

## Janina

By J A Williams

The orange and purple sky she had seen in the morning bode ill for the night, Janina thought, as she walked down toward the lake. She saw Gustave as she neared the shore; he worked on his ancient, tattered net. She smiled at him and stopped to say hello.

“I should get a new one,” he told her.

He had been telling her this since she moved into her houseboat over three years ago. She laughed at the weatherworn old sailor. He gave her a crinkled smile and winked. He had no intention of buying a new net, anymore than he had of retiring.

“Looks like we may be in for a bit of a blow,” she said.

“Yes, it could be a bad one, make sure everything is shipshape and battened down.”

“I will, thank-you and say hi to Sharon for me.”

She walked down the wharf to the middle one of five houseboats. It wasn't huge, but she had almost twelve hundred square feet of living space and the entire roof doubled as a deck. It was plenty of room for one person, in particular when that person spent most of her time at work. She was a corporate lawyer and worked sixty hours a week or more. She was in the office by seven, thermal coffee mug in hand and many days did not get home until eight at night, like today. It was the price of a junior partnership and she was happy to pay it.

Tonight she was a woman on a mission; she had a houseboat to secure for bad weather. She went upstairs to her bedroom, made a quick change out of her low heels, skirt, and blouse, put on a t-shirt, jeans, and a pair of tennis shoes with skid-resistant soles. First, she went outside and inspected her moorings, making sure they were sound and showed little sign of wear. Satisfied the knots were well tied she went inside. She secured all the cupboard doors and made sure there was nothing lying about, which might cause damage if thrown around by the violent rocking high winds could cause. The lake was situated in a long narrow valley. Sometimes in the summer, the winds howled down at over one hundred and eighty miles an hour.

She read for a while and when she was sleepy took the wind-up flashlight, her emergency radio and put them on the chair next to her bed. She climbed in, yawned, and in minutes was asleep, threat or no threat!

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A loud crash woke her; she felt the wind and rain pour through the broken windowpane. She searched for her slippers in the dark and put them on. The alarm clock was black, the power was out and no wonder with this wind! She groped around on the chair near the bed until she found her flashlight. She saw an object on the floor and inspecting it, found it was a small stick. What bad luck! The wind must have picked it up and hurled it through her window. She made her way downstairs to the pantry. She kept some bits of cardboard there and wrapped a piece with plastic wrap and dug the duct tape out of a drawer and went to see what she could do to keep out the elements until she could have the window pane replaced. She managed to get the tape to stick after the third attempt by holding the cardboard against the broken pane and drying the wood around it with wads of paper towels.

She looked at her cell phone to check the time, it was two thirty-three in the morning, and she was wide-awake. She looked out over the far shore of the lake. Both sides were pitch black. She would be awake for some time, so she decided to brave the storm and go out to her shed on the dock and power up the emergency generator. It was small and would not operate more than the fridge and a few lights, but that was better than sitting in the dark until daybreak.

As she got her raincoat out and put on her floppy, wide brimmed rain hat with the chinstrap, a huge gust of wind came up and smashed the houseboat against the dock. She stumbled, and lost her footing, clinging to the doorknob to steady herself. During a moment of calm, she lowered herself to the storage bench to put on her high gumboots rather than chance the possibility of being thrown into the wall or worse. When the wind died down again for a moment, she opened the door and was shocked when something flew past her into the house. With only the poor light of the windup flashlight it had been impossible to tell what it was. She hoped it was nothing more than another branch. She shone the weak light around but could see nothing. 'Tomorrow,' she thought, 'I am going to invest in a better light.'

She made her way down the ramp, straining her wrists and hands to keep a tight grip on the railing. Some of the gusts were strong, perhaps strong enough to blow her off if she was not careful.

She made it to her shed on the dock and unlocked it. She found the primer and pumped it twice, then pushed the start button. It sputtered for ten or fifteen seconds then smoothed out. She turned on the light in the shed to double check that the fuel tank was full. She had twelve hours at most; she hoped the storm would be over by then.

She made her way back to the house over the savage bucking of the ramp. When she got inside, it occurred to her that leaving the porch light on might be helpful to the neighbours. There was also a spotlight on the back porch and she turned that on as well. She looked out the window to check on it and

saw that it was shining straight down. That wouldn't do, she wanted it to shine on the dock where it might help any passers-by.

She went back out, and wrapped her hands around the metal handles she had installed after her first storm, three summers ago. They were within easy reach of one another and bolted to the framing. The gusts were getting stronger and she could feel them tearing at her body as she struggled, slow and cautious, keeping one hand on a handhold as she moved to the next. It seemed like forever but she made it to the spotlight. Each time she reached out to reposition it, a gust would force her to grab hold of the handle with both hands. In the end, waiting for a momentary lull, she jumped up and pushed up the light with her fingertips.

At that instant the thick, corner mooring line of the houseboat next to her, split and slapped into the wall inches from her face. The shock loosened her grip and the wind started to tear her from the porch as another great gust pounded her body. She jammed an arm through the handle, fighting against the wrench of the wind.

She could see the corner of the houseboat next-door pull away from its mooring. The mooring line on the other corner of her neighbour's houseboat and the lighter emergency rope in the centre, were now all that held it.

In the dim light that bled from the spotlight she could see the mooring bit where the line had broken loose and saw the occupants come outside with a bright flashlight. They held tight to the handholds on the side of their houseboat; he motioned his wife to stay put as he made his way to the corner. They were a few feet away from each other. She called to him. He held his hand behind his ear and shook his head. She yelled again at the top of her voice.

"DO YOU HAVE A SPARE MOORING ROPE?"

"NO!"

"I'VE GOT ONE IN MY SHED, I'LL SEE IF I CAN GET IT TO YOU!"

"THANKS!" He yelled back.

She made her way back to the ramp and wrapped her arm around the railings as she walked, stooping low as she made her way to her shed. When she opened the door, the wind slammed it into her face and knocked her down. She sat there dazed. Minutes passed, before she could crawl to the door and lean against it to stop it from slamming open and shut. When she stumbled into the shed, she struggled against the wind to close it. Twice she lost her grip on it. The door banged with such ferocity she had trouble getting a hold of it to pull it shut.

Coiled in one corner were two heavy mooring ropes and one lighter emergency rope for the middle of her houseboat. She knew she could never toss the heavy rope, so tied the thinner one to it while she had light and relative comfort. The two coils together were too much for her to carry so she dragged them to the door. Their weight would anchor her against the wind, she thought. She slammed and latched the door behind her and turned toward the water and her neighbours.

As she struggled with the ropes, an intense gust pushed against her. She pushed her body into it to stay upright. As soon as its force lessened, she stumbled, and tripped on the ropes. They were wrenched from her arms. Before she could regain her footing, the winds gusted again and as she twirled her arms to recover, she was forced backward, step-by-step, struggling to regain her balance. She felt the storm decree that this was to be her end, her demise, and her final failure.

“NOOOOOOOO!” She screamed at the wind.

The backs of her legs were forced against the low railing and she toppled into the lake’s cool, menacing waters.

She bobbed to the surface sputtering. She kicked herself toward the only visible light. The shadow she saw was the dock, she felt it as she groped. She managed to grab onto the deck’s railing and was relieved for a moment. She was not going to die tonight. Her gumboots started to fill with water and began to weigh her down along with her waterlogged clothing. “I won’t die,” she screamed.

She took a deep breath, then another, struggling to gain control. Then holding to the dock with adrenaline infused fingers, she began to remove the left boot with her right foot. When the left boot was off, she pushed off the other. She was still heavy, but the difference was enormous. She bobbed several times, pulling herself up with raw fingers and then swung herself up with all her strength. She managed to get her stomach and one leg up over the railing. She heaved herself with one last enormous effort, and sprawled onto the dock.

She lay there, taking rapid, deep breaths. When her brain cleared, she remembered her neighbours, and her mission. She got to her feet and as she reached the coils of rope, she collapsed onto that which that could be the salvation of her neighbours.

‘Who are these people to me?’ She thought in her pain and exhaustion. ‘Why should I continue, why should I not just lie here and rest? Damn the whole world!’

She was not sure if minutes or hours passed while she lay on the ropes feeling sorry for herself, but she knew she could not leave her neighbours to the elements. If they died tonight, it would not be for her lack of trying to help! Crawling, she dragged the coil of ropes to the mooring post, which she could see in

the dim light of the spotlight. She arrived and collapsed onto the deck, unable to move. She needed to rest; she needed to sleep. God, she needed her bed!

Janina was soaked and the gale chilled her to the bone. There was no part of her tortured body that was free of the dull pounding and stabbing pains of her journey. How did it start, why did it begin, was it hours ago or days ago? Her befuddled mind could not grasp the answers.

She was not sure how long she lay there, but in the end, the dire need of her neighbours forced her to her wobbly feet.

She staggered into the light of the spotlight she'd redirected toward the dock and sighed, the dim glow gave no more than enough light to see. First, she took the heavy mooring rope and wound it twice around the mooring's sturdy post leaving lots of extra to hold onto and control the tautness.

"I'M GOING TO THROW YOU THE ROPE!"

Her neighbour shook his head. Realising that with the greater distance he could no longer hear her, she twisted the end of the smaller rope into loops for weight and began to swing it around until it became clear to him what she was doing.

Her first attempt was an abysmal failure. The coiled end of the rope flew right back and fell behind her. She sank to her knees, demoralized by the failure. She then saw that the couple's ramp was torn from its dock. They were stranded. While on her knees, she heard the gusts of wind. They were no longer uniform, in either intensity or direction. The wind first seemed to come from one direction and a few moments later from another. She struggled to her feet once more and tried again. She timed her toss of the rope to when the wind blew toward the houseboat. Thrice more she failed, but on the fourth try, the rope made it the three yards and landed at the old man's feet. He scrambled after it in a belated effort and it fell into the lake. Janina tried again, and again, and again. The last throw landed right at his feet. He trapped it with his foot, and then held it up in triumph.

He pulled it until he had the heavy mooring line in his hands, pulled it taut, and lashed it to the sturdy mooring bit.

She felt some slack in the line as the wind changed direction. She pulled with all her might. The line tautened again as the winds swirled and changed direction. Another gust slackened the rope and she pulled it until it became tight again. After an hour, an exhausted Janina made fast the line hoping she would never need to move again. The houseboat was now tight against the dock and in the subsiding winds and the morning light, her neighbours made it to the dock and she took them to her houseboat to sit and rest.

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Janina was no gourmet chef. She could burn water, toast, and eggs. She instead made coffee, at which she excelled and put out some whole-wheat saltines with canned tuna.

“Rrrreowww,” she heard. A large skinny tabby appeared in the kitchen. This must be the creature that tore through her door as she opened it earlier this morning.

“It’s been hanging around for days,” the neighbour lady told her. “I don’t think it has a home.”

Janina got up, went to the pantry, and retrieved her last can of tuna; she popped it open and placed it on the floor. At seven, Gustave and Sharon stopped by to see how she and her houseboat fared the storm. They all went outside to check for damage.

At eight, her guests left. She needed a shower and food, but neither held her attention, as did the soft cushions of the couch. She sank onto it feeling enveloped by its warmth and sat staring at the intimidating stairs where her shower and bed waited. Within moments, her eyes began to close. ‘Just for a minute,’ she thought, lying down. She tucked a cushion under her head. As she drifted off, she heard the soft purring of the tattered orange tabby and felt his warmth as he curled up against her stomach. She smiled and fell fast asleep and dreamt of warm beaches and scrawny tabbies.

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