

Trying to Reason with the Hurricane Season

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 18 October 2016 11:48



(with apologies to Jimmy Buffett)

Story by Mark Shaffer

Photos by Mark Shaffer, Jeff Evans,



and Eric Horan

Shortly after the shots ring out, I figure it's time to go. At the very least it's a sign. The Tuesday after Matthew buzz sawed up the South Carolina coast there is a surreal quality to the storm's aftermath. Less than two weeks past a spinal procedure on my lower neck I'm still using a brace (the human equivalent to the Cone of Shame) and feeling the aftereffects of the Percocet. Time has only recently become relevant again. Much of the past week and a half – including the storm – is one long, blurry smudge, like a child's attempt at a watercolor rainbow.

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It's no surprise I've had *The Clash* stuck in my head lately. Since Matthew began tracking toward the East Coast the question for most coastal residents was, "Should I stay or should I go?" A day before Governor Haley orders a mandatory evacuation we're singing a different tune: already gone, and safely (so we assumed) in the heart of the Pee Dee. Frankly this has less to do with the weather in the Caribbean and more to do with my convalescence. My wife Susan and I both grew up in Hartsville and th



e timing seems right to head home to family. Our friend Kim is set to house sit and hang out with our young cat, Edgar. Everything is cool. And then it's not.

Hot on the heels of my surgery comes a milestone birthday for Susan. A long-planned celebratory getaway to – yep! – southern Florida seems a bad idea with the possibility of tropical weather moving in. Hurricane? What hurricane? No one is talking about a hurricane as we – or rather, Susan – packs two dogs and a zombie husband into the car and points the car for Hartsville. In hindsight, there is plenty of talk about the possibility of hurricane danger. We are simply too preoccupied to listen. Therefore, once the threat becomes less remote and then suddenly imminent I began to hear a particular phrase over and over again, like the call of a stranded bird, "Had I *known* to pack for a *hurricane*..."

Around the time the governor calls for a mandatory evacuation, Kim's significant other – a Drill Instructor at Parris Island - informs her they're evacuating to Albany, Georgia. She packs up our photo albums, assorted non-replaceables and waits out the first wave of evacuees. The next morning, she and Edgar head our way in the wee hours of pre-storm Thursday.

We're all comfortable in my dad's rambling old house just outside of the city limits. This

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house has endured pretty serious stuff over the last half century. The ice storm of '69 downed so many huge pines our property looked like a logging camp. And then there was Hugo in 1989. Nearly 100 miles from the coast the storm's sustained winds approached 90 miles per hour. If you look around you can still see plenty of big trees permanently bent from that little bit of weather. But that kind of thing was a fluke, right?

By this point everyone's glued to the Weather Channel, monitoring our various devices (soon to turn to paperweights) and trading texts with friends who stayed behind. Friday night after the house has given up and gone to bed, I sit up and monitor the storm's progress filtering through the reporters' hyperbole. I can hear the wind picking up outside and sense the tall pines as they begin to sway and creek in the dark. Rain hammers the roof.

Shortly after daybreak we lose power and decamp to my Mother-in-law's place in town. She's got power and instead of giant pines looming over the roof, the neighborhood is



full of pecan trees. By midmorning after more than a foot of rain and gusts of 65 mph, one of the neighbor's pecans takes out the main power line. As I write this more than a week later Duke Power crews continue to work around the clock to restore power to tens of thousands affected. Our power is restored to the Beaufort house the Tuesday after Matthew.

The days immediately following the storm are, as I previously mentioned, surreal. The skies are a breathtaking azure and a cool fall breeze bears no hint of humidity. My dad's lost a couple of big pines (again) but the house is unscathed. There are only twigs down in my mother-in-law's yard. Word from the coast is our house is just fine. We fire up the grill and clear thawing meat from the freezer. I declare this henceforth to be a "*hurrication*." We congregate on the back deck under a night sky restored by the absence of street lights. We talk and tell stories. My brother-in-law plays his guitar. Eventually the scrabble board is put to good use. We count

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our blessings and talk about going home.

Which brings us back to Tuesday afternoon. The gunfire – two very loud, very close reports – shatters our post-Matthew reverie. The street out front fills with police and emergency vehicles. A cross street neighbor with a history of issues apparently steps outside, screams “I can’t take it anymore!” and lets fly. There are no injuries. As it turns out, the incident is probably unrelated to the storm or its aftermath. Still, it serves to bring us out of our post-storm daze. We say our goodbyes and return to the Lowcountry the next morning. That evening Susan wanders down to Pigeon Point landing to catch the sunset. A small pod of dolphins follow the incoming tide, feeding at the edge of the marsh grass just a few feet away. The sun falls into the river and the sky and water burn lipstick red. We are glad to be home.



POST SCRIPT

Truth be told, had this been a more serious event for us I wouldn't be joking about it at all. In spite of being poorly prepared and utterly pre-occupied, we got lucky. Really lucky. Certainly, it's no laughing matter for thousands and thousands affected by the storm and the hundreds more who perished. The staggering loss of life in Haiti is another tragic reminder that one of the worst places in the world for human beings to live just keeps getting worse right on our doorstep. As Americans we tend to take a lot for-granted. We have access to much of what we want whether we actually need it or not 24/7. Much of this requires energy. As it turns out, once the power goes out a lot of what we've come to rely on is absolutely useless. This is when the real value of

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what we hold dear and what we take for-granted can truly be assayed. A little food for thought as we continue to reason with this hurricane season.

THINGS WE LEARNED FROM THE STORM

When the traffic lights are dark the guy with the biggest truck always has the right-of-way. Always.

Those spare flashlight batteries that have been floating around the kitchen junk drawer since the first Bush administration (H.W.) are DEAD.

In a post-apocalyptic world ice will be more valuable than gold.

In a post-hurricane world, the toilet paper isle at the local grocery is a microcosm of the post-apocalyptic world.



Never underestimate the value of a board game.

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When faced with imminent, prolonged loss of power do not succumb to buy one/get one ice cream specials.

Two words: canned beans.

In a prolonged power outage your electric stove might as well be a boat anchor. Your neighbor's gas range, however, is a giver of life.

Regardless of how many times we're warned to avoid flood waters someone will inevitably drive into a raging torrent.

In space no one can hear you scream. In a blackout no one can hear Jim Cantore scream.