

The Driving Storm:

Do you remember the last time you were scared? I mean really scared? Not concerned, not fretting, not uneasy but really scared. Last week on our way down to the annual Stoopball Championships near Beloit, WI we found ourselves in one of those situations that can honestly be called frightening. On that Thursday, last week, there occurred some of the most violent storms in years. They were very local, a twenty mile wide band barreling through Madison carrying rain of deluvian proportions, sixty thousand foot thunderheads and five confirmed tornadoes all within three counties.

We stopped several times to take stock of the situation and make plans either to continue or take shelter. At one of our stops we were fortunate enough to see real time radar playing out the storms on a big flat screen TV. We knew exactly where we were in the picture. We were smack in the middle of all the mayhem. There was a confirmed twister just to the west of us; there was another to the east and storms deep enough to spawn some more at any time. We were faced with the choice between hunkering down in a strip mall (not the best place for shelter) and sitting out the next hour of truly violent weather or taking a deep breath and making a run for it ten more miles to the other side of the storms' path. We chose the latter.

Let me tell you folks, that was a choice that could have ended in disaster and I still don't know if it was the right one. But we did it, we got back in the car and we did it. It reminded me of a fullback crashing the line in a goal line plunge; look for the seam, two hands on the ball, stay low and go! We drove into nighttime blackness in the middle of the day. We drove into rain so hard that it was impossible to tell where the road ended and the sky began. We hit cross winds strong enough to push the car half a lane over in both directions within a hundred yards travel.

After about three miles of torrential rain (what I was really worried about was driving into unseen standing water, remember '07?) the sky lightened a bit. I do believe that I crushed the steering wheel in two places during those fifteen minutes. So the sky looked a little better, the three of us in the car began to talk in falsely cocky tones, the kind of chatter you make when you're trying to bolster yourself and your mates. We were doing a pretty good job of it too, just starting to believe that the worst was over. And then the next storm line appeared.

I think they blew up right on the spot. They did not move from there to here. We did not track them across the horizon. One minute it looked pretty good up ahead and the next minute three distinct, oozing, black doom clouds appeared in front of us. They were only a couple of hundred feet off the ground and the winds were fierce in every direction at the same time. I didn't know wind could do that. As we got closer, as my foot on the accelerator pressed harder and harder those awesome beasts in the sky began to rotate. Counter clockwise and at different speeds, now throwing down a hook here and another one there. As quickly as the downspout appeared the mother cloud would suck it back up.

It was a dance, a chaotic dance, and only the storm had any idea at all of what the next move would be.

OK, now I'm scared, really scared. I'm going over in my mind where to ditch the car, how to take charge of my terrified sister in law (she's from California and they don't do this out there), getting ready to make sure Veronica and I were agreed on the same plan of action, telling myself to be cool, buddy, be cool, you've got people depending on you. The luck of the draw has me behind the wheel, so for the moment it's my call, so be cool captain. Keep the brain in charge and if the worst happens at least give yourselves a chance. Do something smart and don't just sit here in this tin can as it gets sucked up into a blender of cataclysmic force.

And then, holy cow and halleluiah, we're on the other side of it. It is blacker than black behind us, Veronica is trying to document it with her camera. "We drove through that?!"

There's patches of blue right above us, freaking blue sky right over head! I'm breathing and sort of sobbing and talking so fast I can't understand myself. I looked over and thought that our passenger had died of fright. She was frozen, staring forward and I swear her heartbeat was shaking the car. I looked in the rear view mirror and there's Veronica giving me that "For a couple of idiots, I guess we did OK" kind of smile.

It's funny but here it is three full days later and I can still conjure up the feeling of profound fear. There's something elemental about being of the edge of a disaster that you can only react to, not a chance in the world of controlling it. There's a lesson in here about who's in charge of what but I'll let you find the deeper meaning.

I'm just glad to be here telling you the story.