

The Deluge

My parents had rented a beach house for the summer. The whole family was there: my mom, my dad, my sister, and me. One Saturday I went down to the boathouse to rent a speedboat, with the plan of taking it over to a small uninhabited island several miles off the coast. I didn't intend to stay the night, but I took my tent and sleeping bag with me, as well as some extra food and water, just in case.

It was a powerful boat. I spent the morning and most of the afternoon racing around the bay before heading out to the open sea to look for the island. The sky was a perfect blue with no clouds. There was no wind, not even a breeze. The ocean was like glass, perfectly still with no waves, not even a ripple. The temperature was warm, but not hot. After I'd pulled out of the bay, I noticed that there was a light breeze in the air. Small ripples had begun to form on the surface of the water. My hair was blowing in the wind. The spray from the water chilled my face. I suddenly felt cold.

I put on my bulky jacket but found that the excessive layers of cloth severely affected my steering ability. The boat was jerking erratically. I didn't pay much attention at first. There were no other boats on the water, at least none that I could see. But as the wind increased, the waves became larger. It was all I could do to keep the boat on course. Strange, since the forecast had predicted mild weather for the entire day.

I considered turning back but with the water being so choppy and conditions rapidly deteriorating, I thought it better to put up on the island for the night, even though I hadn't found it yet. It was late afternoon by then. The sun was still above the horizon but the sky was darkening fast. I figured I had about an hour more of daylight. If I were going to stay on the island, I'd need to set up camp and cook some supper, preferably before nightfall. I opened up the throttle to full speed.

I'd checked the map beforehand and calculated exactly where the island should be. After traveling some distance, however, I realized that I must have gone past it. Apparently I'd headed too far north. It was getting late. The sky was becoming darker by the minute. The wind was picking up. I checked my compass and changed course towards the southwest. Even if I'd missed it on my first attempt, the island couldn't be that far away.

The wind was becoming fiercer. Storm clouds were beginning to form on the eastern horizon. They were moving towards the shore but still some distance from me. Since there weren't any lights on the boat, it was crucial for me to get the island before it was too dark for me to see or be seen. I needed to set up my tent while it was still light. That would be my first priority once I reached the island. Supper would have to wait or be forgotten altogether.

The waves were gradually turning into sizeable breakers. The boat was twisting and turning in all directions, making it difficult for me to stay the course. My steering was still impeded by my jacket but I was too cold to take it off.

I turned on the portable shortwave to get an updated weather advisory but there was too much static. Leaving one hand on the wheel, I attempted to adjust the tuning with my other hand. The tossing of the boat yanked my hand spasmodically over the knob. Since I couldn't steer at all with just one hand, I cut back the throttle to idle and waited for the boat to stop. Although the boat was still rocking violently, I directed all of my attention to the radio. Water was sloshing into the boat. I was getting drenched. My jacket was waterlogged. I felt cold water on my skin.

I spun the dial from one end to the other. I could barely see because of the darkness. Finally I managed to set the dial to the right band. The signal was weak. What little I could hear took me completely by surprise: "...clear and calm for the rest of the afternoon and throughout the evening..." Just then an enormous torrent of water splashed directly over the radio, leaving it sizzling on the seat beside me.

"Liar!" I cursed at the now useless machine. The water had ruined it. I picked up the radio and dashed it behind me into the sea. Then I opened throttle again and headed in the direction of where I thought the island was. I looked behind me. The wake of the boat couldn't be seen for the waves. After heading straight, or as straight as I could, for a fair amount of time, I realized that I must have overshot the island a second time. I spun the boat around and headed northeast again on a slightly altered course.

"I must find that island," I murmured to myself. If I didn't find a haven soon, I would be crushed. My little craft was no match for a storm such as this. I couldn't see more than about ten feet ahead. I suddenly realized that if the island were indeed in front of me, I wouldn't be able to see it in time to avoid crashing into it. I cut back the throttle again and looked all around for a glimpse of the island.

I was still puzzled by the radio broadcast. How could the coast be enjoying "clear and mild"

weather when things were so violent less than ten miles away? Perhaps the storm was running parallel to the coast. But no, the wind was clearly blowing westward toward land.

A decision needed to be made. It seemed highly unlikely that I would be able to find the island in the storm, especially since I'd already missed it twice. The rain was falling in pellets. In any case, I wasn't sure now that going to the island was my best option. The storm was going to be a rough one and the island might be not be the best place to find a safe harbor.

I decided to head west back towards shore. But before I'd gotten the boat turned around, I heard a desperate scream for help in the distance. Already in a state of panic, I was determined to move on toward the coast. But a sense of duty overcame me. I maneuvered my boat in the direction of the scream, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of the screamer. I heard one or two more cries and adjusted my course accordingly.

Suddenly from out of the mist sprang the sight of a wrecked fishing boat. My eyes immediately focused on the hand of a man clasping onto a splintered section of the ship, his head submerged beneath the water. I quickly turned the boat in his direction but before I could reach him, a wave crested over him and wrenched loose his hand.

Setting the throttle to idle, I stripped off my bulky jacket and jumped into the water. I swam over to where I had seen the man disappear but realized that the water had swept him a little to my right. I could see his hand thrashing above the surface of the water. I changed course and reached out for the flailing hand. But before I could grab it, it disappeared beneath the waves.

I frantically groped this way and that under the water but could not find the man. There were no further cries. The ocean was silent except for the deafening noise of the storm. After several desperate minutes of hoping that the man would surface, I reluctantly gave him up for lost.

The terror of the situation suddenly dawned on me. My own boat was bobbing violently on the water and if I didn't get back to it quickly, I would suffer the same fate as the man I had failed to rescue. Fortunately the waves were pushing the boat closer to rather than further from me. I lost no time clambering over the side and back into the boat. The floor was starting to flood.

The engine had died. I tried starting it several times, but to no avail. After letting out the choke, she finally fired. As I pulled away from the wrecked fishing boat, my own boat was sluggish. Something had apparently gotten tangled up in the propeller and was being dragged along behind it. I checked behind the stern but could see nothing.

The boat plowed slowly through the waves. Soon enough I was far away from the wreckage of the fishing boat, heading due west toward the coast. After the incident with the drowning man, my own safety was foremost in my mind. But I also felt that I should notify the authorities, not only about the lost man but also about the perilous conditions at sea. The storm was assuredly heading towards land. It was no longer a storm, in fact, but a hurricane. Great walls of waves chased me as I steered my boat towards the shore. If only it could go faster!

People with houses on the bay needed to be warned to be sure. But I was also worried about my mom and dad and sister. My first duty was to help them get away. The bungalow we were staying in was located on a beach some distance from the boathouse. I would go to the cottage first to get my family.

But then I reconsidered. There was no telephone in our beach house. If the authorities were truly oblivious of the severity of the storm, it was imperative to contact them immediately. I knew there was a pay phone in the boathouse. If I acted quickly enough, everyone living along the coast could be evacuated and saved. I had to inform the authorities first. After that I would go for my parents.

Despite the slow speed of my boat, I had miraculously managed to outrun the storm. By the time I'd reached the bay, the sky had cleared somewhat and the waves were greatly diminished. On the far horizon an anemic sun was about to set. Behind me, though, the storm or hurricane or whatever it was, was fast approaching. There wasn't much time left.

I headed for the harbor where the boathouse was located. When I arrived, I noticed that the water had risen considerably. Water was lapping over the boards of the pier as I docked my boat.

I dashed to the boathouse. It was deserted. The door was firmly locked. Picking up a rock, I hurled it at the large glass window in front. The rock crashed through the window, but the hole it made was too small for me to pass through. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that the storm was now at the mouth of the bay. My eyes fell on a piece of driftwood nearby, which was just what I needed.

I battered in the window with the driftwood and cautiously crawled between the jagged edges of glass. My first foot inside the window hit a sharp piece of glass. I yelped in pain. The glass had firmly

lodged itself in the ball of my foot. Blood was seeping out of my shoe. Gingerly I plucked the glass out of my foot and limped over to the telephone. Somewhere a radio was playing. "Clear and mild for the rest of the afternoon and throughout the evening" it repeated over and over like a broken record.

It took me several seconds to pull a coin from my water-soaked wallet and insert it into the pay phone. I looked out the broken window. The storm had entered the bay, which was quickly becoming a cauldron of waves.

Since I didn't know the number, I hadn't needed the coin anyway. I dialed the operator instead and asked her to connect me to the coastal patrol.

"It's an emergency!" I cried.

"Just a moment, please," she said politely.

The phone rang about fifteen times before anyone answered. Then I heard a man's voice at the other end of the line.

"Coastal Patrol," the man said. "May I help you?"

"The storm!" I shouted. "It's coming! It's already reached the bay!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The storm!" I repeated. "Haven't you seen it?"

"No," the officer replied. "We have absolutely no information about a storm anywhere close to here."

"But I've been out in my boat and seen it myself. There's a terrible storm out there. It might be a hurricane. It's almost reached land!"

The officer laughed. "Listen, kid. If you'd been out in a hurricane, you wouldn't be talking to me right now. You'd be dead."

"But officer!" I exclaimed. "Less than an hour ago I saw a wrecked fishing boat about ten miles off the coast, some place near the island. One man has already drowned. There may be others."

"We've had no reports about a wrecked fishing boat and no signs of a storm. The radar shows favorable weather conditions for a hundred miles all around. If this is some kind of a—"

"Just look out your window!" I shrieked.

"Look," the officer said haughtily. "I'm sitting in a lighthouse right now with windows on all sides and a 360-degree view. The skies are clear in all directions. The sun has just set in the west. The sky is gray but cloudless in the east. There is no storm anywhere in view."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, sir. Good day."

There was a click and then the line went dead.

The whole area needs to be evacuated, I thought, and I can't even convince the authorities that a storm is coming! I quickly crawled back out of the broken window and sprinted as swiftly as my injured foot would permit to where my boat was tied. Water completely covered the pier.

The storm had arrived in full force. My boat was tossing up and down again furiously. I tried to start the engine but again it wouldn't turn. I went aft to check the propeller and saw something in the water behind the boat. It was the body of a man, floating face down. The sleeve of his jacket was tangled in the propeller. I disentangled the jacket and watched the body sink slowly into the deep.

There was no time to lose, however. I tried starting the engine again. It fired quickly this time. Soon I was racing across the bay to our beach house. I needed to get to my parents and sister as quickly as possible. There was a river which flowed into the bay just a mile from the cottage. My plan was to pick everyone up and then go upriver as far as I could. Once out of danger we could land and find shelter.

My boat was rocking violently now and the darkness was closing in fast. It had started raining hard again. My skin was wrinkled. I glanced at the shore and noticed that the water was slowly creeping up over the land, submerging the small trees and shrubs on the coastline.

It felt as if a small sliver of glass was still stuck in my foot, which was aching terribly. The pain was dull and throbbing. But the beach house was now in sight. The water was halfway up the sandy beach. As I neared the shoreline I noticed two figures climbing the ledges above the cottage. Getting closer I saw that they were my mother and sister. When I was within shouting distance I called out to them. My sister turned abruptly and yelled back, "We know! *We know!*"

When I had almost reached the shore, I turned off the engine and let the waves carry the boat to the rapidly receding beach. I jumped out of the boat and tied it to the trunk of a half-submerged tree. Scrambling up the rocks behind the beach house, I was surprised to see that my mother and sister

hadn't waited for me but were continuing to climb up the cliff.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Let me catch up with you!"

The two figures paused for a moment, clinging to the side of a huge boulder. In a minute I had joined them, ignoring the pain in my wounded foot.

"Come with me quickly," I implored. "We must escape, while there's still time."

"There is no more time," my mother replied. "And no hope for escape."

Her voice was simultaneously filled with conviction and resignation.

"Of course there's still time!" I said. "The hurricane won't be—"

"It's *not* a hurricane," my mother trembled. "It's.... It's...." Her voice trailed off in a stammer.

My eyes were quickly surveying the ledges to see if they offered a feasible escape. They looked forbidding. High above a dark figure which I hadn't noticed before was making slow but determined progress up the cliff. I recognized the figure as my father.

"Dad!" I cried. "Wait! Please wait!"

Our eyes met. His face was completely blank.

"Yes, father," my sister wailed. "Don't leave us here alone!"

He stared at us impassively, then turned and continued climbing. He clawed his way over a rock then disappeared without a trace.

"Listen," I said, turning my eyes back to my mother and sister. "I have a plan. We can climb back down the cliff and get into my boat. It will be difficult, I know, but not impossible. Then we'll head inland up the river. We're sure to find shelter somewhere."

"Your intentions are good," my mother said, her eyes filling up with tears. "But it's really no use. We are doomed, all of us."

I looked at her and then back to the bay. A few minutes more and escape would be impossible. The water was rising at an alarming rate. The beach had disappeared completely. The cottage was already flooding. My boat, still tied to the tree, was being pulled down into the water.

"We're not doomed yet," I insisted. "We still have a chance. But we're going to miss it if we continue to bicker like this."

"It's no use, I tell you. It's no use!" wept my mother.

I thought about taking the two of them by force but realized that it would be impossible to get them into the boat without their cooperation.

"There's only one thing we can do," my mother said. "We must pray."

"Mother," I pleaded. "This is no time for prayers. We need to get away from here as quickly as possible!"

"No," she said softly but resolutely. "We must pray."

My mother and sister both bowed their heads in prayer. I was about to join them out of respect for my mother when I realized how futile it all was.

Leaving them there alone by the boulder, I stumbled back down the cliff to the crashing waves. The rope holding the boat to the tree was taut, forcing me to reach far down under the water to untie it. The boat bounced free. I hopped into it. Just before starting the engine, I could hear my mother say, "Our father in heaven, deliver us from evil."

I turned my head to see my mother and sister one last time before pointing the boat in the direction of the river. I knew that my mother was right. There was no escape, no safe haven. But I never looked back.