

From the story "Eyewall" in *Florida*, p. 84-86

It began with the chickens. They were Rhode Island Reds and I'd raised them from chicks. Though I called until my voice gave out, they'd huddled in the darkness under the house, a dim mass faintly pulsing. Fine, you ungrateful turds! I'd said before abandoning them to the storm. I stood in the kitchen at the one window I'd left unboarded and watched the hurricane's bruise spreading in the west. I felt the chickens' fear rising through the floorboards to pass through me like prayers.

We waited. The weatherman on the television repeated the swirl of the hurricane with his body like a valiant but inept mime. All the other creatures of the earth flattened themselves, dug in. I stood in my window watching, a captain at the wheel, as the first gust filled the oaks on the far side of the lake and raced across the water. It shivered my lawn, my garden, sent the unplucked zucchini swinging like church bells. And then the wind smacked the house. Bring it on! I shouted. Or, just maybe, this is another thing in my absurd life that I whispered.

At first, though, little happened. The lake goosebumped; I might have been looking at the sensitive flesh of an enormous lizard. The swing in the oak made larger arcs over the water. The palmettos nodded, accepting the dance.

The wine I had been drinking was very good. I opened another bottle. It had been left in a special cooler in the butler's pantry that had been designed to replicate precisely the earthy damp of the caves under Bourgogne. One bottle cost a year of retirement, or an hour squinting down the barrel of a hurricane.

My neighbor's jeep kicked up hillocks of pale dust on the road. He saw me standing in the window and skidded to a halt. He rolled down his own window and shouted, and his face squared into his neck, which was the warm hue of a brick. But the wind now was so loud that his voice was lost, and I felt a surge of affection for him as he leaned out the window, gesticulating. We'd had a moment a few years back at a Conservation Trust benefit just after my husband left, our fortyish bodies both stuffed into finery. There was the taste of whiskey and the weirdness of his moustache against my teeth. Now I toasted him with my glass, and he shouted so hard he turned purple, and his hunting dog stuck her head out the back window and began to howl. I raised two fingers and calmly gave him a pope's blessing. He bulged, affronted, and rolled up his window. He made a gesture as if wadding up a hunk of paper and tossing it behind his shoulder, and then he pulled away to join the last stragglers pushing north as fast as their engines could strain. The great rag of the storm would wipe them off the road. I'd hear of the way my neighbor's jeep, going a hundred miles per hour, lovingly kissed the concrete riser of an overpass. His dog would land clear over the six lanes in the southbound culvert and dig herself down. When the night passed and the day dawned calm, she'd pull herself to the road and find herself the sole miraculous survivor of a mile-long flesh-and-metal sandwich.

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