

## Out Of The Rain

Kathleen J. Stowe

**A**nne waited. She sat hunched over on the top step of the front stoop with the border collie, Mischa, pressed against her left side, the gray-striped alley cat, Dexter, huddled next to her right thigh. A hurricane-force storm was forecast.

“Come in out of the rain,” her husband, Roger, yelled from the back of the house. “Close the goddamned door. I can feel the draft all the way back here.” The wind whipped the awning and rattled the shutters. “Close the fucking door, Anne.”

She stared out at the street as the flood level crept up over the curbs and the sidewalks disappeared. Murky ankle-deep water inched its way toward the porch, and the bed of impatiens, that she’d planted in early June and nurtured through the last two months, now floated.

The rain hung like a curtain of water suspended from the dark clouds. There hadn’t been a break in hours, since well before dawn when Anne first woke to the insistent drumbeat on the skylight. Only in the last minutes, since she moved out on the front porch, had the wind started to accelerate and decelerate, to course and to pulse, to send waves of ripples across the water that obscured the asphalt.

“Come in out of the rain,” her husband yelled again. “Goddamn it, come in out of the rain.”

She ignored the voice and turned to Dexter, crouched next to her with his whiskers quivering. “Dexter,” she said, “do you think we ought to power up the Ark? Make sure it’s ready to launch?” The cat lifted his face to hers and squinted his eyes. Mischa eased away from Anne’s side,

tiptoed down the stairs and paced back and forth at the level of the encroaching water, trotting back toward the porch for reassurance. “Hang in there, girl. It’s going to be all right.”

A pair of mallard ducks—the male green-necked and showy, the female uncompromisingly dull and brown—landed with a flurry of beating wings in the middle of the flooded street. Mischa twitched and tensed, her eyes focused, her body gone rigid, but at the command, “No,” the dog paused and pressed close against Anne. The animals watched, transfixed by the pair of ducks paddling in synchrony up and down the half-block long lake in front of them. Anne rested her steadying hand on Mischa’s neck and watched with them. *Did ducks mate for life, like geese and swans? Had this pair spent years together already? Did they look forward to more years swimming in tandem? In peace? Did they quarrel? Did they . . . ?*

“There’s a goddamned hurricane coming, Anne. I can’t take care of everything by myself. And where the fuck is that dog?”

Mischa pricked her ears, but otherwise didn’t move. Anne pushed herself up from her seat on the cool bricks, stepped back and eased the front door closed against the command of her husband’s voice.

As she clicked the door shut, she heard his voice again. “Anne, who are you talking to? What the hell are you doing out there?” She could hear his irritation. They’d been married twenty-five years and she recognized his every emotion from the tone of his voice. How long had it been since she’d heard him laugh? Was she only imagining a time when she’d giggled uncontrollably as he whispered terrible puns in her ear in the dark of a movie theater? Was he the same young man who had serenaded her from outside her dorm room window?

As she settled back down on the top step, she said, “This really is something, isn’t it, guys? A

hurricane—and we’ve got front row seats.”

It wasn’t only Roger; her neighbors also disapproved. *Too crazy to get out of the rain.* She could imagine that’s what most everyone up and down the block thought about her. Only the two animals trusted that she knew what she was doing. Trusted explicitly that if she was there, they should be too. Trusted that she knew when to seek shelter, when to come in out of the rain.

Anne shook her head; she didn’t plan to sit through an entire Category 3 hurricane. It was Hurricane Franklin. Roger had already told her that. Eventually she’d have to heed his call and herd the animals inside. But for now, the congruence of a pewter sky, the unrelenting downpour, the swirling winds, and the intemperately warm air held her. The placidly swimming ducks seduced Anne with a sense of normalcy and peace. And that was something Anne needed: peace in the middle of a storm. She stretched her neck, rocked her head back and forth, willing the tension that ran straight up from between her shoulder blades into the roots of her hair to disappear. After a final deep breath, Anne wrapped her arm around Mischa and twisted her neck so that the dog could lick her face up one side and down the other.

A sizzle of light, an echo of thunder pulled her back to the scene in front of them. The gray clouds raced across an even grayer backdrop, the dogwoods and crepe myrtles bent and snapped with each increasingly angrier gust, but the unperturbed ducks swam on.

The cell phone clipped to Anne’s belt vibrated, and she snapped it open and studied the screen: a text message. She read the first words, then clicked the phone shut without bothering to read any further. Roger was keeping track, making sure she stayed informed. And she’d let him do that. As long as she could sit and watch.

Just the way everyday, he sat and watched, absorbed by the fifteen-minute updates on *The*

*Weather Channel*. In the last two years, he'd memorized the names of all the female announcers. "Meteorologists," he'd told her. "They're all trained meteorologists." He repeated their names as if they were special friends, and Anne should know them too. "Melanie said this hurricane might be the one that'll do what Hurricane Hazel did in . . ." Anne brewed coffee and fried his eggs and bacon; she tried to listen. "Heather's the one who's the expert on global warming." She tried to pretend interest, tried not to rankle at the obvious sexual insinuation in her husband's voice. "Tracey had that baby no more than three months ago, but she's really trimmed down, looking good with her figure back, though she's still got some tits . . ." His television in front, a computer on the desk to the side, his wheelchair supporting his buttocks. How could she criticize his attempts to connect to the outside world? What right did she have to criticize him at all? He'd asked those questions more than once. And that's what all his friends and all their neighbors asked.

Every morning, Anne placed his breakfast on the table in front of Roger and turned away.

*What right do I have?*

Two years before, late into the evening—when it became clear that Roger wouldn't be home to share pot roast, mashed potatoes and buttered peas—she'd watched television with the sound muted. As if otherwise she might not hear the telephone ring when he called to complain about a flat tire or a dead battery. Four hours passed beyond the time when she would have expected him home even if he'd stopped at two, three, or four bars, even if he'd made a visit to the seedy motel where she'd seen his car parked twice before.

Anne called his cell phone again and again—every ten minutes, then every five, finally every thirty seconds. Drained and numb she took a break, sat and stared at another rerun of *Law and*

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*Order*, then pulled out the yellow pages and began dialing the numbers for the bars whose names she recognized. Most were already closed. Finally a bartender answered and said, “Lady, I don’t get paid to keep track of these guys.”

“I was just trying to find out—”

“If I knew anything I wouldn’t tell you. Not any good for business if I go snitching to the wives about how men spend their evenings. Not any damned good at all.”

“But—”

“Hey, I ain’t seen him for weeks. All right?”

After that, Anne pulled the most recent phone bill out of the kitchen drawer and started dialing unfamiliar phone numbers. She listened to recordings of syrupy sweet voices with names like Tiffany, Candy, Brandy and Sugar, asking the caller to *please, please, please* leave his number and she’d get back and set up a time for . . . whatever. Anne didn’t listen past that part of any of the messages.

One of the numbers she dialed eventually connected her to a real voice. “Roger. Yeah, I know Roger. That douche bag. I haven’t seen him in six weeks. Not since the night that mother fucker left me high and dry to pay the bar bill while he eased out the back with Stella. Yeah, Stella. Stella my goddamned best friend. Stella and Roger. Fucking shit. It was way more than eighty bucks.” Anne turned her head away from the angry laugh on the other end of the line. “Are you the wife?” were the last words she heard before she disconnected.

After that she shuffled through the pages at front of the phone book searching out the number for routine police matters. Something less than 911. She couldn’t be sure it was an emergency. She choked back tears. She couldn’t be sure.

The dispatcher said, “Ma’am, are you positive that he’s really missing?” as if this wasn’t her

first missing husband call of the evening.

“He always comes home. Eventually. I always wait dinner for him.”

Anne described the make, model and color of the car, the license plate number, the usual routes to and from Roger’s place of work, the bars that he frequented and even the location of the motel. The silence on the other end of the line convinced Anne that the dispatcher listened and she had to believe the policewoman wrote it all down.

The first thing that Roger said to Anne in the recovery room after the anesthesiologist pulled the breathing tube out was, “Why the fuck didn’t you come looking for me?” He grabbed for his chest as a spasm of violent coughing interrupted his tirade. Catching his breath, he wheezed, “Why didn’t you bother to get off your ass—just take a five-minute break from *Law and Order*? Why did you wait so long to call the police?”

The nurse visibly flinched at the edge in Roger’s voice.

“Why the fuck did you let me lie there like that? Did you want me to die? Is that what you wanted?” He smeared away his tears with a tissue that the nurse offered, then blew his nose and tossed the tissue on the floor. Anne stooped, picked up the discarded tissue and dropped it in the trash.

She stood at the bedside for the next days, rigid, unable to sit, listening to Roger’s recitation of how he’d been forced, because of the way he was pinned by the crumpled steering wheel, to watch the slow death of the good friend to whom he’d been giving a lift home. A co-worker, a friend, just a friend. What true agony he’d endured, lying so near as the blood pumped from severed vessels in her neck, and he—unable to reach quite far enough, though he tried, *oh how he tried*, to

staunch the flow of blood—witnessed her inevitable death. Anne, watching him relive the pain, handed him more tissues to wipe away more tears. She listened to his story again and again, as he repeated the words of encouragement he'd whispered to his dying friend. As he described how he'd sobbed as she breathed her last. How he'd begged God. How he'd called out her name. He choked on his words. "Her name was Tiffany," he told Anne.

The phone vibrated again. With a sigh, she clicked it open. Another text message from Roger:

*Landfall in 30 minutes.*

She considered cracking the door and calling back into the house that everything was ready. But Roger knew that. He'd been making lists of things for her to do for days. Ever since *The Weather Channel* started hyping this storm a week ago. And she'd been dutifully carrying out his every order, handing him back his lists with each item checked off.

The first day, she bought batteries: A, AA, AAA, and 9-volt. Then flashlights and gallons of drinking water, canned vegetables and soup. She lugged extra bags of dried pet food into the garage and stacked them in the corner.

Late the next afternoon, he insisted she purchase a generator.

She argued against it. "Six hundred dollars. That's an awful lot. I mean what are the odds that we'll really be without electricity for any time at all?" But Anne saw the panic in his eyes as he glanced from the computer to the television screen, as he moved his wheelchair back and forth in the small space he'd occupied since he arrived home a man paralyzed from the waist down. She tried to imagine how it must feel to have his world, day by day, shrink ever smaller. *Oh, Roger, I know you don't think I understand—and maybe I don't.*

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Mischa whined at the door and Anne snapped the leash onto her collar and headed out. Tail high, Dexter trotted into the yard behind Anne and the dog.

Roger's voice trailed them out the door. "Don't you goddamned dare ignore me. I'm telling you we need a generator." He caught his breath and slammed his fist on the table. "That fucking worthless dog."

Mischa scampered ahead of her into the stand of pines behind the house. Dexter kept pace with the two of them. Anne stood in the pines and inhaled the soft scent of Christmas, of holidays, of happy family times. Five minutes. She kept track. Five minutes of peace, then she walked back across the yard and into the kitchen.

As usual, he won. She shook away her doubts about the extravagant expenditure, grabbed her keys, and said, "I'm headed to Home Depot."

It took several hours, trips to three different stores, maneuvering around traffic jams of trucks loading sheets of plywood. She considered whether that would be Roger's next demand. But for the moment she focused on finding a generator. Not a simple task. Her husband was not the only man who'd decided a generator was a necessity.

She didn't buy the cheapest one, but she didn't waste an extra hundred and fifty dollars on a top of the line model. Even after she'd finally made the choice and then waited in line at the checkout, there was more waiting at the loading dock. At home, in the growing dusk, with fireflies blinking their encouragement, she leveraged the bulky box out of the truck and with a dolly from the shed parked it next to the back door. On the deck, the instruction manual in front of her, a flashlight illuminating the scene, Mischa and Dexter observing, she hooked it up and filled the engine with gasoline.

The next morning Roger wheeled over to the sliding glass door, stared out at the generator and without commenting on it, said, “We need to cut down some of those pines before the storm hits. No telling what damage they’ll do.” He rambled on about the weak root structure of pines, about the hassle of cleaning up pine needles, about the uselessness . . .

She said, “No.” They were her pines, her peace. And he knew it. She won that argument, but only because less than two days before a hurricane, the tree surgeons were all booked up. Roger found that out when he made the telephone calls himself.

He’d never wanted children, or animals either. “Fleas and dander,” he’d said. “We’ll never be rid of them.” He’d been talking about dogs and cats at that point. It was only after the accident, when it was clear that his injury would prevent him from ever changing his mind about children, and after his struggle against helplessness began, that he sent her out to the animal shelter. He was rather specific. “Nothing fluffy or frivolous—or cute. I know that’s what you want. Get something useful. You know what I mean.”

She nodded. She knew what he meant. Something useful: exactly what she’d always been to him.

At the shelter, it took less than five minutes for Anne to identify the border collie with the sad deep eyes. The tag on the cage door read “Mischa.”

In the lobby of the animal shelter, Anne encountered a woman carrying a gray-striped cat. The woman dropped the animal on the counter, muttered, “Can’t keep him,” rushed back out the door and jumped into a waiting car.

Anne stared into the cat’s uncomprehending eyes. “I’ll take him,” she said. She christened

him Dexter on the ride home. No reason she could explain, it just seemed the right name.

Roger frowned at them both. He referred to Mischa as “that dog” or that dog modified by an expletive, but he never referred to Dexter at all.

The wind whipped around the corner of the house. Leaves swirled in mini-cyclones. Whole branches tumbled into the water. The noise had increased, whining and screeching like an old fiddle out of tune. Despite the escalating intensity of the sounds, they seemed oddly muffled, as if a roll of insulation encircled Anne’s head. She shook her head against the pressure in her ears. Along with the wind, the volume of rain had increased in the last fifteen minutes and abruptly begun to blow across the yard in horizontal sheets. The porch no longer offered any shelter.

Mischa barked again and Dexter shifted uneasily as an oversized SUV pushed its way along the flooded street. It barreled through, the wake from its progress cresting midway up the front yard and uprooting the last of the flowers. The ducks launched themselves into the air and Mischa howled. Anne reached down and scratched the dog’s ears. Dexter pressed himself flat against the front door.

As the SUV cleared the water, a Honda Accord motored into sight. Anne shook her head, stood up and sloshed down the flooded sidewalk, waving her arms above her head, trying to warn the driver. “Don’t try it; it’s too deep.” The car sputtered and choked, but plowed on through. As she turned back to the porch, already drenched by her exposure to the rain, another car approached.

It was smaller and lower to the ground than the Honda. An even stronger gust bent the younger crepe myrtles horizontal to the ground, white caps formed on the water. Anne wiped away the water streaming into her eyes. She shivered. It was far from cold outside but her clothes were

wet and the wind was wild. Her cell phone beeped again.

Cracking the front door, Anne yelled into the gloom, "I'll be there in a minute." The yowling of the wind obliterated any chance of hearing a response.

She turned back to the street and squinted through the downpour. This time she didn't brave the rain, just stood and watched the foolishness. There were both a driver and a passenger in the car, two adults making this decision. The car moved slowly into the depths of the water, much too slowly. Its only chance at safe passage would have been steady forward momentum.

In less than a minute it was clear to Anne, even through the veil of rain, that the car was adrift. It wobbled, rose slightly on the crest of a wave and floated sideways toward the opposite curb. She began the trek down the sidewalk to offer assistance. Mischa hesitantly followed but Dexter stayed behind.

The cell phone rang and Anne clicked it open. Not a text message this time. She pressed it to her ear.

"Where are—?"

Yelling, in order to be heard over the noise of the storm, Anne interrupted Roger's angry voice. "There's a car stranded in the water out here. I'm going to help."

"That's none of your goddamned business. Anyone stupid enough—"

She closed the phone and jammed it deep in her pocket, grabbed Mischa by the collar and waded out into the street. Mischa pulled away and paddled toward the car. Both the driver's and the passenger's doors opened and two people fought their way out into the water. After exchanging hand signals, Anne and the car's occupants pushed the car up the street clear of the water and at an angle against the curb.

A young woman had been the driver. At first, Anne thought it was the rain that streaked her cheeks, but as she drew closer she could see the expression around the woman's downcast eyes, could feel the way she cowered. The rain washed away her tears.

The man towered over the woman. He grabbed her arm and pried the keys from her hand. She turned away with shoulders slumped in defeat, looked around distractedly at the water, seeking some route of escape. Anne offered a hand, but she shook her head.

Anne turned and watched the young man's futile efforts to restart the car. A flicker of headlights, a pitiful stutter of an engine drowned out by the storm, but after that no further response from the car. He rolled down the window, alternately banged his hands against the steering wheel and pointed accusation at the young woman's back, as he screamed into the wind. Anne couldn't hear the exact words but it wasn't difficult for her to imagine their content.

She stepped closer to the car and pulled out her cell phone. She leaned down to the window. "You could call for a tow, if you wanted."

He scowled at her and batted the phone away. Lifting his hand, he waved toward the young woman. "It's all her fault. I told her what to do. I told her over and over." He climbed out of the car, slammed the door, and turning back to Anne, said, "And you're as much of a fool as her if you think there's a tow truck available anywhere in this pitiful town right now."

Anne winced at the violence in his voice, watching him as he hurled the keys into the water. "The engine's ruined. Flooded out. Do you have any idea what this is going to cost me? Do you?" He glared at Anne until she turned and called for Mischa.

With the dog by her side, Anne approached the woman. "You can come with me if you want."

The young woman shook her head, and before Anne could say anything else, the man snagged her hand. A band of gold glinted on his ring finger and a matching band shone on the woman's hand. He dragged her forward—and she followed with no evidence of a struggle—through the ankle-deep water on the sidewalk. Anne lost sight of the couple at an intersection two blocks away.

Anne opened the front door and ushered the animals into the quiet foyer; the sounds of the storm altered. As she looked back at the street, the ducks returned for another landing. Above, she saw a break in the solid gray sky, the shadowy outline of sun piercing fog.

Mischa shook herself energetically, droplets of water splattering across the hardwood floors. Dexter settled on the hallway rug and began to groom his sodden fur. Anne ignored the water on the floor, the sound of the television from the back room, and her husband's voice. "Anne, is that you, finally? Anne, I need you . . ."

She trudged up the stairs to the second floor, showered and changed into a fresh pair of jeans and an old sweatshirt. She stuffed her toothbrush and clean underwear into a backpack. For several minutes, she stood in the center of the room considering what else she might want, what else she couldn't bear to leave behind.

With her keys in her hand, her backpack on her shoulder, and the dog and cat behind her, she walked into Roger's room. The image on the television screen held his eyes. He pointed at it. "The eye of the storm is passing over us right now." There was a strange excitement in his voice.

"I know, Roger."

He turned to look at her briefly but his eyes drifted back to the television. "The back side of

the storm will be here next. You know what happens then? Sometimes that can be even worse.”

She slipped out the door, detoured around the muddiest parts of the backyard, loaded Mischa and Dexter into the truck, and breathed in the scent of her pines one last time. *I know, Roger. I know about the eye of the storm. I know what comes next.*