

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

It's not all sunshine and flowers south of the Tropic of Cancer: on February 2nd, a string of tornadoes swept across the Florida peninsula. They claimed several lives and did considerable property damage.

Warmer than usual for this time of year, the weather had been delightful for two or three days, with temperatures in the 80s at noon. On the morning this village took the brunt of the twister, the weather service issued tornado warnings for counties north of Martin, but indicated the danger would be over by 9 A.M.

Giving the possibility but a moment's thought, I continued preparing to attend a luncheon meeting scheduled to begin at 10 and break up around 2 in the afternoon. Before leaving the house shortly after 9, allowing myself time to do an errand en route, I checked all the windows to make certain that, should we have a sudden shower, it wouldn't rain in. In each room I left windows cracked open only a few inches.

During the luncheon that followed our meeting a storm did come through. From our table in the river-front restaurant, we watched rain descend so heavily that high-rise buildings on the opposite side of the intra-coastal waterway were entirely obscured. Since I'd watched similar phenomena from the same location in the past, I gave it no thought. We were glad to be inside, dry and sheltered from the raging tempest we all knew would pass quickly. Heavy rain storms are common here and of short duration.

The meeting adjourned a few minutes after 2; I was two miles from home. As I drove around a curve, a traffic snarl slowed to a stop the line of cars I followed. Ahead, flashing lights of emergency equipment gathered on the left side of the road signalled caution. Fire, police, and rescue vehicles stretched for several blocks. And despite a continuing drizzle falling from a still leaden sky, people milled about on both sides of the highway.

Five blocks from home and only one block from the turn-off leading uphill to my street, a man wearing a yellow slicker jacket and carrying a lighted baton directed me to reverse direction. Winding down my car window I explained I lived nearby and wished to drive one more block and turn right, away from the emergency which I assumed was either a fire or a serious traffic accident. He permitted me to pass. Before I reached my corner, a policeman stopped me once more; I explained once more and was allowed to proceed.

After turning right, I met two of my neighbors, on foot,

headed in the opposite direction. I slowed the car to a stop and asked, "What's going on?"

"Where have YOU been?"

"Tornado!"

"Better see if everything's okay at home . . ." I turned left into our street.

With the exception of litter all over the lawn and driveway the house was undamaged. No trees had blown down. Wire were in place, but the electricity was off. The clock had stopped at 1:20. Grabbing a rain jacket, I hightailed it around the corner and up the rise to the hilltop where I looked down on a scene of destruction.

At the foot of the street when I'd left for the meeting had been a mobile home sales lot. Now the site was a shambles of twisted aluminum, splintered wooden framing, shattered glass, and, over all, shredded pink fiberglass insulating material. The destruction was appalling. Some mobile homes were completely overturned, their wheels lifted skyward, roofs squashed to the ground, sides bulging.

After a few seconds of viewing the mess, I turned home ward again, appalled and shaken. In a matter of only a few minutes, the whirlwind had turned an orderly display of mobile homes into a widely-spread, tumbled mass of waste and wreckage and ruin. Not even hurricanes leave this kind of demolition in their wake.

Not until the following morning could I bring myself to walk the length of the swathe cut by the vicious windstorm that ravaged a mile-long narrow path across northern Martin County. From beneath one up-ended trailer peeked the blue nose of a late-model car, crushed to a three-foot height of gleaming metal. Windows in nearby houses had been blown out by air pressure inside as the low-pressured storm drove through with the speed of a run-away freight train, sucking into its center every shred of material loose or town loose by its fury.

Had I not left windows open when I left the house, the glass would have been blown from its frames, as it was in every window of a house a block away from my own. Its roof had been ripped entirely away.

Trees were toppled, split, wrenched asunder by the wind's forces. Trash cans and covers lay overturned, contents scattered wildly; plastic flower pots, cracked and broken, lay helter-skelter where the wind had dropped them as it rushed. Bleachers in the nearby park lay flattened to the sod.

Next day, early morning sunshine flooded the scene in benign promise of a clear, cool, and cloudless day; together with other people, I wandered amid the ruin. Stunned faces of those looking at the effects of the powerful storm spoke their own wordless stories of incredulous shock. Sober eyes and clenched jaws revealed awe and fear in face of the ruinous violence that had struck without warning the day before.

Fronds of surviving palm trees rattled, rustled, and whispered in the moderate breeze from the south, and the sun warmed my back as I returned home. Miraculously, no personal injury was sustained when the tornado struck Martin County February 2nd at 1:20 P.M.

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