

TORNADO!

By John S. Halbert

February, 1957:

"How 'bout this weather, huh?" My friend Sammy grinned as he and I watched a softball game at sixth-grade afternoon recess. "An early spring, that's what it is. An early spring."

Around us, all the other kids were happily taking advantage of the warm, dry temperatures we had been having all this week, without so much as a cool breeze---a great improvement over the cold, wet weather we had been shivering and sloshing through so far this winter. Who would have ever thought we could romp on the playground in mid-February without even having to wear a coat?

"It's great, Sammy . . . but you know what? It looks strange. It *feels* strange." I had recently read about storms in a science textbook and remembered something about how bad winter weather was sometimes connected with unusual warm spells beforehand. "I'm no expert, but this is the wrong weather for this time of the year."

Sammy scoffed. "Stop worryin'---it's Friday!" He gazed up at the glorious blue sky with a rapturous expression. "The whole weekend's comin' up! C'mon, enjoy it!"

"Something's not right . . . I just know it."

"Let me tell you, pal, when we're burnin' up next summer, we'll remember this day!"

BRRINNGG! came the school bell, ending the recess. As the two of us sauntered across the gravel-and-concrete yard toward the big brick 1920's-era Annapolis Avenue School building in Sheffield, Alabama, I took another look at the cloudless sky. For some reason, even though it was a beautiful day, I couldn't get over a feeling that something about the weather just didn't fit.

My chum gave a smirk and shook his head.

"Well, Sammy," I declared, as the door closed behind us, "who knows---maybe this will be a day to remember!"

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After supper, my parents drove their Plymouth club coupé a few blocks down to the high school to attend a basketball game. As soon as they were gone, my sister Frances and I settled onto the sofa to watch TV---"Ozzie and Harriet" was our favorite Friday night program. Grandma picked up the newspaper and started reading. I noticed that, from time-to-time, she peeped around the edge, checking on us.

Around nine-thirty, vivid lightning, visible through the front window curtains, began flashing in the southwestern sky. My sister and I became interested and went outside, where we spotted Mr. Montana, our next-door neighbor, standing in his front yard watching nature's dazzling display. "Look at that lightning!" he called out, "have you ever seen anything like it?" The constant flashes were so bright it was almost as if a panoramic light bulb was shining above the treetops toward the south and west. The lightning had a weird, greenish hue that outlined an ominous bank of dark, massive clouds rolling up over the horizon toward us. Strangely, there

was no thunder---the lightning was absolutely silent. Mr. Montana cast anxious eyes at the gathering storm, and at his new Oldsmobile parked in the driveway. He trotted over to us. In the flickering, reflected green lightning, our friend's florid face and bulging eyes betrayed his concern. "I don't like the looks of this!" Then he noticed our car was not in its usual place. "Where are your folks?"

A blinding flash seared the scene. "They're at the high school," I said to him, "at the basketball game."

"I hope they're not out in this! Something's about to happen!" As if to punctuate his words, a sudden strong breeze whooshed through the tops of the nearby lofty pine trees, prompting the spindly television aerials on the roofs of several neighboring houses to sway in protest. Another gust, this time a weird mixture of warm and cool air, slapped our faces and clawed our clothes.

"Look!" Frances shouted, pointing. A few blocks away, a churning mass of very dark, low-lying clouds was scudding across the rooftops directly at us, chased by the continuous, kaleidoscopic green lightning. Overhead, the swirling sky was sinister and threatening.

"Get back into your house!" Mr. Montana yelled at us, "quick!"

My sister and I turned and ran for the front doorway, where grandma, outlined by the lights in the living room, beckoned. We leaped across the threshold and shoved the door shut.

An instant later, a wind blast of unimaginable power slammed against the front of our house.

CRACK! The structure reeled under the sudden onslaught. Just as the three of us dropped onto the sofa, the lights went out. Our shuddering home began moaning as if in sudden, unendurable pain. There was a tremendous *CRASH!* outside.

"Shouldn't we pray?"

BLAM! Before anyone could reply, there was a booming racket on the porch and the whole house heaved as a heavy-sounding object whammed against the front. *SMASH! TINKLE!* From somewhere, came the noise of glass breaking.

"Our Father who---" My sister's words were drowned out by an unearthly shriek outside.

WHHOOEE! The screaming became a roar as our despairing house thrashed and groaned to its very foundations as it tried to withstand the onslaught. The howling wind even seemed to be speaking to us! "*OOHH! AAHH!*" It didn't seem possible that the house could hold together for another second.

RAT-TAT-TAT! Beady objects clattered against the front windows *Hail!* Then followed a stupendous noise even louder than the wind as a furious fusillade of inch-thick iceballs slammed, banged and bounced against the outside. *BAM! POW!* A salvo of even heavier hailstones now joined in the attack. *POP!* Glass window panes cracked as the frozen missile barrage seemed about to break through the walls and the roof. Adding to the din, a sudden deluge of rain hit like a fire hose. The roaring wind, the hail, great crashing noises, the continuous lightning, the objects slamming against the house and the incredible torrent of water all went on for several more seconds---

Then, there was only the rain pelting the house.

KNOCK! KNOCK! Someone was at the side door! "Open up! Let us in!" came frantic voices from the outside.

I yanked open the door and rain burst through the doorway as my parents stumbled inside, soaking wet! Mother was crying and hysterical. "My children!" she choked. A lightning flash revealed her face was covered with blood! Dad groped down the pitch-dark hallway to the bathroom and returned with a towel. As he carefully wiped her face, they gasped out the story:

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The basketball game between Sheffield and Scottsboro was nearly over when someone had run into the crowded gymnasium and yelled that a tornado had just struck a few miles outside of town and was headed their way! My parents joined a pushing throng of people scrambling for the exits. Hundreds of other spectators, along with the two basketball teams and cheerleaders, chose to remain inside and crowded onto the gymnasium floor, where they crouched, covering their heads with their arms.

Then, the lights snapped off. Green-tinged lightning flashed through the long row of windows above the bleacher seats.

Meanwhile, my dad and mom raced across the parking lot toward their car. The green lightning outlined the horrific shape of a dark, spinning funnel-cloud now bearing down on the Catholic church steeple only a couple of blocks away! Huge drops of rain began to fall, splattering on the parked vehicles and pelting the scores of frantic, fleeing basketball fans who were now caught out in the open running for their lives. In the glare of the lightning flashes, Dad spotted our neighbor, Mr. Rose, herding his two boys, Cecil and George, between the rows of parked vehicles, desperately trying to make their own escape. "Do you need a ride?" my father called out above the tumult.

"We have our own car! It's right here!" our neighbor shouted, grabbing the handle of his station wagon and shoving the boys into the car. He then dove onto the driver's seat and slammed the door.

Just then, a stupendous wind blast bellowed across the schoolyard, slamming a maelstrom of flying objects into the parking lot. *SHRIEK! THUD! SMASH!*

"Grab my hand!" Dad yelled at Mother. As they bobbed the remaining few yards to their vehicle, a barrage of lethal airborne missiles flew all around them. Just as they scampered into the coupé, the full fury of the storm struck with a thunderous blast of wind. The vehicle rocked crazily and seemed about to lift off the ground. The roar of the oncoming twister became mixed with great wrenching and crashing noises of falling trees, exploding, sparking electrical transformers and power lines mixed with the clatter of wind-borne objects.

Throwing the car in gear, Dad stepped on the gas and the careening club coupé bounded straight over the curb onto Seventeenth Avenue. Desperately wrenching the steering wheel, he aimed the lurching, bouncing vehicle toward High Street, straight into the teeth of the storm.

They had gone only about a block when all at once a whirling washtub sailed over the hood of the Plymouth! Dad slammed on the brakes so hard that my Mother's head banged into the windshield, breaking the glass and cutting her face!

The storm had now reached its climax! *THUD! SLAM! CLATTER!* Objects of all sizes and description crashed against the car, causing it to swerve against the curb. Dad swung the wheel and they again lunged ahead. At that moment there came a loud splintering noise as an enormous tree crashed down across the street behind them---the huge trunk just missing the rear bumper!

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Everyone stood and hugged and cried and gave thanks for surviving the ordeal. In a few minutes, the rain slacked off, and dad, armed with a flashlight, eased open the front door. A huge tree trunk was jammed onto the front porch! So *that* was the big noise we had heard!

The three of us crawled over the scarred, splintered tree and looked around. Next door, a jerky flashlight revealed Mr. Montana, who was making his own inspection. He stumbled around a pile of debris and came over to us. "You folks all right?"

Fortunately, we were---but our friend had had a terrible fright. Just as he had run inside, the wind had snapped off the top forty-foot section of a tall pine tree in the yard next to his and the wide trunk had bored straight into the roof of his house . . . through the living room, passing right by him . . . and all the way to the basement! Then the tree trunk had split off at the roof-line. The upper part smashed down on top of his new car---flattening it---then the heavy object had bounded onto our front porch!

"Get a load of this!" Mr. Montana shined his flashlight at what was left of his just-purchased orange-and-white Oldsmobile. Evidently, the tree trunk had landed squarely on top of it in its headlong flight, as his brand-new, orange-and-white hardtop was now only a crushed pile of mangled junk a couple of feet high. Chunks of twisted metal, shards of glass, and bits and pieces of his obliterated vehicle was blasted across both front yards when the gyrating wooden missile had plowed onto it. Our neighbor ruefully shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair at the amazing sight.

We picked our way through the wreckage over to his front yard. Mr. Montana aimed his flashlight at the roof. We gaped at the astounding spectacle of the splintered, two-foot-thick tree-trunk sticking out through the roof of his house. "It just missed me!" he gasped. "I had just made it through the front door when there was a big 'bang!' This tree came through the ceiling right in front of me and went through the floor all the way to the basement!" Our usually-good-natured friend dropped down onto the porch steps and put his head in his hands.

Here and there, people began to emerge from their homes. Flashlight beams and fitful lanterns gave only eerie, shadowy light, as the electricity was still off, but it was obvious we had taken a terrific hit. The neighborhood was covered with wreckage.

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The next day was Saturday, a brilliant, sunny---and noticeably cooler day. Everyone set out to explore the neighborhood and look at the damage. Dozens of huge trees were uprooted; tree-limbs and power lines were down, all the roof-top television aerials were bent toward the northeast---in the same direction the storm track had taken. Jumbled wreckage lay in disorderly piles as far as one could see.

I rode my bicycle down High Street, where workmen were already on the job with power saws, cutting up fallen trees. I stopped and watched. Looking around, I spotted a crushed washtub in a nearby ditch. Was it the same one that had caused my Mother to bash her head against the windshield? On the other side of the high school, there was much less damage. It appeared that our neighborhood, situated at the highest part of town, had taken the brunt of the twister. But at the same time, we had been very fortunate: the funnel had evidently passed just over our rooftops---had it come through at ground level, perhaps none of us would have survived.

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Monday afternoon at recess, I found Sammy on the playground. "See!" I reminded him, "I told you it would be a day to remember!"