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## Introduction

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‘For once, will you just listen to me, please,’ Dave Nissen barked through the phone. ‘The bureau has got this all wrong. This cyclone’s not hitting Cooktown, it’s heading right towards Resto. I reckon you have twenty-four hours to get yourself out of there. Oh, and before you leave, make sure my boat’s safe.’

*Shit*, I thought. *This doesn’t sound good*. When Dave Nissen said jump, you asked how high. He was a big Viking of a man who had seen it all – a real bushie, who made his money building power stations. Dave had been a regular visitor to the island since my mate Hippy Richard first brought him up here for some fishing. Some of his values were a bit rough around the edges – I didn’t agree with a few of his opinions on Aboriginal issues – but at heart he was a gentle giant and a humanist, who would do anything for anyone. He also knew practically everyone on the Cape York Peninsula and had the ear of all the key people in Cairns.

This fact was made clear to me on the day I received a phone call minutes after I’d returned from a trip to Restoration Rock,

a small island of granite about one kilometre east of Restoration Island, to load some coral into the boat. There's one particular spot on the rock where it's hard to land, and the coral is pushed up to form gleaming white ledges. I crush up this coral and use it for the floor of the kitchen. It makes it look homey, especially when it's been freshly raked, but it also absorbs any spills before the ants can get to them. Most visitors complain that it's impossible to walk on without thongs, but the soles of my feet are like elephant hide from years of walking barefoot everywhere, so I don't feel a thing. Taking the coral is not strictly legit, but I figure that I wasn't actually removing it from the reef.

'Is that Mr Glasheen? The guy who lives on his own on Restoration Island?' asked a muffled voice on the phone.

'Yes, who's this?' I replied.

'Never mind who this is. I have reason to believe that you have just relocated a quantity of protected coral from an area of national parkland. That is a serious offence. What do you have to say for yourself?' What the hell? How could anyone know that? Was this God calling?

'I've no idea what you're talking about, sir,' I spluttered. Dave couldn't contain himself any longer and burst out laughing.

'It's Nissen, you prick. I'm in the customs office and they are trying out some new drones. These things are amazing. We saw you head over to the rock in the boat. I could tell you weren't fishing, so I reckoned there was only one other reason you'd be at that spot. You'd better watch your step from now on, eh? And put some clothes on, will ya?'

The bastard had done me up like a kipper. But drones – really? That was worse than having CCTV outside your house. I thought I'd escaped Big Brother when I came to live here, and I didn't like the idea of being spied on one little bit. So I later had a word with the bosses at the customs office, and promised them that they would be the first to know if I saw anything dodgy. And plenty of smuggling goes on in these remote parts – drugs, of course, but also rare species of birds and snakes. From then on, I have been their eyes and ears, their man on the ground.

When Dave Nissen said something in earnest, he wasn't bullshitting. And there was more than a hint of alarm in his voice when he called to warn me about Cyclone Ingrid. According to all the news bulletins, she was heading well south of Lockhart River, closer to Cooktown, several hundred kilometres away. But television stations use weather reports from the Bureau of Meteorology, which bases its weather predictions on air pressure. Everyone I know around here uses Buoy Weather, which uses satellite technology to monitor sea levels and marine conditions. And, according to Buoy, Ingrid was making a beeline for Resto. Plus, Dave would not have called me if he wasn't genuinely worried for my safety.

'I've seen some tasty storms here already,' I said. 'I reckon I'll be fine, but I promise I won't take any chances.'

'Look, it's up to you. But don't say I didn't warn you,' he said, frustrated, and hung up.

It was true – there had been some wild weather since I had been living on the island. Winds speeds of 100 kilometres per hour

were not uncommon in the wet season, but they were forecasting wind speeds of around 250 kilometres per hour for Ingrid. It's generally thought to be impossible to stand up at speeds of around 200 kilometres per hour. Maybe I did need to rethink this. I had no doubt that what Dave said was true, I just had to figure out the best course of action. And it wasn't just me and Quassi, my fearless four-legged friend, I had to worry about. As I put down the phone, I looked out the window at my two Japanese wwoofers, Nanako and Asami, weeding the pumpkin patch and jabbering happily away, oblivious to the imminent danger.

Wwoofers – World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms – is a scheme to promote non-monetary cultural experiences for travellers. Most of my wwoofers were backpackers who wanted a unique remote island experience on their travels around Australia. After months on the road, most were ready and willing to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty doing various jobs around the island in exchange for a free stay and food for a couple of weeks. Not these two. The Japanese wwoofers were willing to work; they just weren't willing to get dirty in the process. They arrived with two brand-new suitcases on wheels, which had to be carried everywhere because, strangely enough, the wheels didn't work on sand or rough ground. Then, on their first morning, dressed in perfectly ironed white cotton shirts, they both pulled on pristine white silk gloves. 'For garden,' Nanako beamed. 'Clean.'

'No, no, no,' I said. 'No good. You wear these.' I pulled out two pairs of stinky, heavy-duty rubber gloves and their jaws dropped. Nanako shook her head and pointed to my gloves.

‘No! Very dirty,’ she said, grimacing. Within twenty minutes, their gloves had disintegrated into strips of cloth, so they went back to their suitcases and dug out another pair each. There was a pair for every day of their stay. And a new clean shirt. There was no way that these two would survive a storm, let alone a full-blown cyclone. Even if I was going to stay here with Quassi, I had to move the woofers from the island. By now, the sky was overcast and the wind had picked up. There was no time to lose, although the sea was already very choppy and I didn’t really want to risk a trip to the mainland, especially if I wasn’t sure I would be able to make it back. When in doubt, call the fishos.

The numerous local trawler captains and their crews were regular visitors to Resto. The bay was a beaut of a natural harbour for them to drop anchor for the night, and we often traded company, yarns, fish and grog around the camp fire. That day, the nearest fisho was a Vietnamese bloke called Wye Ng. Ironically, most of the boats had headed north on the basis of the bureau report, before Buoy produced the more accurate update. There was no time to head back south and many were effectively stranded in the area. Their only option was to sail up Lockhart River, drop anchor and lash themselves together to increase their critical mass. No cyclone was going to lift twenty boats out of the water, and the trees on the banks would provide shelter. Once secured, there was little else for them all to do except drink grog – a good old-fashioned hurricane party. Wye was heading for the river when I called him, and we agreed that I would meet him with the girls in the tinny. Now I had to try to explain to them what the hell was going on.

‘See boat. You go boat. Big *whooooosh*,’ I said, pointing to the trees, which were now starting to bend in the wind, and doing my best hurricane impression. The girls looked at me blankly. I staggered around, pretending to fight my way against the wind. I thought it was a pretty good performance, but the girls stared wide-eyed, clearly thinking that their trusted host had lost his marbles. So I hustled them over to their sleeping area, grabbed their bags and led them down to the beach. It had finally dawned on them that something significant was happening. Asami started to sob and was comforted by Nanako, the more confident of the two.

‘Look after them, mate,’ I said to Wye, as the girls climbed nervously onto his boat. ‘Maybe ask the deckies to sleep on one of the other boats. They’ll feel safer without so many blokes around.’

‘You come too, Davo. This look very bad,’ said Wye.

‘I’ll be okay, don’t worry about me and Quassi. I’ll see you tomorrow,’ I said. I’m not sure I even convinced myself. But I had to keep up the pretence, and so I waved cheerily as the dinghy disappeared with the girls, terror in their eyes as the lively sea tossed them around. It was early afternoon, and Dave Nissen had predicted that Ingrid would be calling by early the next morning. The heaviest storms always tend to coincide with high tides, so I had around four hours of daylight left in which to make all the preparations. My first priority was to secure my prized possessions. And that proved to be a mistake.

The aim was to pile up everything in the middle of the house and cover it with a tarpaulin, which I would then secure to the walls. If worst came to worst, and the roof was blown off the

house, these items would stay safe and dry. I had collected plenty of washed-up tarpaulins from around the island in just a few years, but when I'd told myself I was saving them for a rainy day, I wasn't expecting quite this much rain. Outside, the wind had reached a gentle howl and the rain was already relentless. Travelling the sixty metres to and from the storage shed was no fun, so I loaded anything of use – rope, nets, wires – into my wheelbarrow to take back to the house in one trip. Quassi never left my side. This was one smart dog – he sensed my anxiety and stayed close for his own protection, and to reassure me.

At the bottom of the pile, I placed waterproof boxes filled with pictures, books and important documents. If any water did come into the house, those items would remain dry no matter what. Then I stacked tables and chairs on top of the boxes and jammed into the spaces any loose objects that might fly away, like pots and pans and bric-a-brac. Finally, I threw my mattress on the top for extra weight. I covered everything with a huge fishing net and tied that to the walls, just in case the tarpaulin didn't hold, and then added the tarpaulin and secured it in the same way. It looked like a big bonfire, but it was rock-steady; Ingrid would have to be one feisty lady to shift this. I left one chair free to rest in after I finished my preparations, and to take to the old generator shed, where I would sit out the cyclone. The shed door faced the hill, out of the wind, and the trees around the hut provided more cover than the house. My final job was to check for any loose pieces of roofing that might catch the wind and tie them down securely. I worked calmly and efficiently, but hurriedly.

Then the phone stopped me in my tracks. ‘Dave, it’s Gary from the police station. Someone just told me you’re still on the island. We need you and your visitors off there now, mate. The cyclone’s heading right for Lockhart River and the whole town has been evacuated and everyone is spending the night in the station, hospital, church or the town hall. We can’t be responsible for your safety if you stay there,’ he said.

‘I’m responsible for my own safety, not you,’ I replied, quite tetchily. Didn’t they realise that now it would be more dangerous to try and take the boat across to the mainland than to stay put? ‘Anyway, I reckon my shed is the safest place around here. But maybe just check on me when it’s all over, okay?’ I knew the cyclone would likely knock out the phones, and I didn’t want to be stranded here if anything did go awry.

‘Righto! And good luck,’ he said. Did I hear him mutter ‘You’re going to need it’ as he put the phone down?

Stage two of my preparation was to secure the boats. Why the hell had I not done that first? The palm trees were already protesting at the bullying wind, and dead branches were being propelled into the gathering gloom. The older coconuts were loosening in their trees, too, and I had to keep my wits about me to make sure one of these missiles didn’t take me out. I was always careful about standing under trees, even on the calmest of days, for that very reason. Even without the added propulsion of the wind, you would be lucky to survive if one of these bastards dropped on your head from a great height.

There were two boats to secure. The priority was my fibreglass

boat – not only was it the heaviest, but it was also my lifeline. Dragging it to shore was not much of a problem, although lifting the anchor was no easy task as, even in the heart of the sheltered bay, the waves were making it hard to stand in the water. Using a few pipes as rollers, I heaved her up to the high-tide mark, though it was likely the water would rise during the night. First, I secured the prow around one of the biggest trees with a length of good, heavy rope that I had found on one of my scouting missions around the island. Finding rope was always a treat. One time out in the boat, I spotted some of that really strong tiger rope used by fishos, and thought Christmas had come early. I leaned over the side to scoop it out of the water, then had the fright of my life when a beautiful yellow and brown snake darted away.

Even tying my boat to the tree was not enough insurance in these winds, and I spent the best part of an hour frantically filling her with sand to make sure that she didn't flip. It was back-breaking work and, despite the rain, the air was still humid so I lost lots of water through sweat. Exhausted, I was tempted to leave Dave's tinny, which he had left up here for his next fishing trip, and hope for the best. But he was a good mate and had asked me specifically to take care of his boat. The light was fading quickly. I probably had another hour, tops, before total darkness, and I wanted to be back in the house before that. Wading to the boat now was a real struggle, because the tide was coming in and it was almost up to my waist. There was no way I would be able to drag her out of the water and secure her in the time I had. But I *could* remove the motor, which was worth way more than the boat itself.

I climbed aboard just as a big wave crashed in from the side, flicking me back into the water and flipping the boat upside down like a tossed coin. *That was stupid*, I told myself. If the boat had landed on my head, I would have been Ingrid's first fatality. I staggered out of the water, composed myself on the beach for a second and caught my breath, and then braced to battle the headwind back to the house. It must have taken me five minutes to complete that one-hundred-metre stretch, bent into the wind at a forty-five-degree angle to avoid being batted back to the beach, and pausing at each sturdy tree for a breather. The constant sheet of rain was almost blinding, and the screech of the wind through the trees was ear-splitting. In the chaos, I managed to pick out a dark blur as it whizzed by my head. If that coconut had made contact, it would have been like a cannon ball hitting a watermelon. Another close call – and the cyclone front would not even be here for another few hours. Back at the house, I needed rest and slumped into the one remaining chair, with Quassi curled up beneath it.

It must have been a couple of hours before I woke to the sound of the house groaning under the constant pummelling. *Great: everything's still in place as I planned*, I thought, as I turned on the torch. Everything except me and Quassi. We were supposed to be over at the shed, and the short trip was going to be hairy. Quassi wondered what the hell I was doing when I put a makeshift lead around his neck, but I wanted to make sure he wasn't picked up along with the rest of the debris when we ventured outside, and he was too scared to object. Just from the noise, I reckoned the wind speed had picked up another fifty kilometres per hour, but I

thought we could stay on our feet for the fifty metres to the shed. I tied Quassi's rope to my arm so I could pick up the chair. Another stupid mistake. Why hadn't I taken it to the shed earlier? Now, if I held the chair upright, it was going to act like a sail, so with one arm I had to almost wrap it around my stomach and edge along, the back of the chair pointing towards the wind. With my spare arm, I grabbed a bag of sandwiches I'd made earlier, a few bottles of beer and the book I was reading, *For the Term of His Natural Life* – an Aussie classic, but perhaps not the best title if I was looking for good omens.

Those fifty metres were nothing short of terrifying. It felt like, at any moment, I might lose the battle to keep my balance and we would be lifted up and dashed into the first object that obstructed our path. The torch was uncontrollable, so I could barely see where I was going. Then, only about ten metres from the safety of the shed, I completely lost my footing and the chair vanished in an instant. As I carefully picked myself up onto my knees, Quassi, happy to be joined at ground level, vigorously licked my face. Not helpful, mate. Together we half-stumbled, half-dragged ourselves the remaining few metres around the edge of the shed and into safety. The shed complained in a constant, violent rattle, but there was nothing I could do now but sit back and hope. I slumped down onto the concrete floor in the corner and put my arm around Quassi, who whimpered softly. This was going to be a very long, very scary and very uncomfortable night. On the safe side of the shed's stone wall, I tried to take stock of the ferocity we had just survived. My life had been in very real

danger three times within the space of a few hours. But I wasn't wondering whether the shed would hold firm, what devastation I might find in the morning or even if we would survive the night. Instead, I was asking myself one very simple question.

*David Gilronan Glasheen, how the hell did you end up here?*