

# A SUMP PUMP, A DADDY-LONG-LEGS AND A MOUTH FULL OF GAUZE: HOW JESSICA GRANT SURVIVED HER FIRST HURRICANE.

**M**ay your first hurricane be called something gentle, like Steve. Mine was called Igor. Igor timed his arrival in Newfoundland to coincide with my wisdom-tooth extraction. That was nice of him. Also, I had just returned to sea level after a week in the Rockies. I barely had time to get used to water boiling at its usual rate when the wind picked up (to the order of 150 kilometres per hour) and deprived me of boiling water for four days.

What follows is part hurricane diary, part survival guide. I hope these 10 tips will prove useful to anyone who has not (yet) encountered a weather system with an ungentle name.

**ONE: Avoid oral and maxillofacial surgery on Hurricane Day.** September 21, 2010, 9:30 a.m.

My oral surgeon is rolling up his sleeves while, outside, Igor is rolling up his. The power lines bounce like skipping ropes. There's a daddy-long-legs out there, clinging to the window. You can tell he's trying to keep his legs relaxed. Bend at the knees, bend at the knees.

I ask the surgeon what happens if the power goes out.

We stop the procedure. But don't worry; I will be very quick.

Is quickness what we should be aiming for?

No response. ▷

I should mention the daddy-long-legs is the insect variety, with wings, not the spider variety.

Lie back, please.

I have opted to forgo sedation. I like to be alert. Also, sedation costs \$330 and I don't have insurance.

The power flickers. I am having second thoughts about sedation.

The surgeon reiterates his promise to prescribe me a nice narcotic when we're through.

I lie back and listen to the surgery. This is why they sedate you: the sound of your teeth being uprooted.

Happily, the procedure is indeed very quick. Half an hour and I'm done. The surgeon stuffs my mouth full of gauze. Follow your post-op instructions, he says and thrusts a poorly photocopied paper into my hands.

In the reception area I am given a standing ovation, which I learn is Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for patients who forgo sedation.

“IF YOU HAVE LOST POWER, A SNAKE LIGHT FROM CANADIAN TIRE IS A MUST HAVE. WEAR IT LIKE A SCARF AND REFER TO IT AS YOUR RUBBER BOA.”

**TWO: Protect wildlife.** As I leave the building, a daddy-long-legs goes smack against my cheek. Hey, it's you! I grab him by the leg and we run across the parking lot together. Igor throws us up against a van. We recover. We get in the car. I put my new friend on the passenger seat. We head to the pharmacy to pick up my narcotic. Then we go home. I deposit the daddy-long-legs on the windowsill. At ease, soldier.

**THREE: Your fondue pot is your friend.** I watch *Star Wars* while my sump pump works overtime. *Star Wars* is excellent. I suspect it is not as excellent as it seems, that it's the narcotic watching, not me. I fall asleep and drool half a litre of blood. I wake to the sound of trees being uprooted. I do not hear my sump pump. It seems I am without power. Okay, calm down. I am off the grid. I can't check online to see if I am really without power. Am I really without power?

I head downstairs and fire up the fondue pot. I watch the fondue pot for two hours. Possibly it's the

narcotic watching the pot, not me.

I recall fondly the outsized molar landscape of the Rockies and how fast water boiled. You put water in a pot and, whoa, what's this, it's boiling.

I call my parents. They don't have power either.

My fondue pot is my enemy, I tell them. I can't get water to boil.

Did you put a lid on it?

No. So I do. The water comes to an almost-boil. I have used an entire bottle of fondue fuel to make a single cup of tea. I eat Harvest Crunch for dinner by candlelight.

**FOUR: Accessorize.** Do you have one of those snake lights from Canadian Tire? If you have lost power in a hurricane, this is a must-have. Wear your snake light like a scarf and refer to it as your rubber boa. See, your hands are now free to change your gauze and search for your pet daddy-long-legs, who is MIA.

**FIVE: Avoid rash decisions.** My closest encounter with a hurricane prior to Igor was Floyd in 1999. I was living in Buffalo, and I got a call from Jacksonville, Florida. My friend was calling from a hotel. He'd left his wife. He'd felt backed into a corner. Floyd was beating the crap out of the palm trees. Whoa, I said. This is rash.

Recalling the unhappy consequences of my friend's decision, I resolve not to flee to higher ground and to stay in touch with loved ones. I call my loved one who lives in Ottawa and tell him I love him.

I love you too, he says. How is your mouth?

Right, my mouth.

By the light of my rubber boa, I read my post-op instructions. Apparently the big thing to fear is a dry socket. A dry socket is when a bit of bone sticks out of your gum like a mini Rocky mountain. To avoid a dry socket, you should: a) refrain from smoking, and b) avoid crunchy foods.

Uh-oh.

**SIX: On the other hand, a rash decision can save your car.** True story: A friend of a friend decides to go get a manicure in the middle of Igor. Her husband says, Don't be rash! It's a hurricane! It'll be fine, she says. It's just around the corner. Off she goes in her car. When she gets home, a tree is down across the driveway where the car would have been. Aha! she says to her husband, pointing a perfectly manicured index finger at his chest. Aha!

**SEVEN: Look up the word “triage.”** I wake the next day and the weather has rebooted. It’s sunny, but still no power. I listen to my battery-operated radio. Newfoundland Power plans to spend the morning triaging. Triaging!

My mother comes by with fondue fuel. She says their property suffered no damage. I don’t think I’ve suffered any damage either. The basement seems dry. So do my sockets.

Your sockets, she says.

I had Harvest Crunch for dinner, I tell her. It’s all over for my sockets.

She says they poached salmon last night in their fondue pot.

You poached salmon! I’m coming over for dinner tonight, okay?

Yes, by all means.

She leaves, and I spend the next two hours making coffee. Why are the Newfoundland Power guys out there climbing trees instead of restoring power?

After coffee, I go for a walk. I alt-tab through the neighbourhoods. Trees, power lines, rooftops: down. Cars with their windows imploded.

I am overwhelmed. I wouldn’t know where to begin. I go home and look up the word “triage.”

**EIGHT: The hurricane is your fault.** You may, as you survey the damage around you, begin to feel that the hurricane is your fault. You may feel that it is a vector pointing at your future. This is natural. Have you contributed to global warming? Probably. Will hurricanes become more frequent? Yes. Will they be called Steve? Probably not. You are right, then, to take the weather personally. We have, since time immemorial, believed that bad weather is our fault. We used to think the gods were punishing us. Remember that? We’ve come a long way. But actually, not so far.

**NINE: Help others, especially if you own a chainsaw.** Look, there is nothing you could have done to

stop Igor. You can’t control the weather. But you can go out and use your chainsaw to great effect now that the hurricane is over. You can cut up all your neighbour’s fallen trees before he even asks you to!

Or, if you don’t own a chainsaw, you can do your part by rushing up to Newfoundland Power workers and offering advice on how to triage. They will love this. They will tell you that your heart’s in the right place but go on now, go home out of it. Git.

**TEN: The hurricane is not your fault.** On the radio I hear that Igor has killed a man on Random Island. He went to check on a neighbour’s house and was swept out to sea.

It is hard not to feel that the word “random” is a vector pointing at a truth about this man’s death.

I realize that I have been absorbed in my own private hurricane called Ego. Hurricanes don’t really have names. Victims have names.

Igor acted randomly, but there is nothing random about the way Newfoundland Power workers triaged the untriageable, restoring power to an island that, post-Igor, saw 50,000 residents without electricity. There is nothing random about the way Newfoundlanders wielded their benevolent chainsaws. Or the way the Canadian military showed up to rebuild bridges and roads, which we heartily wish they would do more of in the future.

We lost power, but we were not powerless.

Three days after Igor, I found my pet daddy-long-legs testing his wings against the screen door. We made meaningful and prolonged eye contact. It may have been the narcotic making eye contact. We shook hands. Then I opened the door and let him go. □

*Jessica Grant is the author of Come, Thou Tortoise, winner of the 2010 Amazon.ca First Novel Award.*