

Name: _____ Class: _____

Black Blizzard

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Maurine V. Eleder has written for Highlights. In this short story, Eleder explores the experiences of those who lived through the Dust Bowl, a time period of severe dust storms during the 1930s in parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and neighboring states. As you read, take notes on the effects of the black blizzard.

- [1] “Ooooh, Betty. Come quick!” said four-year-old Mary Ann. Paper dolls lay forgotten on the floor as she stared out the window.

Betty felt her stomach muscles tighten as she joined Mary Ann. On the horizon loomed a rolling black cloud. It stretched from the ground into the sky, and it was heading directly toward them.

“It’s another dust storm, Mary Ann,” Betty said, trying to stay calm. How many more would there be, she wondered.



“We’ll never make it to the barn.” by James Watling is used with permission.

For the last four years — since 1932 — Oklahoma and nearby states had endured¹ dozens of such storms. Betty knew the routine. “Let’s get some towels from the kitchen,” she said.

- [5] The girls went from window to window, closing each and placing a rolled-up towel where the window met the sill. It would keep out some of the windblown dirt, but Betty knew that powdery dust would cover everything — dishes in cupboards and clothes in closets — long after the storm had passed.

“I’m scared,” said Mary Ann.

“I know,” said Betty, “but we’ll be safe if we stay in the house.”

“What about Mommy and Daddy?” Mary Ann asked.

“They’re probably on their way home from the bank. They won’t be able to drive in the storm. I expect they’ll stop at a neighbor’s home.”

- [10] The dust cloud hid the sun and brought an eerie² darkness, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. The wind howled. Tiny particles of soil pelted the window glass.

No wonder they call these storms “black blizzards,” thought Betty. She stared out the window.

“Oh no!” she said suddenly.

1. **Endure (verb):** to suffer something painful or difficult
2. **Eerie (adjective):** strange and frightening

"What's wrong?" asked Mary Ann.

"I thought I saw Fancifoot. See there — near the fence," Betty said. In a momentary lull³ of the wind, she had glimpsed Fancifoot's white markings.

- [15] Betty remembered other dust storms. Sometimes, even though there was no rain, there was thunder and lightning. That would frighten Fancifoot.

Fancifoot was Betty's colt. She had seen him born. She had named him. She helped carry his hay and clean his stall. Fancifoot would stumble around trying to find shelter. What if he stumbled into the dry creek bed and broke a leg?

Suddenly Betty picked up Mary Ann and set her in the rocker.

"I'm going to get Fancifoot back into the barn," Betty said. "You stay in this chair and don't move."

Mary Ann nodded solemnly.⁴

- [20] Betty jammed on her old straw hat and pulled the brim low over her forehead. She wound a scarf around it so her nose and mouth were covered. In the storeroom near the kitchen, she found her mother's long clothesline. She wrapped one end around her wrist and tied it in a knot. Then she plunged into the storm.

The wind almost whipped the clothesline from her hand. Sandy grit⁵ pounded her face. Betty closed her eyes and groped her way to the porch railing. Bracing herself against it, she tied the free end of the clothesline firmly to one of the posts. Bending against the wind, she trudged along the house, then turned left to follow the fence.

The fence ended. No Fancifoot. Betty couldn't see more than a few yards in the swirling blackness. Then she heard him whinny, and she stumbled toward the sound.

"Fancifoot!" Betty called. Where was he? Again she heard a low whinny. She turned and stepped forward. Now she thought she heard him to her right. She walked backward to keep the grit from hitting her face.

Maybe the wind is playing tricks, she thought. Maybe I didn't really see or hear him. But then she smacked right into him.

- [25] "Fancifoot," she said with relief, "you're OK." She glided her hands over his ears and neck. Quickly, she looped the slack of the clothes-line around his neck.

"We'll never make the barn," she said. "I've turned around so many times I can't tell where it is. You're coming home with me."

3. **Lull** (*noun*): a moment of quiet or lack of activity
4. **Solemn** (*adjective*): not cheerful or smiling; serious
5. small, loose particles of sand

Hand over hand, Betty guided Fancifoot along the clothesline, back to the end she had fastened to the porch.

“Come on, Fancifoot. Up two steps and we’ll be safe. Come on, boy,” Betty coaxed⁶ as she pulled him into the house.

“All safe,” Betty gasped to a surprised Mary Ann.

[30] “We’ll put him in the storeroom until the storm is over,” Betty said.

The storm continued to blow as Betty prepared supper. She sliced bread and cheese and found an apple for Fancifoot. Then she lugged Daddy’s chair over to the storeroom.

“Come on, Mary Ann, I’ll read your favorite story, and we can keep an eye on Fancifoot at the same time,” Betty said. Soon Mary Ann was asleep.

Betty noticed that the wind was not as strong as it had been. Then she, too, fell asleep.

Ai-ooga-ai-ooga! Betty sat up, wide awake. Then she heard it again. Ai-ooga!

[35] “What is it?” Mary Ann asked.

“Our car! They’re home!” Betty answered.

They raced to the front door. A hazy rising sun shone on drifts of dirt piled against the house.

“Are you all right?” Mommy and Daddy asked as they hugged and kissed the girls. “We were passing Schuler’s farm when the storm hit, and had to stay there overnight. We were so worried.”

“Thank goodness you’re all right,” said Daddy. He looked uncertainly at Betty. “I noticed the barn door was open. I’m afraid we may find that Fancifoot got out of the barn and —”

[40] He stopped as Mary Ann and Betty giggled.

“He did get out of the barn, but he’s OK. He’s right there,” Betty said, pointing to the storeroom where Fancifoot stood — munching Betty’s old straw hat.

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6. **Coax (verb):** to persuade someone to do something

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. Animals and children should be taken to safety first in an emergency.
 - B. The bond between humans and animals is unbreakable.
 - C. It's easier to respond to emergencies when you don't let fear control you.
 - D. Panicking during a life-threatening situation can lead to more problems.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The dust cloud hid the sun and brought an eerie darkness, even though it was the middle of the afternoon." (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "Fancifoot was Betty's colt. She had seen him born. She had named him. She helped carry his hay and clean his stall." (Paragraph 16)
 - C. "She wrapped one end around her wrist and tied it in a knot. Then she plunged into the storm." (Paragraph 20)
 - D. "'Come on, Mary Ann, I'll read your favorite story, and we can keep an eye on Fancifoot at the same time'" (Paragraph 32)

3. How do paragraphs 12-14 contribute to the overall structure of the story?
 - A. They introduce an important character in the story, Fancifoot.
 - B. They develop Betty's character by showing how much she cares for animals.
 - C. They introduce the main obstacle in the story, getting Fancifoot to safety.
 - D. They emphasize the dangers that the storm presents.

4. How do Betty and Mary Ann's emotions compare to their parents at the end of the story?
 - A. Betty and Mary Ann are just as worried to see that their parents are safe as their parents are.
 - B. Betty and Mary Ann are light-hearted after surviving the storm, while their parents are nervous to make sure everyone is ok.
 - C. Betty and Mary Ann are shaken after the storm, while their parents are calm, as they knew everyone would be safe.
 - D. Betty and Mary Anne are proud of their actions during the storm, while their parents are surprised that everyone is safe.

5. How would you describe Betty's actions during the black blizzard? What does it reveal about Betty?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In the story, Betty and her sister have to stay in the house during the dust storm. How do you think a dust storm could be dangerous to people caught in it? Describe a time when you have experienced a dangerous or scary storm.

2. During the storm, Betty decides to go get her horse. Do you think her actions were foolish or brave? Why? Describe a time when you helped someone or something in need.