

A Tornado in New Haven: July 10, 1989

You always suspect the worst on Monday - and July 10, 1989 really proved the point. It was a nasty New England day; hot hazy and humid.

All the way home from work, it looked and felt threatening. It was miserable and sticky, and there was the feeling of imminent rain. It was so hazy and overcast that it had the look of a bottle of milk from the inside.

I left work at around a quarter to five that afternoon. Traffic was moving pretty well on the Merritt Parkway, so I got to New Haven in good time.

As I was going up the last hill before the West Rock Tunnel, it started to rain. I could see that the thunderstorm cell was off to my left - somewhere up Route 63 or 69. It seemed to be barreling down the side of West Rock, but that was more impression than observation. Because of the visibility, all that I could see of the thunderstorm was a very dark malevolent looking area with long streamers of falling rain dropping the ceiling from the several hundred feet over me down to the surface on my left. As I turned off onto the Amity Turnpike, the sky was fairly bright in front of me but my rear view mirrors were black.

Then, it hit. I was on Whalley, about halfway between the exit and Westville. Within a minute it got as dark as night - darker perhaps because the streetlights hadn't had enough time to warm up yet. The frequent stabs of lightning kept my eyes from acclimating, and the rain virtually swallowed all of the light from my headlights.

When the rain started, it was coming down fairly straight, but within a few moments, it took on a vicious slant from the west. The roar of the rain on the roof all but blotted out the scream of the wind and the crash of the thunder.

Because I lived on a corner, I frequently turned onto West Park and did a U-turn to park. Certainly, these conditions would make a U-turn rather foolish, so I turned down Forest Road to drive around the park. As soon as I turned, the wind suddenly became more intense. Going down Whalley, it had been a tailwind; now it was striking my car broadside from the right. It was a struggle to keep from drifting into the oncoming traffic.

Equally suddenly, there was a new noise: *hail*. All around, I could see the pellets ricocheting off of cars and the road. They all looked to be of the same size - about 1" on the longest side and more disc shaped than spherical.

I wanted to take Forest to Edgewood, but right after West Elm, (no more than two cars in front of me) I watched as a huge tree fell across the road. While the traffic on Forest started to back up, I pulled into a driveway, turned around and headed for West Elm.

Everything became claustrophobic - the only universe that interested me was the 50' sphere of events that was visible from my point of view. With all of the trees exploding and flying around, I was sure that people were right then losing their houses and cars. Distracted by the high pitched whine of the wind with the slashing sizzle of the wind and the near constant thump of debris hitting the car, I tried to go around the downed lines and the biggest of the trees.

Trying to get around Edgewood Park, I was amazed by the devastation that was in progress. I saw trees being felled by the storm - and I frequently had to swerve to avoid falling limbs. Many times, my car was hit by tree chunks - not limbs, but rather big pieces of wood that was ripped with great force from the trees. The trees were not merely being felled; they were being blasted apart.

At first, I thought that the safest thing was just to pull over and wait, but the air was so thick with flying and falling debris that I realized that anywhere out of doors was unsafe - whether parked or rolling. Very very slowly, I made my way around the fallen trees and up West Park Avenue.

I decided to pull up alongside the house instead of parking in the street as I normally do. Pulling up on the lawn let me put the car into a slight lee created by the house; still, the dominant advantage was that nothing but the house itself could fall on the spot - and if it did, I'd have a lot more to worry about than my car.

The wind was still screaming out of the west - directly at the front of my house. Running from the car to the front door - not more than twenty feet - I got soaked to the skin. I was as wet as if I had no clothes on.

Inside, I took a quick inventory as I stripped off my dripping suit. Power was still on; the cable was blown out; my cat Burton was freaked out; telephone still worked.

I had been nearby when the tornado ripped through Bradley Airport in Windsor Locks some years before, and I observed to my roommate that if she ever wanted to know what being in a tornado looked like, that this was it.

We waited the storm out; and within a half an hour, it was gone. As it blew off, we went out onto the porch to have a look around. Trees were down in the cemetery and in the park and across my street. The corner storm sewer was backed up, but traffic speeding down Whalley didn't seem to see it. They hydroplaned in front of my house, skidding sideways, fighting for control and leaving beautiful rooster-tails behind them. The incessant lightning gave everything the stroboscopic look of an old Charlie Chaplin movie. As soon as the noise of the wind and rain abated, I noticed another sound - the near-constant rumble of thunder. It's as if there was one giant clap of thunder that simply didn't die out. At this point, I'd guess that there was at least one lightning bolt every second.

We went out later to clear the downed trees from the neighborhood roads. The little ones I could move myself; the bigger ones took some team effort, and the really big ones usually had power lines in them and were thus out of my league.

I wish that there was a pivotal anecdote on which to close the story, but there really was none. The sky cleared in time for a beautiful sunset accompanied by more pleasant temperatures and lower humidity. Obviously, tornados are caused by the passage of violent cold fronts, so one would expect generally better weather behind the storm; and this storm was no exception.

Still, there is something basic in the spirit that resents the bright and cheery aftermath to the destruction that this storm brought. A fire can remind the

senses for weeks after that something tragic has happened. A storm that is replaced by a beautiful summer evening seems to say "now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

The next day, I tried to take a few pictures of the storm damage. When I got the slides back, I was rather disappointed. The fallen trees were just as green as the healthy ones. There was no clue of color or contrast that suggested violence. The basically green photos looked just the same as any I'd taken before the storm - the trees were just in different places. There were none of the browns or the greys that usually conjure up thoughts of despair. In fact, with all of the trees covering up roads and cars and houses, the pictures had a definite cheerful look.

Several days later, the leaves started dying, but by then, the parks people had most of the downed wood cleared.