

A hummingbird with iridescent green and pink feathers is perched on a thin branch. The background is a dark, stormy sky with rain falling, and the bird is positioned above a body of water. The overall mood is somber and resilient.

Maria Grace

*Rising
Waters*

Hurricane Harvey Memoirs

Praise for Maria Grace

“Grace has quickly become one of my favorite authors of Austen-inspired fiction. Her love of Austen’s characters and the Regency era shine through in all of her novels.” *Diary of an Eccentric*

“Maria Grace is stunning and emotional, and readers will be blown away by the uniqueness of her plot and characterization” *Savvy Wit and Verse*

“Maria Grace has once again brought to her readers a delightful, entertaining and sweetly romantic story while using Austen’s characters as a launching point for the tale.” *Calico Critic*

I believe that this is what Maria Grace does best, blend old and new together to create a story that has the framework of Austen and her characters, but contains enough new and exciting content to keep me turning the pages. ... Grace’s style is not to be missed.. *From the desk of Kimberly Denny-Ryder*

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Hurricane Harvey Memoirs

MARIA GRACE



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Rising Waters
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For information, address
author.MariaGrace@gmail.com

Author's Website: RandomBitsofFaascination.com
Email address: Author.MariaGrace@gmail.com





Dedication

For my husband and sons.
Even in the worst of storms you are there.



CHAPTER 1



Rising Waters

I've been told that (at least parts of) this adventure would make for interesting reading—rather like *Sharknado*, I think, in the vein of disaster-comedies. I've been trying for two weeks now to settle down and actually write it up. But between recovery efforts, trying to get the boys off to start their university schedules, managing the rest of the book launch, and just coping with the stress left over from the storm, putting letters together, much less actual words just wasn't happening. I mean seriously, I could have put my dragon-cat, Minion, (the one with thumbs) on the keyboard and come out with something far more comprehensible that I would have written.

But things are better now (ie: I've had sufficient quantities of chocolate to subdue a major dragon) and as close to normal as they are going to get in my community for quite some time. So now it's time to write again. I think it will take several chapters to tell the whole story. So let me take you

back a few weeks in time and start at the very beginning.

Lesson 1: No matter what you do, always check the weather

I'm generally a very organized and prepared person, to the point that my kids tease me mercilessly over the little things I do to make my life easier, like the way I unload the groceries onto the conveyor at the store. I put them on a specific way so they can get bagged with like things together and they are easier to put away when I get home. Makes sense right? Even the boys know this because they tease me, BUT they appreciate it when it comes time to store all the groceries.

That being said, I have a particular workflow that I lean on when I write. I get the final draft done, contact bloggers to set up a book tour, while that is in the works, do the final edits and send off the proofs to my diligent and ever patient proof-readers. (They really are saints...) While waiting on the proofs, I finish setting up the tour, plan the posts I need to write and gather the research and notes for all of the articles and make my tour spreadsheet. Yes, I said that, a spreadsheet.

Then it's back to compiling the proofs and creating the final draft of the book. At that point, I create an electronic Advanced Reader edition for bloggers and reviewers to have a looky-see at the book before the tour. From that file, I setup the pre-order for the book in advance of the tour.

(Yes, I'm sure you've been dying to know about the exciting secret life of indie writers. I promise it gets more interesting...)

It's at this point that everything went utterly sideways. Totally and completely upside down and sideways.

Late on August 23, I set up the pre-order which then locked me into a timetable determined by Amazon, one that I could not break out of without serious consequences. Lucky me. Never once did I think, "Gee, this would be a good time to turn on the news and check the weather forecast." I should have.

The next morning I woke up to news that Tropical Storm Harvey was now Hurricane Harvey and would hit somewhere between Corpus Christi and Galveston on the 25th, probably as a category 1 storm, possibly a 2.

Back in 2008, Hurricane Ike's eye wall passed directly over our home. It was 'just' a category 2 storm. We were left without power for nearly two weeks after that. Two weeks. And I had a book launch setup for 7 days hence.

Perfect, just perfect.

So, going off past experience, I figured we'd get out power knocked out as soon as it made landfall on Friday morning, just like happened with Ike. I needed to get our final hurricane preparations in place AND accomplish at least two weeks of book launch work in 48 hours.

So what needed to be done? Well, on the hurricane front, we were fairly well prepared. Our area never flooded in the past (yeah, that's another

chapter...) so the official word was to shelter in place. Done that before, we know how to do that. Got an autopilot setting for it, we're good.

Early preps had been done when the season started. Generator had been checked out; had extra propane for the grill; batteries were in good supply as were candles and lamp oil. So all I really needed were basic groceries, to get laundry done and vacuum the house. (When you don't have power for two weeks, you want to start out with all the underwear and socks in the house CLEAN! Ok, I concede, vacuuming though was not a necessity, just a comfort thing for me)

In the back of my mind, I figured we'd end up having at least part of my family--my rather carnivorous family--staying with us at some point because of the generator and the fact we don't flood. (The irony will become clear in the next couple chapters... :() So when I went shopping I got about a week's worth of meat, cooked it all and tucked it into the fridge. It sounds a little odd, but since I could be reasonably sure we could keep the fridge on the generator, I've found that having cooked meals that we only need to heat up is a lot easier on all of us during the stress a hurricane brings.

So, with the kitchen full of various things cooking, middle son--the one who had been at my elbow telling me I was overreacting to the storm news--had job interviews scheduled for Friday and Saturday the downtown canceled for the storm. In light of that, we decided he'd go back to law school the next morning, before the storm was

scheduled to hit, so he could drive in on dry roads. I hated sending him away when I wanted all my chicks under my wings, but it was the right thing.

Lesson Two: There's nothing like a good list

With all of this swirling in my scattered brain, I sat down to format final book. Exactly the sort of detailed fiddly thing I love to do when I don't have two brain cells to rub together. With the help of one of my old check lists, I was able to get through formatting and upload all the formats by midnight. (Note to self, I'm not just a packrat--there's a good reason for keeping old lists after all!)

Thing one done.

Got up early the next morning to start getting book tour stuff ready. So thankful I didn't have to figure out what I was supposed to do. Just jumped on the first line of the spread sheet and cranked through. Granted, I may not have been at my usual peak of warm wittiness (I can hear you snickering, don't think I can't...) but lots of posts were being written as I watched the news of the storm hitting Rockport--leveling Rockport to be more accurate--as it came ashore at a Cat 4, not a Cat 1 storm. All our coastal cities know there's a risk of hurricane damage, but storms just don't spin up from a Cat 1 to a Cat 4 overnight. They just don't.

Except when they do.

Already the storm was doing totally unprecedented things. (I should have recognized the

foreshawoing at work. Bad writer. Bad.)

Then the rains moved up the coast and started
pounding us.

CHAPTER 2



I used to like the sound of rain

For those of you not familiar with tropical weather, like hurricanes, let me give you a quick primer. These unwelcome guests tend to crash the party in a fairly predictable way., considerate creatures that they are. The weather typically comes in band after band of wind and rain, increasing in intensity as you get to the center of the storm, with a few tornadoes thrown in just to keep things interesting, rather like awful party games unwelcome guests insist you must play.

There are two sides to a hurricane, the 'wet' or the 'dirty side' (the one you DON'T want to be on), and the other side. The dirty side gets more rain and higher winds than the other side of the storm. According to NOAA, the right side of the storm is worse because hurricanes rotate counterclockwise, so the "strength of the storm on the dirty side is the hurricane's wind speed plus its forward velocity." We were definitely on Harvey's wrong side. Funsies.

Typically hurricanes will travel 10-20 mph over

land. So once they hit, they continue along their merry way and move on to better digs usually within a day or so, leaving you to clean up from the party.

Except when they don't.

That's where things were predicted to get sticky. Those who knew said Harvey would waltz in and get stuck between two fronts that would stall it in place like a car stuck in traffic with nowhere to go. (Something Houstonians know a great deal about.) But, luckily for us, the winds would die down to tropical storm force by then, so just—JUST—the rains that would be our problem. That's a little like saying your uninvited guest won't knock over the furniture, he'll just pour his drinks all over EVERYTHING. Oh, goody.

Thank heavens for small blessings. Seriously.

So, we started watching the rain gauges.

The rains started mid-afternoon on Friday. By midnight, the gauge nearest us said we'd already had 5 ½ inches.

Lesson 3: It's not a good sign when the news anchor is wearing the same dress for 24 hours.

Road closures, high water and event cancellations topped the news Saturday morning. The weather channel, alternating with the local news became a permanent fixture on whatever tv was closest. I kept my cell phone in my pocket, with texts and calls flying back and forth between fami-

ly members and friends we were keeping tabs on. I updated facebook as often as I could, knowing there is little worse than NOT knowing what is going on. But there wasn't much to say: *It's raining, a lot, but so far, we're safe.*

The rain came in waves. Pounding, pouring rain that would back off and tease you into thinking maybe, just maybe, it would stop. After all, it was pushing twenty-four hours of driving rain. Certainly it had been long enough now. Surely the rain would stop. But no, the next band would come, teasing and unrelenting. The kind of rain where you can barely see the street in front of the house, dark and foreboding.

I used to like rain.

My poor dog alternated hiding under my desk and hiding under my husband's. Poor thing hates thunderstorms.

By midnight, the rain gauges said we'd had thirteen and a smidge inches of rain. Not including yesterday. That was a foot of rain in a day. About eighteen inches since the storm started. I pulled out the ruler. On me, 18 inches hits in the middle of my knees. Just about 1/3 of the year's rainfall in a matter of two days. Hard to wrap my head around.

Even harder, the poor news anchor who was still wearing the same red dress she'd worn the night before was reporting that we were in for AT LEAST another two days of this. After that, there was a fair chance that Harvey might well go back out to sea and return for a repeat performance. (Hurricane Alicia had done something similar in

1983.)

On that note, we did the only thing we could do at that point. We went to bed, phones screaming tornado warnings at regular intervals.

Lesson 4: It's an even worse sign when one of the local stations stops broadcasting news because they're under water.

Between the tornado warnings, it was difficult to sleep. All the hours of relentless rain had altered the sound from something that had once been relaxing and soothing, into one ominous and threatening. It was strange for rain not punctuated with howling winds to sound so menacing, but it did.

Sunday morning began with a flurry of early morning texts. Church service was canceled due to road flooding. The news reveals the same was happening all over the city as the stubborn, swirling masses of clouds pelted us with even more rain. Sometime near midday, Channel 11 news stopped broadcasting. Another channel picked up the news, showing images of the Channel 11 studio filling with rising water.

It's a sobering, even frightening reminder of just how powerful nature is and how little it discriminates in its effects. The news office represented those who were on the forefront of the survival and rescue efforts, providing vital in-

formation—a place that was supposed to be secure from this sort of thing--an eerie omen of what was yet to come.

Shortly after that, we got a call from my dad. They'd lost power and he needed help with the generator. But he wanted to wait several hours to see if the power would come back. Could hubby and son come over around 7?

I got a little impatient at that point and told him absolutely not, it was too close to sun down and no one from my house was going to be out after dark.

What was he thinking? You can't see water on the road clearly after dark, especially if streetlights are out, and it doesn't take much to sweep a car off the road. Seriously, just six inches can stall out a car and twelve can float one. Many of the storm related deaths come from cars crossing water they shouldn't have attempted. With several bayous to cross to get to his house, we weren't going to take chances. Reluctantly, he agreed to accept help earlier in the day.

headthump* *headthump* *headthump

I paced the floor until everyone got back, damp, but safe. I probably should have been writing more book tour material at that time, but it was impossible to think over the sound of the rain anymore. I managed to feed them dinner and went back to watching the news.

The rain gauges were approaching another nine inches. Over twenty eight inches of rain now. For reference, that comes up to just below my hip joint. Over half a year's rain in three days.

Rivers were racing past flood stage to record flood levels. Bayous were well out of their banks, flowing over roads and into neighborhoods. People were being warned not to retreat into their attics to avoid high water unless they had an axe or other tool that would allow them to break through the roof. (That's how many people drowned in NOLA during Katrina.)

High water rescues were taking place all over the city as officials called for volunteers with boats to assist in the efforts. Volunteers from Louisiana, the Cajun Navy, were mobilizing and heading to Houston to assist in rescue effort.

And it wasn't over yet.

We went to bed that night, with more screaming tornado warnings, and no idea that somewhere upstream game changing decisions were being made.

CHAPTER 3



Game Changers

Sometimes you wake up and really do find everything has changed.

Writers are told to avoid clichés. Clichés like: When she awoke that morning everything had changed and nothing would ever be the same again.

In general, that's good advice. Except when that's exactly what happens.

Monday morning was a little different. The rain had let up just a mite—it was more drizzly than anything else. Maybe, just maybe, we were clear of the storm finally. On that note, I grabbed my favorite fuzzy robe and wandered to the front of the house. Maybe a nice cup of coffee and I'd sit down with the news.

Only the cable tv wasn't working. Nor was the internet. And I could see through the front windows that neighbors were gathering on the corner in front of the house. Those were not the faces of people annoyed by lack of internet.

I rushed back to the bedroom and threw on some clothes, mentioning in passing to hubby that something was going on. No sooner than I opened the front door, it was obvious why folks were gathering.

I remember my face went cold and a numbness trickled down from there in sort of that surreal movie-watching sort of feeling when the plot turns and the beginning of the darkest moment is revealed. It's great when you're watching a movie, not so much when you're watching water rising from three separate directions.

We've lived in this house twenty years, through 2-500 year floods, Tropical Storm Allison, Hurricanes Rita and Ike. Never, absolutely never had there been water in the street like this. On one side, water was creeping up from the end of the cul-de-sac. The street that leads to our street had rising water to the right and left several blocks down. The neighbors told me it was already impassable.

There was no way out. We were trapped. And it was starting to rain again.



A switch inside me flipped, that one that sets you to crisis mode, that shuts down most of the

feelings and turns on that eerie calm that propels you through whatever comes next. Our family gets

very, very efficient when that happens. Efficiency and stubbornness are the family's two most defining traits—and boy did we need them now.

A young neighbor, from the house at the end of the street, the lowest point and in imminent danger of flooding, trudged past with a large bag of dog food and bottles of water that she loaded into her van parked at the top of the street. The rest of her family was in Seattle to view the eclipse. She'd stayed behind to start her university program at the same school my youngest attends. The poor girl was shell shocked already. Ok, she isn't a girl, she's a young adult, but at that age, not many of us are adult enough for what was creeping up on us. Being mom to a bunch of young adults, I told her she was welcome to stay with us and just let us know what she needed and we'd help. She kind of murmured and shrugged in that battlefield sort of way, loaded her van and trudged back down the street. I'd check on her again in a little while.

I returned to the house, sent hubby and youngest son to observe what I had and send out updates to family and friends, including eldest and middle sons. Middle son who had been accusing me of overreacting to the storm suddenly took on a totally different tone. He was now worried and that unsettled me. Worse though, eldest son got back to me some time later to tell me he, his wife and one year old were under mandatory evacuation and heading to her uncle in the Dallas area.

That broke my heart. I had always expected they would be able to come to us to shelter from the storm. I'd prepared for that, and now I couldn't

take care of them. No time to dwell on that—I could cry about that later (and I would), hubby was back inside and we had to plan.

What did one do in this situation? Decide what was important and move it upstairs.

At that point, hubby found our axe and a sledge hammer and put them in the attic. Suddenly this was all very real.

Lesson 5: Cats can be ungrateful furballs.

A frantic knock pounded at the door. Our young neighbor in sodden hiking boots stood in the doorway. She'd just talked to her dad. He told her if anyone offered help to take it. Bless that man!

Youngest son went to help hubby move furniture and I gathered extra cat carriers and went to her house to help her corral animals. Four cats and two dogs.

In general, dogs are easy. You put a leash on them, and they're thrilled. *Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Walkies, let's GO!*

Cats, not so much.

She had one cat crated, but the other three had done what cats do best, disappeared under beds. Of course.

What ensued next had to have looked like a scene from a Three Stooges movie. I was crawling around a total stranger's bedroom, trying to convince a cat to get out from under a bed. Bless her heart, my neighbor was trying to sweet talk the

cat.

I've had cats for thirty years and they don't sweet talk at times like this--nor much of any other time either. They just don't. I found a baseball bat in the corner of the room and slithered under the bed. The bat was just long enough that I could poke the cat toward his mistress. After three slapstick sort of attempts, she caught said cat and I showed her how to pour said cat into the carrier, using gravity to assist the process. One cat caught.

We had to repeat the process twice more, with bigger and longer sticks needed to nudge kitties into the waiting arms of the woman who was trying to save their fuzzy little lives. (Seriously I love cats—I've got 5 of my own—but at times—I can't believe I'm saying this—dogs really are easier.)

Just as we're trying to figure out how we're going to get all six animals back to my house (not to mention what to do with them once they are there given I have six myself!) a team of three big guys from the local Mormon church knock at the door. They were at the neighbor's house, getting stuff upstairs since that family was on vacation elsewhere. They'd finished there and wanted to know if they could help.

A few minutes later the animals were safely stowed in our guest room and she and I were back at the house with the team offering to move furniture. Water was coming up into the house now, bubbling and gurgling through gaps in the molding and seeping through the carpet like some 1960's science fiction monster that couldn't be stopped.

Weirdest thing was that it wasn't cold the way I

expected it to be. It wasn't warm like bath water, but it wasn't achingly cold either. It was softly warm, almost as if to apologize for what was about to happen.

What followed were easily the most surreal moments of my life to date. I was standing in a stranger's house, with a team of strangers asking me what should be done as my poor neighbor was stunned into indecisiveness. I started pointing out furniture and electronics to save while I scoured rooms, shelves, closets, drawers, under beds for baby albums (which I managed to find!), pictures, and important papers. Trying to find another person's life and figure out what to save—it had their weird dream-like quality I'll never forget.

At last, the water was approaching our knees and we'd run out of room upstairs. I made the call: It was time to go. I sent out neighbor upstairs to pack with a list of what she needed. A few minutes later, we slogged out through knee deep water, locked the doors, and made our way up the hill to my house.

Lesson 6: Tetris is a life skill

We dragged ourselves inside and I sent her upstairs to shower and put on dry things. It was a good idea, but I also needed some time to absorb the transformation that our house had undergone in my absence. Our cats (all five of them) were locked away upstairs, their carrier bags stacked near the front door. The dog was in her crate. The place was already eerie quiet.

The entire living room and half the study was empty of upholstered furniture and our king-size mattress and box springs were gone as well. Hubby and son sauntered down the stairs with looks of proud—but tired—accomplishment. Somehow they had managed to tetrise nearly all the afore mentioned furniture into middle son's bedroom, in and around the furniture that was



already there. Plus two boxes of throw pillows and afghans. It boggles the mind. Truly that is one of hubby's superpowers—making things fit into spaces.

Trouble was, he was now at a loss—what to move next?

Gulp. Deep breath. I could do this. I had just done this down the street. Another deep breath—and some dry shoes, heavens above, I could not do this in wet shoes! I started through the house,

starting at the floor and moving up, a foot at a time.

What could not be replaced? What would be difficult or very expensive to replace. Focus on that, just that. Thinking about anything else was just too much. I could do this. There was no choice.

CHAPTER 4



The power of connection

You never realize how wonderful dry shoes are until Hurricane Harvey leaves you stuck wearing wet ones.

Somehow, I had hoped that dry shoes and clothes would change things more than they did. I was already tired of being wet, and according to the latest weather forecasts, Hurricane Harvey was promising that wet was the way things would be for the foreseeable future.



Unfortunately, the task at hand was no different than a few minutes earlier--get what was

important to higher ground. I could do this though. I had just done this very same thing at the neighbors' house. It could not be so very different here, now, could it? I just had to find the clinical detachment I channeled there and apply it here. Just pick a room and start.

Now was not the time for reflection; that would come later.

Lesson 7: Too many really important things are stored too near the floor.

My son and our neighbor were quick on my heels as I headed for the sitting room, hoping for something, or really anything to do, extra bonus points if it was something useful. I was supposed to start at ground level and move up from there, but finding them something to do first seemed a little more important. They needed the distraction.

The file cabinet drawer with all the kids' school pictures and memorabilia—the ones I had always intended to scan but hadn't gotten around to yet—was an obvious choice. The wooden trunks with holiday décor needed to go upstairs too. So I set my extra hands on those and grabbed a laundry basket for my own efforts

The curio cabinet was the first thing I encountered in the room—the one my hubby got me last Christmas because the cats had shattered every shelf in my old one in an event known as the a 'cat'-astrophe. No, stop, don't think about that

right now. It would all be there to consider when the current job was done. For now, just pack: our wedding album and my bouquet, the vase my grandfather brought my grandmother filled with wildflowers when my father was born, my great grandmother's tea cup and missal. It is so hard not to think about each one of these things--they have little monetary value, but they are irreplaceable.



A quick glance outside reminds me I don't have the luxury to dwell on anything but the here and now. The water is still higher, encroaching on yet another house—the third on the street ready to succumb.

Ready hands take the basket and hand me a box as I take on the bookcase. Yearbooks and old family books take up the bottom shelves and make it into the box. The rest could be replaced, just like the rest of the furniture left in the room. Except for the antique dressing table--that would be hard to replace. But there really was no room left upstairs for such things. One more thing not to think about right now.

Stay detached, must stay one step removed if

I'm going to keep going.

A trip to the study turns up a box of my earliest writing--must save that--story notes and the scrapbooking armoire—so very many pictures. Another task to set my extra hands to. Who knew I had so many pictures in there--and more in an adjacent closet--boxes and boxes of them. More that I should have already had scanned and saved.

Hopefully I would have the opportunity someday.

Between each room, I ran outside, braving the pouring rain to hear from the neighbors. With the cable and internet out and phone coverage spotty, everyone was hungry for news. Fresh information was worth its weight in dry shoes. Talk of evacuations--who was leaving now and how--sets my mind and heart racing. Could it really come to that?

It already had. That's why I had my neighbor and six extra animals upstairs.

Can't think about that quite yet. First, finish the house, then deal with that. Somewhere in the midst of it all, numbness sets in, the questions, the decisions become more academic than heart rending. I know there will be a price to be paid for it later, but for now, I will take anything to make this easier.

Lesson 8: The power of connection

Countless trips upstairs dwindle to a trickle. There's not much else to haul upstairs. On one hand, downstairs seems very empty, but on the

other, it feels like there's so much still there—yet there really is that there is no choice but to leave behind. We can't move everything upstairs.

Focus on that. But there is no choice.

Time for another break to check on the neighbors. A third house has taken on water, but it's a two story and she's not ready to leave. The next



one in danger has an elderly couple living there and they're only one story. I remind them they are welcome to stay with us, if their house starts taking water, and it looks like it will. Will check on them again soon.

I'm not sure I've talked to the neighbors so much in the last year—and I'm not proud of it. What a way to meet the neighbors.

Back at the house, the only place I can get cell reception is the front porch. At least the wind isn't driving the unceasing rain under the porch as I set up my old wicker chair and start to dial. My eldest has made it to Dallas with wife and baby and is safely set up at her uncle's house. That's one thing

off my mind, though I'd have given anything for them to be able to shelter with us.

Son number two tells me the pros are being really understanding about the storm—he should have stayed home to be able to help move things. I try to assure him it's better this way—we needed his room to hold furniture, but I'm not sure he's convinced. My father, who only lives ten minutes away, but far enough from the waterways that they're not in danger, doesn't seem to comprehend the seriousness of our situation, but all told, it's probably better than way. How does one explain the boat navigating its way down the street just a block from your front door?



My sister, on the other hand, is just this side of frantic. As I talk to her, I'm watching boats—canoes and kayaks go past—one more surreal image I'll never shake from my head. She wants us to leave now, but it's really not an option at the moment. The water is too deep to wade through, the

boats that have offered help are too small to manage the critters safely, and it's close to nightfall, when things get dramatically more dangerous. It really makes more sense to shelter in place.

Undaunted, she is determined to find us a way out and tells me to keep the phone close.

In the meantime, I go back in the house and try to feed people, but no one is really hungry except the animals. So, they get their dinner and the dogs get a quick trip outside. After that, we decided to see if we could introduce the dogs so that they didn't have to be confined quite so much. In the middle of the living room devoid of most of its furniture, we put everyone on leashes and start the process.

I kind of think they knew what was up. My dog, who is more of a four footed speed-bump than anything else took one look at the other two and rolled over belly up. I swear I could hear here say, 'it's not the time to worry about who's in charge here. I'm a beta and I know it, are we all good now?' Apparently they were and we had a nice little dog pack ready to share the upstairs couch and watch movies with our youngest son and neighbor to pass some of the dark evening hours.

We were finally able to tune in news radio. Even with the crackly AM band reception, hearing a voice that brought news of the outside world was a relief, even if it was news we didn't really want. The rain was not going to let up anytime soon. More of the city was underwater and high-water rescues were happening everywhere—many of them were by civilian volunteers moved to help

their neighbors. The truly sobering news was that there was a fair chance the storm would head back out to sea, strengthen, and return with another several feet of rain. Would there be anything left of the city if that happened?



As 10PM approached, the water was licking the next door neighbor's driveway. If the rain continued all night, there was little doubt it would be getting to ours soon. Later, I discovered we had another 5 inches of rain on Monday, for a total of 32.5 inches of rain since Friday.

My sister's ringtone sent me scurrying to the front porch. She'd been making calls since we'd hung up. She'd located two possible friends of friends with boats that might be able to help, and through a 'seven degrees of Kevin Bacon' sort of maneuver had called an old acquaintance with a cousin who worked at the Parks Service and knew who to call to get on the evacuation list, so we

were now on that list.

Sometime after dawn tomorrow, we had a way out. My knees went a little weak as I managed to go back inside and share the news.

CHAPTER 5



Hide from the wind, run from the water

*There's a saying in the gulf coast: Hide from the wind,
run from the water. Hurricane Harvey took that to a
totally new place.*

Just before bed, I checked the water levels—touching the edge of our driveway now. The fifth house on the street—now empty—is poised with water at the front step. It won't be long now. The couple in the fourth house took refuge at the two-story across the street just before sundown as water began pouring in. Half the houses on the street had now taken on water. On that unsettling note, we called it a night.

Youngest son and our five cats settled into his room. Our neighbor and her cats and dogs retreated into the guest room. Hubby and I tucked the dog into her kennel, now stationed behind the game room sofa and pulled out the sleeper sofa. I'm sure we've never slept on it, but unless we

want to sleep on the floor—literally every other piece of sleepable furniture is tetrised into the middle one's room—there's no choice.

Lesson #9 Sleeping through a hurricane is grounds for justifiable homicide.

We lay down, both still in our clothes, and in under two minutes he started that deep breathing, not quite snoring thing that shouted *'I'm asleep and you're not.'* I can see some of you nodding--you know exactly what I'm talking about. Don't get me wrong, hubs is truly a fantastic human being and an awesome husband, but in that moment, smothering him with a pillow crossed my mind as a viable option.

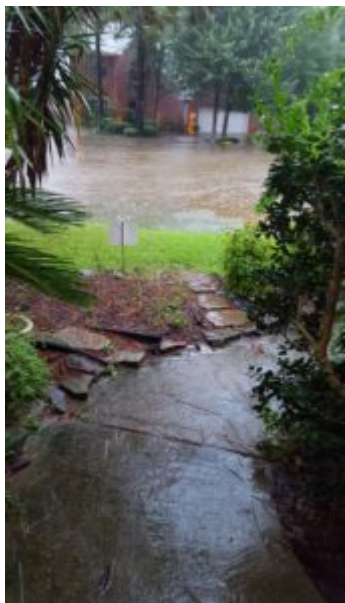
No judge or jury would convict me—sleeping through a hurricane--especially this one--is a reason for justifiable homicide. Really.

As he snoozed though wave after wave of pounding rain, I tried not to toss and turn too much. The sleeper sofa creaked and bounced too much, and at least one of us ought to sleep. (Or so my rational mind argued.) During those moments the rain slowed, I sort-of kind-of dozed, only to be jolted into wakefulness when the AC kicked on—it sounded so much like rain—or more rain bands slammed into us. Occasionally I would remember something that had not made it upstairs, but should have. My grandmother's amethyst combs, handwritten notebooks of half-finished stories—I

made the trek downstairs to find them—and check on the water. It was over the front curb, then a yard into the front lawn.

Just a few more hours until dawn. The water wasn't rising that fast. We might make it out before the water reached the front door.

Lesson #10 Don't be the punchline of a bad joke.



] Dawn came and everyone and everything began moving. The animals got fed, but I doubt any two footed creature could actually stomach food. The water was half way up the drive way and at least three feet deep in the street.

By 7AM hubby was able to get enough wi-fi signal to use the phone as a hotspot. A few minutes later he called up data on the nearby river, the one making a visit in my front yard at the moment. According to what he saw, we were just a couple of hours from the rivers cresting—they were only a couple of feet from projected crest—if of course *'they'* were right. So maybe, just maybe, we would escape without flooding.

On the other hand, the weather reports were

divided—one model had the storm heading to Louisiana, the other said it would go back into the Gulf for a repeat performance and two to three more feet of rain. (We were approaching three feet at this point.)

I took a moment to jump in the shower. By the time I got out, there were boats mooring in the trees in my front yard (just to the left of the picture above.) Read that sentence again. *Boats were moored in my front yard!* Not a sentence I ever thought I would write, nope not ever.

We headed out to talk with the boaters. One of the bass boats was manned by one of my son's HS wrestling coaches from last year. He tells us they are starting evacuations several blocks behind us where there are dozens of homes already with feet of water in them—children and the elderly needed rescue.



(The view from my front door toward the bottom of the street.)

I checked the water levels against a clump of grass in the driveway cracks and it seems like it hadn't risen in the last hour. Was it possible?

Hubby started to talk about continuing to shel-

ter in place. All his data pointed to the rivers having crested now. But if there is more rain—and it is starting to pour again—all bets are off.

Moreover, we have someone else's adult-child with us. We had to think about her as well. With all the animals, evacuating, especially in a smaller boat, was not without risk. If a critter panicked and a crate or travel bag went into the water, we'd have a tragedy.

So what to do? The potential consequences were overwhelming on all sides.

A knock on the door. A large, uniformed Parks and Recreation officer with a large, stable boat, also moored in my yard, asked for me by name. We were on his evacuation list.

That settled it.

There's an old joke about a guy in a flood who prays for rescue. He turns away a truck, a boat and a helicopter, then drowns and complains to God for not having rescued him.

Yeah, we weren't about to be the punchline to that joke. They had a couple of evacuations before us—people with water already in the house took priority. So we had a few minutes to get ready. Crate creatures, pack bags, wrap computers in plastic trash bags. They won't survive plunging overboard, but hopefully the bags would keep off the rain well enough.

Lesson 11: Cats are heavier when wet.

With twelve animals: nine cats in travel cases,

two dog crates with three dogs—four people and eight bags (is this sounding like a trip to [St. Ives](#) yet?) we cannot all travel together. Two trips are necessary. I can't begin to describe how much I didn't like being separated, but like so many other things, there is no choice.

Youngest son and I, all nine cats and our one dog are on the first boat out, along with two bags. This was taken later; this truck was underwater when we evacuated.



I try not to look back as we go. It's just too hard. The boat has to steer around a sprayer truck that is stranded in the center of the road. Only a couple of inches remain visible. The water is over 8' deep in the street.

Several blocks up, the water is too shallow to continue. They have to drop us off in a front yard of a house that, like ours, was still barely above water. We pile the critters around me--and mind you, it's pouring rain--and wait for hubby and neighbor to arrive. Cats yowl around me--they do not at all appreciate sitting around getting wet. Younger son forges ahead, trying to find my sister who is supposed to arrive to drive us out to dry

ground. I'm sure she has been trying to call, but under these condition, the phones are just not much use.

Through the pounding rain, I make out a street sign. Heaven's above, it is at least half a mile from here to where we were told the police were stopping incoming traffic.

The rest of our party debarked and we were faced with a new, unexpected challenge. Four of us had to get all the critters and luggage half a mile through the rain and streets that were flooded waist deep in places to actually get to the waiting cars.

Plan A: We'd have one person wait at one end while three carried what they could to the next safe stop point. One would wait there with stuff and critters while two returned to the start point and brought all that remained.

Military experts say no plans survive first contact with the enemy.

Yeah that.

Lots of people stood around gawking at the evacuations. Several jumped up to help. Soon, I'd lost track of bags, cats, dogs and my own people. There was no choice but to slog on and hope to meet up with sis and the rest of the caravan at the end of the journey. So with a cat carrier on each shoulder and one carried in front—45 pounds of cats when dry, probably over 50 pounds now that they'd been sitting in the rain for a while—I trudged into the hip deep water.

Now I understand why water aerobics are such a great workout. I wonder if adding wet cat

weights to the workout will ever catch on.

Probably not.

I regularly run a three-mile track around the neighborhood, but that was the longest half mile I've ever traversed. At last I spot my sister's car and dad's van. I load up my three cats and turn back around to try to locate all that came with us.

A quarter-mile away, I find hubby and son with a friendly canoer who could navigate the shallower waters. He was trying to load a bunch of our stuff into the canoe. Our dog though had been pushed to her limits. She saw me, jumped out of the canoe and looked at me with eyes that said, "I've done everything you wanted, but I can't do that."

(Our dog once we got to my sister's house.)

Fair enough. I grabbed her leash and we walked to the van, taking a very long way around to keep from water that was too deep for her. All the while I'm thinking it would be a miracle if we made it through with all heads and tails accounted for. I don't even know which cat is in which carrier, much less who has which cat.



A few minutes later, I'm standing at the van counting and recounting. Nine cat bags—yes, really all nine. Count one more time. Yes, nine and three dogs. Enough heads and tails. I close up the van and slog to the car. Hubby assures me everything is accounted for there as well.

Good enough.

We shut the doors, strap on the seat belts and pull away from the flood, heading for dry ground. We could only hope for when we'd be back and what we'd find when we got there.

CHAPTER 6



Singing the Wet Cat Blues

Eleven out of eleven cats agree, hurricanes-- especially Hurricane Harvey--are not kitty cat weather.

The short drive to my sister's house was surreal. In the nineteen years we've been in the house we've driven it hundreds of times, but never like this before. As we drove out, we passed emergency vehicles, more boats on trailers and large trucks. License plates from Louisiana, Arkansas, as far as Tennessee—engines from the Memphis fire department. How many more rescues were yet needed? (I didn't know at the time, but more than 2000 homes in our area alone were flooded by the time the water stopped rising.)

As we pulled up to sis's house, we are faced with a whole new logistical problem. The cats--lots and lots of cats. She is a dog rescuer, so she had a dog yard and dog food, all was good there. But with her two cats, we had eleven cats to accommodate. Cat people know you can't introduce cats like you can dogs, especially under stressful

conditions. So there was only one option.

We stack the cats up in their carriers on the porch, out of the rain. Piles and piles of wet, pissed-off cats, loudly informing us of their displeasure, a veritable kitty-choir cacophony as we corral hers into one bedroom, and set up the other two rooms for the other two cat-families.

Lesson 12: Wet cats and clumping cat litter don't mix

The kitty choir's rendition of the wet cat blues only ceased when we let them out of the carriers in their respective safe spaces and they scurried someplace dry and hard to reach--like under the furniture. We brought in a litter box figuring it would be essential soon. I hung out for a few minutes to make sure they realized it's there.

Our big white boy cat heads straight for the box without so much as a by-your-leave. When he saunters out, much relieved, I discover a previously undiscovered truth. Wet cats and clumping cat litter are a dubious combination. The litter has clumped to him. The whole of his back legs are caked in litter (thankfully clean litter.) I should not have laughed I suppose, but watching him try to shake off his crispy coating brought tears to my eyes.

After decaking him, I toweled off his brother. The poor sweet ginger boy kept licking himself and looking at me with accusing eyes that said "I will never be dry again!" Considering how little good the towel did, he might actually have been

right.

After one more effort with the towel, I left them to their own devices. It was time to dry out our bags and see if the computers survived.

Lesson 13: Rainbows are optional.

Suffice it to say every bit of previously dry clothing we had packed was now wet. Between the rain and the hip deep water we slogged through, really, did it stand a chance? Jeans, socks, underwear, everything in those bags ranged from vaguely damp to sopping. Maybe the cat was right, we'd never be dry again.

Luckily sis had a dryer and we started what would become a five day laundry odyssey.

Finally the moment of truth had arrived. It was time to check the computers. More than merely useful bits of technology, the machines amount to lifelines to our work and for my son's school endeavors. Not knowing how long we'd be out of the house, they were suddenly critical to managing life when we might have neither home nor vehicles. Next to getting people and animals out safely, it's hard to overstate how important the bits of silicon and wire were and how flimsy the trash bags seemed in comparison.

Though flimsy, the trash bags managed to be sufficient to the task; the computers, had stayed dry. Naturally, internet was completely out and cell coverage was spotty at best, so there was nothing we could actually do with the computers, but it

was enough to know they were working.

Suddenly there is nothing to do. For the first time in days, there is nothing immediately demanding attention. I suppose it's good, but I confess I felt lost. Stepping out to check the weather had become such a habit, I was outside before I realized it.

A sunbeam peaked out from between two scraggly clouds. The rain had stopped and there was sun--no rainbow, but there was sun. We had not seen that in nearly a week and had come close to wondering if we'd ever see it again. Sappy and sentimental, I know, but I wept.

Lesson 14: Some phone calls you will never forget

Our neighbor's family arrived from Dallas to pick her and her portion of the menagerie up. Lots of tears and hugs were exchanged all around. In retrospect it was a little odd hugging veritable strangers as though they were family, but in the moment it made complete sense. Seeing her safe back with her family rivaled the relief of getting away from the flood waters.

Later that afternoon, sis and I went out looking for groceries. (She had not anticipated three more adults in the house to feed.) We discovered two of the local grocery stores had flooded severely with the water measured in feet not inches. The other two were closed. So we ended up at the local Sonic, just across the street from one of the closed stores, looking for dinner. Ironically, the same

things happened after Hurricane Ike. How did Sonic manage to be the only place open after a storm? I'm not much of a fast food eater, but that was an incredible chicken sandwich and fries. And the milkshakes were absolutely essential for mental health. Thus fortified, we hit the air mattress and slept for the first time in many nights without the sound of pounding rain.

The next morning hubs and son were twitchy and at loose ends with nothing to do. By 10AM they confirmed that the waters were receding and were off to the check on the house. I pretended to keep myself busy, but accomplished nothing but aimless wandering until the phone rang. Hubby's ringtone. My heart stopped and I could barely breathe, my hands shaking almost too hard to answer the phone. Do I even want to know what they've found?

He tells me anyway.

It had taken a little doing, but they were able to walk to the house on 'dry' ground. (Dry meaning not underwater, not dry in the normal human sense of the word.) The water had stopped rising as we left. The house had stayed dry.

It takes me a while to process all the words. It shouldn't be so difficult to wrap my head around those few, simple sentences, but it was. Once I finally digested what he'd said, I broke down and had a good solid cry. What else was there to do?

Returning home was the beginning of another odyssey, beginning with trying to return the house to normal and help our neighbors muck out their homes. We did three days of nonstop laundry for

our neighbor--sheets, towels, work clothes, even an heirloom quilt we managed to salvage.

Though it's been more than three months, half the houses on our street are still empty save for the construction gnomes who regularly appear to rebuild. March seems to be the most common estimate for people to be able to return home. Dozens of businesses are still closed; we have to think hard every time we go out trying to remember if our destination still exists.

I'd like to end this saga with a series of pictures of the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in our immediate neighborhood

CHAPTER 7



Finding a new normal

I've weathered a number of serious storms. Hurricane Belle in New Jersey in 1976 was the first real storm I remember. That was back during elementary school days. Alicia hit Houston in 1983 while I was in high school. I remember treks for dry ice and cooking the contents of the big deep freeze over a propane gas grill.

Allison, in 2001, was only a tropical storm when it dumped close to 39 inches of rain over 6 days on the Houston area. It was the first tropical storm to have its name retired without ever having reached hurricane strength. Seven years later, in 2008 Hurricane Ike knocked out power for nearly two weeks, and was, at the time the second most costly storm on record.

I remember all of those storms well—probably will never forget them. But none of them have touched me like Harvey has.

So here we are, coming up on the one year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey hitting Houston. With every news media outlet in the city and

many in the state making the most of it, it's hard not to reflect on the permanent mark this storm has left on many of us.

Lesson 15: Sometimes you don't need outside reminders

Just this week, I announced at dinner I had found the new location for the local Marble Slab ice cream parlor that had disappeared under the flood waters a year ago. The pharmacy next door to the old location that we use had only reopened in late March, but there was no sign of the ice cream parlor until now.

The local library reopened over Memorial Day weekend, nine months after the storm. The first floor had been inundated, destroying the entire children's collection. The local YMCA is sort of open, using temporary buildings in the parking lot for many of their programs. Their whole building is still a construction zone.

My son took me for a 'last summer hurrah' lunch a few days ago. We went to Torchy's Tacos. Immediately inside the door is a sort of ruller, with a commemorative plaque at the 7 foot mark: *The water was this deep after Hurricane Harvey.* Just after they reopened there was a big brouhaha with the local realtors asking (demanding really) them to take down the sign fearing it was 'bad for business,' reminding potential home buyers of the flood. As if anyone could forget.

Every morning when I walk my dog, we pass by houses with RV's still in the driveways where peo-

ple are still living while repairs are being done. We walk by houses where the owners are still not living there because repairs aren't sufficiently complete yet. Still others have residents, but are still works in progress. For many, repairs are complete, but the yards still bear the scars of months of debris piles that grew for three or four months after the storm.

This week, we voted on (and approved, no surprise, really) a \$2.5 BILLION bond for flood control projects in Houston and the surrounding counties. What a way to celebrate an anniversary that no one is forgetting around here.

Lesson 16: It's never all bad

In the midst of all the memories of destruction and dire news, there are also powerful reminders of good that happened out of it all. The enormity of the storm and flooding (over 150,000 homes in Houston alone) meant that our emergency systems were overwhelmed. 'Regular' people rose to the occasion and did what they could to help. Some brought out their boats to rescue friends and neighbors from high water. Teams from Louisiana poured in—the Cajun Navy—brought personal boats for volunteer rescues.

A Texas based grocery (HEB) with local outlets deployed disaster relief teams to supply food to rescue efforts. They brought in teams of employees from non-affected areas to man stores in affected areas and even shifted production in their own bakeries and orders from suppliers to focus

on the most needed supplies. A local furniture chain opened their doors to act as a shelter to displaced families and rescue workers. Local churches mobilized not just to open shelters and act as supply distribution centers, but also to send out teams to assist with the overwhelming clean-up efforts.

The devastation the storm brought also brought out some of the best in human nature. I'm not going to lie, I'm crying like a baby writing this. I'll probably always get teary remembering it all.

Lesson 17: Some things are worth looking back on

All in all, I think those good things make it worth looking back on Harvey and all that happened through it. Thank you to all of you who have been here with me through it all. You're definitely part of the good that came out of the storm.



Acknowledgments

Thank you to all our friends and family who helped us weather the storm. A special thanks to my sweet sister Gerri who took us and our neighbor in when we evacuated and hosted the ten cats and three dogs that came with us!

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About the Author



Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again. After penning five file-drawer novels in high school, she took a break from writing to pursue college and earn her doctorate in Educational Psychology. After 16 years of university teaching, she returned to her first love, fiction writing.

She has one husband and one grandson, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, is has blogged six years on *Random Bits of Fascination*, has built seven websites, attended eight English country dance balls, sewn nine Regency era costumes, and shared her life with ten cats.

She can be contacted at:

author.MariaGrace@gmail.com

Facebook:

<http://facebook.com/AuthorMariaGrace>

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