

Savvy

By Ingrid Law

When my brother Fish turned thirteen, we moved to the deepest part of inland because of the hurricane and, of course, the fact that he'd caused it. I had liked living down south on the edge of the land, next to the pushing-pulling waves. I had liked it with a mighty kind of liking, so moving had been hard- hard like the pavement the first time I fell off my pink two-wheeler and my palms burned like fire from all of the hurt just under the skin. But it was plain that Fish could live nowhere near or nearby or next to or close to or on or around any largish bodies of water. Water had a way of triggering my brother and making ordinary, everyday weather take a frightening turn for the worse.

Unlike any normal hurricane, Fish's birthday storm had started without warning. One minute, my brother was tearing paper from presents in our backyard near the beach; the next minute, both Fish and the afternoon sky went a funny and fearsome shade of gray. My brother gripped the edge of the picnic table as the wind kicked up around him, gaining momentum and ripping the wrapping paper out of his hands, sailing it high up into the sky with all of the balloons and streamers roiling together and disintegrating like a birthday party in a blender. Groaning and cracking, trees shuddered and bent over double, uprooting and falling as easily as sticks in wet sand. Rain pelted us like gravel thrown by a playground bully as windows shattered and shingles ripped off the roof. As the storm surged and the ocean waves tossed and churned, spilling raging water and debris farther and farther up the beach, Momma and Poppa grabbed hold of Fish and held on tight, while the rest of us ran for cover. Momma and Poppa knew what was happening. They had been expecting something like this and knew that they had to keep my brother calm and help him ride out this storm.

The hurricane had been the shortest on record, but to keep the coastal towns safe from our Fish, our family had packed up and moved deep inland, plunging

into the very heart of the land and stopping as close to the center of the country as we could get. There, without big water to fuel big storms, Fish could make it blow and rain without so much heartache and ruin.

Settling directly between Nebraska and Kansas in a little place all our own, just off Highway 81, we were well beyond hollering distance from the nearest neighbor, which was the best place to be for a family like ours.

Monday through Wednesday, we called our thin stretch of land Kansaska. Thursday through Saturday, we called it Nebransas. On Sundays, since that was the Lord's Day, we called it nothing at all, out of respect for His creating our world without the lines already drawn on its face like all my grandpa's wrinkles.

If it weren't for old Grandpa Bomba, Kansaska-Nebransas wouldn't even have existed for us to live there. When Grandpa wasn't a grandpa and was just instead a small-fry, hobbledehoy boy blowing out thirteen dripping candles on a lopsided cake, his savvy hit him hard and sudden- just like it did to Fish that day of the backyard birthday party and the hurricane- and the entire state of Idaho got made. At least, that's the way Grandpa Bomba always told the story.

"Before I turned thirteen," he'd say, "Montana bumped dead straight into Washington, and Wyoming and Oregon shared a cozy border." The tale of Grandpa's thirteenth birthday had grown over the years just like the land he could move and stretch, and Momma just shook her head and smiled every time he'd start talking tall. But in truth, that young boy who grew up and grew old like wine and dirt, had been making new places whenever and wherever he pleased. That was Grandpa's savvy.

My savvy hadn't come along yet. But I was only two days away from my very own thirteen dripping candles- though my momma's cakes never lopped to the side or to the middle. Momma's cakes were perfect, just like Momma, because that was her savvy.

I often reckoned what it would be like for me. I pictured myself blowing out the candles on my cake and fires dying in chimneys across four counties. Or I imagined making my secret birthday wish- getting my cheeks full and round with air- then floating up toward the ceiling like my very own happy birthday balloon.

"My savvy is going to be a good one," I told my brother Rocket. "I just know it."