

Full Frame

by Mike Handley

A month before the real flowers came, amputated trees for 31 miles were festooned with pink blossoms. The petals were tufts of Fiberglass insulation shorn from houses incapable of withstanding 260-mph winds -- more than twice the punch Katrina delivered to New Orleans.

In Oak Grove, Ala., a firetruck sat in the middle of a living room, atop a flattened sofa where a family had been watching cable television before a relative telephoned and screamed "Get out now!" The fire station across the street was disemboweled just as they were closing the door to their backyard storm shelter.

In Rock Creek, a mother heard the warnings and was able to usher her three children into the below-ground basement before the twister hit. But the house collapsed on top of them, adding four to the death toll of 32.

Residents of Edgewater and McDonald's Chapel were either walking around like barefooted zombies, looking through tears for loved ones, or huddling on concrete steps leading to nowhere, their possessions strewn across four zip codes. One old woman with blood on her oversized tee-shirt had been plucked from her home and tossed 100 yards into the neighboring woods, which had been reduced to kindling.

I'm not describing the recent storm that ravaged Alabama. This one took place on April 8, 1998, an F-5 tornado that mowed a three-quarter-mile-wide swath through Jefferson County, just a few miles from our little home on the Warrior River, so close that we had to drive through several ruined neighborhoods almost daily.

Yet the 1998 event pales in comparison to the destruction and loss of life wrought by 2011's storm. The body count is climbing daily -- so many that they're being stored in refrigerated trucks. This morning's tally is 246.

I learned yesterday that Concord, the neighborhood where I grew up, was in the tornado's path. As I frantically searched the Internet for images and references to streets and names, a hot poker pierced my gut. The names were sparse, still are, but the uprooted street signs told me all I needed to know.

When the 1998 twister came through, I took four or five rolls of photographs to send to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* -- rolls that mysteriously disappeared in transit. But I remember that many of the shots I took didn't fill my Nikon's viewfinder. Portions of standing, though still-ruined houses were at the margins.

While looking at photos of the recent damage in Concord, however, it occurred to me I was seeing full-frame destruction.

Images of one street in particular stabbed my eyes. As a kid, I took that route every weekday, from home to my school bus stop. I can remember stopping along the way, pulling out my trombone, and playing "Son of a Preacher Man." I used to hunt squirrels in the woods between subdivisions there; carried a homemade fishing pole to the nearby creek's deepest pools; caught crawfish by turning over rocks in the shallows; rode my bike to a friend's house to play smash-up derby with model cars; and it's where I had to sneak past the local bully's house by cutting through his neighbor's back yard. Both of those houses are gone now.

It was within the bushes, only a few yards from where one photo was taken, where I tried to jumpstart puberty, where I first laid eyes on real pubic hair.

Bushes are all that's left. The place is now barren, a war zone, and we lost.

I almost drove up to the old neighborhood the weekend before the tornado, just for old time's sake. I was going to take a camera, photograph the ol' stomping grounds, and perhaps buy myself a Mountain Dew and a pack a cheese-and-peanut-butter crackers from what used to be Hyche's Grocery.

I wish I had.

