

Name: _____ Class: _____

Tornado Coming!

By Dick Donley
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Dick Donley has written from Highlights. In this short story, a boy must act quickly when he hears a tornado warning. As you read, take notes on Matt's actions when he realizes a tornado is coming.

[1] The siren's wail pierced the muggy¹ afternoon and echoed off the Ozark hills. Tornado warning! Matt Morrison swallowed hard. What a time for his folks to be off in the city.

"We should be back before school is out," his dad had told him. "If we aren't, be sure to feed the chickens."

But school had let out early because of the storm watch. Matt fought panic. He remembered what the TV weatherman had said when he spoke last month at the school assembly: "If you hear that siren, head for shelter immediately."



"Matt had to make sure Mrs. Laney was OK." by Gary Undercuffler is used with permission.

"Come on, Buster," Matt called to his dog, huddled² under the table. He scooped up the terrier and pushed open the back door. Matt hated the outside storm cellar.³ There would be water on the floor and mice scurrying around the corners.

[5] The wind stopped. Off to the southwest, churning black clouds swirled against a sky turned eerie yellow. The stillness was scarier than the wind.

Buster whined and struggled in Matt's arms. "Steady, boy." Matt tugged open the heavy cellar door with one hand.

To the west, a ragged corner of cloud swooped lower. Dust flew up to meet it. The breeze returned to rattle a loose shutter on Mrs. Laney's house just up the road.

Mrs. Laney? Should he check on her? But what could he do? With her arthritis,⁴ she probably couldn't walk down to the storm cellar in time. Besides, he wasn't sure she'd even want him checking on her. She was always yelling at him because Buster had dug up her flower beds or something.

But if there was a tornado... she didn't have a basement or a storm cellar. He had to make sure Mrs. Laney was OK.

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1. **Muggy (adjective):** unpleasantly warm and humid
 2. **Huddle (verb):** to curl up into a small space
 3. an underground chamber for protection and shelter during violent storms
 4. stiffness of the joints that can cause pain

- [10] "Sorry, Buster." He set the trembling dog on the steps in the storm cellar and let the door drop shut. Buster would be scared in there by himself, but he'd be safe.

Matt ran up the road. Swirling dust stung his eyes, and the wind was growing louder by the minute. He raced up Mrs. Laney's porch steps and pounded on her door. No answer. Matt turned the knob and stepped inside.

"Mrs. Laney?" he called.

"Who is it?" The quavery⁵ voice came from the back of the house.

"It's Matt Morrison."

- [15] "What? Speak up."

Matt dashed down the hall. Mrs. Laney was sitting in the rocking chair in her bedroom.

"Matthew Morrison? What are you doing in my house?"

The wind howled outside.

"It's a tornado!" Matt shouted. "We have to take cover!"

- [20] "Nonsense." Mrs. Laney un-hooked her cane from the chair arm and struggled to her feet. "Just a nasty thunderstorm."

"No, ma'am." Matt grabbed her arm. "Please come with me," he said, pulling her toward the hall.

"Don't you hustle⁶ me, boy," she said, but she hobbled along beside him. "Where are we going?"

"Here." He led her into the bathroom and closed the door behind them. "You'll be safer in the bathtub, Mrs. Laney."

"I am not getting in there."

- [25] Matt looked at the old woman, her lips pursed together, her eyes defiant.⁷ "Please?" he asked.

Mrs. Laney sighed. "Oh, all right," she said. She dropped her cane and, leaning on Matt's arm, stepped into the tub and sat down.

"Good," he said. "Now put your arms over your head."

The weatherman had said to pull a mattress over you, too, but there was no time for that. Matt lay down on the bathroom floor next to the tub. He reached an arm over the edge and clasped Mrs. Laney's hand.

5. **Quaver** (*verb*): to shake or tremble in speaking
6. **Hustle** (*verb*): to force someone to move quickly
7. **Defiant** (*adjective*): boldly resistant or challenging

Something crashed outside. The weatherman had been right. A tornado sounded just like a freight train, and this one was thundering toward them.

- [30] The whole house shuddered, and Matt felt rain on his face. Dazed, he raised his head. The roof and ceiling were gone, and he looked up at an ugly, gray sky.

Soon the roaring subsided and the house stopped shaking. The storm had passed.

“Sakes alive!” Mrs. Laney’s face, white with fear, appeared over the edge of the tub. “That was a tornado!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Matt stood up, checking to make sure he was still in one piece.

“Can you please help me out of here?” Mrs. Laney asked.

- [35] Getting her out took all of Matt’s strength, but he finally managed. Mrs. Laney smoothed her skirt.

“Well, Matthew,” she said as she took her cane, “let’s go see the rest of the damage.”

Matt pulled the door open, then gulped. The big old pin oak on the west side of the house had fallen squarely across the bedroom, smashing both the bed and Mrs. Laney’s rocking chair.

“Oh my.” Mrs. Laney put her hand to her throat.

As Matt stared at the mess, he suddenly thought of his own house. Hardly daring to look, he peeked down the road. The windrow of poplars⁸ was gone and debris littered the yard, but the house still stood. He heard Buster’s bark from the cellar and the squawk of chickens from the coop behind the house.

- [40] “You — you’d better come to our place, Mrs. Laney,” he said.

“Yes,” Mrs. Laney said. “I expect you’re right. Well, at least we’re still alive, thanks to you.” She patted his shoulder. “If the gas is still on in your kitchen, I’ll fix us some hot chocolate.”

“That would be great,” Matt said. But first he had to let out Buster and feed those noisy chickens.

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8. a row of trees meant to slow the wind

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the main theme of the short story?
 - A. Always have a plan and stick to it during an emergency.
 - B. If you can help someone during an emergency, you should.
 - C. Make sure you're safe during an emergency before helping others.
 - D. First impressions of people are not always accurate.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "He remembered what the TV weatherman had said when he spoke last month at the school assembly: 'If you hear that siren, head for shelter immediately.'" (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "But if there was a tornado... she didn't have a basement or a storm cellar. He had to make sure Mrs. Laney was OK." (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "A tornado sounded just like a freight train, and this one was thundering toward them." (Paragraph 29)
 - D. "She patted his shoulder. 'If the gas is still on in your kitchen, I'll fix us some hot chocolate.'" (Paragraph 41)

3. Reread the quote "A tornado sounded just like a freight train, and this one was thundering toward them" (Paragraph 29). Which statement best explains the quoted simile?
 - A. The tornado vibrated the house.
 - B. The tornado made a high-pitched sound.
 - C. The tornado was wild and out of control.
 - D. The tornado made a loud, rumbling noise.

4. What do paragraphs 8-9 contribute to the structure of the short story?
 - A. They present the moment when Matt decides he needs to help Mrs. Laney.
 - B. They stress how dangerous the tornado is going to be.
 - C. They introduce Mrs. Laney as someone Matt deeply cares for.
 - D. They reveal how afraid Matt is to go out into the storm.

5. Why do Matt and Mrs. Laney have different reactions to the storm?
