

## Beauty and the Beast

On March 26, 2021, in the time it took people to cower and embrace each other in bathtubs, basements, and interior rooms, to breathe in and out in the dark and to pray, the beast came to call just after midnight. It was breathing, too, roaring in fact, blowing out lethal 170 mph breaths, exhaling against everything in its way as it sped across miles of my town, Newnan, GA. It peeled back roofs, shingles, siding, beat windows into shards, walls into splinters, turned order into utter chaos. It sucked up rooted trees, spitting them out on power lines, homes, garages, and schools. For good measure, it blew the trees it didn't ingest into broken, twisted missiles and roadblocks.

When it was finally done the beast lifted itself away and disappeared, indifferent to the turmoil it left in its wake. And when quiet came, the people emerged to behold their places in the world. There was a collective gasp, and then the letting out of heavy, communal breaths of horror and disbelief. Then there were voices calling out in the black night,

"Hey Pat, are you and Pam OK?"

"Yeah, we're alive! How 'bout y'all?"

"We're OK!"

"Help! I smell gas!"

"Oh Miss Connie, your gas line is broken! I'll get my channel locks and turn it off!"

"Thank you!"

"Are you OK in there, Miss Nancy?"

"I am, thank you!"

And so it went, into the first morning light, when the full effects of the beast's rampage were becoming visible. On his rooftop, a young man – our son, Scott - the same one who turned off the gas behind his neighbor's house and checked on his other neighbors - stood and spoke quietly into his phone while making a video, panning across the ugly damage. Broken trees poked their sharp, black silhouettes upward, puncturing the dawning sky. Others lay like splintered Lincoln Logs tossed about everywhere in a suddenly unfamiliar, unnatural landscape. The unwelcome view was painful and harsh, a hideous, open wound, allowing him to see farther than ever before. The once quiet beauty of the place had been swallowed up by the beast and regurgitated, leaving a wretched, hopeless disarray. And yet, in the quiet, half-light of dawn, as he prepared to speak, there were the sounds of birds.

He spoke for his - and all of - the broken neighborhoods in town when he said, stunned from the ordeal and so eloquent in his quiet assessment, "Any tree that is left standing is going to have to come down, so there are literally no trees left in Hollis Heights. A tree smashed Val's car, and fell all the way through the garage, which is leaning in, so that's gone. All in all, we are incredibly lucky in our specific location. Broken windows, roof damage, siding torn off. We can get stuff out of the garage. We can fix things. We can plant trees. But this is unbelievable."

In a moment of stark realization, the pain obvious on his face, he took a long, deep breath, blew it out, and said, directly to the camera now, "Well, two hours of sleep and the dawn is here. We have to start figuring things out now. Thank you to everyone who has checked in on us. Thank you for all the offers of help. We will call on you when we figure out what we need. But we're ok. Getting power back will be a big bonus. But for now we're gonna start digging out and making sure everyone has what they need around here. Oh, there's my dogwood tree! Wondered where that went. Thank you again for checking on us."

The video was still rolling as he stood looking out, in one more long, pensive moment. Then, he said, his voice catching, emotion on his face and flowing through his words, "But we are the City of Homes, and these homes are still standing."

Indeed. At least some of them. It is the collective spirit of the people that still stands, for sure. We are Newnan strong.

At midnight, on the other side of town, only a mile away, my husband and I were ensconced in our basement, too, after hearing the tornado warning, waiting for the storm to pass, praying it would miss us. We had heavy rain, maybe even hail as best we could determine, tap-tap-tapping on our basement windows. We lost power, internet, and cable. But there was no loud, approaching train blowing over us. We could hear something coming from the south that sounded like a huge white-noise machine. And then it stopped. I called my son.

"Mom, we took a direct hit. We're ok." he said, raw emotion in his voice. "I'm going to look outside now. Oh. My God... There are no trees..."

My husband was already putting on his raincoat and boots. Wild horses couldn't keep him away from rescuing them and the dog. Shortly after midnight, he drove as far as he could toward their house, until the trees and debris prevented him from going any further. He parked and started walking, probably a quarter mile, flashlight in hand. This way and that, right turn, left turn, detouring around debris, through dark gaps in yards and streets, he found himself standing in the dark at what should've been their intersection. It was a foreign land. He questioned if he had come to the right place. A fallen street sign illuminated by his flashlight told him, sadly, that he had, indeed, found it. There were voices, people calling to each other. Shadows wandering through yards looking out for each other and assessing damage.

Four traumatized boys and a dog trekked out of the neighborhood in the pouring rain with GrampaRick, the two parents at their side, reassuring the boys as they found their way to the car. Then their parents returned to secure and assess the damage at their house and their neighbors' houses. By the time the boys and Rick and the dog returned to our house, our power had been restored. Four soaking wet boys and a stinky, wet dog entered our house, traumatized, crying, backpacks soaked through. They needed reassurance, and a safe, dry place with power to unwind and try to sleep.

In Von Trapp fashion, we lined them up at the laundry room. We tossed their wet clothes into the dryer, and wrapped the boys in dry beach towels, blankets, and Rick's warm, just-dried shirts fresh from the dryer. Hot chocolate was some comfort. Hugs were better. They all chose where they wanted to be for the night and bedded down. This small bit of control was all they had left after mother nature had just sent the beast to crush that concept. Choosing one's bed was a small comfort, but it was comfort, nonetheless. It was easily 3am before they were all asleep.

The family joke, later, when jokes were even possible, was that Rick's first priority was rescuing the dog, since he's a veterinarian. Laughter is good medicine. Even if it takes a while to remember laughter is even possible.

In the days following the beast's ugly rampage, the beautiful people of Newnan showed up. They epitomized how goodness survives and thrives, even when things don't. Volunteers with chain saws, equipment, manpower, food, water, and supplies swarmed unbidden, yet oh so welcome, into Newnan's war-torn neighborhoods. Soon piles of debris, 6 feet high and climbing, were forming along the curbs of dusty, dirt-covered streets. Friends drove in from all over to help. They parked in undamaged areas and walked in to the war zone. Folks driving four-wheelers showed up to deliver people who couldn't walk that far but could offer help. The four-wheeler folks also loaded up much needed food, water, and supplies into

areas that were inaccessible. Tornado relief groups began to organize and offer their assistance. Food banks and donation centers mobilized, staffed by their own workers and extra volunteers, ordinary citizens answering the call. The county fairgrounds became a central donation location where people could go for items they needed, and showers, laundry, and mental health services. A phone number was established for questions and volunteer opportunities (910-632-3309).

Charitable disaster relief organizations like Red Cross arrived. Insurance companies erected tents at various locations and stationed claims centers underneath. Shelters opened. Churches made sandwiches, held clothing drives, walked the neighborhoods handing out water and food, and Easter baskets. Individuals walked the streets pulling coolers, handing out bottled water, sack lunches and snacks. Monetary campaigns were mounted for donations. Newnan was on the news nationwide. Calls and inquiries and volunteers from all over the state and the country poured in to help. Utility workers and linemen worked tirelessly. City and county offices geared up to make recovery as efficient as possible, waiving building permit fees, and discussing policies to help with re-building. Helpers showed up at the most incredible moments. Rick and I were working to clean up our son's yard, and I noticed the banisters on his front porch were hanging off, nails poking out. I yelled over to Rick, "We need a sledge hammer!" Before he could answer, a woman parked at the curb beside the house opened her truck door and emerged.

"I've got one!" she yelled back, brandishing the long-handled tool like the Olympic torch. "What can I do to help?" And then, this angel proceeded to march right over and knock those banisters off in quick order, happy to help. Then she disappeared to offer her gifts elsewhere. Just. Like. That.

When the official report was released recently by the National Weather Center, it was declared that Newnan had suffered an EF-4 tornado. The beast was a half mile wide, skipping and jumping and barreling its destruction over as many as 39 miles for over an hour. The official, combined preliminary report from Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency (GEMA/HS), City of Newnan, and Coweta County assessed the damage at 1744 homes, 120 of which sustained major damage, and 70 of which were completely destroyed.

Officials placed red, yellow, and green stickers on structures to advertise their status, green for "all is well," yellow for "damaged property but habitable," and red for "unsafe and uninhabitable." It is weird seeing them plastered on every house, like some kind of twisted Passover story, all three stickers sometimes appearing in the same block.

All in all, the caring hearts, generosity, support, and love people have displayed has been and continues to be nothing short of mind-boggling, heart-warming, and absolutely beautiful.

And it is by no means over. It will be a long road to recovery. The clean-up and re-building will be a part of Newnan for as long as it takes. Months, years. People are still living in hotel rooms and shelters. Many have lost everything.

In our part of town, only a mile away from our son, we had not one twig out of place. Our azaleas and dogwoods are in full, glorious spring bloom. I feel so fortunate, and I feel guilty. I caught my son standing alone, quiet, and wistful on our back porch at the end of a perfectly beautiful Easter Sunday afternoon last week. Face lifted to the sun, he was studying all our trees, taking in the green, green, green and the outrageous beauty of the blooms; our neatly ordered, partly shaded backyard, clean, and landscaped. I could see the pain on his face, reflecting what had happened on his side of town, and how things would not be same there for a long time, if ever.

That evening, he posted something on facebook that gave me a chill, a jolt of pride, and hope. Being a forester and a charity-minded guy he would think of it, of course. He said, he hoped when it is time to replant that everyone in his neighborhood (and elsewhere) would consider planting cherry trees. He would see if he could get the trees procured and find assistance in the planting.

Think of it! A Newnan Cherry Blossom Festival rising from the dead landscape, resurrecting neighborhoods, binding neighbors, and an entire city, together in solidarity, love, and remembrance. I can think of nothing better to serve as an offering and a living testament to the resilience of a community who rose above the suffering, and planted hope and beauty in the aftermath of a dark, destructive beast. A beast who will not have the last word.  
#newnanstrong