



Lady Isabel, Commandant

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It's cool in here, well lit, and there's ice in the freezer. The telephone, yeah, there's a dial tone...and my Internet home page is even active. There are no holes in the roof, or any structural damage to the facility at all for that matter. Nearly completely unaffected, this brick Jeffersonian facility I call an office. That's certainly not the case for a large percentage of the region that is bouncing back like a flat tennis ball from the worst destruction owed a single storm most any local can recall. So I login to my online communication class web page to see what I've missed. You see, days have passed, and I must be falling behind by now. No? How compassionate my instructor who is only inviting us to reach out to one another and comfort each other with shared stories of our vexations in the face of Isabel. And so I post...

Being native to Hampton Roads, having endured many hurricanes and even more false alarms, I'm one who's reluctant to jump at every potential storm. However, during the fall of 2003, Isabel caught my attention as she lurked off the southeast with her encumbering size and strength. Heeding the warnings this time, I put aside my stubborn local mentality and actually made an effort of preparation for the coming of this category five hurricane. "This one I'd better not ignore," I thought as it headed directly toward our coastline region. So by Wednesday, I had secured all loose articles in my yard, including the five-foot cactus that was sunbathing on the patio. I carefully boarded the windows facing east, particularly those that suffered damage from Bonnie years prior. I thinned my grape vine around its trellis to reduce resistance and pruned the limbs of my peach tree that were within reach of the cable lines. A little tape on the remaining windows and all that was left to do outside was hope for integrity in the new roof I installed in June.

By Wednesday afternoon, I had completed rummaging through sparsely stocked shelves for overpriced water, canned foods (which I'd probably never eat), ice, candles, batteries, and some supplies to assist my Grandmother's preparation. Closely monitoring Isabel's progression, I began to feel a sense of excitement. Was I being sadistic with my eager

anticipation? I really like storms, but deep down I knew the potential for resultant hardships. I welcomed my sister's family that evening as they pulled in from North Carolina to take shelter from their even more endangered location. We spent the night predicting, speculating, and monitoring the movement of Isabel after a late walk on the bay, feeling the awesome winds from atop the planks of the Harrison's Pier in Ocean View. This would be the last time we staged a storm watch from our favorite storm patrol post.

Thursday morning, dawn of Isabel, winds woke me from a slumber earlier than I expected. All was still intact as I rinsed the coffee pot when a sudden silence and still interrupted the ingenuity of man. AARRGH! (As Charlie Brown would say) Eight o'clock a.m. with no power or COFFEE, and the storm was yet to fully reach us! Well, this was no real surprise. After all, we were expecting this visit from our lady...along with all her luggage. So through gusting winds and rain, my girlfriend Andrea and I made a brave and absolutely necessary expedition to her family's house to fill a thermos of liquid beans. There, they were a few hours advantaged and enjoying the early morning with Harry Potter and the aroma of a fresh percolating brew.

As it would be from my perspective, Thursday unfolded as an over-promoted action film that failed to live up to the hype. We spent the day watching treetops swaying fiercely in the wind, all the while with the windows ajar and the doors wide open. My nephew and I ran playfully outside every time we heard a noise, almost hoping we'd see the beast herself riding in on a chariot of flames from hell! After all, we are boys, and that's the kind of stuff we like. To our disappointment, only two small falling trees and a single branch entered our theater. By the time the winds began to settle, we had eaten a multitude of snack foods and a box of once warm fried chicken that I scored that morning from the local grocer during the great coffee run. A victorious game of Monopoly by candlelight had awarded me an excess of \$6000, hotels on all four sides of the board, and rendered me slightly less than popular among the other players.

As the clock would have struck midnight, a calm swept o'er the city and it was time for my storm patrol crew to assess the damage. So my nephew, Andrea, and I all piled into the Vanagon and headed north. To our surprise, the city looked like a war zone. While we sat however powerless, yet comfortably at home, it seemed the rest of the town had been acting frontline against the Isabelian army. The city was as dark as a Halloween graveyard and trees blockaded the roads like corpses of fallen soldiers. Having lost the phones hours ago, it became priority to check on Grandma. With a flashlight as bright as a light saber on

steroids, we busted into her home like Luke Sky Walker, Princess Leah, and Chewy Chewbacca. Relieved that all was well, we continued on our mission to verify the haunting reports heard earlier from a battery-powered clock radio. They say Harrison's Pier has fallen.

Before Grandpa passed, he'd always take us to the beach right after the storms for a treasure hunt because "you never know what'll turn up from the bottom of the bay." But this trip yielded no such treasure. Instead, through the beam of our shared light saber, we discovered our childhood playground turned upside down. We stood slack jawed as there washed upon the shore 100 yards up the bay were the remnants of the very planks that supported us only 24 hours prior. Sadly confirmed were the reports that General Harrison had indeed fallen to the war with the Isabelian army. We paid our respects with reminiscence, collected souvenirs in the way of bolts that once fastened...or...rather failed to hold the pier together, and we trudged our way home in disbelief.

The next morning, I awoke to the buzz of chainsaws and neighbors about assessing their damages. It was a bright and beautiful sunshiny day, contravening the previous. It seemed as though everyone was outside, all gazing in amazement at the carnage left behind. Gratefully, I tended to the minimal task of my own yard, raking only leaves and a few twigs. I was truly blessed, unlike many of whom I would later discover had received harsh crushing blows from fallen trees and projectiles.

My refugees quickly gathered their things that morning to make homeward bound for an uncertain assessment of their own damage. Andrea and I spent the remainder of the day checking up on local family and friends while absorbing the magnitude of Isabel's wrath. Fortunately, the storm was reduced to only a category one or two hurricane by the time she made landfall. It sent chills down our spines to imagine how much worse it would have been had Isabel sustained her power from sea. Never before in our lives here on the Chesapeake Bay have we seen such a storm, we agreed. And never again do we wish to see another.

The following days passed slowly and gruelingly as we endured...and continue to endure six days later, life with no electricity. Sunday was the funeral for all things perishable in my Frigidaire, as my icing efforts had melted away seemingly alongside the region's recipe for it. We sit warmly by candlelight these dark evenings, optimizing on the romantic mood with a glass of Cabernet. But we welcome our shifts at work for the generator powered AC, cold drink, and the almighty PC with Internet access. But as the days number, I can't help but wonder,

where is my power company? I've yet to see a service truck in the neighborhood. Was I THAT late on last month's bill? Did I say something rude to the collector? Perhaps I let that bush get too unruly around the meter. Or maybe I, too, have become a casualty of war? I wonder if I can call upon the aid of the UN.