

# PROVIDENTIAL EYE

*Jackson Willis*

HELEN

The hospital's third-story maternity ward trembles with us. We've all been on edge since the emergency power came on twenty minutes ago. The other grown folks stay quiet; I think we're doing enough talking in our own heads. Squealing babies remind us where we are and what's at stake.

Last we heard on the news, the storm was a Category 4. Now the internet's out and I know we've all got to be thinking the same thing: *What if it gets worse? How much can this building take?*

Everyone's moved out of the rooms with windows now, crowded around the central nurses' station. Nobody's showered in a couple days since being quarantined for the storm, and the air reminds us of that. All the sterile white medical equipment smells like isopropyl, and all the people smell like grunge and sweat.

A man sits across from me with his face buried in his hands. The women are still mostly in the rooms deemed safe, bedridden with labor or postpartum recovery.

"I don't wanna die here," he says again and again. He doesn't work here, so I guess he must be a father. Other people sitting by us avoid looking at him, like he's a tractor beam of hysteria. I don't know where he gets off, whining about himself when he's got a new child and a woman to think about.

"You're a nurse?" The question takes me off guard. It's coming from another man squatting on my right.

"Yes indeed." No point denying it in my blue scrubs.

"My baby's in the NICU," he says. "They got her on oxygen. If the backup power goes—" He chokes off, but I know his question.

"Your baby's gonna be fine," I say. I've got my own kid to worry about, a little fourth-grader staying down in the basement with the other employee family members. She'll be fine, too. I know God can see us. I know he won't let all these little angels come back home so soon. "This place has been through storms before."

He nods like my answer is satisfying, but his tap-tapping fingers give away how he's really feeling. The man across from us is still carrying on, getting louder and louder.

“I don’t wanna die here,” he says, like it’s a fact we need to be convinced of. Someone finally yells at him to shut up, and now it’s quiet, maybe worse than before. A couple babies are still crying. It’s not until a chunk of ceiling comes down and flattens the reception desk that adults start hollering, too.

### ABBY

My favorite part was the FEMA trucks. Momma said they’re here because the storm killed our city, so don’t be too happy about it. I still smiled and ran up when they turned the corner.

The plastic-wrapped military meals they handed out down the road were always gross and hurt my tummy and I couldn’t figure out how to use the built-in heat pad to warm them up. But FEMA always gave you as much hot food as you wanted. Sometimes it was hamburgers, or barbecue sandwiches, or beans and rice. Leave that food, Momma would say, we don’t need it. We didn’t need help because she was going back to work soon, just as soon as they built the hospital again. She helped people have babies, and people would always need that.

I lined up with the neighbors on the sidewalk and said “Four, please.” One for me, one for Momma, two for later. I told the FEMA lady I had a brother and a daddy so she wouldn’t look at me wrong. Momma would pretend to be mad, but she liked having real food. The fridge was empty since the storm killed it with the lights and toilets. Momma said it’s like camping. We ate food from FEMA and Salvation Army and sometimes the plastic-wrapped meals too. We lit the apartment with candles, and we took our dumps in gray Publix bags.

### HELEN

People tumble down the stairs looking for safety, skittering like roaches and hoping to be as resilient. I’m getting to the bottom now. I think the stairs are quaking under my shoes and pray that it’s my imagination. Then I hit the basement level, where the friendly hospital facade turns into brutalist concrete that’s painfully good at echoing all the alarms ringing out.

I worry about my daughter despite myself. The girl’s always been a rebel — all her teachers say so; I have just got to trust that the folks in childcare can keep her behaved. I can’t think about what would happen if she got lost in the hospital with all the chaos going on.

I see an attendant in a reworked office space surrounded by kids, and I try putting those thoughts out of my mind. My heart beats fast when I don’t

see her.

“Momma!” She looks up from a drawing-in-progress. My racing heart skips a beat even in relief. God has a plan, even for this. We will come through stronger, like the Israelites in the desert.

## ABBY

There’s a man who lived on the corner of our street. Not in a house, but really on the corner. He was happy about the storm. I know because he started smiling and standing up all the way when he walked, and he looked more alive in line for the FEMA truck than he used to holding that crinkled cardboard sign.

Big trucks came to give us toilet paper and blankets and band-aids because stores didn’t open anymore. One time I asked, “Are they gone for good?” Momma said some of them are. “What will come back?” Momma didn’t answer that one. She sat there quiet on the porch and watched the neighbors sawing up an oak tree into pieces small enough to pull out of their roof.

A big truck parked down the street, the kind that gave out toilet paper and water bottles. The neighbors stopped their sawing and headed over to the line forming by the truck. I would have followed but Momma was watching and she had that look. She shook her head while the line grew.

Free stuff is bad for the city because it makes people expect it, she said. I didn’t mention the corner man.

## HELEN

The hospital doors open for the first time in days. They can’t let us all stay forever; now we’ve got to find out whether there’s a home to go back to. I breathe deeply walking outside, mentally preparing for what’s out there. My chest is tight and sharp. Abby’s pulling at my shirt sleeve with her brow knotted up. I probably don’t look much different.

When I see the parking lot, I think maybe it’s not so bad. The damage could be worse. A cacophony of car alarms threatens to make my ears bleed, and all the palms are tipped over and resting in windshields, but then there are some cars with barely a scrape. I keep an eye out for my SUV while we walk. There’s a surprising amount of garbage strewn around the pavement, and only some of it looks like chunks of car or tree.

“Momma, look.” Abby’s pointing behind us. I turn to see where the hospital’s upper floors used to be. The main tower’s squashed in like the

face of a rubber doll, and the rooms are exposed to the outside like a doll's house. And I see the sky peeking around the hospital, even the lower floors, where a treeline used to frame the building. All I can think is that it's wrong, everything's wrong.

The SUV is totaled. I know it when I see the windshield caved in. God gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers. Abby looks at me funny, and I realize I said those words aloud. They fall flat, now, in the face of this destruction. This wasn't a battle; there wasn't any way for us to fight.

"Get the blankets out the bag," I tell Abby, pointing at the suitcase we had brought to the hospital. I wipe the glass out of the driver seat and throw a blanket over it for protection from any strays. Abby climbs into the back seat and looks out the window while I pull out of the parking lot real slow. I push the car's damage out of my mind. I need to forget about how much it's going to cost. It's running — I should be grateful for that.

The landscape gets worse as we get farther from the hospital. It gets flatter. It isn't the city I remember from before we quarantined in the hospital. My city doesn't have buildings in the highway. Doesn't have cars stacked on top of one another. Doesn't have trees divvying up houses.

I don't see national emergency service vehicles coming to the rescue anywhere, and with a sinking feeling I come to a stop where a three-foot-thick oak trunk blocks the whole street. It might take days or weeks just to make a way for disaster relief to come in. I take a detour around the tree.

Needles poke my heart. All the tall buildings and trees are down so that I can almost see across the whole city. It's an open sore. We're almost home and I can't keep myself from looking. I look and look around my murdered city. All across the open landscape, I can see everything but God.

**ABBY**

The school closed down after the storm, but not for very long. Me and the other kids had to walk together through rubble streets to reach the school. Walking was safer because everybody had to drive slowly, and because all the intersections turned into 4-way stops with the lights and signs gone. Sometimes you could tell when someone had evacuated for the storm and was coming back. They would drive even slower than the other cars. They would hang their head out the window and point and say hey, there used to be a 7/11 there.

At school I learned what Momma meant when she used to say how God provides. I was running out of the trailer that was my new classroom. A building across the street was being used as a kitchen since our cafeteria was

gone. It was better than the cafeteria. I went in, and all the other kids were eating, even the kids that didn't used to. The food was just like what the FEMA trucks had, the same food that brought the corner man to life.

I sat down on a long bench filled with other kids, and most of us wore dirty clothes and smelled because the water wasn't back in our houses yet. With a paper plate turned soggy by barbecue pork sitting in front of me, I clasped my hands like Momma always did. I upturned my head, eyes closed, and prayed thank-you to God for the storm.

*This short story has been brewing for a couple of years now, sparked by Hurricane Michael in 2018. Recently the story became ready to bear physical form, and I'm glad it has found a home in Brushing.*

