

Preface

I've spent almost the last 10 years of my life educating about climate change. I've repeated the message about the likelihood of experiences with stronger hurricanes (even Category 5 systems) from primary school classrooms to the Government Cabinet. On 6th September, 2017 Hurricane Irma suddenly, abruptly and unapologetically translated that theoretical message into a game changing and horrifying reality for all those who call The Virgin Islands home and shocked even me.

We understand now in no uncertain terms what it means to live through a direct hit from a Category 5 plus hurricane, the strongest to ever make landfall in Atlantic history. To say that the Territory was "entirely devastated," which were the only words I could find to describe the impact to my friends abroad in the days immediately following, was perhaps an understatement and certainly too general a description to give any meaning to the stark reality on the ground.

The experience of Irma cannot be captured in a few news headlines or even the apocalyptic photographs that lay bare the carnage unleashed. The experience is best captured in the very personal, detailed, harrowing yet amazing, and at times amusing and inspiring accounts of the ordinary, turned extraordinary, people who battled through Irma, minute by minute, and came out alive.

The day after Irma I distinctly remember remarking that the place looked as if someone had bombed it; the entire island was shell shocked. Within the first 2 weeks of impact I vividly recall a candid conversation with a squad of British Royal Engineers who had come out to help. We crossed paths at the National Emergency Operations Centre where I assisted in the month following Irma. It started with me asking if they thought we could ever recover from this. Very optimistic, the men all agreed that we could. A bit sceptical, I asked how long they thought it would take, suggesting on my own a timeframe of 5 to 6 years. The men were all eager to reassure me that recovery could happen much sooner and that possibly, apart from scars on the hillsides, in 2 to 3 years we would not be able to tell this had happened. Even more sceptical at this point and convinced that they were trying to shelter me from the discouraging and harsh realities I asked a final question, "Have you even seen anything like this before?" One officer was quick to confess that he had not, but Major Tom quickly interjected with an instinctive and uncensored response that will stay with me forever, "Sure I have...in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and BosniaI have spent almost the last 10 years of my life working on climate change in The Virgin Islands¹. Among other

¹ Note that throughout this book, *The Virgin Islands (the Territory's formal name)* is used in place of the commonly used name, *The British Virgin Islands*. The islands that are territories of the United States are distinguished as *The United States Virgin Islands*.

things, I have written the Territory's Climate Change Policy, conducted a vulnerability and capacity assessment of our tourism sector to climate change, helped pioneer and see through the development of our Climate Change Trust Fund, set up our Climate Change Committee and helped develop and implement community climate change adaptation projects. I have repeated the message about the likelihood of experiences with stronger hurricanes (Categories 4 and 5) as a result of climate change for years, from primary school classrooms to the Government Cabinet. Irma suddenly, abruptly and unapologetically translated that theoretical knowledge and message into a game changing and horrifying reality for all those who call The Virgin Islands home. Irma shocked even me.

We understand now, in no uncertain terms, what it means to live through a direct hit from a "Category 5 plus" hurricane, the strongest ever at time of landfall in Atlantic history. To say that The Virgin Islands was "entirely devastated," which were the only words I could find to describe the impact to my friends abroad in the days immediately following, was perhaps an understatement and certainly too general a description to give any meaning to the stark reality on the ground.

The experience of Irma cannot be captured in a few news headlines or even the apocalyptic images that lay bare the wanton destruction unleashed. The experience is best captured in the very personal, detailed, harrowing, yet amazing and inspiring and, at times, amusing accounts of the ordinary-turned-extraordinary people who battled through Hurricane Irma, minute by minute, and came out alive.

The morning after Irma, like so many others that day, I walked for hours over fallen trees, poles and other rubble in search of family and friends, just to make sure they were alive and well. On that walk, I remember hearing rumours of the 15 to 20 people or so who had died, including a family of six in my own village. As sad as these numbers were, as you walked from one village to the next and witnessed levelled homes and tossed cars, they certainly seemed reasonable, in fact expected.

Along the walk, I distinctly remember remarking that the island looked as if someone had bombed it; everyone was shell-shocked. Within the first 2 weeks of impact, I vividly recall a candid conversation with a squad of British Royal Engineers who had come out to help. It started with me asking if they thought we could ever recover from this. Very optimistic, the men all agreed that we could. A bit sceptical, I asked how long they thought it would take, suggesting on my own a timeframe of 5 to 6 years. The men were all eager to assure me that recovery could happen much sooner and that possibly, apart from scars on the hillsides, in 2 to 3 years we would not be able to tell this had happened. Even more sceptical at this point and convinced that they were trying to shelter me from the discouraging and harsh realities, I asked a final question, "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" The first officer immediately confessed that he had not, but Major Tom quickly interjected with an instinctive and uncensored response that will stay with me forever, "Sure I have...in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia."

Working in the climate change arena, I was very familiar with the term *climate refugee* before Irma. What always seemed like an extreme expression and an unlikely reality to me suddenly became a very tangible, distinct and present possibility. It cemented for me early on that Irma is likely just a glimpse of our future, and there is a real possibility that a hostile climate could eventually make the islands I have always called and cherished as home uninhabitable.

After all, exactly a month before Irma, in the height of our traditional dry season, we had been hit with perhaps our worst flood in history, and as I often tell people, the scariest moment for me over the last few months was not the day of Irma itself but that Friday, 2 days later, when I sat on my back porch and heard the Deputy Chief Fire Officer coming around my village, repeating an announcement on a bullhorn. As the fire truck came close enough, I could finally make out the words that will remain etched in memory, something to the effect of, “Category 4 Hurricane José likely to affect The Virgin Islands this Saturday into Sunday. Please secure your property or find a safe room.” This was the most well-intended but unrealistic message I had ever heard. “Secure property? Find a safe room?” I thought. We were sitting in our shambles just 2 days after a direct hit by the strongest Atlantic hurricane ever at time of landfall! I remember feeling so terrified and helpless in that moment. I had the fanciful thought that someone would send a few of those cruise ships that frequent our shores in good times and just take us all off the islands for a few days to at least save our lives. Thankfully, Hurricane José made a fortunate turn north at the last minute and spared us. But our troubles this hurricane season did not end there. Just 2 weeks after Irma, we were hit by Hurricane Maria, another Category 5. Fortunately, the hit was not direct and we managed to get away with perhaps Category 2 to 3-force winds.

The level of fear instilled in the population was evident. The traditional hurricane season officially ended on 30th November and most homes, even those without much damage from Irma or Maria, including mine, remained boarded up until then, or even after, out of the fear that another monster might suddenly develop and strike. Normally, boards would be removed immediately after a hurricane has passed, but this time we readily traded in fresh air and light for the hope of having a home after the hurricane season.

The term *climate refugee* should forever remain a theoretical extreme. This must not happen to us. And so, I feel compelled to share these Irma survivor stories in the hope that they will wake up and shake up the world, by allowing people to connect on a very human level to climate change and what it means for those on the frontlines and impacted most.

Inspiration for *The Irma Diaries* came during the first month post-Irma while I was volunteering at the National Emergency Operations Centre. There, I learned from official sources that in actuality four people of the roughly 36,000 that make up the population had died during Irma, not 15 to 20 as had been rumoured. While this was a much more palatable number, it was also unbelievable to me. I became absolutely fascinated by how people must have survived, and it dawned on me that these amazing stories could really help to connect people in a personal and tangible way to climate change, which for many remains an abstract and distant concept. The reality is that we only act on the things we care about, and we often need a personal connection to something in order to care. And so, I set out to collect survivor stories and *The Irma Diaries* was born.