



Volume 13
Issue 1
2018

Herbert Saffir, Measurer of Hurricanes

Mary Hutchings Reed

“Herbert Saffir died last night,” John’s mother said. Her voice startled him. He was sitting next to her on the maroon loveseat in the large common area of the assisted living facility where his mother had lived for more than three months now, and he’d been watching another woman at an old oak vanity pawing through a pile of brightly colored Mardi Gras beads. Today, in honor of the Thanksgiving holiday, one of the nurses had draped green, gold, and orange beads on all of the women residents and some of the men.

John’s mother was a sweet woman whose only vice was a snobbishness in education and jewelry. She preferred unique designer pieces from stores like Tiffany and Georg Jensen, and was proud her son had graduated from Country Day and Northwestern. She would be appalled, he thought, to find herself adorned in plastic beads, and she wouldn’t have been too happy, either, to be caught sitting in what she would’ve called the “parlour” in her gardening clothes, black polyester slacks

and a zipped pink sweatshirt. It amazed him that these things didn't seem to bother her now; that she, who once had been so neat and orderly, was not disturbed by the eclectic busy-ness of the common room and its unused activity center: a toy workbench, a baby doll and cradle, a cold iron and ironing board. Nor did she seem to mind that some of her fellow residents wandered the room in constant circles mumbling to themselves about lost keys while others slumped in wheelchairs in front of *The Sound of Music*. They were always showing *The Sound of Music*, it seemed to him. It must drive the staff nuts.

He didn't know Herbert Saffir. "Did he live here?" he asked. When she didn't answer, his thoughts drifted, and he dreaded the worst. If the man had lived there, then his mother might have seen his body bag wheeled out the front door. The place claimed to have no back entrance, although there must've been a rear exit for the kitchen and the trash. When John had asked about using a freight elevator for moving his mother's bed and bureau, the administrator, a specialist in public relations and "sales," said, without apology, "They come in the front door and they go out the front door." At the time, John had wondered whether they wheeled a resident out pretending it was a run to the hospital or put a telltale sheet over the face. Even though he'd come to believe that most residents wouldn't connect a gurney to sickness or death, the image troubled him every time he keyed the code to leave the building. There would be no other way out for his mother.

John was not naïve about her memory loss, although he thought it had come on quickly. Looking back, he saw that for several years she'd outsmarted the disease and her family, laughing off lapses of memory as the price for living to eighty.

“Gotta forget some things so I'll have room for the years to come,” she'd say gamely.

She'd stayed active, too. After his father had died seven years ago, every Sunday in the summer he and his wife and three kids would go to her house on Little Green Lake and while they swam and kayaked and sailed the dinghy he kept there, he would take his mother for nine holes of leisurely afternoon golf. She was pretty good—“for an old lady,” she would say—and she could both correct his swing and encourage him with the same intelligence and love that had gotten him through schools at the top of his class, all the way to his PhD in education. One of the last times they played together last the previous summer, she'd lined up a six foot putt and then swung her putter like a drive, digging an unforgivable three inch divot in the green. John had been horrified, but his mother calmly replaced the torn grass, stamping it down to repair it. John had tucked that incident away, not connecting it to the hints he'd often found in the kitchen: a baking sheet with hard biscuits browned the day before in preparation for his family's arrival; a plate of packaged cookies wrapped in plastic with a slip of paper, “Pecan Cookies Made With Real Butter;” a note on the microwave, “100=Power=On,” which John finally

recognized as his mother's method of cooking one minute at a time, avoiding the complexity of time and power options on the control panel.

There were few men in his mother's facility. "Did Herbert live here?" he braved again. He didn't particularly want to talk about death with his mother, but any coherent conversation, however brief, whatever the topic, would be a great improvement over their past visits, when her response to the simplest "How are you today?" was often, "Oh, yes."

His mother turned to him, as if the sound of his voice reminded her that he was there. She nodded and smiled. Herbert's passing didn't seem to have registered as "sad" in his mother's lost vocabulary.

"That's too bad," John said, keeping his voice low, "but I'm sure he is at peace." He glanced around, hoping none of the other residents had heard him, for fear of starting a general keening. He smiled to himself that it would again be news to many that Herbert had passed—if they remembered Herbert at all.

He changed the subject. "My youngest daughter Jenny won her swim meet." He'd gotten used to the need to identify himself and the members of his family.

"South Korea confirms bird flu outbreak," his mother said, and John finally understood: his mother was reading the headlines from the newspaper open on her lap.

November 24, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Although the man was important enough to make the front page of the *Tribune*, John had never

heard of “Herbert Saffir, Measurer of Hurricanes.” Must be a slow news day, he thought.

His mother studied his face, and he met her gaze with his own, balling his left hand into a tight fist. Neither of them could comprehend the other’s incomprehension, John thought. He wasn’t even certain that she recognized him, her only son.

She turned her attention back to the newspaper. “Structural engineer created 5 category system used for C-L-A-S-S-I-F-I-C-A-T-I-O-N of storm strength,” she read, spelling out the longest word. She looked up at him, her eyebrows raised, her green eyes glistening. That she didn’t wear glasses, that she could still read, that she could still recognize words that had no meaning for her, was something. He smiled back and then gently took the newspaper from her, “May I?” Still holding his other hand, she let the newspaper slide from her lap as if she’d forgotten it was even there.

John scanned the story. Saffir had died of a heart attack in a South Miami Hospital. In the 1960s, under a commission from the United Nations, he’d created the “Category” scale that describes the strength of hurricanes. The scale was intended to measure the structural damage that the winds of each Category storm could create, and it had later been modified by a guy named Simpson to measure tidal surge, storm surge, and possible flooding.

A colleague at the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade County was quoted in Saffir’s obituary as saying he was “just such a nice, sweet man.”

A nice, sweet man with a front page obituary, not because he was sweet, but because he “cre-

ated” a scale, not unlike the earthquake scale, and topped it off at 5. Why not 6 or 10 or 100? Katrina, Rita, Wilma, all those hurricanes from a few years ago, all Category 5, according to the article. John had been to the Gulf Coast with a group of Rotarians; he’d seen buildings splintered and swept away. He’d seen the remnants of lives heaped eight feet high and bulldozed into piles awaiting removal; lives totally wiped out. He’d seen the trailers, he’d seen nice homes abandoned, he’d seen blue tarp roofs and schools and hospitals closed. And he’d seen faces. Clerks in stores smiling forced smiles, their shoulders rounded, their eyes dull.

John looked up from the story, and saw that his mother was asleep, but still holding his right hand. Some friends’ parents had heart attacks, some were eaten away with cancer and comforted with morphine, some failed to see the red light or the oncoming truck and left without a chance to say good-bye.

A caregiver came by and asked how he was. “I’m sorry you have to work the Thanksgiving holiday,” he said.

“Oh, I love working holidays,” she said. “And Christmas, too! You know they ask me twenty times a day what day it is, and on Christmas I tell them and they light up, ‘Oh, Christmas!’ each time! It was like that Thursday, too.”

John laughed heartily and turned to his mother’s sleeping profile, his eyes filling.

“Let me know if you need anything,” the caregiver said.

You had to have that kind of attitude to work in such a place, John thought. To act as if plastic beads were white gold and *The Sound of Music* your wedding song. To ignore the structural damage, to love in the moment, knowing there might be a hurricane, destruction yet to come.

His mother opened her eyes but didn't notice him. He put the newspaper back on her lap. Without looking at him, she read, "Herbert Saffir," and started to spell, "M-E-A-S-U-R-E-R ..." John put his arm around her.

"Of Hurricanes," he said out loud.

Mary Hutchings Reed
is a Chicago novelist
and retired lawyer
whose mother, a librarian,
suffered from Alzheimer's. Email:
mhreed3@gmail.com.
www.maryhutchingsreed.com