THE HURRICANE OF ‘38

A vivid memory for anyone living at the time. It still is for me, as I was

a boy turning four the next day, September 22, 1938

After devastating Long Island, New York and killing 600 people, the storm struck New England with no warning. It pummeled the coastline with powerful winds and heavy rainfall and charged inland rapidly – about 60 mph. The hurricane wiped out shore areas and swept countless homes out to sea, many with occupants still in them. An estimated 100 lives were lost. Winds of 100 mph. and gusts up to 186 mph. (recorded at the Blue Hills Observatory in Massachusetts) flattened lighthouses, razed forests, and decimated buildings of every description.

I was staying with a babysitter down the street from our Depression era attic room where I lived with my mom. Late in the afternoon it began raining. Then the wind struck. Whooshing, whistling sounds astonished the household; windows rattled, twigs and dirt beat against the clapboards, electrical power died. “Look up!” someone shouted – through the kitchen window we could see shingles from the roof next door taking off like a flock of birds. Our house trembled and creaked. Frightened, we moved to an interior hallway, cringed on the floor as flying debris threatened to break the windows.

In the midst of our huddling my mom suddenly appeared at the doorway. Amazing!

I felt so astonished and so relieved to see her. My chest nearly burst! She helped me put on my jacket, said a quick goodbye to the sitter and the other children and hurried me out of the foyer > into the maelstrom. “Hurry up,” she urged, “We must run to Aunt Min’s.”

The rain was surprisingly light, but the wind …the wind was stupendous. We dashed into the street lurching into the hurricane, our eyes mostly closed to avoid the dust stinging our faces. Everything that wasn’t anchored was airborne including the two of us. The tempest increased and screamed. We could barely touch the ground – a headwind suddenly lifted us to a standstill > picture that!

As we grasped each other tightly and turned to cross the street the wind shear propelled us on our tiptoes toward the opposite sidewalk, nearly lifting us off our feet! What fun to body sail, to let the wind float me into the air like a bird.

What an adventure for a four year old boy!

We fought our way to Aunt Min’s house a block away, locked arm in arm with a hand covering our faces to ward off the windswept stuff. We arrived uninjured - a miracle - and fell into the warm arms of my grandmother and a relieved Aunt Min. Mom and I removed our dusty clothes, caught our breath and washed our hands and faces. Candles were lit. After a cold supper we hunkered down for the night, sleeping fitfully as the house rumbled and groaned.

Next morning all was calm but the streets were a shambles; tree limbs and debris everywhere. Cleanup began and daily life resumed. Later in the day I was allowed to go outside and ride my tricycle but a huge uprooted tree blocked the sidewalk. A neighbor carried me and my bike to the other side and I pedaled away, marveling at the sights.

As I blew out the candles on my birthday cake that evening, I closed my eyes to make a wish but found myself flying again in the wild wind of the hurricane.

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