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Waiting for Earl: A Report from Martha's Vineyard

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By: Cristine Russell and Ben Heineman Jr.

CHILMARK, MA. After days of waiting for Earl, it seems he is actually coming to our small rural town of Chilmark on the western end of the island of Martha's Vineyard. Earl is the unwelcome end-of-summer visitor, the kind who keeps hinting that he wants to come stay with us in our picturesque beach community and finally decides to barge in uninvited for a last-minute Labor Day weekend visit. We had long heard stories of the times when some of his other family members had come to visit--cousin Bob in 1991 and aunt Carol in 1954. And they had indeed caused trouble, big trouble everywhere they visited in their northern trip along the Eastern United States.

But now it was our turn, and we were waiting to meet Earl. Yes, he was indeed coming our way, but we still did not know quite what to expect. Then came the daunting Thursday evening Code Red robo-call: "Hurricane warning for Chilmark residents. The governor and board of selectmen have declared a state of emergency in anticipation of the arrival of Hurricane Earl Friday afternoon. You are encouraged to make all necessary preparations before noon on Friday. After that time, please avoid traveling. All roads and businesses should be considered closed as of 2 p.m. Friday. You should shelter at your home if it is safe to do so."

The headline on this morning's top story on the Vineyard Gazette website confirms our fears: "State of Emergency and High Alert. Hurricane Earl Barrels Up the East Coast."

Still, on this Friday dawn, we look out from our Martha's Vineyard house over the wild

flower meadow, Chilmark Pond, the fragile barrier beach and the Atlantic Ocean; it is hard to believe that Earl could roar in later today with hurricane force winds and pummeling rain. The fog is lifting; the wind a zephyr only; the mute swans sitting calmly on the water. It is a typical lazy, early September morning, a slow glide into Labor Day before returning to the work-a-day world. The expression, "the calm before the storm," seems more apt than ever. The only discordant note: the sound of huge surf breaking on the ocean beach.

But, like all our neighbors, our eyes are diverted from this serene sea-scape to hyper ventilating, on-the-scene Weather Channel reporters from Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina to Chatham, Massachusetts, providing little information but much emotion about Hurricane Earl as it punches the Outer Banks and then tracks directly towards Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

A better screen is on the computer where the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) website provides much more hurricane information in a fraction of the time. Clearer storm track; probabilities of wind velocities and rain in our area; and explanations of why being on the West side of the hurricane is better. A hurricane is a huge cyclone with winds churning in a counterclockwise direction so that the Eastern side has the most wind and storm surge (as it moves in the direction of the storm) and the Western side has somewhat lower winds. At this point, it appears that Nantucket, our sister (and sometimes rival) island, which sticks further out into the Atlantic, will bear the brunt of the storm more than the Vineyard.

We have been compulsively checking these sources of information since Wednesday every hour or two although any significant changes in forecasting only come about every 12 hours. Even now, about 8 to 10 hours before the storm hits, we are not sure whether it will pass East of Nantucket (so we are on the better West side) or how far; whether we will get sustained hurricane winds (more than 70 mph) or just gusts or only tropical storm winds (e.g. sustained winds of 45-50 mph with gusts in the 60s).

But we knew enough two days ago to be shaken from our summer torpor, our last geopolitical thriller, our kayaking and swimming, to join Islanders here (and our southern neighbors along the Atlantic Coast) in preparing for an autocratic slap from Nature's majesty. We are used to winter snows clogging the streets and airport delays due to thunderstorms, but we are not ready for a roaring monster, with horizontal sheets of rain, raking our home and our island. We are not used to being face to face with an implacable nature that "just is" and doesn't care a whit about our flowers or lawn or trees or boats. It will come blasting past without acknowledging that we puny mortals exist.

So we are checking the generator (we will be among the lucky ones if it works when the electricity inevitably goes out); taking the aluminum motor boat, tandem kayak and dinghy out of the water; moving the cars into the garage; laying out the air mattresses and sleeping bags for a night in the basement; ensuring that there is enough food and water; flashlights and lanterns at the ready. And the modern instruments of

communication, iPhones and iPads juiced up, should we lose power. We're even planning to grill our hot dog supper in early afternoon so we'll have something to eat when we hunker down for the storm.

The giddiness of an unexpected and uncertain adventure is, for us, definitely outweighed by simple fear that our island and our home and the homes of our friends will get whacked (and people might get hurt). Yes, much of this concern is just about "things"---and there is insurance to cover damage. But like so many, we have lived here for decades, and our emotional attachments to this flower bed or that tree or, indeed, to our roof line are so palpable that the pit in our stomachs won't go away.

In 1954, Hurricane Carol gained speed off North Carolina and raced up the coast to wreak horrendous damage on New England, including Martha's Vineyard. There is a famous Alfred Eisenstadt image of boats buffeted by Carol in Menemsha harbor. Today is more than a half century away in preparation. We have been receiving updated Code Red calls from our town of Chilmark and Dukes County warning us to make hurricane preparations (we have!). The Steamship Authority has announced that all ferry service to the mainland will cease early this afternoon (no evacuation for us--the island is too populous and the ferry capacity way too small). The fishing fleet (including some 70 to 100 feet trawlers) has fled from Menemsha Harbor for the safer waters, behind jetty's, in New Bedford, about 20 miles across first Vineyard Sound and then Buzzard's Bay. Emergency shelters are at the ready, including the small wooden Community Center building in Chilmark. The only unresolved issue: what will happen to the bridal dinner tonight and the huge wedding tomorrow which is the talk of the island (supposedly thousands just for flowers had been spent)?

A hurricane racing up the Atlantic coast from the Outer Banks brings back eerie memories of a brush with family disaster 56 years ago this week. The Heineman family--father, mother, sister and I--were finishing a summer of sailing the waters of New England on a 40-foot yawl. They had brought her back to home port on Buzzard's Bay early in the afternoon, with reports that a hurricane would be arriving late the next day. We couldn't decide whether to sleep on the boat or get off and go to Boston. My father decided we should go to Boston. Hurricane Carol accelerated and hit our boat and its harbor in the dead of night on August 30, 1954. After being lashed against other boats and piers, our boat was broken into small pieces. We never knew whether we would have been able to get off in the dark stormy night---or what else might have happened. But that memory----of the incredible power of a storm----remains vivid, particularly on this day.

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