

Island in the Storm

I am the only resident, except for my Golden Retriever, on a small island off the northern coast of Queensland in Australia. The island, which is about a metre above the high tide mark, has access to the mainland over a bridge. The bridge is about a half-hour drive from my cottage.

We're subjected to plenty of unsettled weather here and so we're no stranger to tropical cyclones, storms, rough seas, and high winds. Hence the reason I named my dog Squall, especially because she was born during a particularly severe thunderstorm. Her poor mum only lasted six months after Squall was born, when she developed septicaemia from a bad cut on the rocks down at the beach.

I've been living here for several years and so I'm used to the weather patterns now. But when I first moved here, it was a different story and I almost didn't live to tell it. I've always kept a journal and I recorded the events of my first severe thunderstorm on the island. Since that time, I've become a bit of a weather freak – probably that's quite normal when you live in a place subjected to the elements – and so I'm able to tell you the story using all the correct weather terminology.

One thing I have had right from the beginning since I began living here is a weather app on my smart phone. If I'd understood then what I know now, I'd have taken proper notice of it, instead of putting myself or Squall at risk.

But if I'd done so, there wouldn't be a story to tell today.

These are my adapted journal entries...



I woke on Saturday morning, hoping for a better day than yesterday. Yesterday the sky at sunrise was a deep fiery red. It was covered with low clouds and the driving rain was persistent. A fresh gale was blowing in gusts. This was not unusual because it was always windy on the island. The waves near the island were about six metres high with streaks prominent.

I checked the electric wall clock: 5.45 am. The amount of light told me it was much later than that. My wristwatch said 11.45 am. 'Mmm,' I thought. 'No power.' Unless there was a miracle, I'd have no phone once my battery went flat, which wouldn't be much longer because I'd forgotten to charge it during the night. I'd also have no Wi-Fi, no internet and no radio. Nil communications until power was restored, whenever that might be. This was frustrating, as the power had been out yesterday as well and was only restored 12 hours ago.

When I switched on my smart phone, I noticed to my alarm that the display read: Cyclone/Hurricane/Typhoon Wind Warning. I had no idea how long the app had been sending me the warning. Because I'd switched off the phone, all the previous notifications had been wiped.

I inserted my hearing aids, as I am practically deaf without them, and immediately heard the howl of the hurricane outside and the rain hammering against the windowpanes. Donning my wet weather gear, I went outside. The wind was blowing the rain almost horizontally and I had to squint in order to see anything through it. I also had to grasp onto the railing to be able to stand upright.

A savvy friend who had also lived in remote locations subjected to wild weather had suggested I install it so that I could at least continue with some limited outdoor functions in severe weather. I was grateful for it now. Squall had come outside as well and she was staying close to me, whimpering against my legs. Dogs have a sixth sense. I wish I'd asked Squall what was coming.



‘Look at that sea,’ I said to her. The ocean surface was completely covered with white foam. I clicked on the windmill icon button on my app, which displayed: Air filled with foam and spray, with low visibility, indicating at least hurricane force winds.

The storm surge had advanced to the very edge of both sides of the road that led off the island, and furthermore, it was advancing with every wave. I knew that the storm surge could be up to six metres.

What I didn’t know was how much time I had before the hurricane approached landfall and the storm surge covered the coastal road. I’d heard about this happening and although I hadn’t experienced it myself, I guessed I might still have about four hours. Nevertheless, I wasn’t about to take any chances. I’d already been too laidback about this weather event.

I ran around the cottage, securing the exterior storm shutters over the windows. Then I sprinted inside, turned down the flue on the wood burner, grabbed my car keys off the hook near the kitchen, and slammed the cottage door shut, hoping my little home would withstand the high winds and driving rain. Opening the driver side car door, I urged Squall in, although in reality she needed very little persuasion. ‘Jump in, girl!’ I shouted above the wind, pushing her into the front passenger seat. She barked and immediately obeyed, while I jumped into the driver’s seat and put the key in the ignition faster than I’d ever done before. Flooring the accelerator, I sped away, increasingly desperate to leave the island while we still had time.

The tyres sprayed up water on both sides of the car and I was concerned about hydroplaning, but I couldn’t let up on the acceleration, even if it meant I lost a little control. I’m a good driver and we had to get out of there fast.



The windscreen wipers were on rapid but even so, I could barely see through the windscreen in the driving squalls. It felt as if the howling wind was going to lift us into the sky at any moment, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz twister, and I was finding it difficult to keep the car straight on the road.

After what seemed like a lifetime, negotiating branches that had fallen across the roadway and frequently and anxiously peering in the rear-vision mirror at the road behind us to make sure the water wasn't approaching us unawares, I finally spotted the bridge through the driving rain. Cautiously approaching, and checking to see that the waters beneath the bridge had not risen to dangerous levels, I drove across it onto higher ground on the opposite side.

There was no other traffic about and I stopped and parked by the roadside for a moment, watching the rain becoming heavier and the wind increasing in strength. I could see the low-lying areas on the island gradually flooding as I watched. We had escaped just in time. The wind was screaming, as if enraged that we had made our getaway safely. In the distance, the sea was white with foam and streaks. Huge waves were crashing onto the beach and not for the first time, I was relieved I'd made the decision to build my cottage a couple of kilometres back from the shore and up on higher ground.

I knew what was coming next – the eye of the storm – and while I can describe it, I sure wasn't going to wait around for it. I knew that the worst thing I could do was to get out of the car, or even stay where I was much longer, while the calm eye passed over, as I would soon be caught off guard by the violent winds in the opposite eye wall.

Turning to Squall, who hadn't stopped whimpering since before we'd left the cottage, and who was now looking at me with eyes that pleaded with me to get her to safety, I stroked her head and said, 'Too right, girl. Let's get out of here, now!'

* * *



Months later, after the close call of nearly being trapped by the cyclone, I was looking forward to a spot of fishing off the island in my little 12-footer.

The weather forecast on the radio indicated that fine weather was ahead. Fine weather is essential for fishing in such a small boat. Waves from a Severe Thunderstorm can easily swamp the boat, as the storm's sustainable wind speed is at least 56 km/h. That's a near Gale-Force wind.

I loaded the gear and headed out across the smooth sea. The fishing grounds were about two hours away, which feels a long way by boat. It was good to arrive.

I was just starting to get a few bites when I noticed that the barograph on my storm buddy app had fallen 1.57 mb in the last hour indicating that a storm may be approaching. Pressure fell 4.7 mb in 3 hours exceeding the The Thunderstorm Rule threshold but there was no sign of storm onset and the pressure continued to display an ongoing steady pressure trend. A Severe Thunderstorm was developing.

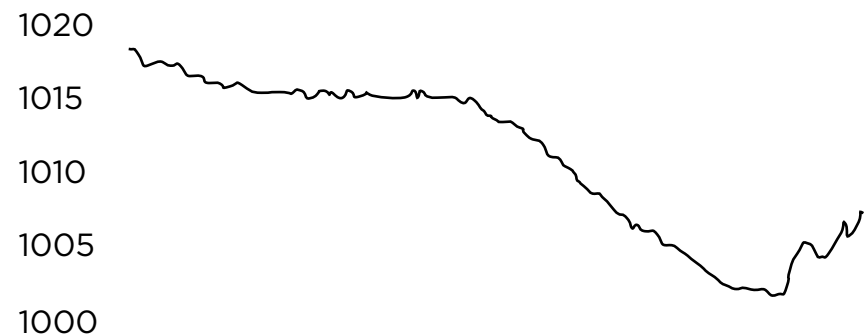


Figure 1: Barograph (mb) for the Severe Thunderstorm*.



According to the Severe Thunderstorm Early Warning Rule I had at least 5 hours (and possibly up to 9 hours) early warning of the onset of a Severe Thunderstorm. I had plenty of time to get back to shore and it took about 2 hours.

I have to thank my smart phone and that little barograph app, Marine Barograph which can be used on land and sea. App is available in Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

Always remember that if The Thunderstorm Rule is applied (*see page 116 in the book 'Predicting Storms – The Adventure Begins'*) and there is no storm onset it means a Severe Thunderstorm is developing.

*Pressure fell to 1002 mb after 7 hours

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