

Looking out a window, the Satterlees saw nothing but pouring rain. Another false alarm, it seemed. Still, Bennett's mom sent the kids to the basement and turned on the TV to monitor weather reports. She called Uncle Frank on his cell phone. "We're getting close," he promised.

GIGANTIC GRAY CLOUD

Jeff and Kathryn Piotrowski arrived in Joplin just a few minutes later. They rode slowly through the city's downtown. Kathryn admired the historic buildings. Some had been built back in the late 1800s, when Joplin was a wild town known for its coal mines and street fights.

The city seemed calm.

But then Jeff saw it: a boiling gray cloud moving in from the west. He slowed the car and stared at the cloud more intently. His blood turned to ice as he realized that it wasn't really a cloud.

It was an enormous tornado.

Two violent
supercells had joined
together to create
a storm of
unimaginable power.

What made this tornado especially dangerous was that it had become "rain-wrapped." It had formed in a cornfield outside Joplin and then became wrapped up in a curtain of rain.

When people think of tornadoes, most picture a perfect funnel. But rain-wrapped tornadoes, which look just like big storm clouds, are common. In fact, the huge tornado that destroyed Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the month before had been rain-wrapped. Many there didn't realize it was a tornado until it was too late to take shelter.