

We will forever remember 2006 as the year of the storms. The first storm, short-lived but violent, struck when the new leaves were just beginning to open on the trees. John and I had gone to the grocery store in a nearby town. As we walked through the aisles of the store, the intercom warned of tornadic winds, lightning, and hail. The sky darkened as we filled up the tank with gas and headed home. We turned off the highway onto the country road that leads to the dirt road we live on. As we drove around a curve, John slammed on the brakes. A large tree blocked our path. We assessed its size and decided we would go the other way. John turned around and headed up the highway. When we reached the turnoff for the road that would lead us to our house, we noticed a truck stopped at the corner. The driver was waving his hands. "There's a tree up there. You can't get through," he said.

"How big?" John asked.

"Big," the man said. "If you want, go up and take a look. If you can get around it, I'll be right behind you."

We drove up to the bend and saw the tree. It was twice the size of the one that had made us turn around. We decided we'd try our luck moving the other tree and drove back. By the time we got there, several other vehicles were lined up. "Anyone have a chainsaw?" John asked.

"Guy that lives over there went to get one," the man in the car in front of us answered.

And so, we strangers worked to cut up that tree, and another, and another, as we slowly made our way home.

The next morning, as John and I walked up to feed the cattle, we saw trees torn from the ground within yards of his mother's house. We walked into the woods and saw the pattern of uprooted trees -- some of them over 50 feet tall. We envisioned the tornado dancing up and down the sides of the gulley. We stared at the trees in awe of the force of nature and were thankful we had escaped her wrath.

The second storm rose up from the oppressive humidity that clings to the earth during most Missouri summers. The heat had been ghastly for over a week and we had not had rain. That afternoon it clouded up and I considered whether to water the vegetable garden or wait to see if it rained. It blew over, so I decided to wait and see. John got home just after dark and started dinner -- a dinner of summer sausage, cheese, crackers, and fruit, which we would eat by candlelight. The lights began to flicker before dinner was ready and we heard thunder grumbling. I decided to light some candles just in case. Just as I lit the first one, the power went out. I went to the back of the house to make sure the dogs stayed calm. We adopt strays and have twenty-seven dogs, so keeping them calm is no small task. Nothing would keep them calm that night -- they were terrified, and so were we, when the house began to moan and scream. It sounded like the roof was being torn away. I stood in the candlelit hallway and uttered soothing words to our cowering dogs.

What seemed an eternity later the winds died down. John opened the door to the hallway. He told me he'd gone outside and the house had lost some siding. He was going up the road to check on his mom and would be right back. I went around and lit more candles, but John still had not come home. I started to fear the worst and considered going up to help him in case his mother was injured, but I decided against it. He would

come get me if he needed me and the dogs were still very nervous. Besides I didn't want to leave the house with candles burning. He finally came home and told me about how he'd had to walk up to her house because there were so many trees down across the road, but that she was fine. She'd slept through the whole thing.

We sat down to eat dinner and drank the chilled white wine greedily. The storm had done nothing to relieve the oppressive heat. After dinner, we stayed up and talked a bit then tried to sleep naked on top of the covers. All the windows were open, but there was no movement in the air. We slept fitfully and in the middle of the night I woke up thirsty. I went to the sink for water and realized that without electricity we had no water. I got ice from the freezer and crunched it as the gravity of our situation sunk in. We were fifteen miles from town with no water and the roads were blocked by trees. I tried to remember what we had to drink. A few bottles of wine, a few cans of soda, yesterday's half pot of coffee. And what about the animals? We have two gallon waterers, but how full were they? Was the pond water drinkable if it was boiled? And how would we boil it? The thought of lighting a fire in this heat was unbearable. When the ice was gone, I lay by the window and tried to go back to sleep, but I was in full-blown panic. I was sure we were going to die and I told John that.

"It'll be ok," he said. "Go to sleep."

I stayed awake by the window. Sometime before dawn, I heard a roar. Not the roar of thunder or wind, but that of an engine. And I saw a light flashing across the trees. I looked out the window and saw a tree pusher moving the trees off the road. Behind it was a line of cars -- people who had been trapped in the woods by the storm. My panic eased. We weren't trapped. At the very least, John would be able to drive to town and buy water.

It was a week before power was restored. On the third day, we were finally able to buy a generator. It wouldn't run the water pump or the air conditioner, but we could run a fan, a couple lights, and the computers. We had survived nature's wrath a second time.

As the leaves changed colors and fell away from the trees, the shattered bones of the woods stood stark against the sky. Limbs hung dejectedly and some trees were split in two -- their spirits not quite free. I thought about how many years some of those trees had listened to the sounds of these woods and how many stories they must know. I told John what I was thinking and we agreed that we should publish our own collection of short stories named *Bones of the Woods*.

The third storm arrived in early December. I had just begun to write "The Protectors" that afternoon. The weather report threatened a mix of snow and ice. I encouraged John to close the shop early and come home. It was cold, so he planned to make chili for dinner and I was looking forward to its warmth. By the time he arrived home, the freezing rain had started. As he got the chili going, the lights started to flicker. "I hope we don't lose power," I said.

"We won't," he assured me.

I went back to writing. Fortunately, I was using my laptop because the power did go out. We settled for cold cuts and crackers for dinner instead of the chili we'd craved. John went out to get wood and hurried back in for the tape recorder and camera. "I thought it

was someone shooting,” he said. “I thought how stupid can someone be to be out poaching in an ice storm. Then I realized I was listening to trees and branches falling.”

That night and, in fact, for several days, we listened to trees and branches, already weakened by the summer storms, snap and crash to the ground under the weight of the ice. The next morning, the world was a glistening fairyland. I took picture after picture, including the cover picture and some of the others in this book. It was beautiful, yet harsh. We took turns tending the fire, but we were lucky to have one. Many didn't. We also had the generator and I finished writing “The Protectors” dressed in layers of clothing, sandwiching my words between crunching through the ice to get wood and stoking the fire. Although I didn't write it until a month later, the idea for “The Thaw” rose from the embers of that fire.

And here it is, verging on summer again -- the summer of 2007. So far we've had no violent storms (let's hope it stays that way) and our book of short stories is ready for you -- our readers. It is you who will make us “Immortal”.