

United States  
Los Angeles section  
McPhee typescript

In Los Angeles versus the San Gabriel mountains, it is not always clear which side is losing. On a February night some years ago, the family were awakened by a crash of thunder - lightning striking the mountain front. Ordinarily, in their quiet neighborhood, only the creek beside them was likely to make much sound, dropping steeply out of Shields Canyon on its way to the Los Angeles River. The creek, like every component of all the river systems across the city from mountains to ocean, had not been left to nature. Its banks were concrete, its bed was concrete. When boulders were running there, they sounded like a rolling freight. On a night like this, the boulders should have been running. The creek should have been a torrent. Its unnatural sound was unnaturally absent. There was, and had been, a lot of rain. #

The family had two teen-age children, whose rooms were on the uphill side of the one-story house. The window in the boys room looked straight up Pine Cone Road, a cul-de-sac, which, with hundreds like it, defined the northern limits of the city, the confrontation of the urban and the wild. Los Angeles is overmatched on one side by the Pacific Ocean and on the other by very high mountains.

From its high turnaround, Pine Cone Road plunges downhill like a ski run, bending left and then right and then left and then right in steep christiania turns for half a mile above a 300 foot straightaway that aims directly at the family's house. Not far below the turnaround, Shields Creek passes under the street, and there a kink in its concrete profile had been plugged by mud and a six-foot boulder. Hence the

~~by the~~

United States  
Los Angeles section  
McPhee typescript  
page 2

silence of the creek. The water was now spreading over the street. It descended in heavy sheets. As the young children and their mother glimpsed it in the all-but-total darkness, the scene was suddenly illuminated by a blue electrical flash. In the blue light they saw a massive blackness, moving. It was not a landslide, not a mudslide, not a rock avalanche; nor by any means was it the front of a conventional flood. In the mother's words, "it was just one big black thing coming at us, rolling, rolling with a lot of water in front of it, pushing the water, this big black thing. It was just one big black hill coming toward us." In geology, it would be known as a debris flow. Debris flows amass in stream valleys and more or less resemble fresh concrete. They consist of water mixed with a good deal of solid material, most of which is above sand size. Some of it is Chevrolet size. Boulders bigger than cars ride long distances in debris flows. Boulders grouped like fish eggs pour downhill in debris flows. The dark material coming toward the family was not only full of boulders; it was so full of automobiles it was like bread dough mixed with raisins. On its way down Pine Cone Road, it plucked up cars from driveways and the street. When it crashed into the family's house, the shattering of safety glass made terrific explosive sounds. A door burst open. Mud and boulders poured into the hall. We're going to go, the mother thought. Oh, my God, what a hell of a way for the four of us to die together.

~~together~~



United States  
Los Angeles section  
McPhee typescript  
Page 3

The parents' bedroom was on the far side of the house. The father was in there kicking through white satin draperies at the panelled glass, smashing it to provide an outlet for water, when the three others ran in to join him. The walls of the house neither moved nor shook. As a general contractor, the father had built dams, department stores, hospitals, six schools, seven churches, and this house. It was made of concrete block with steel reinforcement, sixteen inches on center. His wife had said it was stronger than any dam in California. His crew had called it "The Fort". In those days, twenty years before, the family's acre was close by the edge of the mountain brush, but a developer had come along since then and knocked down thousands of trees and put Pine Cone Road up the slope. Now the father was thinking, I hope the roof holds. I hope the roof is strong enough to hold. Debris was flowing over it. He told the boy to shut the bedroom door. No sooner was the door closed then it was battered down and fell into the room. Mud, rock, water poured in. It pushed everybody against the far wall. "Jump on the bed", the father said. # The bed began to rise. Kneeling on it - on a gold velvet spread - they could soon press their palms against the ceiling. The bed also moved toward the glass wall. The two teen-agers got off, to try to control the motion, and were pinned between the bed's brass railing and the wall. Boulders went up against the railing, pressed it into their legs, and held them fast. The father dived into the muck to try to move the boulders, but he failed. The debris flow, entering through windows as well as doors, continued to rise. Escape was still possible for the parents but not for the children. The parents looked

~~Report~~

United States  
Los Angeles section  
McPhee typescript  
Page 4

at each other and did not stir. Each reached for and held one of the children. Their mother felt suddenly resigned, sure that her son and daughter would die, and she and her husband would quickly follow. The house became buried to the eaves. Boulders sat on the roof. Thirteen automobiles were packed around the building, including five in the pool. A din of rocks kept banging against them. The stuck horn of a buried car was blaring. The family in the darkness in their fixed tableau watched one another by the light of a directional signal, endlessly blinking. The house had filled up in six minutes, and the mud stopped rising near the children's chins.

*ritard*