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## Hurricane Sandy Diary



Day 1. I'm scared. The house is really dark. The phone no longer works. We light candles and I have a solar lamp if we need it. This is the second storm like this in a year. It's just my daughter and me. I'm texting my friends and family in California and they give me the news. I worry about the nuclear power plants along the east coast. Will their generators hold out? What about flooding? All through the night, the wind rages and we have no idea what's happening, where the storm is now. I hear more crashing outside. Earlier, I was saying my last words to my cousin in Brooklyn on the phone, and there was a loud buzzing sound and a huge flash of light; that's when the power went out. A tree fell across a power line and the sky lit up. No fire as

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far as I can tell from my windows. More texts from friends about Oyster Creek and Indian Point. My friend Stephen texts me from California and says it's the widest storm in history and we are at the center. I imagine a white swirl covering us. I wish there were more people in this house. How many days will we be without power? It could be a long time. Last time, it was 12 days. What if it's longer? How cold will we be? I filled my car with gas today and the gas station was so busy I backed into something and broke my tail light. We can leave, maybe, if we need to? Where would we go? How far can one tank of gas take us? Long Island makes me feel claustrophobic. I hate when they close the bridges. I feel so stuck here.

Days 2–4. It's very cold in the house. Colder and colder and quiet. Nobody comes by except one friend. He inspects the house and says we are safe. We walk around the outside. It's such a mess. Debris everywhere. The air smells weird and damp. The house smells damp. We take cold showers. It's too cold to wash our hair. We drive to a nearby store and see a hair salon that says, "Hot water. Free hair washing." The man washes our hair. The warm water on my head feels so wonderful. I'm tired of cold food. We read under the covers. My fireplace is useless. It doesn't make real heat—not enough to make a difference. I don't want to use the gas in my car, so we stay home and the roads are covered with trees and wires. No sign of LIPA. New York officials seem to have abandoned the suburbs. I miss hot coffee.

Day 5. I dreamt last night about my three birds—a cockatiel and two parrots—creatures from other lands, displaced and domesticated to live in cages in artificially constructed human-made environments.

Two of these birds died over the past two years. In my dream, we are in my garage. The birdcage and the garage door are open. It's a dangerous combination. Only one bird (the living one), a bright yellow cockatiel, perches in an open cage. I fear he will fly out and away—into the cold and die. Just then, my daughter runs past and opens and runs through a door that leads into the house. The cockatiel (still living) flies after my daughter and into safety. Relief. I turn back to the cage and see the other two birds, who, in "waking life," are dead. They perch on top of the open cage. They don't fly away. Elated, I call out to my ex-husband: "They are here, they are here." I go to the parrots—one bright green, and the other orange and yellow like the sun, and carry them back into the house, into safety.

Things are as they used to be. Before Sandy. Way before Sandy.

I wake up in the very early morning confused. Where am I? We are not home, my ex-husband is not with us, and the two birds I just carried into safety are dead.

It's five days post-Sandy.

Yes, as of last night, since we first moved to our friends' house (their electricity was restored, and ours was not), we have a warm place to stay. I am grateful for the kindness of friends and warm place to sleep, but the world still feels scary and unpredictable.

We hear and see horror stories about homes, people, and cars washed away; about fires, floods, and trees falling and crushing houses, cars, and human beings. Houses around mine have been crushed. Down the block from my house, there is a river where there used to be a road. Electrical wires dangle everywhere. Supermarket shelves are empty. Gas is scarce and there are long lines and sometimes guns. Communication is so difficult and information hard to gather if you don't have power. We communicate via text and charge the phone in the car. Support from the outside world is not there. There are deaths and suffering. Travel is dangerous and impossible in many locations. Getting off Long Island is treacherous. The weather grows colder by the day, and a Nor'easter is on its way. Schools are closed. There is no sign of when things will return to normal. Nobody knows.

Life imitates art. Life imitates scientific predictions. We've been warned for years.

This isn't just one fluke hurricane. It's called climate change. I heard Heidi Cullen speak at my university less than a year ago about the wild weather patterns and tragedies to come. She said "every other year." This is two years in a row. I show the films *Earth 2100* and *Everything's Cool* in my classroom, and teach postapocalyptic books like *Into the Forest*, *Year of the Flood*, and *Parable of the Sower*.

I feel like I'm inside the pages of these books.

They say everything changes. Everything. Now the weather is changing. It's eerie. The air feels strange. I cannot find words to describe it. Perhaps we'll need new words for weird weather, just the way the Eskimos have many words for snow. Will they lose these words when the snow vanishes? These thoughts make me sad.

In Buddhism, they talk about "impermanence." Nothing lasts forever, everything changes moment to moment, and it is our attachment to things remaining the same, or operating as we think they should, that makes us unhappy. It's how we deal with change, or loss, that defines our experience of life. Clinging to a particular outcome results in attachment. Attachment results in all kinds of problems and pain. By contrast, if we expect and accept change and loss—"impermanence"—we can be happy, peaceful, and calm.

This includes death, divorce, pets flying away or being devoured by predators.

It includes climate change. How do I accept this? How?

I find it difficult to accept what is happening to our earth. The sight of huge and majestic fallen trees makes me weep. These creatures are upended everywhere. Wild black birds come to perch on them, visiting their dying friends.

Thoreau said the church bells should toll when a tree is cut down. I hear many bells in my head and heart right now.

We are an island in mourning.



Day 6. We are still at our friends' house. No news. It's cold outside. No sign of any trucks cutting down the fallen trees that block the roads, no fixing of fallen power lines. Are they coming? When? Today, we spent hours at a little café nearby where there was Internet. Small tables were packed with laptops and coffee cups. There is nowhere to go. I don't want to use up our tank of gas. I don't know if we can fill up the car again once we do. I hate gas. I hate what it's done to the planet, but here we are in the suburbs with no other viable way to get around. Buying food is a problem. The store nearby has no food. Trader Joe's, where I normally shop, is too far and I don't want to burn extra gas, and everyone says stay close. My students on campus have electricity and Internet. I have not been teaching. I cannot get to campus without burning gas and there are no classes. I live an hour away.

My daughter doesn't want to stay at our friends' house anymore. She wants her privacy. We're sleeping in the living room. She's bored. They keep the heat up very high and it's too hot. I say I prefer hot to cold, and she says she doesn't mind the cold. The bird, the cockatiel, would die in our home.

I like making dinner with our hosts and talking at night together. It's quiet. There are no cars on the streets. I like to watch the horses across the way. I like that about this house, they are across from a barn. Remnants of the old Long Island. Before development, this was horse country, trails everywhere. That's all gone now. Maybe it will all come back one day, like the Howard Kunstler novel, *World Made by Hand*. What would they eat? I'd like to get on the back of one of those horses. I won't.

Day 7. Still at our friends' house. We don't want to waste gas, but I drive home to see if there have been any changes. Maybe the lights are on? Maybe the phones work. I miss my bed. Everything is the same. A tree remains crashed into my neighbor's house. Other fallen trees have not been moved. The river down the street has drained. I text my cousin in the city. He says lower Manhattan is terribly flooded. This still feels like science fiction.

Day 8. Still at our friends' house. My daughter is antsy to go home. My friends are very generous and allow my daughter to invite another teenager to sleep over.

For me, the destruction of the planet, our human disconnection from the natural world, feel linked to my familial and human communal dis/connections.

Some days, I feel okay with being a single mom and an orphan—a two-person family, mother and child. Some days, I am at peace with going it on my own. Other days—in the middle of a wild hurricane, for example, when the wind is howling, and the trees crash all around me—the worst fears erupt in my mind. In those moments, I long for an imaginary muscular dude, like my Dad, to save the day. A guy with an ax and good survival skills. I imagine a big family sitting around the fire together, six kids, other adults, preparing for the storm and caring for one another.

I miss my Dad. Or, some guy who is capable like my Dad was. He was the old generation Boy Scout type. He fixed things. I was a Girl Scout. I learned nothing useful except how to sell cookies door to door. Oh, I did learn to sew an apron and a headscarf. Sewing won't help me much now.

What kind of ecofeminist does this make me? Wanting a fix-it guy to save me? Shouldn't I be happy wielding my ax alone? I don't actually have an ax. That's a metaphor.

I feel pathetic. I would not survive very long if/when the lights stayed off, and this may happen permanently, and it certainly will happen like this more and more. Maybe the day will come, when nothing gets turned back on? I'd better learn some skills fast and get myself into a sustainable community. Right now, we're sitting ducks. Waiting for someone to save us. There is no *someone*.

That community thing. Utopia. That's how I feel on this cold dark night as I write this—wondering what's going on in the world and how can I get off this island without running out of gas before I get someplace safe? Someplace safe? Where would that be?

It's a fantasy. Maybe I'd want to run from my community members after living with them in close quarters after a year. I lived in a hippie artist co-op in Soho in the 1980s. There were fights. One co-op member deliberately set the building on fire.

Sometimes, it does work, though. Look at Findhorn. Look at the many sustainable communities springing up around the world. I lived in such a community as a child in North Carolina. I spent time in a kibbutz. I loved them both.

We really do need each other. I realize it with Sandy now more than ever.

If people were truly connected, how could we poison ourselves and the earth? How could we doubt global warming and not do something about it?

How could we leave each other to die?



Day 10. After the Nor-Easter. I drive to the university to teach my classes.

We sit in a circle and I ask my students how they survived the storm. Their faces tell the story. They look years older than they did a week ago—at our last meeting before the storm.

"It's not over," says Claire. "And what bothers me is that most students and people just care about themselves. Is my light on? Do I have gas in my car? Do I have to wait on a long line?"

One student, Melanie, tells a long story about several incomprehensible events. Her grandfather, who uses an oxygen tank, was told by LIPA not to worry, they'd get him power within a few hours. But they didn't and he almost died. Two houses belonging to her family members blew up—exploded. A huge boat washed up in front of her

house (that is not on water). Neighborhoods have been destroyed and will never be visible again—they were washed away forever.

Another student, Kimberly, tells of her job in a nursing home that lost power and was still unheated as of yesterday. During this time, five elderly residents died. Perhaps it was from the cold—Kimberly couldn't say for sure. But she thought it was likely. "The saddest thing," she says, "is seeing these freezing and confused old people, bumping along the walls in the dark."

Anna, a chemistry student from Long Beach, who usually approaches things with much calm, opened her mouth to speak and burst into violent sobs. She had no words to share, but wrote to me the next day and sent photographs.

Anna had this to say: "Long Beach has been getting a fair amount of press, not like New York City, but they are in the news. The bigger story, I think, comes from Island Park. Island Park is a barrier island right next to Long Beach. It is a smaller community made up mostly of *very poor people*. Long Beach has gotten a lot of aid. Island Park got hit just as bad, has even more infrastructure damage, still has no power AND the people are socioeconomically disadvantaged so they don't even have the resources to help themselves. My mom is a public school teacher in Island Park, and apparently the situation there is really, really bad right now."

Claire, who works as an RA in the dorms, says the stories she's hearing from students about their families are horrifying.

My students understand something is very wrong.

They understand we are at war. It's a battle humans are waging against themselves and all living creatures. It's a class war. It's an environmental war.



Day 11. I am back home. We have power as of three days ago, but 160,000 households in Long Island still don't have electricity and it's getting colder. As soon as we return home, we take in another family, and my house serves as a warming and dinner station for a second.

I take a walk this afternoon with my friend, Bette. She's a German biologist. Bette can build a house, grow an impressive organic garden, or run a full-scale experiment in a world-class biology laboratory.

Bette and her family just got their power back. She has one disabled child. Her house was blocked for days by large trees that crashed across her front yard and driveway. The family couldn't go anywhere by vehicle, but they could walk.

The house across the street from Bette's caught on fire from its generator.

Like the rest of us, she's in distress.

We run into men on the street with "National Grid" on their white helmets and big white trucks. The trucks and men look like life-size toy figures that little boys like to play with.

Bette rails at the men. She tells them about a street near her filled with several old and disabled people: "No one has been by to turn on their power or check on them. When I call LIPA, they don't answer. When I call the town, they tell me to tell the old folks to call LIPA. How can the old or sick folks call anyone when the phones are not working? The lines are down! Cell phones don't work either. It's insane. Those people are going to die in there."

FEMA is barely functioning. LIPA can't keep up, they "were not ready for a major storm," says our local paper, *Newsday*. No kidding.

There appears to have been no governmental planning, no foresight.

Right now it's the survival of the fittest, and I'm not exaggerating.

Day 12. Tomorrow, I'll visit my neighbor, Micky, who came home, last Thursday, to a cold and dark house after her double mastectomy.

I go to my meditation class. Paul, who is sick with cancer and in chemotherapy treatment, sobs through the whole session. After, he apologizes. "I just can't take the cold," he says. "My body can't take it. My apartment is so cold." I feel so bad for him. He says he's moving to his sister's tonight and she has heat. "I'm sorry for crying," he says.

It's so complicated and confusing. There is climate change and climate denial, pollution and cancer and over-consumption. There are not nearly enough (or any, in some cases) governmental environmental regulations or disaster relief precautions in place. Communities and families are socially disconnected, and there is a lack of everyday and basic survival skills—all the things our grandparents used to know how to do, that could get us through a power outage, we've forgotten.



I need to learn canning, heat making, basic repairs, electrical wiring, farming. I can't do anything. I'm an idiot. I can't take care of my daughter, not really. Like so many, I'm reliant on a system that is no longer reliable. I need skills.

Something is wrong with the way I/we live.

Days 13–15. Back to work. We have heat and lights. Will I remember this? The sense of confusion? Will others remember? The air still feels weird. Are the molecules screaming out to me? I met a mother who fled, as I was about to do, and she got stuck in New Jersey, without gas, on the side of the road in the dark of the night with three boys.

This is America. This is suburbia. What's going to happen? We are not prepared.