

COMMENTARY

Just like the water



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Out of the palmettos and live oaks it came, out of the slash pines, the jays' scrub and the cow pastures with their abandoned branding chutes and broken-down holding pens, all of them now the unlikely property of an absentee rancher named John Q. Public, who calls his place the Alva Scrub 20-20.

Disconcertingly, it came out of Lehigh Acres to the south of us, defying the traditional imperative of sheet flow: to march relentlessly southward like a liquid William T. Sherman.

Instead it did exactly the opposite, racing north, stealing a march with the dazzling speed of a Stonewall Jackson or a Nathan Bedford Forrest.

One minute it wasn't there, and we stood gazing foolishly from the kitchen window, wearing the silly expressions of misguided seductees. We welcomed the hard rain. We believed its well-filling promises. We even trusted its momentary sweetness.

But the next minute a trickle appeared, sliding out of what we call the hammock woods that separate our house from our own little horse pasture and a mile of wide open once-upon-a-time where no houses stand.

Ten minutes after that the trickle was an insistent run, lapping and licking thoughtlessly, and in an hour it assumed the bullying character of a swift current a foot deep and wider than the one-lane pavement out of sight at the end of our drive. The current pushed toward Tuckahoe Road and the neighbors lined up beyond

it without so much as a by-your-leave.

Behind their houses lay Bedman Creek with its deeper channel, bound for the

Caloosahatchee River just over a half-mile from our house. Bedman would soon be coming out to meet the newly minted stream, we knew, since hospitality is so highly regarded in these parts.

Meanwhile, our own private river became a hostage taker, spreading out to flank and destroy any hope we held of capturing a little dry ground here or there — someplace, anyplace where we could park our cars or maybe just stand quietly and watch the boys play in puddles.

Mistakenly, we imagined clear pools forming up gently under our old oaks, as clean and fresh as the driving rain that would form them.

But this was not that kind of water. This was flood water, as dark and moribund as motor oil when it moved away from the main current and began to settle in. This water carried with it the lives and let-go of worms, insects, amphibians, reptiles, ducks, geese, guineas, dogs, cats, donkeys, horses and humans without explanation or apology. Where the Florida peninsula had once risen above it, the dark force soon effected a water world as enigmatic as the surface of another planet.

I waded out and moved our cars to a strip of high-and-dry across the road, a place generously offered up by a neighbor.

Another neighbor, another kindly soul, had stopped by to warn us what might happen if it rained 10 or 12 inches: We'd be living in a houseboat, he told us, surrounded by knee-high water and perched above it only by the stubborn grace of the block girders that support our old pine and cypress cottage.

Night fell, and with it our ability to see the mounting water. The sound of waves lapping where they don't belong is unnerving, but we

made light of it in a wine bottle and a 30-candle wash of soft light.

Only one of us had never seen anything like this before, and he wasn't my six-year-old, Nash. At 81, my mother hasn't seen a lot of things, at least not in the last 35 years; she lost her sight at about 45. But that didn't mean she didn't know a lot more about this than we did. When she heard the world quit itself of mechanical sounds — planes, motor vehicles — she assumed the same philosophical, slightly amused expression I've seen on her face whenever things have gotten particularly hard in life. She appeared so relaxed, so calm and so cheerful that I knew we were bound for trouble.

She stowed her gear in her room so that everything was in perfect order. She put out her water for drinking and brushing and set up for spare living just the way she always had, I suppose. Since she'd grown up on a remote mountain cattle ranch in the West with no running water, indoor plumbing or electric power, none of this was unfamiliar.

"Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink," wrote the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but there was a complaint in his tone that we aimed to avoid.

For a day or two this was fun, one of those deep swamp pleasures the chambers of commerce never tell you about when they trot out the word "paradise." While the human world withdrew, the amphibians and insects produced a choral cacophony that rivaled the output of a large metropolitan opera company, at least in decibels, and that's not too much of an exaggeration.

It's safe to say that my mother is no great fan of bugs and other creatures that intrude too closely in her domestic life, but she reacted to all this with an eager, almost ardent curiosity. She's a born traveler, and a little adventure or discomfort has never been particularly intimidating for her. When you come here from the West and you're headed someplace other than

a resort beach, that's the only attitude to have if you want love in your life.

By the third day, mother decided she wanted to go look around, which is a euphemism for doing something nice for her children and grandchildren (she seems incapable of caring about herself if she can care about someone else first, namely us. Must be something in the water).

Problem was, the cars were 100 yards away across a knee-high brew of now toxic slop. What do you do if you're blind, old, vacationing in Florida, cut-off by a flood and nobody from the chamber of commerce knocks on the door to tell you? If you're my mother, you stay willing and ready.

Mom, I'll carry you, I told her.

Have you ever carried your 81-year-old mother 100 yards, or offered to? If you have, then I'll bet you have a mother like mine. And I'll bet your mother refused, at first, too — not because it was unladylike, not because it was uncomfortable, and not because she couldn't. But only because she didn't want to make you uncomfortable.

What about your back, my mother asked?

What about it, mom?

We stuffed the giggles and jokes back in the bag, and I led her down three of the six steps from our deck to the peninsula, and then proceeded into the water. A moment later mom was mounted on my shoulders, with her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck, holding on like the girl who once rode out with her sisters, mounted on her father's tough saddle horses.

When I paused a moment to take stock of this experience, she wouldn't have it. "Let's go, Roger," she said crisply, a note of determined joy in her voice. "Let's move it along."

So just like the water, we did.

For 100 yards of our lives we were escapees, broke and run from an ordinary world and fighting a storm of laughter. ■



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