

First Person

Lisa Waterman Gray

I awoke in a casually elegant room full of rustic antiques. Broad windows framed country quiet, and chilly, dreary weather cloaked the landscape.

Glasses clinked as hosts for The Barns @ Timber Creek set the breakfast table in this beautifully renovated barn outside of Winfield. After savoring light-as-air crepes, plenty of coffee and pleasant conversation, I filled my water bottle and re-packed the car. Cool spring rain spit and sputtered as I checked my itinerary.

Forecasters in south central Kansas anticipated severe weather, so I wanted to return to the road quickly. I toured the Iron Gate Inn, an 1885 mansion decorated in period finery, and then headed towards the rural Bluestem Bed & Breakfast beneath an ashen sky. I toured the sprawling home and left hastily, looked upwards again and felt my stomach tighten. When gravel gave way to paved road, I relaxed a bit.

A high-pitched, screech suddenly arose from my right front wheel well, which especially unnerved me after driving this car for only six weeks. I pulled over - hoping to dislodge what I suspected was a piece of gravel. After several quiet minutes of driving the screeching returned. I prayed to reach town safely and an intelligible address.

Rain fell harder as I entered a convenience store lot and called for roadside assistance. A tow truck soon arrived. When the driver couldn't determine the cause of the noise, he recommended towing the car. I breathed deeply while hoisting myself into the truck cab.

A local repair shop found nothing wrong and the noise had stopped, but I gladly paid for piece of mind. After stopping briefly at a handful of businesses in the downtown area, I set my GPS for tiny Sedan. Along the way, I spent an hour visiting restaurants, shops and a museum, in Arkansas City.

Severe weather warnings kept my stomach in knots and hands glued to the wheel as I entered open countryside. An eerie inversion between cool and warm air filled an isolated valley with no other cars visible, and I constantly scanned the horizon for tornadoes.

I met Sedan's town 'ambassador' in mid-afternoon and followed her car to a beautiful cabin at a private ranch, but none of the lights worked. A text message told my host that all power had also gone out downtown. "Do we have an alternative for lodging?" I asked. "I can't imagine staying alone in an isolated cabin without any power."

Within minutes, we were headed towards a new hunting lodge with concrete reinforced walls, owners who lived next door, and a backup generator. I had Internet access, a cooler full of snacks, some unopened wine, and cable television. An F-1 tornado had traveled through one highway intersection less than two hours after I passed by, and the weather system I'd fled for the better part of the day had wreaked havoc around Oklahoma City.

But I slept well that night and a bright and beautiful day followed - the silver lining behind tumultuous weather in tornado alley.