

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Smell of Rain

By Jennifer Owings Dewey
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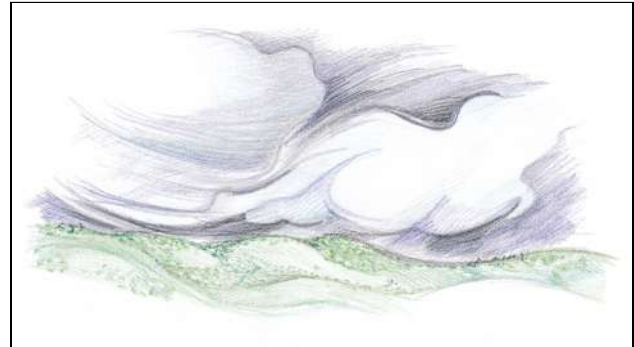
Jennifer Owings Dewey is an author and illustrator of natural history books for children and adults. In this short story, a narrator describes being able to smell oncoming rain. As you read, take notes on what the narrator observes when it is about to rain.

- [1] "What do you mean, you can smell rain coming?" Amanda asked. She was my first cousin, ten years old, same as me. She was on a visit to our ranch from her home in Vermont.

"Nobody ever asked me before," I said, shaking my head. "I just can."

"But how?"

My curious cousin started the two of us on a quest¹ for an answer. Can anybody honestly smell rain coming? What made me think I could?



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- [5] It was August, so there were a lot of chances to observe. In the desert, southwest monsoon rains come in August. Strong winds come first, blowing over the mountains. Dark thunderheads build, rising miles into the sky, and rain spills out of them, falling in gray streaks that resemble long, straight hair.

But before I saw or felt any of those signs, I could smell the rain coming. No wonder Amanda was so skeptical.²

"Think," Amanda said to me. "What is it you smell that tells you rain is coming?"

I struggled to find words for a complex sensation that, until that moment, I had not even thought about. "Let's go to the pond this afternoon," I said. "I want to show you something."

I planned to show Amanda that insects can detect coming rains. If insects could do it, then it wasn't impossible. So why couldn't people do it, too?

1. **Quest (noun):** a long search for something
2. **Skeptical (adjective):** having doubts

[10] Our irrigation pond³ was fed by runoff from the river, an irregular flow that came and went according to how much it rained. The pond was muddy, shallow, sometimes boggy, and always alive with insects. I had noticed that insects flew in low and gathered in huge numbers around (or on) the water well before a rain. We tested my theory a few days later, waiting by the pond as thunderclouds built in the east. Sure enough, the willows that surrounded the pond were soon thick with insects tucked under leaves, clinging to stems and branches. Over time, we saw that the approach of a big storm, with flashes of lightning and booming thunder, always increased insect populations in the bushes and on the surface of the water.

"They sense rain is coming," I ventured.⁴ "They're out flying around, and something makes them find a safe place to wait out the wet."

Chickens and chicks, pigs and piglets, cats and kittens—all sought shelter before a storm.

In large, noisy flocks, ravens flew into the cottonwood trees, squawking and cackling an hour before rain fell. Bees zipped into their hives. (We had a dozen white hive boxes at the bottom of the alfalfa field.)

One afternoon, my sisters went horseback riding and got caught on the far side of the river when a flash flood⁵ tore out of the mountains. They came home and described how their mounts turned nervous and jittery, ready to bolt for home well before reaching the river. The horses had sensed the danger.

[15] Amanda insisted that I did not smell rain coming, but saw signs.

"It's the way animals behave that's giving you clues about rain coming. I think so, anyway," Amanda said.

"Maybe," I said, frowning, considering. "But I can smell it, too."

Finally, we discovered other small changes that took place before a rain. Cut hay let off a potent aroma.⁶ The berries on juniper pines seemed to swell and turn a darker purple. The smell of the berries seemed richer.

Alfalfa blossoms appeared to grow fuller and bluer. Their fragrance seemed fuller, too.

[20] At the time, the true source of these aromas was a mystery. Years later, I understood that moisture in the air—a rise in humidity—can cause plants to give off strong smells.

In our search for answers, we asked Bill, the ranch wrangler.⁷ He lived an outdoor life. He knew Mother Nature's secrets.

3. a manmade pond used to provide water to animals and crops

4. **Venture (verb):** to dare to do something risky

5. a sudden flood, usually due to heavy rain

6. a strong smell

7. someone in charge of the animals on a ranch

"Part of the answer is the creosote⁸ bushes," he said. "When creosote bark gets rain-soaked, it lets off a powerful smell. Some folks like it. To me, it's the stench of roofing tar. The winds blow that far-off smell to your nose, well before the rain comes."

"Wind carrying plant smells," Amanda announced, pleased with herself.

She went home in early September. I wanted her to stay forever. "I'll try at home, to smell rain on the way," she said, maybe to console⁹ me before leaving.

[25] We had discovered that there are aromas, changes in the air, and changes in what animals do, before a storm. Paying attention to these signs can help a person predict rain.

It's still mysterious, but like a lot of mysteries, it's also still true.

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8. a brown, oily liquid used to keep wood from rotting

9. **Console** (*verb*): to comfort someone

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence best describes the theme of the short story?
 - A. Paying attention to your senses may help explain nature's behavior.
 - B. It's impossible for humans to fully understand nature.
 - C. Some people are more in touch with nature than others.
 - D. Animals are better connected with nature than humans.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A
 - A. "But before I saw or felt any of those signs, I could smell the rain coming. No wonder Amanda was so skeptical." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "I had noticed that insects flew in low and gathered in huge numbers around (or on) the water well before a rain." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "We had discovered that there are aromas, changes in the air, and changes in what animals do, before a storm." (Paragraph 25)
 - D. "I wanted her to stay forever. 'I'll try at home, to smell rain on the way,' she said, maybe to console me before leaving." (Paragraph 24)

3. PART A: How does Amanda react when the narrator tells her that she can smell rain?
 - A. She does not believe that her cousin can smell rain before it starts.
 - B. She is jealous that her cousin can smell rain and she can't.
 - C. She is excited by the idea that her cousin can smell rain.
 - D. She is suspicious that her cousin is lying about being able to smell rain.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "My curious cousin started the two of us on a quest for an answer." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "'Think,' Amanda said to me. 'What is it you smell that tells you rain is coming?'" (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "'It's the way animals behave that's giving you clues about rain coming. I think so, anyway,' Amanda said." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "'I'll try at home, to smell rain on the way,' she said, maybe to console me before leaving." (Paragraph 24)

5. How does paragraph 10 contribute to the development of the story?

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, the narrator claims to smell rain. Do you think some people are more aware of changes in nature than others? Why or why not? What might make a person more or less aware of nature? Have you ever smelled rain before it started, like the narrator? What were the smells that you noticed, and why did these smells hint that rain was on the way?
2. How can people use their basic senses to understand the world around them? What other methods can help a person understand changes in nature? Describe a time when you realized the weather was going to change before it actually did. Did you rely on your senses or your experiences?
3. At the beginning of the story, the narrator struggles to explain how she uses her sense of smell to predict rain. How does the narrator try to explain her thinking to her cousin? Have you ever been in a situation where someone didn't understand how you felt or what you believed? How did you explain your thoughts and ideas?