

Rebelliousness: A Tale of Two Buddies - by Thomas Gerber

This story is true, but the names have been changed to protect the guilty.

Chapter IX

'Riders on the Storm'- The Doors

They made their way out to the pasture where Freddie's old International pickup had been left. Most of the vehicles were gone by now and they could get out easily. Just a few miles down the road, Freddie turned the truck around and he explained that they had to go back to get his guitar that he left behind. Those few extra minutes may end up saving their lives.

It had started out as a very pleasant spring day in the Ohio Valley - partly cloudy, warmer than normal for this time of the year, with a light wind out of the southwest. But as they neared the city limits the weather quickly changed. The skies darkened and the wind increased dramatically. It became apparent that they were going to get wet. They drove down Main Street that was eerily quiet, as an ominous storm front approached from the southwest.

Normally, in the early afternoon the street would be bustling with activity, but they saw only a few people outside looking nervously at the sky. They were completely unaware that a warning had been issued.

As they drove out of town to the west, the sky turned coal black and the wind blew so hard that Freddie could barely keep the heavy '62 binder pickup on the road. He had to pull over across the highway from the Power Plant. Tom's family had moved here in '55 when he was four years old. His dad, Roy, had come here to open a concrete block manufacturing facility to provide masonry materials for the construction of the electrical power generating plant.

The IKE plant consisted of three mammoth coal fired turbines, each with its own boiler and three 660' high smoke stacks. It was built on the bank of the Ohio River so the river water could be used for cooling. The entire structure was built from concrete blocks and bricks provided by the Miller Block Plant. In those days, the blocks for the stacks were hand carried up ladders & scaffolds all the way to the top. At the time, it was one of the largest construction projects attempted in the area.

The Power Plant was built less than a decade after the end of World War II and as the Korean conflict was nearing the armistice. The cold war with Russia was at its height. American families were building fallout shelters and schools were practicing nuclear attack drills. It was a crazy world to live in. Little known to the area residents, 90% of the electricity produced by this plant was transmitted to a plant in Ohio that made nuclear fuel for atomic weapons. For this reason, it was a safe assumption that this area was on the Kremlin's hit list for nuclear attack.

Sitting in the truck on the side of the road was like riding out a hurricane in a mobile home. The sky was as dark as night. It was raining like pouring pee out of a boot, but the raindrops were moving left to right horizontally driven by the wind. The heavy truck was bouncing up and down. Then Tom witnessed something he would never forget. The sky turned from charcoal black to an ominous emerald green color. Be advised, if you ever see a green sky, find a hole

to crawl into! It was too dark to see what others would later report, that when the funnel crossed the Ohio River, it exposed the muddy river bottom, and sucked up the river mud like a vacuum cleaner. Then, when it hit the electrical distribution yard at the power plant, they saw three giant green sparks jump up into the clouds.

Tom turned to Freddie and exclaimed, "My God, they bombed us!"

When the funnel crossed the road, it was a brown turbid vortex of river mud driven by 220 mph circulating winds. It struck a church building on a bench above and to the right where people had taken refuge in the basement. They did everything they were told to do, they hunkered down in the basement of a church, but when the structure collapsed on top of them, seven people perished. Then the turbulent muddy funnel lay over against the 400 foot high hillside that separates the downtown area from the uptown and continued on to devastate the northern residential area, the vortex now a half-mile wide.

Almost immediately, the wind subsided, the rain let up, and the sky began to clear. Tom and Freddie just looked at each other for a moment, bewildered. They had no understanding of what had just happened. But the sky had cleared, and it was time to move on.

There were four roads leading out of the valley to the hilltop. They were on State Road 56 West. Freddie put the truck in gear and started up the hill. But around the first bend in the road they found it blocked by fallen trees and had to stop and turn around. They drove back into town and turned up Highway 7. They were met by cars coming down and flashing their lights. This road was blocked and impassable also. They turned back into town again and as they drove down Main Street they saw a young boy running down the street yelling, "Another one's coming, another one's coming."

Another what? They wondered. They headed to Michigan Road only to find it blocked by police cruisers. So Freddie turned toward Highway 421, their last chance to drive out of the valley.

When they reached the top of the New Hill Road they encountered debris. Lumber, insulation, siding, roofing, and personal possessions were lying about, but the road was navigable. When they passed the tree line to the left they immediately realized what had happened. Looking west, it appeared as though a quarter-mile wide weed-eater had cut a swath through the hilltop commercial and residential districts. They turned left onto Highway 62 and drove west alongside the obvious tornado path. Trees had been uprooted, homes and businesses were completely demolished, and debris was scattered everywhere. Electrical lines had been toppled and live cables were sparking and jumping about. Flames and smoke were rising from gas lines that had been ripped apart and set ablaze. Cars and trucks had been thrown about like toys. It was a truly surreal landscape.

Finally getting a grip on the situation, they realized that the path of destruction was pointed directly toward Hanover where both their rental houses were, and they sped off to the west. Fortunately, the highway was just north of the tornado's path and they could continue unabated by the debris field. They drove past the entrance to the state park, now seeing no sign of the storm's destruction. They crossed the intersection of the three state highways that served the area, still in the clear. They passed the lane that leads to the local Hanover College, which also looked normal. The road then curved to the south and they approached the outskirts of town. Their hearts sank!

The highway turned to the right at the Hanover City Limits. Straight ahead was Madison Avenue that led into the town's business district, two blocks down. Tom and Freddie could see nothing but utter devastation, uprooted trees and downed power poles lying across the road. Cars and trucks had been tossed about. Shops and houses looked as though they had actually exploded and lay in heaps. Debris and people's belongings were scattered everywhere. It looked like a massive bomb had exploded.

Freddie pulled onto the side of the highway and Tom bailed out. Freddie continued driving to the west of town where his house was and Tom ran into the town toward his rented house. He started running as fast as he could but when he reached the tornado's path he had to climb through tree branches, jump over telephone poles, and stumble through debris piles, while avoiding the sparking electrical wires to make his way. He could hear people crying and wailing and saw residents slowly walking around in shock and disbelief. Small fires were burning everywhere. He continued on as quickly as he could.

Years later, when the movie 'Twister', starring Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt is released, Tom would notice how unrealistic parts of the movie are depicted. When Aunt Meg's town is struck by a tornado and she is trapped in her house, the storm chasers drive right up to her house and rescue her. It just doesn't happen that way.

Tom's rental house sat on the hillside behind Finnegan's grocery store and above a nearly new and very well kept two-story single-family home. Finnegan's was an older two story square building in the middle of town. The first floor of the structure was built of mostly storefront glass panels and the upstairs housed several apartments accessed by an exterior stairway typical of older Midwestern shops. Freddie used to live in one of the apartments.

When Tom neared the store he was amazed at what he saw. The first floor of the building had blown out and the second floor was sitting almost exactly on the original foundation. He crawled his way around the left side of the building and his heart stuck in his throat at what he saw next. The two-story house at the bottom of the hill was destroyed. It was completely leveled and lay like a pile of pixie sticks. Tom prayed that Lisa, who was off work that day, hadn't been at home.

He made his way to the back of Finnegan's and came upon the most incredible sight. His house was still there! The monster had devastated the house below, jumped over Tom's and Lisa's rental, then came back down to mangle the store above. He saw that his shingles had been stripped from his roof, his windows were blown out, and the big maple tree in his front yard had fallen onto the corner of his garage, missing his Ford pickup and Lisa's car. But the house was still standing. Unbelievable!

He ran across his strangely debris free yard screaming, "Lisa! Lisa!"

She met him at the door and flung it open. They ran into each other's arms as he cried out, "I thought I'd lost you!"

Freddie's sister, Janet was with Lisa when the tornado struck. Lisa and Tom were both avid Weather Channel watchers and she knew the area was under a tornado warning. She and Janet were kneeling on the couch looking over the back of it through the picture window when the sky turned black as coal, and they watched the two-story house below them disintegrate. They drove in front of the couch as the windows blew out. Shattered glass and other loose items rained down all around them. Then the wind subsided and it became strangely quiet.

Terrified, they had remained inside the house until Tom arrived. They were emotionally distraught, but miraculously, bore no physical wounds.

It roared into town at 3:51 p.m. April 3rd 1974, during what would be labeled the Super Outbreak, the nation's largest and deadliest tornado outbreak ever. During the outbreak, 148 tornadoes touched down in thirteen states, including seven F5s and 23 F4s creating a damage path of more than 2,500 miles and causing more than two hundred million dollars of damage in Indiana alone leaving 330 dead and 5484 people injured. At times, more than fifteen separate twisters were on the ground at the same time. This local F4 tornado that day traveled more than 240 miles from Brandenburg, Kentucky across Southern Indiana to Xenia, Ohio. When it blasted through Hanover and Madison, it sported winds over 220 mph and the funnel's base was a quarter-mile wide.

It is perhaps the most extensively studied and mapped tornado by the National Weather Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in history. Those who survived it would have their lives forever changed. This outbreak would lead to the use of the Fujita tornado strength scale and the Doppler radar system to track tornadoes.

Tom saw things that most people only hear about. His garage had a metal roof that he had painted in psychedelic colors and images. The tornado stripped it off the building and he found the metal panels three miles away scattered in the state park. He saw straws and twigs embedded in the brick walls of buildings that remained, some plastered with river mud.

An acquaintance, a housewife and mother, was unexpectedly caught on the second floor of their two story frame house with three of her young children. It being too late to escape down the stairs, she and her kids took refuge in the bathtub. After the tornado had passed, demolishing the home, they astoundingly survived and were left swaying in the steel tub suspended by the cast iron sewer pipe. An extension ladder had to be brought to rescue them. Tom met a man who claimed to have been swept up by the funnel and carried two miles down the highway in the industrial district. Many people remained alive only by the Hand of God!

The tornado blasted through town on a Wednesday and Tom had a National Guard drill scheduled that weekend. He called the company commander to inform him that he wouldn't be there because of the tornado striking.

The CO said, "Yeah, I know. How many people do you want?"

Tom said, "Send the whole damn company with all the equipment."

The CO instructed Tom to meet them at the city limits and take command.

"Yes Sir!"

Tom knew that they had to muster and it would take over an hour for them to convoy down, so he went out to the city limits sign to wait for them at 9:00. Soon he saw the convoy rolling his way.

They came prepared. They brought the front-end loaders, excavators, back-hoes, bulldozers, cranes, and dump trucks with about 120 skilled soldiers. They meant business! The lead jeep stopped and the Captain asked, "Where you want us?"

Tom told him that there were three main highways and three hill roads that needed to be cleared first and located them on the map.

"Ok, you ride with me."

"Yes Sir!"

He and the Captain met with the Lieutenants and laid out a strategy. The troops dispersed and went to work.

In two days the 1313th Engineers of the Indiana National Guard cleared the debris from the highways, main access roads, and many neighborhood streets in the entire county. Mission accomplished! That's what the Guard does.

Tom and Freddie quickly repaired their small rental houses before repairing and rebuilding homes for family and friends. Their five man crew was working simultaneously on as many as fifteen jobs in order to quickly shelter as many people as possible. FEMA and the insurance companies responded immediately and diligently. Outside construction crews arrived, and the city was restored.

Americans buckle down and do their best when they are confronted with the worst possible conditions.

Chapter XII

On November 5th, 2005 Tom was returning from Madison to Evansville traveling west on I-64. He was listening to rock and roll on the Evansville classic rock channel when he saw the southwestern sky turn coal black. He had seen this before. The music program was interrupted for a tornado warning. It said that if you are traveling on I-64 north of Evansville that you should get off the road. He was approaching the last exit before exit 29 to Evansville so he turned off.

He pulled into a small service station and quick stop, and parked his truck on the downwind side of the building. As he walked around the corner to enter the store, he looked to his left and saw the sky turn green! He knew what that meant and rushed inside. Many people had already taken refuge there.

Soon after he walked in, the glass double doors flew open and the items on the shelves blew off and started flying around, with the terrified occupants screaming and crying.

Tom turned, and yelled, "I got this," as he grabbed the panic bars on the doors, and pulled them shut. He held them tight and the swirling articles dropped to the floor. He held the doors closed until conditions outside settled down.

Although it sported winds of 200 miles per hour at times, this tornado would be determined to be only an F3, but it would take the record of the deadliest tornado in the state away from the one of April 3rd, 1974 in Madison. This one blew through a mobile home park, taking the lives of twenty-four. Tom had now stood in the center of the two deadliest tornadoes in history in the state of Indiana.