it's the weather." Jarrett said.

"No, I mean, should we just stay here?" Her head continued to move back and forth between Jarrett and me, and it was obvious she wanted an answer to a different question from the one she was asking. A question more like, "Isn't there something the two of you can do to make this not an issue at all so that we can just have a fun road trip because I decided to drive with you two fools instead of fly out again because you always talked about how much fun it was and now there's a tornado and isn't there something you can do about this?"

Jarrett had double-majored in classical studies and anthropology, was a philosopher by nature, and still is one of the smartest people I have ever known. This combination is at least part of the reason he approached almost everything analytically, removed from the immediate clutter of things like emotion and worry, which left him free to consider everyday situations from within a larger, sociological context and then turn those situations into games. All the analysis, however, happened behind the scenes, so that if you didn't know Jarrett well, he came across as someone who just went around making fun of people and taking nothing seriously.

“Well,” he said, “we could either wait here for the tornado to come to us, or go out there and meet it, but I think God will be able to get us either way.”

Anne rolled her eyes. She came from a simple Baptist upbringing and was still trying to use her anthropology major to peel off the last clinging rags of that tradition while still holding onto some sort of faith. Jarrett, on the other hand, pranced about happily in his agnosticism, making fun of any belief system that came his way, including his own. It wasn't that he didn't value religion; he just thought it took itself too seriously. Also, Jarrett liked to pick at other people's intellectual weak spots, and since Jarrett and Anne had been friends for over three years now, he knew any mention of God—no matter how lightly—would hit one of Anne's weak spots.

“He's right, though,” I said. “We'll be just as unsafe here on the edge of Kansas as we will in the middle. The warning is for half the state. If we drive, we might miss it. And we need to be in Arizona by tomorrow.”

We looked up at the sky. It was gray, but calm. I could see Jarrett's red hair moving away from us out of the corner of my eye. After a moment, a car door slammed and I heard Jarrett calling for us to go. I took that to mean it was settled and went around to the passenger side.

“Navigate then,” Anne said. I got my maps ready and spent the next hour flipping from station to station searching for news on the weather and anything other than country music.

I was still searching the airwaves as we neared Salina, and the sky started to get that look. It's a look that's hard to explain to anyone who's never been in a tornado, but one that's hard to forget if you have. The sky gets this strange amber glow, and the clouds bunch up to form what looks like the bottom of an egg crate, with bright areas of aquamarine shining through the deep gray puffs. I noticed the wind was picking up, too, and batting at the side of the car. The leaves off to our right were flashing their paler undersides violently. There was no rain yet, but I knew it would come soon.

The first drops hit sporadically and were impossibly huge, then the sky just dumped on us and the rain beat like hammers on the roof, washing darkness over us. The announcer we found told us that someone had spotted a funnel and it seemed to be moving east down Route 70, just outside of Salina. I looked down at the map.

“It's moving away from us,” I said, somewhat shocked. “It missed us.” I was thinking about how smart we had been to take the chance and drive, how lucky to have missed a second road-trip tornado, how this one wasn't even that bad in comparison to last year's. Then I took another look at the map. I'm still not sure how it happened, but somehow I had completely misread it. Maybe I didn't hear the announcer correctly. Maybe I thought we were further along Route 70 than we were. Maybe the map had been upside down.

I realized my horrendous navigational failure and started yelling. “We're heading straight for it. Get off, get off! Next exit.”

Anne's head jerked forward, then over at me as she started screaming.

I just point at a nearby exit. We cut across a lane of traffic, hoping that Jarrett would follow us because we could barely see him through the thick rain. Luckily, there were hardly any other drivers on the road, a fact that I had been wondering about earlier but that suddenly made a lot of sense.

As we exited, the rain stopped as abruptly as it had started. Anne and I looked at each other.

“Is it over?” she asked, but the first marble-sized hailstone hit the windshield and cut her short. Then others hit, attacking faster and faster, clicking and clacking in a crescendo assault that made Anne scream again and me worry about the roof of my car. The rain joined in the attack, and I knew that we were close to the funnel.

A few hundred yards off the exit ramp I spotted a small brick building. It was perched on a hill to our right, surrounded by a patch of trees, which were themselves sitting like an island in the middle of all this flat green land. The darkness was so deep that I could see the lights that were on in a few of the windows. Ten cars sat in the gravel parking lot out front, behind a sign that read “East Salina Baptist Church.”

“Pull in there. There!” Anne wasn't talking and was following my orders, which is how I knew she was really scared. We parked as close to the front door as possible, parking spaces be damned, and Jarrett pulled in beside us. We thought about waiting for the hail to stop, but the ripping thunder and searing lightning convinced us to run for it. We were soaked by our third step and held our hands over our heads to block the hail.

As we yanked open the double doors, lighting slammed into something off to our left and paralyzed us. We stood in the open doorway, drenched, the growling of thunder all around us, expecting to find other travelers taking refuge. Instead, the fervent voice of a five-foot-two Bible-belting preacher slammed into us as the lightning flashed again.

“And the wrath of the Lord (deep breath) will be visited (deep breath) on the heads of the evil doers-uh!”

We inched just inside the tiny foyer, eyes wide, hearts pounding. The entire congregation turned to stare at us for a moment, as if we had just stumbled into the middle of a ritualistic sacrifice, then turned immediately and calmly back to face the preacher. The preacher never blinked, never even looked our way. Death was on its way outside, and three refugees were panting at their front door, and none of them seemed to be concerned.

I looked over at Anne, hoping that her religious upbringing could give us some direction, but her mouth was hanging open, her shoulders hunched, her arms out and dripping. I turned to Jarrett, expecting a witty comment or at least a smug grin, but found him frozen in the act of cleaning off his glasses, staring at the preacher, who was now literally jumping up and down as if to illustrate God's wrath, smashing bugs beneath his feet. I moved over to a bench at the right of the entrance. Jarrett and Anne followed. We sat meekly on that wooden bench and shivered as the preacher continued to shout, spelling out precisely how the Lord would punish all evil doers—the heathen, the unclean, the unregenerate, the unsaved. I couldn't help but thinking he meant us, and that the congregation knew it. After all, didn't they come to this same church every week? How many times could they hear that same message? It must be for us.

Jarrett didn't say anything, and his expression never changed. Anne also sat frozen, staring straight ahead at nothing. Occasionally, the wind would emphasize one of the preacher's shouts by tearing open the door with a bang and fury of rain and lightning. One of us would jump up and pull it shut again, returning to our shocked stillness on the bench. I ducked my head as if we were to blame for all of this. Perhaps we had brought God's wrath on our heels and disturbed these poor, undeserving, honest folk. But the longer I sat there, the more I began to wonder, as the thunder shook the floor and the preacher's voice shook the walls. Had God cornered us in this little brick building in the middle of nowhere, trapped us here, finally, to force us to sit and listen and know that he is God? Perhaps God and the preacher had conspired together, God driving us in with the storm, the preacher waiting like a catcher hovering over home plate.

It was a lot like a haunted house. You don't believe in ghosts and spirits and rattling chains . . . until night falls and the wind starts to howl and then all the silly theatrics seem a whole lot scarier than they did in the daytime. It was like that, sitting there on that bench, shivering, cold, the preacher's warnings and condemnations—like the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah—falling down around us to the booms of the thunder outside. Like Job's meeting with God in the whirlwind. The end was at hand, we had stepped into some other dimension, and this congregation were agents—demons or angels, I wasn't sure which—trapped in the spell of the preacher, enthralled by the magic he wove with his voice. A strange thin line between a heavenly host and a demonic séance calling forth the powers of destruction, and we weren't sure on which side of that line we sat.

I didn't want to take seriously the caricature at the front of the church, waving his Bible, bending over to bellow out his warning, but I couldn't ignore him, either. Or rather, I couldn't ignore the voice pounding outside the church, in time with the preacher, the one pounding in my head, the lightning searing me somewhere in my chest. A voice primal and deep that had little to do with the sign out front or the people inside. A voice that I could hear. Still, I kept thinking: if I saw this on television, I'd laugh and turn the channel. But I couldn't do that. And so we waited. I don't remember any of the preacher's actual words—couldn't even give you an outline of his message. But the sound of those two voices beating together is impossible for me to forget.

When the strange ceremony was over, and the preacher closed out with a prayer, we opened the doors and let ourselves out. The storm was gone, almost as if it had never been. Some streams of fast-flowing water scurried through the clay and gravel, rain clung to everything, and gray clouds stalked off in the distance, but these were the only hints at the fury that had just passed. The congregation transformed back into simple Kansas folk that spoke with a thick accent and smiled at us and asked how we were. We even received several invitations to lunch—which we declined. As quickly as we could, without being rude, we returned to our cars. As Anne and I approached mine, she cut me off and said only, "You drive."

We never met the preacher. I think maybe we were afraid that he wouldn't be transformed like the others, that maybe his hand on us would slay us. I can't, of course, know what Anne and Jarrett were really thinking through all of this, but I do know they sat there paralyzed like me, and that Anne and I were silent for at least an hour after returning to the road, and that Jarrett hadn't made one humorous or analytical remark as we sat in that foyer, and that he hadn't laughed at Anne for shaking as she reached for the door at the end of the service.

After the Israelites saw the flames and heard the thundering voice of God on Mt. Sinai, they wouldn't even come near it—even after God asked them to, so that he could bless them. Instead, they sent Moses. "You go," they said. "We don't want to die." The intensity of those few hours in Salina still beats in my head, and I'm sure it's a really nice place on a calm day, but I don't plan on going near it anytime soon.