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Hurricane

Lee Torda

My first hurricane was Fran when I lived in Greensboro, North Carolina. I moved there the summer before to start a PhD. I moved there fat and nervous. I have never been so fat or so nervous. I was a child, thick, still, with baby fat. I moved

there with an angry boy who didn't think much of me really. In another age we would have been grown-ups by then, but we were just a boy and a girl, Midwestern and middle class.

We met in Maine, at the University, in a decrepit house on the edge of the Stillwater River. He was a year ahead of me. After he graduated he left for home, Minnesota, but he moved back to Maine not even three months later. To be with me. I offer this as the only proof I have that moving together to North Carolina was not really such a bad decision. Not long after we moved, though, it would become clear that he was only there because he had come up with no better plan for himself. He arrived ahead of me and found an apartment. Once I knew the city even a little, I realized it was probably the first building he had come upon. Our year together had been long.

That August of 1996, Hurricane Fran was just blooming near an island called Cape Verde. That fact would have meant nothing to me then, but now I live where one of the largest populations of Cape Verdeans outside of those islands calls home. What winds blew them here I don't know.

I was fascinated by Fran, felt safe enough to be so. Three hours inland, I figured, it would feel like a thunderstorm. In Ohio, thunderstorms turned the light a greenish-yellow. Your mouth would fill with the tin taste of electricity. The first giant drops would steam off the sidewalks and driveways. The wind would grow fierce. You'd run indoors to shut all the windows, and five minutes later it would stop.

As I was learning, with a hurricane you endure the heat and humidity for days, the air turning close and choking. The skies are mercilessly grey. Sporadic rain offers no relief. I remember sitting in the vanilla apartment watching the news reports that charted the progress of the storm in its stunningly slow march to the coast. Weather people entertained various landfall scenarios. I thought about how remarkable it was: *you could see it coming*. I was sitting with my legs curled up to my side, my arm over the couch, almost but not quite in an embrace of the young man. I said to him: "When else in life do you get this much time to get ready for a catastrophe?" I meant it without even knowing what I meant.

I watched the long lines of evacuation traffic, saw people pulling up ingenious docks from their coastal homes—literally, they were docks that could be rolled up so that the storm wouldn't wash them into a house. That impressed me—such preparedness. I had no sympathy for the people talking about braving the storm and staying put. Idiots, I thought. *Get out of the way*. After Katrina, I realized you didn't always get to choose: sometimes you were stuck.

At exactly this time, my parents came to visit us. Desperate to find air-conditioned relief from pre-Fran misery, even more desperate to shield the young man from my parents and my parents from him, I planned ceaseless indoor activity. One such activity was a trip to Reynolda House in Winston-Salem. Reynolda is the estate built by RJ Reynolds for his wife, Katherine. That is RJ as in the RJR Reynolds company,

maker of, among other things, Camel cigarettes, as well as, of course, Winstons and Salems. Katherine was thirty years RJ's junior and college-educated. She conceived the plan for Reynolda and oversaw its construction. It was a model farm and dairy, producing enough milk for all of the employees at the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company every day. So wholesome.

The house was a museum in 1996, home to a modest collection of American art. Also, the house was nearly built around a tremendous organ, the pipes running clear up through the attic. This organ was of some importance in the world of organs. I never understood why anyone, even the rich, would want a huge pipe organ as the centerpiece of a house. But I loved touring Reynolda because the experience was so visceral. There were no roped off areas or locked doors. You could walk anywhere, sit nearly anywhere. I am not really much of a romantic, but I used to like to touch the walls and sit in the chairs and clutch the banister and imagine the people and lives of those who walked and touched and lived in that exact same space before.

I went to the house many times, this time with my parents was one of the first. It wasn't until a third or fourth trip that I made it up to the attic. Once used as bedrooms for the children, it had been turned into the only part of the house that could truly be called a museum of Reynolda itself. It held outfits worn by the family. A collection of dolls. It also had a family tree that traced the lives of the brief collection of Reynolds's that occupied the house—which, in fact, only served as a family home for a mere fifty years. What a waste, I always thought, to have built all that house for only fifty years. This couldn't have been part of the plan. Katherine built that house to last the ages, to house the sons of empire, but the story of the house is pure wreckage.

RJ himself died of pancreatic cancer after a life of chewing his own product,

not long after the house was completed in 1918. He never made it past the dark paneled room that was meant to be his study. Instead, it served sad duty as sick room and deathbed. Katherine died in 1924, in childbirth, in the house. Later, another Reynold's female relation would also die in childbirth, also in the house.

The worst mess of it all is the story of the youngest son, Zachary Smith. He was born on November 5th, 1911, roughly sixty years and two days before I was born (impetuous Scorpios, the trouble we find ourselves in). Somehow, I got it in my head that Zachary Reynolds died in World War II. That he went off to fight, probably, in my imagination, against the will of his family, against their every, moneyed effort to keep him out of such pedestrian ugliness. I had a further secret fantasy that he did not die in the war at all, but that instead, wanting to avoid the idle life of an heir, he disappeared into the rank and file, found a French wife, one that cheered him on the road from the beaches of Normandy, one that he came back for and grew old with on a farm that he tended to. This farm, in my version of Zachary's life, would remind him of only the best parts of Reynolda and of his youth, before the death of his father and mother.

What actually happened is that he died at the age of 21, shot in the head in one of those gleaming indoor bathrooms, so remarkable to Reynolda house when she was first built, bathrooms that art-lovers and organ aficionados—and I—would eventually meander through. Though that's not information anyone puts on a plaque on a wall next to an early Jackson Pollock.

His death, originally called suicide, was found to be murder. His second wife, Libby Holman, a Broadway actress ten years his senior to whom he'd been married to for less than a year, was indicted for it, as was his personal assistant, Zachary's childhood friend Albert Bailer "Ab" Walker. Walker and Holman

were rumored to be having an affair. But evidence was scarce, and the family was against a trial. The prosecution dropped the matter.

Zachary Reynolds's first wife was heiress to the Cannon Mills—as in Cannon Towels—cotton fortune. Before divorcing her for Libby, he had a child with her. Holman herself was pregnant with his child at the time of his death. I know nothing about what became of those two babies, half-siblings with a murdered father, except that a suit was brought on their behalves, pitting infant against infant, over Zachary's share of the 60 million dollar Reynolds's fortune.



Time magazine covered Reynolds vs. Reynolds, calling the trial "the most involved inheritance litigation of 1933" and the late Zachary "a weak-chinned, moody child." I have always preferred my version of Zachary Smith Reynolds's life.

Because my father died of cancer most likely due to his years of smoking, I blithely and tastelessly say that all this loss was brought down on the Reynolds by their decision to make their fortune off of an insidious poison. But then I remind myself: my father could have quit.

My parents left, and Fran finally ripped through with a force I was unprepared for. The wind and rain came crashing in on the front end of the storm with a dumb brutality. Then the bizarre, unnerving calm of the eye, and then the

wind and rain again. Fran tore up ancient-looking, towering pines, knocked out the power, had us all boiling water. At the time I was working as a clinic clerk for a state-run pediatric clinic. We were open the day after the hurricane hit, and as the youngest and least useful member of the staff it was my job to run up the four flights to nab supplies and files from offices already being overrun in the late summer heat by mice and roaches. It all felt more precarious and desperate than I think it actually was, three hours inland. It was almost exciting—of course, my apartment was still standing and nothing I owned and no one I loved was hurt or missing or homeless.

The crazy thing is that the day after a hurricane finally finishes is some of the finest weather you could hope for. Humidity plummets. Skies break blue and clear. The air feels scrubbed clean. If you don't mind the debris, it's a good day for a run.

At the end of the summer, the boy helped move me into a new apartment, one that I found. I could walk to campus, and it had hard wood floors. Then he kissed me for the last time, got in his car, drove back to Minnesota. That was it. Then school started and fall came. The land dried; the electricity came back; people cleaned up. On the coast, people repaired windows and rolled out their docks again, like welcome mats. On the street that I moved to, the crepe myrtle bloomed purple and pink. I started running and grew lean and serious. The year after that I would fall in love again. And the year after that my father would die. And then the year after that I would leave North Carolina and move to Massachusetts, trading Hurricanes for Nor'easters. Our only real choice is forward, I guess, despite everything and regardless of the wreck we make of what lies ahead of us in our path.

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