



STEVEN CHURCH

ANTICIPATING THE STORM

Before the fake apocalypse came and the TV drama *The Day After* was filmed on the streets of my hometown, my family and friends all lived in a place called Alvamar—a subdivision of large single-family homes built on the western edge of Lawrence, Kansas. This was 1982 and ours was one of the original subdivisions in Lawrence—one that has now been swallowed up by more furious sprawl—and it was a good place then, a safe place. At least it felt that way most of the time. I believed in Alvamar and I had evidence to support my faith in place.

Alvamar was largely spared in the attacks.

They didn't film any scenes of *The Day After* there. Our houses weren't quaint and country-looking, not modest and Midwestern enough. We didn't have realistic lawns or front porches adorned with rocking chairs, swings, and peeling paint. We had chemically treated grass, three-car garages, tennis courts, circular driveways, and alarm systems. We didn't make for good huddled masses. Shots of blast victims congregating on the eighteenth hole in their plaid slacks and golf-spikes just didn't have the same evocative power as pictures of crusty evacuees camped beneath a bridge down by the river.

Dad was a partner in Sunflower Inc., a large company responsible for much of the design, development, and construction of homes in Alvamar. Though never formally trained in architecture, Dad taught himself to draft. He designed and supervised the construction of our *dream house* on Alvamar Drive. From the moment we moved in until the day we left broke and bankrupt a few years later, I remained convinced that there was no larger, more opulent house on the planet. At around forty-five hundred square feet it seemed cavernous to a small child. There were rooms we never used, furniture I barely touched. The basement felt like a different world.





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I also appreciated the opportunities Alvamar provided for ambitious children to escape our palatial homes and plan for the future, to practice our rebuilding and perfect our recovery efforts. We all knew the end of the world was coming, the nuclear death of a civilization, and we realized that somebody would have to start over and drag Lawrence from the dust of atomic ruin.

My friends and I were up for the job. Whenever a new home was under construction in Alvamar, all of us neighborhood kids gathered after school and on the weekends to play in the construction lot, the turned earth, the ever-shifting landscape. We had dirt-clod fights, chucking wads of thick Kansas clay at each other from behind piles of excavated soil. We climbed around in the skeletal framed-up houses, walking gingerly across the rafters, and we scampered up on the new roofs even when we knew we shouldn't.

Once I nearly burned down a newly framed-up house when I held a match to some Liquid Nails adhesive the carpenters had left, "just to see if it would burn," and watched thick black smoke and yellow flame leap up the two-by-four wall studs. I kicked at the gob of burning glue with my shoe, succeeding only in spreading the flaming glue-mess over more of the wood and across my shoe. I danced around and frantically tamped at the fire with a piece of cardboard. As the glue burned away, my frenzied dance was enough to muffle the flames and keep them from engulfing the entire house. Incidental pyromania. This is what happens when golf courses outnumber parks.

One day we discovered giant pallets stacked with dusty red brick and we thought we'd died and gone to heaven. The piles of material—destined for a new development of town homes—spawned fantastical plans for forts and cities of stone. We bided our time, watching the piles and waiting for the construction crews to disappear on the weekend. When they did, we descended like worker drones on sweet nectar.

We gathered at dusk on Friday, short-legged soldiers of the new millennium, buzzing with excitement. The landscape of the evening, the weekend, the near future to a child, appeared where only a field of weeds and thistle once stood. If there is value in suburban sprawl, it's in its transformative zeal, its mutative push to remake and change the landscape—





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but, I will admit, that's rarely true in the final, large-scale product. Our sprawl was innocent enough, miniaturized and simple, harmlessly strange.

Kids are all about process. So we moved among the brick piles silently, knowingly, our eyes aglow with possibility, and with few words or plans we simply started building our homes. It must be primal and instinctual, this impulse to construct. When we drifted home after dark, the walls of a small brick city had begun to rise from the vacant lot. Civilization had spread where there had once been emptiness. City from nothing.

In the morning, after *Orel Samuelson's Farm Report* and *The Superfriends*, we made excuses to extricate ourselves from our families and return to the project. We gathered and started building again, feverishly and furiously. We constructed four-foot walls with windows and doorways and laid sheets of plywood over the top. We built brick mansions with verandas and porches, guest houses and parking spots. We built cottages and cabins. We planned out sidewalks and gardens and crafted deck chairs from bricks and scrap-wood. We built parks and playgrounds (and a noticeable absence of golf courses).

Our own little red brick utopia felt so permanent, so real, so solid. Pretty quickly the city began to divide itself aesthetically. Some built lazy structures where I wouldn't house a dog. My Taj Mahal, on the other hand, included a curved wall and doorway inspired by the illustrations I'd seen in David Macaulay's children's book on architecture and history, *Cathedral*.

We even built a town jail, an imposing structure that also happened to be the tallest in town and the only building that we teamed up to build, the only real group effort in our little utopia. It was not quite clear how one ended up in the town jail, but all of us agreed that it was not a pleasant place to be, especially during the heat of the day, when we imagined it must get unbearably hot and stinky and full of biting bugs and perhaps even poisonous copperhead snakes. By the end of Saturday, when parents emerged from the brush and dragged us home, we had built something truly marvelous.

As I drifted off to bed that night, I dreamt of our red brick city and couldn't wait to return. We went back after church the next day and the city still stood tall. Other kids gathered





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and we spent our last few hours of fantasy lounging around our suburban homes, pretending to smoke cigars and drink beer, pretending to yell at our invisible kids. We all knew that tomorrow morning we would board the bus for school and the workmen would show up. We knew they would knock down our town, flattening our suburban dreams to build bigger ones. We knew our red brick utopia would give way to someone else's living room, dining room, veranda, front porch, and garden of the future. We knew our dreams would become a family's home. We knew all of this but we didn't speak of it. It was Sunday, the day of rest, the weekend almost over. We listened to the crickets crank up in the brush and the chemical hum of the lone street lamp and we were silent and undeniably happy.

At school our suburban dreams didn't end completely. Our rebuilding efforts were simply miniaturized. In the midst of family turmoil, I became a first-rate cardboard architect. I built models of survival. One week, perhaps inspired by our brick city, I convinced the other kids in my cluster of desks that we should build a city for our Matchbox cars—a new and glorious toy utopia.

I brought supplies and we built a miniature city from Dad's cigar boxes and the backs of Big Chief writing tablets. We were high-end builders, subcontracting solely for the Hot Wheels set. No Fisher-Price plastic crap in our neighborhood. No mistakes. We developed a sprawling and multi-leveled subdivision of flat-roofed White Owl cigar-box houses spread out over the terraced Formica landscape. It looked like a Spanish villa or a vacation retreat in the south of France. It looked like something from a different world, a better world.

We were industrious, ambitious, and still learning our multiplication tables. We were dangerously innocent. We barely knew what was happening all around us. I was still too far away from the rift to see my parents' marriage beginning to crumble, still too young to understand how everything would change in the years to come or foresee the collapse of Dad's business and our inevitable move away from Alvamar, away from success and safety. I was still firmly planted in the present, anchored in the third grade, a year of my life that seemed to last forever.

Soon a new city had risen from the flat plane. Reinforced





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cardboard ramps and tunnels connected the short and tall desks. Paper-clip streetlamps lit the neighborhood. We all drove Corvettes, Camaros, and other impractical hot rods. We rolled around in Jeeps and yellow stock cars plastered with Mountain Dew and Pennzoil labels. We parked their die-cast bodies in cigar-scented palaces. My sweet ride was a black Chevy van with red and orange flames, the closest thing to an SUV. But I also drove a white Lotus with a British flag on the hood, a car I like to think lent our little village a distinctly international air.

Mrs. Frakes, her spine curved into an S, liked to tell me that I was “ornery” but it sounded like “onree” when she said it. She loved us and we loved her; and she didn’t really seem to care that we were blindly paving the new suburban frontier in our little cluster of desks. Mrs. Frakes rested her coffee mug and her tissues on the shelf of her belly and watched us work, mildly impressed or at least amused with what we’d created. She’d been teaching for thirty years, had seen it all, and probably recognized the value of our project.

Matchbox Town thrived for the rest of the week during any spare minute in class. It blossomed into a community of dedicated car-loving suburbanites happily rolling along wide, well-lit boulevards. We had created our own little vacation spot and every day we traveled some place else in our minds, a safe place away from politics and fear. We went home for the weekend and could not imagine the horror that would come. We were not prepared for the sudden storms that hit our lives.

While we were away for the weekend, safe at home, tucked in our child beds, the silent, silver-haired janitor who roamed the hall with a wide, red dust mop descended upon our village. Without so much as a warning siren signal, she tore our houses down, ripped through our town like a F5 tornado, and wiped everything away.

On Monday we gathered around our desks—the surfaces shining from the janitor’s touch, the air reeking of cleaning compounds—and we mourned the loss of our homes, our utopian dream. Maybe you can picture the helicopter photos of storm-battered townspeople gathering after a tornado strike, or Jason Robards wandering through the ruin of his home in *The Day After*—only there was no rubble for us to





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sift through, no family pictures to hold up for cameras, no symbolic finds like a dead wife's watch, a photograph, or a precious juicy orange.

Our city was unceremoniously dumped into a plastic bag and heaved into the Dumpster. Fortunately we had all driven our Matchbox cars to our weekend homes. Otherwise the losses might have been even more catastrophic. Wordless and dumb with grief, we stood and wondered at the random violence of janitor wind, the tiny apocalypse that had befallen our town.

Fueled by innocent optimism or ignorant denial, we immediately began to rebuild—our hearts bursting with the nostalgia for paper houses taped together by hand, pencil-drawn patios, and imaginary vegetable gardens. We ignored any lingering fallout, all suggestion of future attacks; but all week we watched the janitor roam the halls in a new light. She swung her bucket of sawdust ominously, dumping it on pools of kid vomit, and wielded her mop like a staff. She stomped around the school like a thunderstorm brewing.

Friday came again and another Matchbox Town cardboard city stood tall again, towering higher than the original with double-decker box houses and complicated ramp systems. It was truly spectacular and golden. A phoenix to behold. Built to last. On Friday we left a note:

Dear Janitor,

Please don't tear down our city. We worked real hard to make it. Mrs. Frakes says it's OK if we keep it.

Thank you.

The Kids from Cluster 4

The weekend lasted forever. We wanted to believe in the goodness of humanity. We prayed that she had a heart, an appreciation for the imaginative industry of a child. But when we returned to school on Monday, our desks were scoured clean, our city destroyed all over again. There was nothing left, no trace of our efforts, our dreams; and the chemical smell of Comet lingered in the air. Utterly defeated. Crushed. Cursed. Wiped away. We didn't ever bother to rebuild this time—our spirits splintered, our suburban dreams diffused into wisps of nothing.





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I still have trouble understanding the violence of this, and I have to imagine the janitor after hours, drooling over her destructive work, her fingers punched down through the cardboard roofs, ripping them from their Scotch-tape moorings. She yanked and pulled and dropped it in the garbage. She enjoyed the destroying. And suddenly, in the midst of my imagining, I feel sorry for her.

My writing lets me do this. Little else. I see her at home alone, struggling to paint by numbers, anguishing over a rickety popsicle-stick castle. I see her knitting four-fingered gloves for children she never had. I see teetering, awkward Lincoln Log shacks and Tinker Toy contraptions; the electric blue glow of the television, cheap dinners in tin trays with a mushy peach cobbler for dessert. Maybe she resented us for our architecture, our ambition, our imagination. Maybe she envied our innocent sprawl. Maybe she just took her job too seriously. We were simple boys, vessels of developing hubris and dreams, and we could not be blamed for the desire to create.

Just before *The Day After* production crew arrived in Lawrence, my father's business collapsed into bankruptcy when the housing market bottomed-out. We moved from Alvarado first to a tiny duplex then to a house two blocks away from our elementary school. We spent the summer remodeling the house. Dad got a new job. Instead of boarding a bus every day, my brother Matt and I walked through the water-tower park and down the street to the school. We were almost too close for comfort.

The school district held tornado drills several times a year. They began with frightful cacophony. The big yellow siren mounted to the pole on the playground cranked up with a gut-shaking anguished howl, *wooooOOOOO*, causing bowels to quiver and knees to shake. Then we had to march out of the room single-file and line up in the hallway.

These sirens were the same sirens that went off in *The Day After*, the same ones that would go off in the case of an actual nuclear attack, and I could hear them from my basement bedroom. They seemed to go off a lot more than necessary, and I suspected that some guy at the central office was just getting his jollies by scaring the crap out of every kid in town.





was peeled off and tossed into the air like a playing card, the black funnel twisting above, sucking children into its spin, sucking the janitor and her dust mop up, Mr. Armstrong too. I was the only kid with my head up, the only one watching it all, the only witness as the school, the walls around us, began to disintegrate and the bricks flew like bullets, grass blades imbedded in trees, and then a voice came at me, piercing the fog of my imagination.

“Church!” Principal Armstrong bellowed. “Head between your knees!”

What’s the point? I wanted to say.

I lowered my head again, stared at my shoes, and closed my eyes. Waiting. *Foolish humans*, I thought. *We’ll all be dead if a tornado hits the school. Don’t you know that? You might as well enjoy it. Besides, if the twister doesn’t get us, the bomb will.* I was a big kid, fat-kneed and somber. I’d begun to grow, to take on the weight of the world. I hated Mr. Armstrong for not understanding this.

Things were tense around the house in those days after we moved. Mom seemed distant and Dad was just plain angry at the world. Matt was characteristically oblivious. I wanted some independence and separation from the rest of the family and liked having my room in the basement. I liked the darkness, the quiet, the solitude. But it wasn’t always an easy place to live.

We had mice. At night I heard them scurry-skitter across the ceiling tiles over my bed, making frantic, hair-tickling noise as they moved about. I banged on the walls with my fist, but they didn’t care. They were always running, always clawing. Driving me crazy. One day, after I complained enough, Dad pulled down a ceiling tile and set a trap with peanut butter. We caught seven mice in one day. He pulled each one out of the trap and, if it was still alive, let the dog maul its broken body for a while before tossing it in the trash.

When it rained really hard in the spring and early summer, the basement window-wells filled and leaked. One morning I climbed out of bed into an inch of water. But that was nothing. The worst part of living in the basement was coping with my fear of fire. I’d seen the public service announcements on television and the numerous educational filmstrips and programs at school about the danger of house fires—



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especially to children. I was haunted by the ubiquitous images of mothers standing on the sidewalk, screaming, “My baby!” My baby!” as the house burst into flames and collapsed into cinders and dust. I always wondered how it was that all the adults always made it out of the house.

Families were encouraged to hold fire drills and practice escape routes. This seemed easy enough for my parents and my brother. They lived upstairs and were surrounded by large windows and doors. I lived in the basement, and at the top of the stairs, the only exit, was a massive sixties-era Kenmore oven—a fireball waiting to happen if I’d ever seen one. At the bottom of the stairs, the prehistoric furnace lurked and clanked and rumbled with flame. The water heater was down there too, hissing with blue gas, threatening to blow shrapnel.

I began suffering vivid and terrifying nightmares of being trapped in a house fire, burning to death as the house collapsed around me. The fear was always about being trapped with no escape. Before long I spent most nights sleeping on the couch upstairs in the living room, faced with a huge bank of bay windows that I figured I could crash through easily if a fire broke out. It got to the point where I couldn’t spend the night in my own room. The fire dreams were just too much.

One day, out of the blue, Mom and Dad announced they had an idea they thought I might like. They brought me upstairs and into the small office-space on the main floor between their room and Matt’s room. Dad had a sly grin on his face and I knew he was up to something. He opened the closet and pointed at the floor. “You know what’s under that floor?” he asked me.

“Nope,” I said.

“Your bedroom,” Mom said.

“Huh?” I said, realizing slowly that they meant the closet was located directly over one corner of my basement bedroom and if we were to, say, cut a hole in the floor, we could look down into my bedroom. To their credit, Mom and Dad waited for me to understand. They waited for eye contact, recognition.

Then Dad said, “I say we build a trap door and put in a ladder so you have an escape route in case of a fire. You’d have your own secret entrance.”

He let the idea sit for a while, hovering in the space be-





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tween us. I loved it. I wanted to let it float for a few minutes and appreciate the loft and weight.

“Cool,” I said, and Mom hugged me, knowing what this meant.

Later that day Dad brought his power tools into the house, ripped up the carpet in the closet, and after drilling some pilot holes, sawed a huge chunk out of the hardwood floor. He didn’t even think twice about it, didn’t balk at the idea of cutting a gaping chasm in the house. He installed a rope ladder and a trap door that allowed me to climb on to my chest-of-drawers and up the ladder into the coat-closet upstairs.

Somehow—even with all the other crap in their lives—Mom and Dad knew that I would love the idea of my own secret escape hatch, my own private Batman-like entrance. Maybe they understood me after all. There was little I wanted more in the world than some kind of hidden passageway, a secret doorway or room of some kind, and they’d given it to me. Just when I thought I was on my own with this whole fear of fire business, Mom and Dad stepped up to save me. They also gave me a release from my nightmares, a door back to my own space. My dreams settled down after a few days and the comfort of my secret escape let me sleep again—finally.

More than once I climbed up on my dresser, popped the hatch open, pulled down the rope ladder, and hoisted myself out—just to practice for the inevitable fire. Survival, I understood, takes careful planning. Survival was about believing you could escape—even if the reality departed from the truth somewhere between the basement and the ground floor.

We’d heard stories about *The Day After* for years, it seemed, before it ever aired. We’d lived with the pretend apocalypse for most of our young lives; it was part of our existence, but it was still hard to get used to, difficult to understand. The movie felt like a new kind of threat.

Growing up in Kansas, you learn to appreciate, or at least marvel at the imminent approach of a storm. You watch them build on the horizon—this piling up of charcoal-thick clouds and a low bowel-rattling rumble. Storms don’t hit and run in Kansas. They invade and it’s positively biblical—an apocalyptic mix of everything: rain, wind, lightning, thunder just





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dumped on top of you. When tornadoes hit home, they often settle down into the landscape and cruise around for a while, chewing up giant swaths of trees and cows and houses and cars, destroying everything in their path. The big one that hit Andover a few years ago was almost a mile wide and stayed on the ground for half an hour.

Despite their destructive fury, I love the awesome beauty of a Kansas storm—even the really wicked ones that spawn tornadoes. Apocalyptic weather is one of the few things I truly miss about living in Kansas. I miss those jangly electric hours of anticipation. The sky just before a big storm is an experience to behold; and Kansans are known to emerge from our homes amidst the worst storm warnings to stand in our yards and stare slack-jawed at the roiling pea-green sky. We are addicted to the spectacle—the sky tinged with a chemical-green hue, stinking of sulphur and ozone. We can't get enough.

When the 1980 tornado hit the south side of Lawrence, we were still living in Alvamar, but it was close to the end for us there. We would be gone soon, moved off to a new neighborhood. The twister plowed south of town, chewed up a few houses, and smacked into the K-Mart, then drifted across the street and thrashed the Gaslight Village trailer park into a stew of metal and wood. Dad and I stood in the front yard of the big house and watched the sky swirl and twist like a bubbling pot of gravy. Little twister sprouts, anxious roots, dipped down from the thick body of gunmetal-gray clouds.

“Look at that,” Dad said, pointing at the sky. “Isn't it amazing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It's really moving.” I heard storm sirens blaring in the distance. “Shouldn't we be inside?”

“Oh, don't worry,” he said. “We'll be fine.” He barely looked at me and just stared up at the sky.

I gazed up too, watching the hillside to the west of our temporary house. A wall of rain slowly appeared, creeping over the homes above us and down finally to our street and across the yard. Dad and I retreated inside, gathered up Mom and Matt. The radio sounded a tornado warning, meaning that one had been spotted on the ground. Rain pounded the roof and the slab-porch out back and the creek rose quickly, spilled over its banks and kept coming into our yard.





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“Listen to that,” Dad said. “That is something else . . .”

“Is it going to come in the house?” I asked, gesturing out the window.

“No. Don’t worry. Just listen,” Dad said, a strange smile spread across his face, his ear cocked to the ceiling. “You know, I’ve always wanted a bedroom with a tin roof.”

“A what?” I asked.

“A tin roof,” he said, “just for these thunderstorms. So you could really hear the rain hitting the roof. I love that sound.”

Mom said, “It looks like the trees are fighting each other,” and she pointed out the window.

We all stood there for a few moments and listened to the rain pound our home and watched the wind whip the trees out back. They danced back and forth, slamming their limbs into each other, fighting for purchase, and the creek crept closer and closer to our back door. But I never really worried. Not with my mom and dad there.

I think it was my parents’ sense of wonder at storms, their appreciation for the beauty and power that always made them less frightening. Mom was always a little more afraid, a little less willing to marvel at the destruction, but she still couldn’t pull herself away from the window and those fighting trees. Dad would have sacrificed sleep just so he could listen to the sound of rain hitting a tin roof—something most people wouldn’t even dream of doing. They didn’t try to explain storms to me or define away their magic. They didn’t give me scientific explanations of their behavior—at least not explanations that stuck around in my head. They gave me pure wonder—that unique ability to sit back and quietly appreciate that which you cannot control. Some days I think I’ve lost touch with that sense of wonder completely and I’m not sure I know how to find it again.

I think now that part of what made nuclear war and, in a different way, *The Day After* so frightening to me in the years to come was Dad and Mom’s inability to appreciate nuclear capability. They were not impressed. It did not inspire in them a great sense of wonder or fascination. They didn’t brag about our nation’s killing power. They didn’t celebrate the technology that made nuclear war possible—though Dad did seem to be a fan of nuclear power. But they





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didn't protest it either. Perhaps it was more than an inability to explain or support or even protest. It was an inability or unwillingness to express much emotion whatsoever about it that made it so terrifying to me. By attempting to minimize the harm, I think they maximized my fear.

I can't really blame them. I'll probably do the same thing for my own son—err on the side of innocence protected rather than innocence lost. They could barely talk about nuclear war, barely understand it themselves—at least not the new reality of it—and seemed unable to decide if the proliferation of warheads throughout the Western hemisphere of the planet was a good thing or a bad thing. They were young and strangely unprepared to educate their children about something that, while unique in its manifestation, was part of their childhood too—fear of the nuclear apocalypse. They grew up with this stuff. But I realize they had their own problems to think about, their own divisions and battles waging beneath the surface that would explode and escalate soon enough. But back then I didn't see it coming.

Perhaps partly because of their silence, their inability to explain the politics and fear, nuclear war began to loom in *my* imagination as a different kind of storm, one my dad couldn't stand in the yard and marvel at with me. This was a storm of our own making and it must have been the weight of guilt that kept their eyes averted, their feet firmly planted in avoidance. They knew that, on some level, they were responsible in the same way that I am responsible for the world today—the war, the fear, the threats—where my son lives. We're all responsible for finding new ways to understand the world.

As a kid living in the shadow of the apocalypse, I was terrified when they announced their intentions to film *The Day After* in Lawrence. It seemed like an enormous cosmic joke. I didn't understand why they needed to do this, why they needed to invite the apocalypse to our hometown. I wanted to make sense of it; but I had trouble. My dad couldn't tell me a fantastical story about the sound of fallout pattering on a tin roof, or the exquisite beauty of genetic mutation, the wonders of nuclear fission and fusion. He couldn't describe a wind-powered, solar-heated house with a wooden space ship in the backyard just like the one we already had. I wanted





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him to tell me about a bunker built for shelter, maybe a bus buried under the yard, a cave stocked with food—giant wheels of cheese and huge smoked sausages the size of a child's leg—a cave hidden past a maze of tunnels that fed into the airtight, temperature-controlled, oxygen-rich, basement environment of our imaginary suburban dream home.

In the face of the apocalypse, I wanted Dad to cite hopeful statistics he'd read in *Discover* magazine, articles from the *Wall Street Journal*, or stories from Paul Harvey's radio show—evidence of the irrational nature of my fear. I wanted him to make the movie scenes; the threat of war, bankruptcy, and divorce; the culture of threat and response—all of it—just seem magical, impossible, and far away from my real world.

After a big storm in Lawrence, after the rain filled the creek and flooded the golf course, after the culverts clogged with debris and the storm sewers backed up, after the trees did their fighting and Dad dreamed of a tin roof, after the clouds passed, when the sky parted and the bruised cumulonimbus rolled off to the east, when the rain ceased and the atmosphere softened a bit, all the neighbors in Alvamar emerged from their homes and gathered on the nearest golf-green, perched on a manicured island, surrounded by a wide, shallow lake of rainwater and the occasional tree-limb, tee-boxes rising up like rescue helicopter landing pads. They gathered together, pants rolled up to their knees, wearing yellow rubber boots. They clutched coffee cups and held colorful umbrellas aloft. They chatted and hugged and compared stories. They gathered to console over flood damage, to commiserate and comfort. But mostly they gathered to marvel at the mess and watch with wonder as their children waded knee-deep through the inland sea.

