

Chapter 3 - Crash Helmet

Elaine Mandrish and John Everitt are a lovely retired couple; they were college sweethearts who reconnected and got married 10 years ago. Both originally from the United Kingdom, for the last 17 and 10 years respectively, they have called The Virgin Islands home. Between them, they own a house at Luck Hill, Tortola which they now rent and recently bought a second house together at Great Mountain, Tortola where they now live. In her past life, Elaine was a management consultant working in the United Kingdom and across Europe and Africa. John had been a professor at Brandon University, Canada where he taught courses on climate change, among others.

- Interviewed 7th October, 2017

Elaine: Category 4 Hurricane Earl, 2010, was the most terrifying experience of my life prior to Irma. We had spent that hurricane together at Luck Hill.

John: We moved to this house at Great Mountain 5 years ago and had recently completed major renovations on what was then a real wreck. With lots of hard work, we turned it into our Caribbean dream home; there are four units separated by sun-drenched walkways. The house was complete with brand new doors and windows. Our recent, carefully executed renovations perhaps made us a bit overconfident. Conscious of the threat of hurricanes, we selected hurricane-proof glass windows and doors. We thought that meant something! So, we went into Irma under the false impression that our house was more hurricane-proof than it actually was. Adding to our false sense of security was Irma's forecasted northerly track. "Tough for poor Anegada," we thought, "but we should be alright."

Elaine: Even if we got a full-on hit, we figured we had been through a Category 4 hurricane before; how much worse could a Category 5 be? Despite the terror we felt in Earl, at the end of the storm when we came outside everything was basically fine; the damage was next to nothing. Our house had been painted in leaves, but that was about it. Oran, one of our tenants at Luck Hill, had been through a direct hit by a Category 4 hurricane in the Turks and Caicos Islands and did not want to be alone during Irma, so we invited him over to stay in our second bedroom, situated directly below ours.

The morning of Irma arrived. In preparation for being locked away in the bedrooms, which are disjointed from the kitchen, I cooked for everyone in advance of the storm. I made a spicy chicken tikka masala and cottage pie. We retreated to our respective bedrooms to await Irma's strike, our tenant in the downstairs second bedroom and John and I in the upstairs master bedroom. Each room was equipped with a microwave, electric kettle, tea makers, food, juice and water - enough to last us a couple of days. Our generator was going. We felt prepared.

Our cat was in the bedroom with us and was going crazy, literally bouncing off the windows as the winds picked up. He finally hid under the bed. Frankly, I would have joined him if I could have squeezed under! Instead, I killed some hours emailing friends, giving live updates on the progression of the storm.

John: The first half was easy! We were able to make contact up to the eye; I remember sending a message then. Oran came outside with us and we surveyed the property. Just like with Earl, the

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impact was limited to a few downed trees. “Hey, we’re alright!” we thought. We went back in, ready to face the second eyewall. Like I had done in the first eyewall, I held on to the south-facing bedroom balcony French doors that were rattling quite a bit. Elaine went into the entryway between the bedroom and bathroom, carrying her laptop and our other important possessions.

Without much warning, things moved beyond the realm of manageable. Trying to hold the doors closed became almost impossible. At a point, I thought my hand was broken; it was so swollen from the strain. I remember feeling a bit short-changed on hurricane doors at the time! While I was battling the balcony door, an invisible hand was busy opening the casement window to my left. The clips that locked the window shut were now lifted, and the window operator was spinning around winding the window open. I immediately abandoned the door and rushed to close the window. As I did, I noticed that the one next to it had done the same. Managing to close that one also, I headed back to my post at the door. Before long, the invisible hand was opening the windows again and I found myself in a constant, exhausting loop between the windows and the door. Eventually, I couldn’t keep up and the windows just disappeared. Fortunately, the windows blew out and not in, landing on the deck down below, remarkably still intact, perhaps with just a small crack in one of the window panes.

“Help!” I thought, as I continued to clench the doors. I could see that they were about to go. Wondering what to do next, I turned towards the bathroom where Elaine was. Before I had a chance to think, “Boom!” the entire bedroom exploded and the bathroom followed shortly after. Everything went flying, including the toilet; a wall was not left standing. Between the force of the explosion and the winds, I was thrown about 20 feet from the front of the bedroom, clear across the room and down behind it. Elaine was thrown as well. ...

End of Sneak Preview

