

We Survived Hurricane Ivan On Our Sailboat

by Jeannette Dean

Like an awkward but determined monster child, Ivan mauled and clawed and ripped at our boat, seeking the prize that was within. There was no malevolence, it was just the way things were. We were in his path and he was moving through, doing what came naturally.

We had endured hurricanes at sea, but one feels more vulnerable when tethered in a marina, surrounded by land. The mind conjures visions of boards transformed into missals, corrugated steel sheets slicing through the night sky like vindicating scythes, and unmanned boats becoming tanks programmed to crush all in their paths. Or, would Ivan succeed in tearing open the hull of our 25 year old Bruce Farr sloop, scattering Cowry planks and our remains across the Intracoastal Waterway?

Rauf and I had watched Ivan, studied his moves since his birth. Trouble for true, that was obvious, but we didn't seriously discuss options until he hovered between Cayman and Yucatan, lining up targets. Since returning to the States we have resided at Bear Point, a small marina on the Alabama Gulf Coast, and the South's resort-style charm effectively seduced us both. We lay alongside the western dock, reveling in awesome sunsets and daily dolphin visits. Our vulnerability was obvious, so alternatives were weighed. We could anchor *Ethereal Virtue* in one of the bays favored by locals, tie her stern to a tree and keep a wary eye on the neighbors, praying they moored

wisely. We could leave her there and drive north 100 miles to the country house we had inherited, close to family and out of harm's way. Or, we could move her deeper into the marina, secure a multitude of lines to solid pilings, and stay aboard to adjust lines for Ivan's inevitable surge. The latter was the only choice that felt right to us both. Some admonished, some called us foolish, one said we were junkies for the life-on-the-edge high. A policeman who was moving his boat asked for name and number of our next of kin. Several friends and acquaintances kindly offered houses.

We moved into a slip on Tuesday and commenced the tedious process of securing all that might go flying, layering tarps over all possible deck leaks, and positioning dock lines. Then repositioning them. Thinking, talking and planning filled the time as the television weather channel gave us regular updates. Ivan was predicted to make landfall during daylight hours Thursday somewhere between New Orleans and Panama City, Florida. When it began to look like he had his eye set on the Alabama/Mississippi line, all Orange Beach power was cut off to encourage the reluctant few to heed the island's forced evacuation order. Rumor had it that the three bridges that link Orange Beach to the mainland would be closed at 1800 Wednesday.

So much to do. I watched myself become hyper at times, finding prep details of inflated importance, but there were plenty of ways to channel the energy. Pre-Ivan time has blurred, merged, and I can't honestly say when the wind picked up or the barometer began to drop or the immensity of his power established itself in my mind. The night was incredibly dark. Our solar panels had topped up the batteries but we used our wind-up radio to keep track of Ivan, reserving all power for the small pump in our shallow bilge. We dozed, talked, checked the lines and listened. Monster child began to toy with us. The 30mph-whine was well established and had intensified in tenor to a howl by the time the radio informed us he was heading for Gulf Shores. Hhmmm. We both had water-proof computer cases and water-resistant back-packs ready for travel as a norm,

but I insisted we stuff in a change of clothes at that point.

We snacked, dozed and were cuddled on the starboard settee when a loud thud to the deck drew attention from straining to hear the radio above the cacophony outside. We scrambled out the companionway, expecting the worst. The topping lift had snapped, dumping the aft end of the boom on deck. No real damage. Chastising ourselves (we should have lowered the boom before Ivan arrived), we secured it and moved around to check lines. Midnight was near. Rain and spray meant visibility extended little past the boat, though wind very nearly precluded opening the eyes anyway. Rauf crouched and crawled forward. I followed, clutching stanchions, secure lines, anything solid, but the minute I raised my head and shoulders I was lifted from the deck and thrust backwards. Yeah, definitely over 60mph. Luckily the stanchion my left hand gripped was firmly entrenched. We hadn't considered unpacking our harnesses. Adjusting lines was a physical impossibility at that point, however each seemed to be doing its job to the best of its ability. We crawled below.

By the time we had changed into dry clothes it sounded like we were surrounded by a swarm of jet engines with irregular glitches. *Ethereal Virtue* trembled, vibrated, fought the nylon web that restrained her. The radio confirmed what we knew . . . Ivan had moved ashore and was progressing over us. Rauf raised his arm and switched his watch to barometer mode. We stared. Down to 962 millibar at 0100. Pretty radical. I believe there is a point in extreme situations where one enters animal survival mode. All senses become directed towards whatever the next second may dictate. We hung there. We waited.

They say we had winds over 100mph. I believe them. I never considered going out to check. Sometime during the next few stagnant hours it shifted to blow from the south, then from the West. It was only when the decibel level lessened slightly that I heard the radio commentator say Ivan

was deteriorating and heading on north. Great! But no, wait, did he really say that the eye was positioning itself over a group of small rural communities, one of which was Range? That's a red dirt road, a few houses, a railroad track, thick woods. That's our family and relatives, our house.

External noise lessened but tension did not. We ventured on deck and looked down on the tops of the pilings. On a nearby boat the shredded headsail whipped and snapped, torn from its roller-furling. Rain fell in sheets as we struggled to the foredeck. The wind was shrieking from the west, had separated our port bow line and was attempting to bash our bow into a starboard piling. We managed to drop a line over the port piling with a boat-hook to prevent damage.

By pre-dawn the wind was down to around 60mph and we managed to winch our bow in closer to the dock with the remains of adrenalin-fueled strength. A partially inflated dinghy, along with the dock planks and ropes that ensnared it, was wedged against the hull, banging and scraping. With grunts and curses we worked the flotsam free and it shot across the marina. That task accomplished, we stared at the carnage that surrounded us. Dock store and restaurant stood firm though the water level was halfway up their doors. Fuel pumps were not in sight. Small boats, sections of dock, tree limbs, bags, and various unidentifiable items floated around us. A large ketch pinned three smaller boats to the dock beneath her. A lovely old cabin cruiser remained in her slip but her side had been ripped away. She seemed embarrassed with stacked dishes and folded clothes on display. East and west docks no longer existed, though the pilings and a few trapped boats remained. The good news was that the inner harbor and resident boats appeared intact.

Though there was no real sun, the world had calmed by late afternoon. A friend arrived in his dinghy and helped us retrieve ours. Our cell phones had given no satisfaction so I was trembling with relief and dread by the time I found that the dock store was left unlocked for us (thank you!), and that the phone worked, though all lines were down. I calmed as soon as the

phone was answered. The family were fine though trees were down, part of the roof gone, power off and roads impassable. Yes!

The next few days were spent fielding calls from anxious boat and house owners who couldn't get on the island. So many lost or damaged boats, so much pain. I've been quite awed by the power of nature, the damage in Ivan's wake. Yes, we were lucky. Yes, we would do it again. However, truth be told, it's better in the middle of the ocean.