

2016 Interview with Mary Shafer (Weather Expert and Artist)

Kate: The weather -- how long have you been interested in that and how long did it take you to cultivate an understanding?

Mary: That's kind of a two-part question. I was interested in weather ... I'm pretty sure since I've been cognizant. I can nail the part where I got kind of obsessed with it.

I was four years old, just about to turn five. It was June of 1966. We lived in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. My dad had a friend who had a beach cottage out on Beach Haven, Long Beach Island. They let us borrow it for the weekend, and it was me, my mom, my dad and my brother and my baby sister, who had just been born in January of '65.

I remember when we left to go there, it was raining and kind of icky. As we drove further east out toward the shore, it got worse and worse. My mom was afraid. She was always afraid of everything. I remember her really kind of needling my dad: "Why are we doing this?" Then, as we went further and we got onto the bridge going out to the island, she really got upset because we were listening to the radio, and the radio must have mentioned a storm, because I remember her saying, "See? There's a hurricane coming!" Well, I didn't know what a hurricane was. I was four. I just knew that my mom was upset. You know when you're a kid, you really pick up on that energy?

By the time we got to the cottage, it was late; after dark. I remember very distinctly that the cottage had a picture window, and my dad went over to it. I remember, he lit up a cigarette and was standing there, looking out the window. Then he goes, "Shit." My mom's like, "What?" They went over to the window, and I went over, too. I remember what I saw, but I didn't know at the time the significance. They were hoisting the two red flags with the black boxes in the middle, which are hurricane flags. One means a hurricane watch, and two is a hurricane warning.

They were raising them on the dock, which was right down the beach. We could clearly see it from the picture window, because they had a spotlight on it. That's how people knew, especially the boaters. My mom just looked at my dad like, "I told you so," and they started talking about what we should do.

We had a station wagon and it was pulled up to the house. This was in '66—there weren't paved roads. There was maybe the paved road going out there, but the lanes were all dirt or sand, and you could park right on the beach, so we did. We had parked on the beach next to the house, and the cottage was beachfront. When we first got there, you could see the waves down at the beach; but by the time we left, the surge was already coming up and there were waves coming almost to the car, and they were actually hitting that picture window. I remember my mom packing up the car, and I was standing there shaking, literally trembling. I was so scared, I wet my pants. As far as I know, I must have rode all the way home like that, because I don't remember Mom changing my pants.

Anyway, that was my first encounter with severe weather, and I'll never forget it. I believe that was Hurricane Alma, I actually looked it up when I was doing my book *Devastation on the Delaware*. It was the first one in the season, so its name started with A.

My second influence was growing up in the Midwest, in southeastern Wisconsin. You're not right in Tornado Alley there, but you're right next to it, and you do get tornadoes. I remember many, many, many tornado watches during the summer. A few tornado warnings, too...I remember going to the basement a few times. There was a time when we had a tornado warning and my dog was tied to the pump out in the front yard, so my mom said to go get her, because she was going to go get my sister, who was out playing in the garage. I remember mom saying, "Oh, my god! There it is!" while looking past me. But I was too scared to look and I just wanted to get the dog in the house, so I never saw it. I don't know if she actually did see a funnel or just thought she did, but it was that close.

I've worn glasses since I was eight years old. I'm very nearsighted, and I remember those nights when we would go to bed during a tornado watch. I would keep my glasses on my face, because I was so scared of getting up in the middle of the night and not being able to see. My dad would just yell at me. You know, "You'll bend them!" and "They're expensive!" and stuff. It didn't matter, though. He could have yelled his head off, and I still would have done it.

Then the third big thing—and this was probably the hugest thing that really cemented it for me—concerning my severe weather obsession: In June of 1990, I bought a house with my partner in northern Wisconsin. I had just gotten a job as an art director for a small publishing company, and that was our first house. I thought when we moved up there, that we would move out of Tornado Alley, but we actually moved further into it. At that time, I was aware there was such a thing as Tornado Alley, but I didn't really know where it was. We lived in Iron County, and it turns out that it's one of the counties in Wisconsin that gets the most tornadoes. I don't know why...something about the geography between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River Valley, and all those influences.

On September 15th that year, I was getting ready to drive to Milwaukee the next day, for my sister's wedding rehearsal dinner, because they were getting married on the 18th. I stayed home from work, since I was also going to be doing some business while in Milwaukee, and I was taking comp time. One of the things that I had wanted to do is catch up on my correspondence, because I'm a letter writer. I still write letters. I enjoy it, and I like getting them. Anyway, I owed my mom a letter.

I was sitting in our enclosed screen porch, because it was very hot and humid, and the house was stifling. We had chickens, and they had a run maybe 30-40 feet from our porch. While I was sitting there, I could watch them. I loved watching the chickens. They were fascinating.

Kate: I like chickens, too.

Mary: They're just great. We had inherited them with the house. We had a couple...maybe two or three...red ones—I think Rhode Island Reds—and then the rest were White Leghorns. We had maybe five or six of those.

We were at the top of a bank of an old cranberry bog that had dried up and filled in with sphagnum moss (which, by the way, was the best trampoline in the world. We would tie ropes around our waists because there was water underneath, and tie those to a tree, and just jump. It was so fun).

Anyway, if we would find roadkill or whatever, we would drag it down into the bog and put it on the moss. Then we would watch all the coyotes and foxes, and sometimes we got wolves, eat it. Anyway, because those predators were always down there, the chickens would usually stay far away from that rim.

So I'm sitting there, writing a letter to my mom, and it was hot like today, only still. Slowly, the sun went away and it became high overcast. And then it just got really, really still...like, not a whisper of a breath of breeze. I noticed that the chickens were really agitated, and I thought, "We have a creature. Something's stalking down there." But I checked and didn't see any stalking going on. In my letter to Mom, I said, "Wow, Mom, I'm a little concerned about the weather. The sky looks like it's going green." And it was. It wasn't that brilliant, creepy green you see when a storm is imminent. It was just kind of a dull, grayish-green, because we had that flat overcast. It stayed that way all day long, which is unusual. Usually it's just right before storm, but I didn't know that then. I wasn't that knowledgeable about it yet...but I knew that something wasn't quite right.

As I was sitting there...you know how you sit there and you're twiddling your pen and you're writing and you're trying to think of what to say? Just at that moment, I got the weirdest feeling. This is the only way to describe it...it was just a weird feeling. I felt compelled to look up. I looked over at the chickens, and all of a sudden, all four chickens that were sitting on the roosts flew up. They didn't jump or take off, they just flew straight up. Straight up, at the same exact time, into the air. They came down outside the run, and ran down into that bog. All four of them, at one time.

Kate: Oh, wow.

Mary: I didn't know anything about chickens, but I knew that wasn't right. I kind of put two and two together with how the sky looked, and I'm like, "They know something."

Earlier, I'd bought one of those little boxy weather radios from Radio Shack, because we were really out in the sticks and I didn't want to be unprepared. We didn't have cable, so we only got like three TV channels, but the repeater tower from PBS and NPR was right up the street, so that's mostly what I watched and listened to. At lunch, the local NPR station had mentioned severe weather forming up in Duluth, which was only about two hours northwest of us. So when I went back out on the porch after lunch, I brought that weather radio with me. When I sat down to continue writing, I hit the little rocker bar on it and they were talking about tornado watch, and blah-blah-blah.

I listened to that throughout the day, and by that night, it was so sweltering and humid. We did not have air conditioning, and we had a maybe 600-square-foot house. It was very, very small, and was so close in there, I couldn't even breathe. I got that same feeling I'd had when I was little. I went to bed with my glasses on.

It was so hot, I couldn't stand to have any pajamas on. I did think, "If something happens, I don't want to have pajamas. I want to have substantial clothing on." I had a pair of overalls, and I opened them up and put them on the floor next to my bed, so I could just jam my feet in, and take off. I had a pair of tennis shoes or something there, because I knew there would broken glass if something did happen. Thank God I did that.

My partner then came to bed. She was completely exhausted. I said, “Don’t go into a deep, deep sleep, because I just don’t have a good feeling about this.” The weather radio was reporting really violent thunderstorms coming through. Again, this was before public weather stations had Doppler radar, or maybe early Doppler; but anyway, they didn’t know about how to see an embedded thunderstorm, or an embedded tornado. You just had to kind of guess.

I couldn’t sleep. I kept getting up, and the dogs kept getting up. Clickety-clickety-clickety, on the floor with their toenails, driving me nuts. It was just so hot. We had a fan on us and everything, but I couldn’t lay there. I got up and I went out and listened to the weather radio again, and it was just not good news. I was getting really nervous, but finally, I was just exhausted. I went to bed. I laid down, and I thought, “I’m never going to get to sleep. I’m going to be so sleepy to drive down to Milwaukee. I think I had kind of started to drift off, when it started to rain. Softly at first, then it started to rain really hard, like a machine gun.

I laid there listening to it, thinking, “This is just not good.” Then it was like somebody flipped a switch, and it just stopped. We were at the edge of some kind of a cloud thing. Right at that moment, I heard the highest-pitched scream I’ve ever heard in my life, but it was far off. It gradually got very, very loud. I knew the only thing that made screaming like that was wind. I immediately elbowed Susan. I was like, “Get up! It’s a tornado, get up!”

It was lightning so fast, it was like a strobe light on a dance floor. It was so constant, you could actually see what you were doing, even though the power had gone out and we had no lights. That loud screaming is getting really, really loud...like it’s getting close. The dogs are terrified. The cats’ eyes are like dinner plates. I’ve got one cat under one arm and one cat under the other arm, and they’re both clawing the shit out of me, but I’m like, “It’s okay. Whatever, you’re not going to die.”

Susan was still half-asleep and she was in front of me, moving too slowly. I’m like, “Go, go!” She was standing at the foot of the basement stairs, because the dogs wouldn’t go down – they were afraid of that stairway because there were only treads, no risers. She says, “They won’t go!” I said, “Push them! Better broken-legged than dead!” She pushed them, and they went down.

When we got to the basement, we went under the steps, because they had been built of sturdy wood poured into the foundation, so I knew that wasn’t coming out. Without any risers, if stuff was going to fly, we were going to be in trouble, but it was the best shelter we had. Susan was hanging on to the dogs, and I had the cats. I was just mauled from their claws and was bloody, but I wouldn’t let them go back upstairs.

By the time we got to the basement, it was so loud. I cannot describe how loud it was. I can tell you, we were standing next to each other trying to talk, and she was so close I could feel her lips on my ear. She was screaming at the top of her lungs, and I could not hear her. It was unbelievable! I remember my ears popping really bad, which hurt, and I remember feeling like it was hard to breathe, so I knew it was passing right over the house.

You could hear the roar outside, and then all of a sudden we heard these weird, loud popping noises. I yelled, “What the hell was that?” This whole ordeal probably only lasted maybe three or four minutes, but it felt like forever. I fully expected to watch our house lift off above us. There’s nothing you can do. You just sit there and hope to God you’re not going to die. I was so

scared for the animals, because they were clearly terrified, and I couldn't explain what was going on. I thought, "Oh, what's happening to the chickens?" It was really scary.

Kate: It sounds terrifying.

Mary: It was, and you know, three to four minutes doesn't sound like a long time.

Kate: It sounds like a long time to me. Thirty seconds can be really long in a situation like that.

Mary: Then slowly, slowly, you could start to hear it die down. It went off to what I now know was the southeast, which is weird, because it usually comes from the southwest and goes to the northeast, so it was definitely coming around.

We didn't get any more storms that night, but I couldn't sleep. I just couldn't wait to see the outside in the morning. By the time we got awake, we had electricity back on.

Kate: Well, that's a miracle.

Mary: The sunlight came. It must have been five-thirty, and I'm not an early morning person; but I never slept, so I went upstairs, and looked outside. I just was like, "Oh, my God." There is just stuff everywhere. Stuff that wasn't ours, that had blown in from other places, and lots of tree limbs. I went outside on the side of the porch, and I saw this huge tree limb against the van I borrowed from work to go to Milwaukee. I'm like, "Oh, God, I'm going to get in trouble!" You know?

Kate: Yeah.

Mary: I called right away and left a message at work and told them what had happened. It turned out it was a very, very narrow damage path, and it only hit right along our road. No place else got touched.

Kate: Really? Wow.

Mary: That morning, I was so curious about what that popping noise had been that we'd heard. I walked around the house, and found it right away. We had a little boxy house, and right next to my office, there were two, 35-foot balsam trees. Beautiful, they smelled so good. They were over. One had fallen right along the house, missing the gutter by like two inches. The other one fell the other way, and I thought, "Really?" Then I looked at the trunks. They weren't severed, like it had just gone snap. They were twisted, and it forced these things to shred vertically. I said, "Oh, my God, that's what the popping was!"

Kate: That is crazy.

Mary: As scared as I was, it was really amazing. To this day, I'm amazed by it.

Kate: What is it that makes you amazed by it, do you think?

Mary

Mary: The power. The absolute power of it. But it's not just the power. The power amazes me, but...I know this sounds really twisted, but it's beautiful. There is something about the way weather happens that is so graceful.

The other thing is, I think that we, as a species, need something that's bigger than us and uncontrollable by us, to remind us that we are not all that. We have a place in the universe, but we are not the universe, and we are governed by the laws that all other creatures have to follow. I feel really strongly about that. We need something to keep our heads from getting this big and thinking that we are the masters of the universe, because we are not, and we (humans) shouldn't be trusted with that.

If you take the time, you cannot watch a supercell develop without having a sense of extreme awe. It's not like anything else. It's like watching a mushroom cloud happen in slow motion. The symmetry of it...I mean, you've seen some of those cells that I post online.

Kate: I'm not sure I see them in the same way you do, so you keep talking.

Mary: Okay, so for instance: There are names for supercells, the different formations they take. There's the one that's called "the upside-down birthday cake," because you can actually see the cloud layers. There are these beautiful striations around them, and the symmetry is just amazing; this is what's cool about the supercell. There's only a short period of time when the symmetry is perfect, and that's when the storm is at its most powerful, because everything has balanced. Again, it's that whole balance thing with nature. All the sudden, something will happen inside the storm. If we knew what it was, we could probably stop it from happening. Something happens inside that storm that tilts it over one way, or maybe there's a stronger updraft in one part than another; but whatever it is, it throws off the balance of the storm. The minute that happens, that storm becomes a killer.

Now, the power has moved to one part of the storm, and it can take over and make the storm into something that becomes violent. Not just powerful, but violent. It has to happen that way. You can see it. If you watch, you'll see this beautiful, mostly symmetrical storm, and then it'll get shear from the top. You can watch the top blow off, and make that anvil head: You are screwed now. You are going to have a violent storm. It may not turn into a tornado, but it's a very good likelihood. At the very least, you're going to get some big hail.

Kate: Is that because when you upset the balance, one part becomes more powerful?

Mary: That's exactly right.

Nature hates imbalance. Nature wants to correct it. The reason we have wind is we have areas of extreme low barometric pressure—air pressure—and we have areas of high barometric pressure. High pressure is usually pleasant weather, low pressure is usually a storm. We have wind because nature...

Kate: Wants to balance.

Mary: (Nodding) Wind is the air pressure rushing from the high area to the low area. We need that. If we didn't have it, the world would die, because you have to have that movement of air. You have to have that exchange of moisture. Moisture exchanges heat. That's the biggest thing. Almost all of weather is about exchanging heat—heat and air pressure—to regain balance. That's really it.

You look at these other supercells: You can have that striated look, you can have the one that has the crunchy edges, that's got the roll-cloud on it, or the shelf cloud. The shelf cloud is...I've seen probably five or six pictures on Facebook in the last week of stunning shelf clouds. My favorite is, right before it goes super-cellular, it has that cauliflower look to the top. I mean I could look at those forever, those brilliant white things.

Kate: I was on a plane not too long ago, and it was evening. The sun was going down, so it was like late dusk. There were storms happening. We were flying above the clouds. You could see the lightning on the clouds. It was amazing.

Mary: Isn't it cool?

Kate: It was beautiful.

Mary: You can't look at one of those clouds and not be awed by it. I like the fact that it puts us in our place. I like that fact that there is something bigger than we are. I am comforted by that. It makes me think...I mean, if you think about it, Napoleon—considered one of the most powerful and winning generals in history—he was stopped by a storm.

Everybody talks about Waterloo, but it wasn't just another army. He was stopped by weather in the Alps. Do you the word *Kamikaze* means "Divine Wind?" That was named after Japan was being invaded by China and the Mongol hordes. They had a typhoon, which is their name for a hurricane. They called that the Divine Wind, because it saved Japan from being taken over. So in WWII, they called the suicide pilots *kamikaze*, because they thought they, too, would again save Japan.

Weather has affected so much. Do you know that in 1814, at the end of the War of 1812, the British actually got into Washington, D.C., and burned the Capitol building? Do you know why they left? There was a tornado.

Kate: Interesting.

Mary: It actually went through and decimated their troops.

Kate: Wow.

Mary: It also put out the fire. That's what happened! This ended their little mischief in Washington. And, for all practical purposes except for the Yorktown thing, it ended the war.

Kate: You've mentioned a few times that you were really terrified in these weather situations, and do you feel like that somehow fuels your interest?

Mary: Oh, sure. Yeah. I've never been as afraid in my life as I have been of weather. People laugh at me and think I'm nuts because I go storm chasing.

Kate: This is what I'm thinking of -- so what compels you to do that?

Mary: Part of it is because for me personally, I hate being afraid. It disgusts me when I'm afraid of something, because I want to be a brave person. I want to be a courageous person. I know for a fact that the only way you can conquer a fear is to directly face it. When I decided to go storm chasing, I figured this time, I'm going to face my fear of tornadoes by putting myself in its way and looking at it straight in the eye. That is exactly what I did.

I thought, "Okay, I'll get it out of my system. I'll overcome this irrational fear." Well, I realized that the fear is not irrational. It's not BUT rational to be afraid of a tornado. But what I felt out there was freedom, because when you're out chasing, you're chasing them. You're not sitting in your house, waiting for them to come hit you and destroy your world. I'm still terrified of that. I'm really scared, especially here where I live, because we don't have a storm shelter.

I guess it's a really long answer to the question. I did it because it made me not feel afraid and more in control. I was facing it instead of being chased by it, I guess.

Kate: And how did you get involved in Emergency Response?

Mary: So the emergency response thing, that actually came out of a specific incident. I was at the time working over in Lambertville, New Jersey. I happened that day, to be down in Wrightstown. I was in a big barn that had been converted into a photography studio, and I was photo directing a shoot. When I went in there in the morning, it was raining like all hell, and when I came out, it was still raining, but more heavily. Thank God I had a Jeep with big tires, or I never would have gotten out over there, because the guy's driveway was completely covered even in the morning.

It ended up being Hurricane Floyd. Normally it takes me from Wrightstown, between 45 minutes to an hour, to get back up to Ferndale. That day, it took me four hours.

Kate: Oh, my gosh.

Mary: After I got home, I looked down in the road, and there were all these big rocks that had washed down the hill. On the hill in Ferndale, at the light where we were living, it just becomes like a waterfall. I looked at the street and there was water running down it, very, very fast.

I went out in the road on Rt. 611 with a rock rake, and was pulling those rocks down into the ditch on the other side of the road, because I knew that ambulances would need to get through. I had never even known what emergency management was. Then this guy pulls up in this big blue Chevy Suburban, and he's like, "What are you doing in the middle of the road?"

I said, "I'm clearing rocks. I think the ambulance won't be able to get through, otherwise."

A couple days later, I'm out cleaning up the mess the storm left, and that same guy comes by again. He goes, "Hey, thanks for what you did. That was good thinking." Then he says, "I'm the emergency management coordinator for the township. Would you have any interest in joining us?"

I realized that I should do this. I used to be a cop, and I'm trained to handle people and myself. I know how to manage crowds. That's how it happened. I was the weather and communications coordinator for the Nockamixon Township Emergency Management Agency for 13 years.

Kate: Were you working during Hurricane Sandy?

Mary: I was working it, for 13 days straight.

Kate: Oh, that's right, now I'm remembering that.

Mary: For the first three days, all of the township news was getting out through the personal hotspot on my smartphone.

Kate: Really?

Mary: For the first three days, I was on 24/7, and then I finally just...I had to sleep. I had to sleep and I was hungry. But then I was back. I had these two computers going, and I had my iPhone and my iPad all going, at the same time.

Kate: Oh, wow.

Mary: I was monitoring National Weather Services, watching the radars, monitoring all of Facebook and Twitter, and I was also monitoring our website.

After it was all over, I remember posting on Facebook, "I just want to thank everybody for your cooperation during Hurricane Sandy, and the tremendous amount of support we got as the EMA." Man, I had people posting some of the nicest things.

Kate: I bet.

Mary: It made me cry, I was so touched.

Kate: Well, you were their lifeline in that moment of crisis.

Mary: I guess I didn't really think of that. I just thought, "Everybody needs this information." I remember feeling really committed to making sure that people had the information, because my background as a cop told me that the worst thing you can do is keep people in the dark, because first they get scared, and then they get angry. Once they get angry, bad things happen.

Kate: People get desperate.

Mary: When people are frightened and angry, they do stupid things. They're always sorry, but you can't take it back. The strategy is, just don't let them get that way in the first place.

Kate: When I said that I was interested in interviewing you as a scientist as well as an artist, you said, "Oh, but I'm not a scientist." Do you feel like you're not?

Mary: No. Science was one of my poorest subjects in school. So was math. Those are the two things you need to be a good meteorologist.

Kate: Right, but you can explain how hurricanes form and all this technical stuff.

Mary: You don't have to be a scientist to understand that.

Kate: No, I guess not.

Mary: I'm just fascinated by it. I love to know how things work. For three years of my life, I was an auto mechanic. I just did it because I loved figuring out how things worked. I guess to an extent, that's science. It has to be, because it's physics. If I am any kind of scientist at all, I'm a physics person.

I will say, I actually do—for the most part—understand Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. I actually do understand it, which...it's amazing. First of all, it's just amazing that anyone's brain could figure this out, but then when you realize that it touches every single thing you do...

Kate: Well, physics has that spirituality component to it.

Mary: It does, it does! Just...I mean...the whole thing. I mean, what you're talking about here is the fourth dimension of time, and then the realization that time doesn't actually exist. It's a human construct. Basically, nature just floats out there in whatever. She doesn't care about the relativity to anything else. I don't know, it's amazing to me. We build these constructs so that we can comprehend what's going on around us.

Kate: Yeah, that's interesting.

Mary: I have a fantastic book. The writer is actually an artist. He likes the clouds. He likes to draw them, and maybe paints them, I don't remember. But he was fascinated by them, by those shapes. Then he realized that the shapes of clouds changed with different kinds of weather. He invented a system of classification. That's where we got *stratus*, and *cirrus*, and *cumulonimbus*.

You'll find throughout science, throughout history, that human beings tend to have this silver bullet mentality. It's either this or that, on or off, black or white; but in reality, it's hardly *ever* that. There's usually never a black-and-white answer. Almost everything is shades of grey.

Kate: Right.

Mary: We naturally build psychosis into the way we deal with our lives, because we want to stick everything into these neat little compartments, where they don't fit. He realized this, so there wasn't just *cumulus*, and there wasn't just *nimbus*, there was *cumulonimbus*, because sometimes they ran together. He allowed for that, which is one of the first classifications that ever did. That's science that I get, but you have to tell the story in a way that non-scientists can understand. I guess that's what I love, because I love weather, and I'm fascinated with it, and I can't understand how anyone can't be fascinated by it, because it affects everything we all do.

Kate: Yep.

Mary: I want to share that with people, because to me it's fascinating, and it's exciting. I like to share my enthusiasm with people in a way that makes them enthusiastic, too. You know how I have that Facebook page about creativity?

Kate: Yes.

Mary: I think that there's a very close relationship in human beings between our connection with our creative selves, and our tendency to become ill. I think when we neglect our creative selves, we get sick. I think the more we neglect, the sicker we get. Part of why I think we stop connecting with our creative selves as we get older, is that we come to understand things more, and so our sense of wonder erodes. That's sick. That by itself is a sick thing. It doesn't have to happen that way.

The reason our sense of wonder erodes when we understand something is that we stop thinking of it as magic. Now it's just science. It's no longer a miracle. We stop according it wonder, when in fact, that should make us wonder even more. Because, yes, we understand how it works; but we still don't understand why, and we never will. There will always be another why. We will never be able to answer all of those whys.

It is my profound hope that we never, ever, ever completely understand the weather or anything else, because when we do, our first inclination as a species is to screw it up and mess with it.

Kate: Right.

Mary: I want people to appreciate the weather. I don't want them to just be scared of it. I don't want them to be disgusted at it or whatever it is people feel about weather at any given time. I want them to realize that weather is amazing and we can't do without it. I mean, in writing, it's a metaphor for so many things. I will probably always, in my fiction, write about storms, because it embodies so much. It's a great setting for emotional drama.

Kate: Atmospheric. Literally.

Mary: Literally. That's exactly true. There's a reason that we use the words that we use. Look how many times we talk about something being stormy, when it has absolutely nothing to do with the weather. It's because it's such a perfect, apt metaphor. You know, you're making me think of this, and I've never thought of it before. I know there's some connection between my interest in

art, my interest in weather, and my interest in creativity. I just don't know what those connections are.

I know it's there. I know that I'm working on this series of novels called *The Storm Diaries*. I think I've told you about them. There's a reason I picked that. First of all, it fascinates me, but second of all, I wanted an excuse to go research all these historical extreme weather events and be able to write it off as a business expense.

But it's not just that crass. That is a cool byproduct, but I really want to write this story because I'm also taking a character—my main character—and I'm essentially telling her emotional life story through the metaphor of weather. That's going to be a challenge.

Kate: And what about your artwork?

Mary: You saw some of my cloud drawings. I've decided that my next big painting series is going to be storm clouds. It's definitely going to be cumulonimbus clouds and supercells, because visually, they're the most interesting clouds. There is a tendency of these clouds, especially when they're lightning, or they're against the backdrop of a sunset—which they frequently are, because it basically happens during the afternoon, because you've got all that convection; it happens during afternoon heating, and then storms tend to initiate between 4:00 and 6:00 PM—you do frequently get these big, huge, bulbous clouds. They have this internal glow, or at least it appears to be that way, and I don't know if I can capture that, but I'm going to try.

Whenever I paint, I always give myself an assignment. I'm not always successful. The painting might be okay, but if it hasn't achieved what I set out to achieve, it's not going to be my idea of a successful painting. I know it's going to take me a long time to get good at painting clouds that look like clouds, like they're made of mist and not of clay. It's a real technical challenge for me.

So I'm learning to translate my interests in weather through my art. The thing is, who's ever going to buy a cloud painting?

Kate: Oh, I don't know.

Mary: Probably nobody, but I don't care. Because you know what? If I can hang them on my own wall, that's fine.

Kate: Yeah. You know, I recently sold a painting to somebody I didn't know. That's the first time that's ever happened.

Mary: Congratulations!

Kate: Yeah, it was good, but I was really struck by what you'd said about that experience—how it's kind of sad, and part of you is taken away.

It's a little bit like giving away part of your soul. I had not been prepared for that feeling, even though you kind of told me that. Mostly because I just never really thought it would happen, and then it did and it was like, "Wait, wait!"

Mary: Yeah, I will tell you that every time I go to someone's house that's bought one of my paintings, I have an absolutely 50/50 feeling between being really proud that they liked what I did enough to want to live with it, and, "Give me that back, I want to take it home with me." Because there's a reason you made that picture.

Kate: Exactly.

Mary: There's actually a couple pictures that I have sold or given away over the years that I really wish I had back. I think about it. Sometimes I think, "I'll just redo it." But you never do that same painting twice. You couldn't. It's impossible. It'll never have that same feeling that made you do it in the first place. It'll just never be that same picture.

Yeah, there's one in particular that I did, when I lived out in Milwaukee. I was basically out there for 30 years and I never felt at home. My home was always Pennsylvania. I was so homesick. I can't even tell you. When I lived in northern Wisconsin, the year after that tornado, I don't know if it was something about that storm—it may have been—that reminded me how short life can be, and I really wanted to go home. I got really homesick. I started having this one dream every night. I was constantly dreaming of driving over this one hill on Route 522 that comes off the turnpike, to see my grandmother.

Kate: Where did your grandmother live?

Mary: Huntingdon County.

Kate: That's there by where I'm from.

Mary: Where?

Kate: Alexandria. That's my hometown.

Mary: I didn't know that! I bet we grew up 30 miles from each other!

Kate: That is crazy.

Mary: Grandma's from Mapleton Depot. My aunt and my cousins lived in Huntingdon most of the time, my granddad worked in Tyrone. We went right through Alexandria.

Kate: That is crazy.

Mary: When I was away, my heart would hurt. I had, actually, a physical ache right in here. It would go between my tummy and my heart, and I would feel completely hollowed out and think, "If I can't wake up and see the mountains soon, I'm going to die."

Kate: I definitely feel that connection to the mountains, too.

Mary: Yeah, even here.

Kate: Right, it's not the same.

Mary: I remember in Mapleton Depot, my grandmother was actually outside of town, which is already outside of town. They had a farm, and it was back in this hollow.

Anyway, I remember a couple of times—and you can probably relate to this—thunderstorms back in the hollow were very different than the thunderstorms out in the flat Midwest, because it would echo back and forth. I never heard thunder as loud as it was in that hollow back there. It scared the hell out of me.

We would sleep in the guest room. The second floor had been put in later, so the window was really low to the ground. It was only like nine inches off the floor. Even as a little kid, I could reach it, so I would get out of my bed at night. They had the deep windowsills, and I would just sit there with my butt on the ground, and it was just a little ledge, perfect to lean over with my head on my arms. There's a smell to that part of the state. It's like humus, and the bluestone has a smell, and something wild. I think it was the creek, actually, because it wasn't that far away. At night, the cool would rise up out of the damp, and it would smell so good. I would listen to the whippoorwill. I never heard a whippoorwill again after I left there.

I'll never forget that. Then, way off in the distance, I would hear a Pennsylvania Railroad engine blowing its whistle. Then when we would have thunderstorms, I was really, really scared of them, but I still had to go to that window and listen. It's like I've never been able to stay away from the storms.