

Night of Fire and Rain

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Originally Published by Kamloops This Week

The night the United States began bombing Baghdad, we were barbequing beef dogs in the United Arab Emirates—or at least trying to.

We were on Muslim turf and Allah knows you can't get any pork nor can you solve centuries old problems by invading a country. We were lucky to get wieners at all, I guess, and as it turned out, we were lucky to have survived that stormy night.

It was March 19, 2003 when the war started; two weeks ago when I left you last.



Photo Paul Linden

You may recall, after risking our lives, running in a lightning storm to the ocean's edge to wash our feet of the previous campers' latrine, we were finally granted a reprieve from the ruins of our day.

As quickly as the storm had blown in, it gusted out, leaving us silent and stunned by the fireside. A couple of beef buns and brewskies later, we were able to laugh at the peril we'd survived.

An eerie calm descended upon the island where we'd struggled to set up camp. The children could run without fear of falling down from the force of fearsome winds, while the anchored boat rocked in rolling waves.

"Can you believe it?" We asked one another. "Did you ever imagine you'd be stuck in a storm, on an island in the Persian Gulf, the night a war started?"

A respectful silence slipped between us as we pondered the shift in world order but we weren't permitted to ponder long. As though swollen with stormy sentiment, the black belly of the sky was about to burst, spewing fire over Iraq and rain over the UAE.

The wind came back around, roaring like a beast, the seas churned, camping articles took flight, and children cried from tents whose pegs had ripped from the

ground like carrots tugged from a garden.

Fighting the forces of nature, we made our way back to the tent, unzipped the flap, and found our kids on their backs, their little feet pressed flat against the ceiling in a desperate attempt to keep it from collapsing in on them.

“Help us,” they cried.

Like the swirling sand thickening the night air, the evening got hazy after that.

We must have slept a little because there are parts that are totally black but I do remember the relentless howl of the wind outside the tent flaps, the sound of sand whipping at the canvas as the sides collapsed.

Morning finally fought off the night, but the wind was too strong to tackle. Our friends were attempting to take down what remained of our camp, struggling to make their way, one cooler at a time, to their boat, now in a bay, not where we left it, slamming up against another watercraft.

We had to be grateful. It might have washed out to sea and we might have been left stranded, a sort of Gilligan’s island in the Gulf.

As my husband and I stumbled from our shelter, a particularly strong gust caught the tent, picking it up and rolling it like a bowling ball down the beach—with us in it.

Tracey tells me she’s still waiting to see something so funny again. Like clothes in a dryer, we tumbled in circles inside the tent as it rolled down the sand.

And then we saw him. Like a savior on four wheels, he came. The old Bedouin drove his ATV into our camp, his dishdasha robe flying behind him. We thought we were being rescued until he began playing charades.

Framing his face with fingers curled into claws, he morphed into a monster. As he scratched at the air we yelled out our best guesses.

“It’s a bird!” We cried.

He pushed his hand toward the ground.

“Small bird!” We tried.

He continued to swat at the air with human claws, biting at invisible demons with shiny, white teeth but it took us a while to get it: A small child was being threatened by a big bird.

I wish I had a photo of my husband perched behind the Bedouin, riding off into the storm on his ATV, to rescue the kids from the cage of Emus they were attempting to pet.

At long last, children safely returned, waist deep in churning ocean, we loaded the boat with all the food we never got to eat, all the gear we never got to use.

But guess what? The battery was dead.

But we weren’t. By evening we were back home, though the same couldn’t be said of soldiers battling a Gulf storm that hasn’t died yet.