What They Don't Tell You About Hurricanes

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What they don't tell you about hurricanes is the uncertainty.

First it's *whether*. As in *Weather* Channel. There's been a rumor of storm off the coast of Africa, and it's turned into a tropical depression. It churns across the Atlantic into the Caribbean and is upgraded to a Tropical Storm, winds at forty or fifty knots, and the person in charge of such things gives it an androgynous name: Fran.

Will it hit us here on the south coast of North Carolina?

They can't tell. The experts. We've been through this before—Hugo, Felix, Marilyn, Edouard, Bertha. My wife, Kathleen, who grew up with California earthquakes, bridles at the lingering uncertainty, the waffling, a whole season of emergency. She wants it quick, bang, and over. But it doesn't happen that way. Hurricanes are big and slow and cyclone around offshore for a few thousand miles.

So the radar scope on the Weather Channel becomes familiar, part of the nightly ritual before going to bed, like taking out the dog and locking the front door. It becomes the first thing you do every morning, even before coffee. Watching the swirls of red and orange, a bright pinwheel of destruction. Checking the stats—wind speed, barometric pressure, latitude and longitude. We are at 34 degrees 12 minutes north latitude, 77 degrees 50 minutes west longitude. A degree of latitude equals sixty miles north or south. The arithmetic isn't hard.

Fran bangs into some islands from the vacation brochures and it's heading toward the U.S. mainland. But here in Wilmington, we just had Bertha, a direct hit. The eye sat over our backyard—you could look up and see the actual sky wound into a circular wall, like being down inside a black well, watching the stars out the top.

Surely, not twice in one season—what are the odds?

What they don't tell you is that hurricanes, like lightning, can strike exactly the same spot time and again. Fran is not the first storm. It's the second slam from a hurricane in eight weeks, and in the meantime

it's rained torrentially almost every day. It's been a whole summer of violent storms, of lightning fires and local floods, of black line squalls that knock down fleets of sailboats racing off the beach. The ground is so saturated we have had the lawn sprinkler system turned off all summer. Starved of oxygen, tree roots are rotting in the ground.

The longleaf pines that ring our property stand sixty and seventy feet high, two feet in diameter, precarious upright tons of wet wood, swaying already in the breeze. Their roots are soft in the spongy ground.

We've been set up. It feels like there's a bull's-eye painted on the map next to the words "Cape Fear."

So it's *when*. Fran is moving at 14 knots, then 16, then wobbling slowly into a kind of hover. It's a monster storm, darkening the whole map of the Atlantic between Cape Fear and Bermuda, sucking up warm water and slinging it into windy horizontal rain. It's too big to miss us entirely.

It's Monday, the beginning of a long week. We fill up the bathtub, stockpile batteries and canned goods, locate flashlights and candles and matches, fill the truck with gas. Then we load all our important documents—passports, mortgage papers, insurance policies, marriage license—into a single attaché case and keep it handy. We take lots of cash out of the automatic teller.

Landfall of The Eye expected Wednesday night, late. Wednesday is good for us, because Wednesday means south. Good for us, bad for Charleston. Hugo country.

We wish it on them. Me, Kathleen, the neighbors who drift back and forth between houses just to talk out loud, just to look at the sky. We feel bad about it, but we wish it on them anyway. If we had real magic, we would make it happen to them, not to us.

But Fran wanders north, following Bertha's path, and on TV they change the *when*: Thursday night, after midnight. Because our Beneteau sloop *Savoir-Faire* is moored in a tidal harbor, we pay attention to the tides. Low tide will be at 9:34 P.M. From then on, the tide will rise one foot every two hours until 3:29 A.M. By mid-afternoon all of us whose boats remain in the community harbor at the end of our street are lashing on extra fenders, strapping lines to the pilings, watching the water lap at the bulkhead separating the marsh from the harbor.

I'd take the boat out of there, drive her to safety, but where? It would take eight hours to get down the waterway and up the Cape Fear River, and I don't know the hurricane holes there. I'd be stuck

on the boat, away from my wife, in the low-country wilderness, with a three-to-five knot current pushing dangerous debris down the river at me all night long.

Full-force Fran aims for coast says the local newspaper front-page headline.

Everybody is thinking the same thing: *don't let it come ashore at high tide.*

We speculate nervously about how much the tidal surge will actually be in this protected harbor, blocked from the ocean by a large, developed barrier island—Wrightsville Beach—a channel, a spoil island, the Intracoastal Waterway, and finally a hundred yards of marsh that is dry land at low tide.

Nobody knows.

Our docks are the floating kind—they can float up on their pilings another nine feet, and all will be well. All of our boats made it through Bertha without a scratch—eighty-five knot winds and a tidal surge of six feet.

There's the standard hurricane drill: strip all sails, remove all windage-making gear—horseshoe buoy, man-overboard pole, life-sling. We all help one another. Nobody has to ask. While unbending the large full-battened mains'l, I bang my new racing watch on the boom gooseneck and break it. A bad portent.

We retreat across the causeway to our homes, where the power has already gone off, as the rain becomes torrential and the wind begins to blow in great twists of energy. It has started. So we have an answer to *when*. An hour later, when Fran comes howling down on us out of the ocean, it's *how hard*. As we huddle indoors and listen to the roaring, the question becomes *how long*.

When, *How Hard*, *How Long*: the trigonometry of catastrophe.

The answer is 8:05 P.M., almost dead low tide.

The answer is sixteen feet of surging water anyway and winds of 105 knots.

The answer is 15 hours.

Some of the clichés turn out to be true.

The rain really is *torrential*, as in *torrents*.

A hurricane *does* sound like a freight train. Exactly like. If you were lying between the rails and it went roaring along over your head all night long. It really does *roar*. Like whatever is holding the world together is coming apart, tonight, this minute, right here, and you're smack in the middle of the program.

And your mouth really does go so dry with fear you can hardly talk.

The great trees cracking and tumbling to the ground in the roaring darkness really do sound like an artillery barrage—*crack! crack! whump! whump!* It takes italics, exclamation points, boldface clichés to tell about it. The house shudders again and again. Our house has too many large windows, so we run next door to wait out Fran with our neighbors. We're sitting up with them in their living room drinking any liquor we can get our hands on—vodka, beer, wine, rum—and each shudder brings a sharp intake of breath, a little cry. You can't help it. You laugh and make jokes, but it feels bad and the feeling gets worse every minute. The kerosene lanterns don't help. They make Halloween light. Eerie, spooky light.

There are times when you have to dodge out into the maelstrom of wind and flying debris and back across the lawns to check the outside of your house, to clear the storm drain and prevent flooding of the lower story. It's stupid, especially in the pitch blackness, but it feels like something you have to do. The world is way out of control, but you're still responsible.

There are freaky contradictions of nature. Paradoxes of chance. A massive oak tree that has weathered three hundred years of storms is ripped apart by the wind, literally twisted out of the earth by the roots. The next lot over, a pair of forgotten work gloves left to dry on the spikes of a picket fence are still there in the morning, and so is the fence. Dry.

The wind blows strips of new caulking out from between the casement windows but leaves intact the plastic tarps you nailed over the open sides of the upstairs porch.

There are amazing feats of heroism and survival. A man on one of the beach islands sends his wife and kids to the shelter, remains behind with their dog to finish boarding up the house, then the only road off the island overwashes, and he's cut off. He grabs his dog in his arms and ropes himself to the house, and all night long he and the dog are bashed against the house by water and wind, but they make it through. The dog was a boxer.

Lightning strikes the home of an old couple and it catches fire. Two young men appear out of the storm, attack the fire with a garden hose and keep it from taking the house until the fire trucks arrive, then disappear. Nobody knows who they are or where they came from. The old couple believes they are angels.

There are tales of death. Another man is seen stepping onto his front porch as the hurricane hits. They find him in the morning miles away, floating face-down in the Intracoastal Waterway. A woman rescued from a mattress floating in the marsh dies anyway.

For a week afterward, urban rescue workers prowl the wrecked homes along the beach with dogs, sniffing out the bodies of the ones who wouldn't leave.

It's also true, the cliché about the capriciousness of nature and about blind luck. Three Marines in a Mustang are swept off the road by the rushing water. One is washed to the far shore and stumbles into a shelter. The second clings to a tree limb for nine hours until he is rescued. The third drowns.

There are things that are outrageously unfair. A family down the street gets flooded out on the ground floor. They scramble upstairs ahead of the surge. But the battery of their brand new car shorts out in the rising water, and it catches fire. The garage underneath the house burns. Soon the whole house is burning. Incredibly, at the height of the hurricane, the volunteer firemen arrive. They maneuver their pumper through waist-deep water. But they can't get the electric garage door open and have to axe it down. And by then the family is smoked out, the house is partly destroyed, the car is a hulk.

Hurricane, flood, fire, all at once.

Thunder and lightning come in ahead of the hurricane. Tornadoes spin off the leading edge like missiles, knocking out bridges, tearing holes in houses, twisting trees out of the earth and flinging them into power lines.

Biblical stuff.

Furious Fran unforgiving, the local newspaper says, again on page one, unable to let go of the corny habit of alliteration.

What they don't tell you about hurricanes is the heat.

The oppressive stillness of the stalled atmosphere the day before the winds start. The hundred degrees of swampy humidity the day after, before the torrential rains resume. The air-conditioning is off, the windows are latched down tight. An hour into the storm, everything you touch is greasy. You put on a fresh shirt and sweat it through before you can fasten the buttons.

And then the bees arrive. Swarming, disoriented, stinging, bees gone haywire. Bumblebees, wasps, yellow jackets, hornets. I'm no entomologist—they all sting.

After a hurricane, the radio warns, that's when the injuries start. Beestings are number one, followed by poisonous snakebites and chainsaw cuts.

When the rains resume a day and a half after Fran passes, the yard

is jumping with frogs and toads. Little bright green tree frogs with suction cups on their feet, smaller than a penny. Black toads the size of your fist. Giant croaking bullfrogs that splash around like rocks. Rat snakes. Water moccasins. Copperheads.

What's next—locusts? Well, not exactly: crickets. By the millions. All over the debris, the backyard deck, the wrecked boats.

But the birds are gone.

The water is off.

After sweltering hours clearing the tree limbs out of the road, pulling limbs off cars and shrubs, dragging downed trees off the driveway, raking the mess off the steps and walks and deck, my wife and I shower by pouring buckets of cold water, saved in the bathtub, over our soapy heads and bodies. We are scraped and cut and bruised and stained with pine resin that does not wash off. Every pair of shoes we own is wet and muddy and will not dry. The house is tracked with mud and debris, and a lethargic depression sets in—part physical exhaustion from relentless manual labor in the heat, from two sleepless nights in a row. Part emotional exhaustion. Grief.

We were luckier than many. It just doesn't feel that way.

When the power comes back on, it's like a religious experience. Everything becomes possible again—bright lights, cool air, television news, ice.

Then after a few hours it goes off again.

What they don't tell you about hurricanes is that the Big Hit is the beginning, not the end. Fran has swept on up the coast, taking the Weather Channel and CNN with it. On the networks, things are happening in Bosnia, Chechnya, Indonesia.

Here in Hurricanelandia, it's raining eight inches in three hours on top of ten inches that came in with Fran. They predict it will rain for another week. All the low-country rivers are cresting, shouldering through the wreckage of human cities toward the sea.

Our house is an island surrounded by rushing water two feet deep, and it's back out into the storm wearing Red Ball boots, clearing out clogged gutters on an aluminum ladder, counting the seconds between lightning and thunder, counting how long to dare such foolishness. Then slogging out onto the muddy access road behind the house to rake out the clogged storm culvert, trying not to get carried into the muddy water.

On the local radio, the jocks are chatting about this and that and the other, but for hours nobody gives a weather report. When will it

stop raining? *Will* it stop raining? The phone is working. A friend from across town, where they have power, calls. Look out your window—is it raining there? The edge of the cloud is moving over us now, she says, and there's sun behind it.

The water recedes, and now it's time to clean out the flooded garage. At dusk, the generators go on. It gets dark and noisy. We will wake to the lumber-camp sound of chainsaws.

For weeks and weeks.

What they don't tell you about a hurricane is that it just seems to go on and on.

But the worst of it is not captured on the awesome helicopter videotape of destruction. The worst of it is waking up to the new stillness of the morning after, when the wind has finally quit and the rain has slacked and the sun may or may not be up yet, the sky is just a gray slate of clouds.

Overnight, the world has changed in some important, irrevocable way. You can just feel it.

My neighbor John is standing outside waiting. "You ready?" he says, and I nod.

Half a mile away, the approach to the harbor is littered with dockboxes, paddles, small boats, lifejackets. Like a shipwreck has happened to the whole neighborhood. The houses by the harbor have taken a beating. A 44-foot sportfishing boat lies on its side on a front lawn, and my stomach turns. That's how high the water rose.

A few nights earlier, I had stood on our dock talking quietly with an old friend, admiring the sleek, trim lines of *Savoir-Faire* under starlight, feeling lucky. Thirty-two feet of beautiful racing yacht, a dream of fifteen years of saving come true. I'd take *Savoir-Faire* out onto the broad back of the Atlantic and race her hard, rail down, or just jog along in mild breezes, clearing my head, sharing her with friends, or filling up with the good strength that comes from working a yare boat alone.

The harbor was demolished. Boats and docks were piled up like a train wreck. Boats were crushed, sunk, broken, smashed, aground. Some were simply gone.

Out in the middle of the harbor, alone, *Savoir-Faire* lay impaled on a piling, sunk by the bows, only her mast and transom rising above the dirty water.

What they don't tell you about hurricanes is how many ways they can break your heart.