

Where were you when the storm hit? You know the one: It whirled up out of the blue (literally, the sky was blue five minutes before) and roared through our local neighborhoods, ripping up trees, snapping power lines, exploding transformers and wreaking all manner of miscellaneous havoc. *That* storm.



I was at home. I had just picked up my daughter and her friend from school, cruised them through Sonic for slushes, then bypassed Pigeon Point Park – much to their chagrin – since the sky looked a little funny. Jeff had come home early, for no particular reason, and was out back in the shed when the first thunder clap bellowed. The girls were playing with their American Girl dolls in Amelia's room, and came running out in a frenzy.

We watched through the window as the fine summer day turned abruptly – ferociously – black and angry. Before there was rain, there was wind – *hard* wind – opaque with twigs and leaves and Spanish moss. "It's not even raining!" Amelia squealed, confused by that strange, gauzy scrim of wind. And then it *was*

raining, and the scrim was a solid curtain.

Remembering Jeff, I ran to the back door and peered out the window. There he stood, leaning in the door frame of our shed, wearing what I could only imagine (I could barely see, remember?) was a calm, casual smile. Jeff has this quality – at once reassuring and infuriating – of never getting the least bit riled by anything. He gave me a little wave, and I figured he was content to stay put as the tempest raged.

Then the power died. It went out with a bang *and* a whimper. (We heard a transformer blow up – bang! – then the lights, TV and computer whimpered.) It was only about 4:00, but our house was suddenly very dark, thanks to the artificial night that had descended outside, so I scrambled around for candles. The girls had put on their game faces, but I could tell they were a little shaky. At some point, Jeff had made a run for it, so we now had A Man In The House, for which I was grateful. (I, too, was a little shaky.) Jeff struck the matches – I hate matches! – and helped me distribute the candles, and before you knew it, our dark, creepy house had cozied up nicely.

I was determined to make this fun for the girls. I suggested we play "Pioneer," but hadn't counted on the question: "What's that?" (Maybe you don't get Pioneer 101 till third grade?) I talked a bit about the "olden days." Tried mentioning *Little House on the Prairie*... Laura Ingalls Wilder, anyone? They stared at me blankly. Who was this Laura? A new character on *Hannah Montana*?

So I changed my tack: "Let's tell ghost stories!" I suggested. Amelia looked nervous, but her friend Sydney was all for it. She launched into a chilling tale about a haunted telephone at Coosa Elementary School. Have you heard it? I'd recount it for you here, but I don't think she ever finished it. She kept being interrupted by heart-stopping thunder cracks and breathtaking lightening flashes and other unsettling sights and sounds: an oak tree falling across the street, a transformer crackling into flame a block over, branches thumping our roof, etc... None of us was

concentrating very well...

That's when I had a brain storm (no pun intended) and got out my guitar. The one I never play. Miraculously – and against all odds – my stiff, un-practiced, callous-free fingers took on a life of their own. Without so much as consulting my aforementioned brain, they knew just where to go. Chords I hadn't played in years came back to me like old friends, the kind who lose touch but never really change. We sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee," and "This Land is Your Land," "Jesus Loves Me" and "Hey, Jude." Jeff grabbed *his* guitar, and together we introduced the girls to "Thunder Road" (the unplugged version). By the time we got to "the skeleton frames of burned-out Chevrolets," the girls had lost interest. By the time Mary "got to the porch," we

had lost interest in the girls.

Fortunately, Sydney's dad arrived right about then to pick her up. Apparently, while Jeff and I were wrapped up in our mutual delusion of rock 'n roll grandeur – and the girls were wrapped up in rolling their eyes and giggling – the storm had subsided. We sent Sydney and her dad on their way, then cautiously stepped out to assess our environment.

The scene outside our door was eerie. Other-worldly. Borderline apocalyptic. Dusty clouds still blanketed the sky, but an odd amber light now suffused the atmosphere. The ground was a motley quilt of broken limbs and twisty moss, tipped-over flowerpots and soggy mail and such. A once-proud water oak had fallen at the end of our street, making traffic impossible. Another tree sprawled across our neighbor's driveway. (Luckily, his car wasn't in it.) Yet another, across the street, had brought a power line snaking down with it.

Slowly, slowly, people were venturing out of their houses, blinking their eyes in the weird yellow light like moles coming up from the earth. Neighbors we hadn't seen in a while – and some we never see – were greeting us, and greeting each other, and doing that wonderful thing that people do at times like this: lending a hand. One industrious guy over on Wilson Drive, I'm told, was walking yard to yard with his chain saw, offering his services to anyone who needed them. Around the block on Pigeon Point Road, a gargantuan oak had split, just missing the little house beside it, but swiping the residents' truck and pulling down a power line, which was smoking and sparking like crazy. Neighbors gathered round those residents – who were really taking things in stride – just chatting and hanging out and offering moral support while they waited for the repair crew.

Walking down to Emmons Street, we encountered the worst sight we'd seen yet: a house virtually sliced in two by yet another mammoth water oak. We learned that the owner was on his way home from Charleston, having been informed of the bad news via cell phone. I was moved by the number of people there waiting to greet him, making plans to take him in, fretting over his dog.

Everywhere throughout our neighborhood, the spirit of friendship was palpable, diffusing the gloom and radiating a warm, bright energy. Devastation was all around us, yet laughter and animated conversation rang in the streets. People were lending each other candles and flashlights, pulling out their chain saws, their power mowers, their rakes and trash cans... cleaning up not just their own, but *each other's*, yards. Our little world was a wreck, but we had our strength, our wits, and each other. We were the first people on earth. Early settlers. Pilgrims. Pioneers.

Later that night, as I lay on my bed atop dampening covers, the temperature inching up past 80 degrees, I decided to think, since I sure couldn't sleep. I thought about the storm, and how suddenly it had arisen. Here in the Lowcountry, we're told to "be prepared," but deep down

inside, we all expect to have several days of warning before The Big One hits. This was certainly not The Big One, but it sure felt big enough, mainly, I think, because it caught us unawares.

But isn't that how the storms of life – both literal and figurative – usually catch us? Unawares? One minute, everything's fine. The next minute, bam! Things fly apart. There's only so much we can do to prepare for the sudden squalls that inevitably blow through our days on this earth.

But what we *can* do, hopefully, is learn from each storm that comes along, and take those lessons forward. From this very literal storm, for instance, I learned a few things I already knew, but had forgotten. Like how good people can be to each other, and how pretty my daughter looks in candlelight, and how much I love Bruce Springsteen. It shouldn't take a storm to make me turn off the TV, put down the magazine, even shut off my precious computer once in a while. It shouldn't take a storm to remind me how much I like telling stories to my daughter... how much I enjoy playing music with my husband. And it shouldn't take a storm to remind me to be neighborly to my neighbors.

Storms force us to focus on the things we count on by stripping us of the things we only *think* we do. I can live without my reading lamp and my AC and even my Internet. But laughter and conversation? Music and stories? My friends and my family? No way. These are the basics, the bare necessities. A storm throws that fact into bold relief, reconnecting us with what's essential.

It sounds so trite, so obvious. But I, for one, seem to need constant reminding. It's only been a week since the storm, and already I'm back to my old ways. Haven't touched my guitar or told a ghost story or lit a single candle. And even now, I'm itching to finish this column so I can check out a few blogs...

I hope you're doing better than I am. It doesn't really matter where you were when the storm hit. What matters is where you are now.