

A Rose From Charley



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THE DAY HURRICANE CHARLEY churned across Pine Island Sound and did a mad, destructive dance in Bokeelia, we were in our kitchen expecting the worst. From between the storm shutters, we peeked at the wind-whipped froth that sent bass from our pond hurtling through the air.

blessings, fell to that other preoccupation—counting our losses. This began with tropical trees, hand-planted so many years ago, and went on to such things as shingles, soffits and fascia.

The pool enclosure, so much a part of the house itself, was gone, much of it blown into our pond at the same time the bass were blowing out, most likely. It looked incongruous, like the spars of a black ship climbing from the gloom of the green swamp. Everywhere, rising from the plangent earth in ghosts of steam, was the burnt, bruised fragrance of ripped roots and crushed leaves.

Wingless bass flying through wind-bent, earth-pressed paper-wood trees. No dream of life ever seemed more surreal. Then, when Charley tired of sawing up slash pines, came a dripping, dew-bright moment that was the eye of calm, the eye of false peace. The ripping and the raging resumed; but after a while, Charley seemed to get bored with woods-wrecking and roof-pulling, and he spiraled out across Indian Field and then into Charlotte Harbor, whence he made his way, as everybody now knows, to Punta Gorda.

We came out of our bolthole, blinking at the new world that lay before us. The phrase “wrath of Charley” doesn’t describe the haunted, unleaved and, in many cases, bare-barked trees. Or the canopies of vines woven into a tornadic tapestry that swung dreamily from the broken stalks of pines and palms.

A new world, yes. A wet and gleaming world that bore no resemblance to the Garden of Eden we’d shuttered off just two hours before when we locked and bolted ourselves into our house.

Miraculously the house still stood. But it had taken a battering.

Lorry and I, after counting our

At last my eye fell on something known, something dear. A scraggly little rose bush that lived by our lanai. Its bony back was neither bent nor broken, and, unaccountably, one bright red-orange rose was popping out among the purplish leaves.

Lorry and I stooped to admire the hardy little bush. Its brittle bark had been stripped clean of the lichen crusts that we'd been too busy to scrape off all summer.

In reverence, I touched the blossom, and it toppled lazily onto the ground. I stared in disbelief. Then, turning away from sadness, I fetched the flower and gave it to my wife.

She christened the flower Hope, and put it in a crystal shot-glass filled with water. And so we went about our lives that day, readying ourselves for the great indoor camping trip that would begin and end in our own house two weeks later.

During the day, however, we remembered the rose. How Charley had brought it forth. From destruction, creation. From bombs bursting to buds breaking.

That evening another miracle occurred: The phone rang.

The power had been out since Charley's blue eye had glared on Bokeelia. We were also without any water. In addition, the phone line—pinned down by fallen pines—was lying on the ground.

I approached the receiver as I had the rose—gently. The sound as I pressed it to my ear was that of a hollow shell at the beach. A kind of *om*. Then I heard the bright yet distant voice of Kelvin, our horticulturist friend in Trinidad.

"I heard you were having a hurricane," he said.

"How did you get through? Our phone's been dead."

"Love always gets through," he replied.

Kelvin, who's been through a hundred tropical storms and who-knows-how-many hurricanes, was so reassuring that I forgot the seriousness of what we were up against—the grim aftermath, the insurance woes, the broken parts of our home.

Instead, I told him about the rose that bloomed in the midst of Charley's winds.

"You must go out there and tell that brave rose bush how much you love her, and how many more flowers you want to see her make," Kelvin said, laughing.

And with that, the phone went *zzzttt* and went dead.

In honor of our friendship and Kelvin's infallible wisdom, I went directly outside into our ruined garden,

and did what he'd told me to do. A heron flew over the pond. A warm glow flowed through me. I felt so grateful for being alive. And somehow, even after Charley, Pine Island seemed at that moment the most enduring place on earth.

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THE NEXT MORNING, WE started to clean up. By day's grueling end, my wife and I were fumbling, tired and hot. It was 92 degrees in the shade. We were both staggering, and the dog fence—so necessary in our yard with the Great Danes—was far from finished. I told Lorry, "I'm going inside to call the fence guy."

She said, "With what phone? You know the line's dead."

I sighed, and looked to the sky. It seemed like it was going to rain.

Two red-shouldered hawks settled in a broken-off pine tree a few feet from us. Suddenly, they froze and gave us a red-eyed, sharp-beaked stare. Then, in two separate yet equally strident shrieks, the hawks screamed at us. Maybe they were sounding off about the dismal, dark

state of the world, but it seemed to me they were speaking to us.

They were such beautiful birds, a matched pair. Their shoulders were rusty-patched, each with a dark tail that had white bands on it. I'd never been this close to a red-shouldered hawk. After scolding us, both birds flew off, leaving the pine branch twanging behind them. Up into the Charley-polished air, the two hawks soared, and then, seemingly to underscore their message, they made a sharp and sudden descent, aimed in our direction. Each hawk fell in a series of perfectly turned, upside-down pirouettes. One roll after another, until, heading right for us, they broke off, singing that high song of angry triumph and crying despair.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes. Saying nothing, my wife and I finished fixing the fence. We worked quietly and uncomplainingly until we were done. The fence, after we were finished with it, looked pretty good. Would it stand up to a galumphing Great Dane? We didn't know. But as we were walking back to the house with our tools, I said, "I think they were telling us to get back up and fight."

THAT EVENING, LIKE ALL others for the next two weeks, we bathed in our freshwater pond; and while we were paddling idly among the lily pads and amethyst lilies, I saw a female anhinga drying her wings on the white trunk of a fallen paperwood tree. I knew this because of the female's characteristic tan head and neck. Both males and females, however, have black bodies with white plumes and silver edgings on the wings. The anhinga, or snakebird as they're often called, sat in that emblematic pose—wings extended,

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head erect. Her pointed bill was yellow and straight, unlike the cormorant, which has a descending, hooked beak.

She was so still she appeared sculptural. I swam close enough to gaze into her red-orange eye. Her sun-gilt feathers were the gleaming black gown of an Egyptian queen. Like the heron of the night before, here was another Pine Island blessing.

I admired the anhinga as I treaded water among the lilies. I don't know if she admired me, but she regarded me with tolerance. I could feel that she wasn't afraid of me. Like the hawks, with whom we were somehow bonded, this ancestral relative gave us a sense of both timely and timeless

confidence in the renewal of life.

That evening as we lay in bed trying to fall asleep in the oppressive night heat, the only sounds were the far-off barking of a dog, the nearby roar of a generator, and the crazy riff of a displaced mockingbird that kept waking up and singing for no reason I could figure other than joyousness.

We couldn't sleep. A poem by Richard Wilbur kept filtering through my mind. Its title was *Love Calls Us to the Things of This World*. It's about angels—things all around us that speak to us in the language of poetry and praise.

I told Lorry, "Angels are animals and birds, too."

"Sometimes they are little rose bushes," she added.

I thanked the flowered, feathered, furred and finned denizens of Pine Island. Their insistent life had called us back to the beauty of this world and awakened us to our own inner strength. ♣

Pine Island's Gerald Hausman has written more than 35 books for children and adults, including The Mythology of Horses (with Loretta Hausman).