

Tornado Diary

by Gita M. Smith

A storm was building along the Locust Fork of the Warrior River where I lived on a small sheltered slough.

Lightning whipcracked a pine tree not 40 yards from me, setting it aflame. But the fire wasn't orange or red; it was green from the turpentine and sap and resins and bark and needles all catching at once.

Then the tree began to whistle as steam escaped from all the tiny holes made over the years by pine beetles and woodpeckers. The whistling changed into a jet engine roar at the instant the fire changed to orange and, with a mighty upward *whoosh*, consumed every last combustible molecule of pine.

Then, as suddenly as the lightning had come, the fire was gone and all that stood was a blackened lodgepole, slick with creosote.

The storm grew in might until it spawned the worst kind of tornado, an F-5 or Finger of God.

In Oak Grove, Alabama, Debra and Tom Jackson were sitting in their living room watching tv when a relative phoned to say *'take cover,'* because a twister was about to hit. They ran to their concrete pump house in the back yard just as the town fire engine came crashing through their roof, landing on the sofa where they had been sitting. The next morning, on assignment for the Atlanta newspaper, with reporter's notebook in hand, I picked my way through the rubble of three different towns, all completely leveled. In Edgewater, I saw a dead man slung over the limb of a tree, too high for his relatives to reach because their ladders, along with their houses and sheds, were gone with the wind.

A woman sat, hugging herself, staring vacantly through the windshield of the only shelter she had left in the world: a broke down Cutlass.

There is no accounting for where things will end up after they are sucked aloft by 300 mph winds. Aluminum siding, brick walls, heart pine floors, refrigerators, joists and Ford pickup trucks travel in patterns that seem nonsensical relative to their weights and aerodynamic features.

The storm of April 1998 produced 62 separate tornados, but the one that ripped through our area, the F5, took 34 lives and millions of board feet of dwellings.

The storm lasted four days, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, hurling family photo albums and car titles from here all the way to the Georgia Capitol where their arrival was talked about on the radio.

It was Easter week, and the pale yellow and pink tufts coating shrubs and ditches were not chicks or decorations or azalea blossoms but the pastel attic insulation that came unmoored when the tornado raised our roofs and razed our houses. It hung like strange fruit, mimicking a gayer time when there were still chocolate eggs and lawns to run on and church pews and kitchen tables at which people could gather together to ask for a blessing.

-30-

