

The Last Leaf

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THE WINDS CAME

HURRICANE CHARLEY began its turn northward as it was crossing the western end of Cuba. Weather forecasters in Orlando were showing a projected path that put the center of the storm over Tampa, with landfall in the early afternoon on Friday, August 13th. In less than half a day, the projected path had moved to the east, with landfall in the Ft. Myers area. By Friday morning, the path had shifted again; the eye would pass directly over Orlando. Wind speeds in the Orlando area had changed from an estimated 40 to 50 miles per hour to perhaps 70mph, gusting to 85mph. People in Orlando now began to switch their thinking from “*no big deal*” to “*this might be serious.*”

My experiences with hurricanes ranged from the direct hit of Donna in 1960 to near-misses of five or six others in the years that followed. I wasn't worried, but I was very much aware of what needed to be done before noon on Friday the 13th. I spent several hours in gathering up and storing all the loose items and in securing items that would remain in the carport. By early afternoon on Friday I was ready.

The first bands from Charley crossed Orlando well in advance of those nearer the center. The periods of calm between rains were deceptive and the streets were busy with people showing their disdain for bad weather. By eight fifteen in the evening, however, the rains were much harder and the wind much stronger; the streets became empty except for the waves of water that washed them over and over, turning gutters into torrents. At 8:50pm as the wind was gusting mightily, electricity went out, leaving a darkness that was relieved only by the periodic flashes of lightning—or of transformers as they died. Candles could not lessen the feeling that a furious Nature was whipping the earth with unrelenting fury. We cowered and were silent as the house creaked under one blast after another. In the midst of a hurricane, an ego is a very small thing.

Slowly, so slowly, the rains diminished, the winds died to a gentle breeze and relief began to restore our faith that the storm would pass. We sought the comfort of our

beds and drifted into an uneasy sleep, wondering what the morning would reveal. We awoke to the deafening silence that lay all around us ... there were no cars in the streets, no planes in the sky, no birds twittering, no dogs barking, no A/C units starting and stopping. The air was heavy and humidity was high as we opened all windows in search of a breeze. And in all that silence, the sun was bright with only a few clouds—a study in contrasts.

The street was littered with leaves and small branches; dirt had gathered in low spots and the retention pond was rimmed with debris marking the highwater level. As the day warmed, people began to appear and cars returned to creep slowly past the cluttered yards. Here and there a wooden fence was down, exposing long-hidden areas. A gentle breeze sprang up and quickly made the outside more tolerable than the inside of houses unaccustomed to naturally moving air. We sat on the front patio, unwilling to leave the breeze; unwilling to return to the dank and gloomy rooms which teetered on the edge of despair. Conversation lagged; enthusiasm and good cheer had vanished with the howling winds. We needed a spark of something good to fight off all the attacks of hopelessness that filled the house. As noon approached, we ate a tasteless sandwich, drank bottled water, and sprawled on the bed, desperate for a nap and some freedom from the aftermath of Hurricane Charley. It came.

“*Mom! Dad! Where are you?*” It was the voice of our daughter at the front door that snatched us off the bed and simultaneously filled us with new life. She had driven the eleven miles from her home to see if we were OK. None of our phones were working yet. She reported that power had been restored in her neighborhood and insisted that we stay at her place until our power came back again. We happily packed a few clothes and a few bags of perishable food, locked our house and followed her to Winter Garden. Two days later our outside lights signalled the return of power, so we came home and began the process of emptying out food from the refrigerator and freezer. Limbs had broken off from a tree in the backyard and were on the roof. Two pickets were blown down from the wooden fence. I managed to get the limbs off the roof and put back the pickets, then swept up the small debris that had filled our carport. Another tree was down in the neighbor's yard; he was working on it with a chainsaw. Gradually, the activity brought back all the normal sounds and even though the curb of every house had trash ready for pickup, the pall of despondency had lifted and life seemed good again. Not so fortunate are the many people left without homes in the path of Charley as well as the many still without power. We see the TV news coverage still showing great destruction and heart-breaking loss and we pray that those sufferers will find relief. In the back of our minds huddles the thought, “*There but for the grace of God.....*”

—Hugh Singleton,