

# Ike

*Kirby Johnson*

The day before the storm hits, my mother always sends me across town for sandbags. I drive to Home Depot, pick up twenty bags of sand, drop ten off at the rental property, which was also the house I grew up in, and take ten home to put outside the back door. Each hurricane is always the “big storm,” and I pick the bags up out of love.

When I arrive at the rental property the tenet is drunk and trying to unload a keg from the back seat of his car. I ask him to not have a party and he tells me that everything is ok, that nothing is going to happen. I say something about this being the “big one” and we both don’t really believe it. We watch the neighbor check his mail while holding a shot gun before I help them unload the keg and go home.

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When preparing for a hurricane, they tell you to do several things. First and for most you must pick up a hurricane tracking chart brought to you by your favorite local news station at your favorite local grocery store but really, only the people on TV or senior citizens do this. The rest of us walk around blindly until our bosses tells us a storm is coming and that we should go home early, but only after we give them all of our contact information and promise to report back when it’s all is over. The next steps are all about planning and hoarding. You must create a family plan, a pet plan, and an evacuation plan, but no one really does this either. After you must hoard supplies like plywood, toilet paper, and canned hams, then protect your supplies by boarding up your home up to lock-out daylight and intruders. Most people like this part the most. Hoarding is patriotic, and so is protecting your property. You can’t let anyone take your hams, let alone scare your women. Lastly, they won’t tell you until right before the storm but you must go fill your gigantic car up with gas, and you must do so in an excited panic. Gas is also very important to hoard and you will spend the last moments until the storm waiting in line

for overpriced fuel. Price gouging is also normal. Once you are done filling up, you are officially prepared and it's time to head home.

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Several days before running around town to pick up and drop off sandbags, the news shows a large Hurricane hitting Haiti and Cuba. This is the second one in a few weeks. The news person says the rain and wind are coming our way, and we need to prepare. Mom says I have to take off of work to help get the house in order. The next morning I decide to go to work anyway.

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**To do:**

Remove all potential “projectiles” from your lawn and garden.

This means potted plants, lawn furniture, and any decorative items.

Fill every pitcher you own with water.

Fill the bathtubs.

You'll want to flush the toilet three days from now.

Make large blocks of ice in the freezer.

Barricade any doors and low windows you may have with sandbags.

If water comes in, your floors will buckle and your carpet will mold.

Board the windows.

It's important that you sit in the dark, for many many days before and after the storm.

Park your car as close to your home as possible.

This will protect it from thieves and debris.

Wash all of your clothes.

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We turn the air conditioning on as high as we can. The newscasters say the outskirts of Ike will hit the Texas coast around 1:00am, so we crank the AC and watch the news before we lose power. By midnight winds pick up and trees start falling on transformers. Loud, distant explosions can be heard every few minutes. A friend calls to say they are watching a neighbor's house burn. They are outside in the wind with a water-hose trying to save their own. From our upstairs patio, we can see fires in the distance. By 1:30 a neighbor's tree falls on the transformer outside of our house and the lights go out.

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The weird thing about when a storm makes landfall at night is that you can't see anything that's going on. You look out the windows through the cracks between the boards and everything is dark. All you can do is listen to the low roar and the debris hitting the sides of the house and you don't know all of the fear you could own because you've never been through something this large before. Your parents had Alicia but all you've had are tropical storms here and there. You're part of a generation that's getting drunk with friends around town, not knowing how fucked up nature can be, not remembering what happened with Katrina. So you sit at home with your mom, your mom who for days has worked hard to instill fear and anxiety in you, your mom who was partially right, because you hear the roar, and you see the darkness, and yes, you are scared. But she is not scared. She's suddenly excited, asking you to come out on the patio to watch the wind and the rain blow sideways, exclaiming how beautiful the house fire is off in the distance. You feel sad and nervous and you don't want to watch the rain. You get calls from friends who are drunk and scared and surprised and you mumble something about how you told them, how you told them this would be big, but you know, you know that you didn't even believe it the first time the words came out.

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The next day everyone goes outside to witness the damage. The street is a brownish river. There are trees on cars and trees in the road. Men take sticks and push debris away from the gutters. Women begin to clean their yards. Within an hour the street is clear and we go back inside. The following morning a thunderstorm comes through to flood the streets again. The gutters are thick with the pulp of leaves, the water doesn't drain. Houses flood again and we step outside to repeat the process of cleaning and clearing.

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When the phone lines do not work, you must teach your mother to send text messages. Teach her to communicate through emoticons and abbreviations. Teach her about this new technology. Teach her as she cooks you a homemade pizza on the grill. Teach her and appreciate what you are sharing. Eat your pizza as she texts you, "hello ;-)" Tell her thank you and she will say it back.

## X

The day after the storm, my boss sends word to go downtown the next morning. So I wake up, get dressed in the dark, and take the surface roads into the city. We are told to show our City of Houston badges when we get pulled over and I do, twice before reaching the row houses that surround downtown. When I finally make it into the city, everything looks bruised and grey. The leaves of trees have been beaten off branches and shards of glass blanket the streets. Men in rubber boots and city jackets pull hoses from alleyways and move branches from one place to another. Police cars block several roads with their lights on. Everyone looks tired.

## X

At work, we sit at computers and read FEMA application questions to people who can't read very well. Most of the applicants cannot tell us clear answers, so we go to the help website to read more questions, to try and find more answers. The application takes twenty minutes to complete but everything feels longer, more drawn out. The twenty minutes becomes complicated.

These people are at the library because the mayor has told them we are open and that they can apply for aid here. So we sit and read questions. We sit and listen to their stories but only a few have needs related to the storm. The rest are there because their power is out and they don't know what else to do. Most of them are senior citizens. All of them are poor. So you hold the hands of elderly women. You read forms to men and women covered in bruises or track marks. Many of them don't have homes. They don't have addresses. They didn't have these things before the storm.

Throughout the days you meet countless diabetics and a man with an abscess. You can smell the abscess. There are women, women of every color, women with children, women who can't read and you get tired. You shut down. You shut down because helping them takes everything you have. You shut down because you cannot help them. There is no way to help all of them.

## X

**FEMA FAQ**

My electricity is off and I lost all my food; can FEMA help?

No.

Will FEMA reimburse me for the generator I purchased after the disaster?  
Probably not. Don't try.

How do I check the status of my FEMA application?  
You can't, the website is down and you lost your user name and or password.

Do I qualify for "Other than Housing Needs" Assistance?  
Probably not.

Part of my roof has been torn off/impaled by a tree. Can I apply for temporary housing?  
You still have the rest of your house, right?

I do not have a current address, what do I do?

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I do not have a current phone number, what do I do?

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No one will touch the tree on the power line in the neighbor's yard. We call the city to get it removed. We speak into machines that record our request and address. We wait.

Some neighbors run extension cords from houses across the street, others spend the majority their time at home in the back yard, others still have purchased generators. My mother and I are in the group that sits outside. We share our time quietly listening to news radio. We listen to the mayor scorn the director of FEMA and then we listen to the County Commissioner try to apologize. We don't have much to say to each other but choose to listen to everything around us and during these moments it feels like we are living in a different time, a time when families frequently gathered outside, a time when kids played in backyards. We can hear the friendly voices of our neighbors talking to each other. We can hear them in their homes with the windows open. We can hear home phones ring and someone answering them. My mother and I live in the house she grew up in and it feels like how it must have been when she grew up. When look at her I think she feels this way too. Her face looks nostalgic but calm. She is good at living in this simple way and

I am happy to spend time with her.

When it gets dark we go inside and the generators of our neighbors are all you can hear. The noise isn't a hum, but a growl, and I frequently cannot sleep. On some nights I walk upstairs to the patio. From the balcony the neighborhood is a dark mass of houses, hungry for the glow of street lights that line the main road. The lights have been restored for drivers but the apartments and homes on either side of them are dark. Every once and a while a cop passes by. They patrol the neighborhood with heavy flood lights. They patrol the apartments across the streets the same way. Sometimes you can hear the cops on their loud speakers yelling. Sometimes you can hear their guns.

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While cooking a sweet potato on the grill after work, I listen to a caller on the local NPR station ask if anyone has heard news from the City of Galveston jail. She says she hasn't spoken to her son in over a week and she doesn't know if he's safe. Despite a mandatory evacuation order from Galveston's Mayor, the jails on the island were not abandoned. A thousand prisoners were left with a half of the jail staff and a twenty-foot storm surge. The woman on the phone is crying. My dog sits on my lap. We listen to her and other callers. A few hours go by.

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### **Grocery List:**

Instant rice  
 Potatoes  
 Bread  
 Canned Chicken Breast  
 Apple Sauce  
 Ice  
 Tampons  
 Oranges  
 Tuna  
 Instant rice  
 Charcoal  
 Instant rice  
 Plumbs

Lighter fluid  
Ice  
Apple Sauce  
Potatoes  
Bread  
Lighter Fluid  
Charcoal

X

The city starts to move employees around as other branches of the Library are cleared to reopen and I'm relocated to a branch closer to my home. My new coworkers are nice but uncomfortable. There are more of us than needed so we double up to fill holds, clean the stacks, and sit at the desk. Sometimes there are six of us at the desk with nothing to do, but that is ok. Work begins to feel normal again. The schools reopen and in the afternoon the branch is full of noisy children: their small hands and faces, a colorful distraction from the work we finished downtown and the quiet darkness in our homes.

When the kids are in school we talk to anyone and everyone who comes into the branch. We ask them how they are and we spend time with them on the computer looking for ways to help. The patrons tell us about the damage to their homes, the dog they lost, and their insurance companies. There are no easy fixes but directions. We direct people to the tarp program, the relief volunteers down the street, or the clinic giving out medications three miles away. We tell patrons which bus lines are open and look on employer's websites for updates on re-openings and permanent closures. We talk to everyone but we also listen.

On one of my lunch breaks I take time to fill out a FEMA application for my mom and for our home. I also fill one out for the rental house, claiming that I live there. I do this but expect nothing.

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One afternoon a cop stops into the library to say hello. We ask him what it was like working after the storm and if everyone is ok. He tells us stories about the prisoners complaining and how it wasn't as bad as the last time it flooded several years ago. He tells us how during one tropical storm, the jails flooded and the inmates spent days waste deep in water and sewage. He tells

us about how the prisoners have more rights than we do. He says they all have cable TV, all sorts of snacks, and somehow he makes these snacks sound important. He asks us if we have cable TV and most of us say no. He tells us these things knowing he is better than the men he is talking about. He tells us, not knowing who we are or if we agree.

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### **A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home**

Mold can grow anywhere there is moisture and honey there is moisture all over your home. There is moisture under the linoleum in the kitchen, under the carpets, and all up in your walls. Your home is moist and girl, you can't do anything to stop it. That mold will grow and it will spread. It will be in places you never thought it could find. It's thick, greenish black and people are going to want to talk about it. In fact, people will call you on the phone to talk about it. They will talk all sorts of things about your mold. They will make promises about taking that mold away! They will try to win you over with their talk but they will know nothing about mold! They will take your money and that mold will still grow. It will grow and you can't do anything to stop it.

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Six weeks after Ike made landfall and sixty people are still missing. On the news, reporters show images taken from helicopters flying over Bolivar Peninsula. Only a few buildings still stand on the tiny strip of land, others are reduced to splinters: shards of the brightly painted homes that once lined the beach. Somewhere inside the piles I imagine ceramic bits of decorative seashells, wooden boats, and rattan furniture. I imagine bodies, their fleshy pink color, now turning grey. The reporters show Galveston bay with cars and sofas still floating in the water. They show the seawall and the beach, but the beach is gone, washed away.

I begin to dream about the tide and then the bodies. The dreams start as memories of fishing around the peninsula as a kid: my dad and me in his boat, him talking about the currents, me pointing to the GPS asking if we found the fish yet. We'd usually go off the Intracoastal Waterway near Galveston at Port Bolivar, where the calmer waters of the bay met the rapid current that the larger boats used to propel themselves out to sea—the same places where helicopters and reporters were flying over now. There we would set anchor

or hang fishing lights off a nearby pier at night. You could tell when the tide was rolling out because your line would get caught on plastic bottles and the carcasses of dead fish other fishermen had thrown away near shore. In the dreams the tide is the same and we cast and recast our lines hoping to get a bite, hoping not to snag something that was lost.

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My mom asks me to come home for lunch to meet the insurance adjustor. The adjuster is a tall tan woman in a small truck. She brings a ladder and climbs on the roof. She comes inside and looks at the soft bulging sheetrock of the interior walls and the black pools of mold under the kitchen floor. She grunts and makes notes. She says there isn't anything she can do. She says all the damage is caused by wind-driven-rain and somehow wind-driven-rain is not hurricane related. She says the water that came in during the second day flood was caused by wind-driven-rain. I ask how the wind can blow from the ground. She doesn't laugh. I say the water that came into the house was from flooding. She repeats the words wind-driven-rain. Wind-driven-rain.

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As weeks and months go by, the house begins to settle. Doors don't quite close. Broken tree branches slowly begin to fall on the house or in the street. The pear tree outside the window begins to rot. Everything shifts then settles again. People do their best to repair and forget. My mother and I spend our evenings doing this: repairing, scraping, cleaning, and re-painting. Then we get tired and do our best to ignore and move on. We go to work and wait for spring. We wait until there is something else to move on from. We wait until the trees grow back their leaves and mend their scars.