



The Tornado Ride

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Where I live, we often get hit by microbursts, which are small dust storms that last for about five minutes and have 80-100 mph winds. These microbursts are very annoying but are better than a full-blown dust storm, which consists of high winds blowing our outdoor sand arena away.

Usually, we avoid riding our horses in such conditions, because we know about the time these storms are going to happen. But one evening, in the early spring, our predictions weren't quite right. It happened as follows...

The clouds were quite dark but that means nothing here. Nine times out of ten we get three minutes of rain and a cold night. But tonight was different.

I spent extra time tacking and grooming my horse, for I had no worries about the weather. When he was finally tacked up and ready to go, we headed for the pasture. We walked a ways and then picked up a slow, but not sluggish trot, for he knew we had a long ways to go. We trotted over the hill and back around to the gate, where we slowed to a walk briefly before continuing on at the trot. Once we got to a small, straight line of fence, I asked for the canter, which he picked up excitedly. (He loves to go FAST at the canter!) Then we trotted and I asked for the other lead, which he didn't pick up. But at that moment I felt a faint drop of rain and decided we had better be heading back. As we slowed to a walk, I patted him and praised him, and we continued on a loose rein. We were almost to the highest point of the pasture when I saw it. Huge clouds of dust rumbled over the open countryside, evidently made from the oil roads behind them. A dust storm.

I was not worried then for I thought all I had to do was turn my horse away from the storm and keep facing forward. (Sand blowing at that speed can be very harmful if you look into it.) But as I glanced quickly over my shoulder to check the storm's progress, I became worried. Along with the dust, hundreds of prickly tumbleweeds that had become uprooted by the wind raced steadily along. The speed at which they were going was much too fast to be a dust storm: this was a microburst. And this microburst was faster than any microburst I had ever seen; it was advancing quickly without any signs of stopping, which was quite unusual. You see, microbursts usually either stop gradually once they get to you or pick up gradually. But this one was not like that. This one was literally a solid wall of wind, and it was going to hit us pretty soon. The microburst came over the hill, and my horse started prancing worriedly. He knew what was going to happen.

The velocity of the wind shuddered through us both as the microburst came upon us. It

was like being in a tornado. Some of the tumbleweeds did not stay on the ground to chase us; instead they flew 15-20 feet up in the air above and around us. By this time, my mount had started running. He did trust me, though, he turned corners and listened to all of my aids except the ones to slow. I do not blame him. I felt like I was in a nightmare, except this was true. The wind lashed me back and forth like I was a rag doll. I was SO scared. The rain the microburst had brought with it felt like hail, and I was only in a tee shirt. As we turned the corner, a giant tumbleweed hit my horse in the head. He was now completely frightened, and so was I. But somehow, like a miracle, I found the right words to calm him. I whispered them so quietly that I was surprised he even heard them. The words poured out of my mouth like a well-memorized song. His ears turned to me and then back to the chaos, like tiny radars, as he tried to understand. And he did understand. He slowed to a walk, and as if that was the magic word, the microburst ended. It was silent, and the sun peeped out of the clouds. Still shaking, I praised him and patted him wildly, telling him all the time that he was a really good boy. We walked back to the barn, where I quickly untacked him. It had started to rain again, so I groomed him in his stall while he happily ate his two well-deserved carrots. Everybody was surprised that I stayed on and told me I was a great rider. But I just smiled and said I owed it all to my great horse. Because my horse, through 100 miles winds, pelting rain, and attacking tumbleweeds, listened and trusted me fully. And through this great test of friendship, I have found the truest friend and partner anyone could ask for; someone who I not only can love and trust but also someone who loves and trusts me: my horse. Truly, one of the greatest things in this world is the bond shared between two individuals that are so different physically but yet so close emotionally: a rider and his/her horse. (But really it's a horse and his/her rider!)