

A PICTURE OF HELL

We made our way down Estero Boulevard on Fort Myers Beach. I wasn't sure where I was. Landmarks were flattened, street signs missing, with buildings washed into the street or gone completely. PVC piping stuck out of the ground where structures had been. Boats were in the streets, in yards, on top of homes. Hundreds of cars were everywhere; in ponds, in pools, overturned in driveways. Homes and businesses had holes in the walls, where you could see from front to back, some with no sign of any personal belongings, others piled high with unrecognizable stuff. Washing machines stood in a line like soldiers ready for battle where the laundromat once stood. They lost the war to Mother Nature. The Seven-Eleven stores and gas stations collapsed. Publix and CVS were boarded up. The musty odor of rot made me sneeze. The scene of devastation became real. A picture of Hell.

Stepping out of the car in our driveway, the song by Annie Lennox, *Walking on Broken Glass*, came to mind. Neighbors, like zombies, moved slowly with white faces and vacant eyes, as they shoveled out their homes. Welcome home.

...

My husband, Bill, and I watched the weather channel for updates on the storm's direction. We decided to leave two days earlier than planned to avoid evacuation traffic. The house was prepared with storm shutters, hurricane windows and a steel roof. Storage bins were placed on high shelves in the closets and important documents put in a box in the car.

On September 28, 2023, we arrived in Indiana excited for our granddaughter's wedding. Then Bill received a video on his cell phone from our neighbor showing rising water above the fence between our yards. It gave us a glimpse of what would come, that would change our lives forever.

A PICTURE OF HELL

Two days after the wedding, we borrowed our son-in-law's truck filled with donated t-shirts, five gas cans, a shop vac, blankets, gloves, plastic bags, cleaning supplies and two grain shovels and headed back to Florida.

After Hurricane Ian surged over Estero Island, residents were banned from entering as rescue and recovery responders searched for bodies, and heavy equipment cleared the mounds of sand and debris from the main streets. Finally allowed on the beach, we woke before dawn, put on jeans and black sneakers purchased at Walmart. I grabbed the t-shirt my daughter had given me that said "Not Today Satan." The drive to the island was a slow crawl through checkpoints. As the sun came up, we approached the Matanza bridge. To our left was our first view of the commercial shrimp boats out of the water, piled on top of the trailer park.

During the drive down Estero, I whispered, "Oh My God," as tears washed my face. We passed Hercules Street, when Bill began to cry, unusual for a guy who rarely displays his feelings. His friend's house was gone. Mitch had been washed away trying to escape.

The front door was blocked by furniture. We entered our house through the lanai, overwhelmed by the site. Stud walls, furniture, a staircase, an industrial propane tank, and wood filled the pool. Not our stuff. My leather recliner, that comforted me through my broken femur and knee replacement, sat against the wall of the pool having traveled from the living room. In the kitchen, the odor of rotted food hit us. I slipped on the floor covered with debris and slimy mud. On the counter sat the Kitchen Aid mixer, having not moved from its regular spot ready for Bill to make pizza dough.

With some hired help, we moved from room to room carrying out furniture to pile at the street. We used a cart to load the smaller items; books, art work, clothes, bedding. Our dining room table fell apart in our hands, but the Fiestaware dishes sat on the floor without a chip or crack. It seemed as though large pieces of furniture were moved and tossed by the pressure of the water. Smaller fragile things simply floated gently to the floor.

A PICTURE OF HELL

One afternoon, I took another load to the street. It started to rain. I stood with eyes to heaven and screamed, "Come on, really? You haven't sent enough water? Give us a break."

I searched through piles of mud covered clothes, hoping to rescue some. The only clothes we had were those we had packed for our fall trip, none appropriate for the Florida heat. To the rising hill of garbage, I dragged the soggy clothes. The grain shovels scooped up what was left on the floor. A squeegee removed the slimy residual water from the slippery surface.

One of the workers, a young man in shorts and Crocs, stepped on a broken stem from a martini glass and cut his foot. Fortunately, we had a first aid shelf in the garage with Lysol wipes, hand sanitizer, BandAids, and antiseptic cream. I had a supply of masks and gloves and encouraged everyone to wear both. The environment in which we were working was thought to be full of toxic material. Bill and I found that after spending time on the island, we would have upper respiratory issues, itching skin and overall fatigue.

The first couple of days we packed ham sandwiches and bottled water for lunches for us and our workers. Then we discovered a food trailer from the American Red Cross, who distributed warm meals, and set up porta-potties, shower stations, and a truck full of cleaning supplies, bottled water, and ice. Reminiscent of our neighborhood spaghetti dinners that we hosted on our lanai, with linen tablecloths, napkins and candle light, now we invited our neighbors to sit at a folding table and chairs, still holding water in the legs, rag wiped of the mud, to eat a Red Cross lunch out of a styrofoam container with a plastic fork. At the end of the day, exhausted and filthy, we rolled down the car window and received styrofoam containers from World Central Kitchen and Mercy Chef volunteers, who passed out dinner to take home.

We moved from room to room, hauling everything we owned to the growing debris pile. My studio, a place where I found peace, creativity, and joy was tumbled with thread and ribbon of all colors wrapped around fabric with cabinets turned over, books and tools in the water. The ceiling was hanging, with the bed overturned and my sewing machine buried in the rubble. We also found Bill's mothers portable Singer sewing machine. Many years ago, she taught sewing

A PICTURE OF HELL

and had one of the first portable Singer machines made. Both machines were irreparable and headed to the mountain of trash. I cried my way down the driveway to hide in the garage.

After the drywall was removed and mold remediation completed, I walked back in the house, greeted by an empty canvas, a skeleton of the past. A person's choice of color, furnishings, pictures, books and mementoes reveals a portrait of the individual. Our life together had been erased. Everything was gray. The orange walls were concrete block, only contrasted by the wood studs. The colorful kitchen tile had been ripped up to expose gray concrete. The custom turquoise and cream draperies were gone. The white bookcases filled with book jackets of red, yellow, blue, green and black, and brilliant pictures of puzzle boxes, gone. The furniture of beige, turquoise and shades of orange, gone. Collected artwork, gone.

Some people have said, "It's just stuff." It's true that furniture, dishes, pots, pans and clothes can be replaced, but not my Mother's high school graduation picture or my Dad's military discharge papers. Irreplaceable is the poem my granddaughter, Zoie, wrote that was framed and hung in the guest room. The essay that another granddaughter, Samantha, wrote about family gatherings at the lake house, that I carefully kept with my writing material, has washed away. The folder of my favorite recipes and Lucy's Father's Day picture has disappeared. The oval antique framed picture of Bill's Dad and Uncle as little boys is soaked in muck and irreparable. Vanished are photos of mine and my children's childhood, not saved on the Cloud. Mementos of trips we took to Germany and Italy are gone. So many things that I think of and miss. Sometime in the future, my memory will fade and the belongings to remind me of who I am are missing.

We won't rebuild our home on Estero Island, but we will rebuild our lives. Maybe a casa in Mexico, or a log house in Michigan, or a condo in Indiana will be our future home, filled with color and new reminders of who we are and what is important to us.