

DESTRUCTION, GENEROSITY, BEATINGS, ROBBERY, DESPARATION, FAITH, HOPE, LOVE, FRAUD, CHARITY, HUMAN CONNECTIONS AND SURVIVAL. A SUPERSTORM SANDY STORY

SANDY DAY ZERO

A Survivor's 7 Day Account of a Superstorm

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(The following journal entries written during Sandy October 2012, with transitional text written in 2014. As of October 2022, It has now been 10 years since SuperStorm Sandy. *The following words are not edited or journalistically smooth on a professional level. They are a raw, realtime rough draft account which may create confusion in people and places as there is no foreshadowing or background, but the purveying ethos and emotion of the times are conveyed. When I have time, the full, comprehensive, edited book will be written to literary code. However, I am releasing these passages now in the essence of prevailing Hurricane disasters in time to help assuage survivor's anxieties as well as to present an account for those to understand who may not comprehend the magnitude of the emotional and physical impact of an apocalyptic disaster.*)

Seven hundred and twenty nine days. That's how long it's been since Day Zero. That day my life turned inside out and upside down, and never, ever, would be even remotely what I'll consider normal again. Superstorm Sandy hit the Jersey Shore directly on October 29, 2012. No, it wasn't a Hurricane like Andrew or Katrina with category 4 to 5 status, it was a Category 1, but it was evil. This storm had devious help to make it a storm of a century and more. A low pressure system off the coast, a high pressure coming down from the arctic, and Hurricane all met on the same day at the same moment, during full moon peak high fall tides, and right when the eye of the storm crossed over, the high tides peaked, ushering in an 8 foot surge like the bottom dropped out of the earth and the tsunami rushed in, enveloping and destroying dreams and hopes. I was 38 years old at the time, no wife, no kids, and lived in my house year round as local in the Camp Osborn section of Normandy Beach for 16 years. I am an outdoor writer who mainly writes about saltwater fishing, and living a hundred yards from the crashing waves definitely helped me keep in direct tune with the ocean's whims and treasures and kept me dialed into the pulse of my livelihood of a fishing writer. I've taken tens of thousands of photographs, written 15 years encompassing tens of thousands of articles and columns on this stretch of beach and in my world travels fishing far off destinations, but there's a bond among locals who take pride in our life on our own beach existence, we know the tides, seasons, and what February is like on the beach like no other tourists can know. This is the Jersey Shore and it is not a tourist destination, it is home. You may not like someone in the local community during the offseason, you may argue at a bar, or not like how somebody said something to you at the grocery store, but differences get pushed aside during the summer when the bennies come down and we, all the locals, all bond together as one. When a massive destructive force comes to town, the same bonding comes forth, regardless of differences. Since Day

Zero I've seen and felt pain and anguish like I've never known, not just from me, but from faces I can't even put a name to. I've also seen some of the most beautiful and wondrous actions and spirit that the human being is possibly capable of, and even more into the realm of angelic from survivors and caretakers alike. Sandy brought our already tight community together, but it also ripped life as we knew it completely and unrepairably apart forever. Right here, right now, what you about to read, isn't a sob story, a Pulitzer prize winning book or an affirmation of any kind, it's simply a first hand, real-time account of loss, frustrations, love, anger and hope of Superstorm Sandy. Here's what happened, from my point of view, the first 7 days of Superstorm Sandy.

October 25, 2012 – three days before Day Zero

I was surf fishing, like I usually do. The surf is beautiful, glassy 2 to 3 foot, clean and clear aquamarine, and sunny skies. Casting clams off Mantoloking beach, a mile north of my house. Always fish here in late October and cast out to a submerged wreck on a dead low tide to catch blackfish from the beach. The only true way to find the spot is to line up the 1057 house with the whale weathervane chimney on the houses behind me and triangulate it to get an idea where that wreck lies on the ocean floor. It's not the usual type of surf fishing, it's an oddity and a secret that I never write about in my newspaper columns and magazine stories as an outdoor writer, because I want to protect my spot and my fishery. The tides were so far out on the dead low because of the full moon influence, and the tides are super high on the peak for the same reason. Full moon is only three days away. But I dialed in the blackfish, one after another and it was probably one of the shining moments in my fishing career. I knew I was going to keep coming back to this little secret spot and have it all to myself for years to come. Today was a good day.

October 26, 2012

Paying attention to Sandy now. Looks like it's a category 3 off the Carolinas and doing a bit of damage. Models have it going any which way still, no real direction to commit on. But a few of the paths have it leading directly across Jersey. We had Hurricane Irene roll through last year and Hurricane Bob hit us direct a year prior to that around this time and all the media blew it up like the shitstorm of the century was gonna hit, but it ended up being some heavy rains, local coastal flooding and some heavy winds that knocked down a few power lines, ripped off some shingles. So, what about this Sandy one? Oh, ok, another panic drummed up my Jim Cantore the Weather Channel in ridiculous puffy storm red jacket hanging onto his hat in sideways rain, s along with the rest of the media's viewer and advertiser driven content, beating the drum of panic once again. Besides, no storm has hit Jersey like this since Andrew in 92 in Camille in 69, and even then, it was all about flooding, some lost houses, but not the end of the world. Sandy? Just another panic drum being beat again.

October 27, 2012

Sandy just changed her course in an oddly weird way, like some hand of fate grabbed it by the hair and yanked it to do a Beeline right into the middle of New Jersey. Those tracking models on TV now show plenty of red lines going right through the Jersey Coast. The models showed a near 100% direct hit now. People are packing up and leaving the Barrier Island. Plywood is coming out and being nailed to all the windows of storefronts and beachfront mansions now. I walked up Mantoloking Beach to my blackfish

spot and all the beachfront mansion owners have a line of people taking the dune fences down, I dunno why, maybe so as not to lose all of it when the waves come up to eat them, saving them a few hundreds of dollars, maybe a thousand bucks. No doubt though the seas are getting angry. White capped, strong 8 to 10 foot crushers now, 25 to 35 knot easterly winds pushing the spray onshore, sand kicking up in my face making it hard to keep my eyes open. Something isn't right.

Sunday, October 28, 2012

12 noon

Woke up to brutal howling winds, deathly gray skies, and a feeling in my inner ear like they were going to pop and drop out. Time for a Hurricane Party! All the local boys and girls love when the seas get nasty, because it's time to get our pirate on and start drinking ridiculous amounts of rum and beer. We've been through this scenario before dozens of times, as the seas tongue tastes the dunes, licking them away piece by piece, sometimes half the dunes can be wiped out like in the February Blizzard of 2003, but we always know we've got that protection, and nothing in history has ever told us different. Its only noon, but time to get my drink on, headed up to Pathmark in Point Pleasant since all the local island business are closed for the off season, and packed my "hurricane survival kit" which consisted of a flock of bananas, two handles of Captain Morgan rum and a 12-inch Bubba Blade killer knife, just in case I needed to fend anybody off that may try and loot after the storm. It was kind of a joke. When I got to Pathmark, the place was absolutely slammed like the summertime, but it was strangely eerie, the shelves were almost totally barren and you couldn't find any water anywhere, I guess the media did a good job of putting the eternal scare in everybody's head that this was the Big One and you better get stocked up and supplied now or die from thirst or starvation! So I couldn't get water, and all they had left was bananas. The rum was from the liquor store which of course is open during storm days, and the knife was mine. I threw the "survival kit" in the back of my Jeep and headed along the barrier island to my home, about 15 minutes away cracking a few pops along the way. Got home, threw the stuff on the kitchen counter, took one of the handles of Morgan and walked up to the beach, fighting the 60 knot direct in your face easterly winds leaning at a 45 degree angle, because I had to see what the ocean looked like. These are the times you feel truly alive, when Mother Nature is spitting right in your face with salt spray and vicious breath, and coming over the dunes I saw what looked like the ocean about to erupt in a vile projectile vomit gut wrenching puke that was going to destroy the map. I felt it. It was like nothing I have ever felt before. My ears dropped, my eyes went big, then squinty and little, and for the first time in my life, I truly, really honestly felt like something big beyond me, beyond life, monumental and serious, was going to happen. I kind of steeled up straight and my joy from drinking rum was pushed down and smoked out. I felt an onslaught coming. I've seen the oceans moods millions of times throughout the years, every single day as a matter of fact, and at no time ever had I seen the way it was pushing up into the dunes and absolutely ripping, clawing and tearing at them in such a way that I felt like the coast was being raped, killed right in front of me. It was that strong. I knew at that moment, that this was something different. Strangely enough, I wanted to ride it out and that was still my mindset. I walked back to the house and grabbed my camera to head back up and take a few photos of the area, because in my heart, I knew something, I wasn't sure what, wasn't going to ever be the same.

3pm

There's a mandatory evacuation order directly from Governor Christie that everybody must leave the barrier island or face charges. Cops were going door to door checking if people left and if you demanded to stay to write your social security number on your wrist in black permanent marker so they could identify your body if it washed up somewhere. This shit just got kind of serious. Police are coming door to door checking on houses that look occupied and forcibly taking people out of them to leave the island now. Finished taking photos. My mom just called telling me she really, really didn't want me to stick it out. I said I still plan on it, it's not that bad and it only looks like it's going to be a Cat 1 hurricane. It's a point of pride with locals riding out a storm, for reasons of balls respect number one, but also to help anyone around that may need it. Time for a drive to see what Mantoloking and Bay Head look like and take a few more pics. I drove up and stopped by Mantoloking where the people were removing their fences. Luckily they did, because not only was the area where the fences were completely gone, but the water already ate up 20 feet into the dune and was pushing through the last 20 feet of it. I jumped in my Jeep and sped up to Bay Head, the traffic lights were already all out of power, transformers were zinging their hum from being knocked out, and stop signs were vibrating like pistons in a car engine. I put the Jeep in park in the middle of Ocean Avenue and jumped out on North Avenue to walk up the wooden dune walkway to see the ocean in Bay Head. All I saw was nothing like a nervous ocean, but a full on insane frothing, white beast that was pushing forward like an army, sending haymaker waves to pummel the bastion of the coast. I saw the 20 foot high wooden walkway next to me which I just walked over, get pulled away by one wave and sucked into the ocean. I hopped scotched waves and clung to the bulwark of boulders that lined the beachfront homes for protection, not to be sucked out with the receding flush of backwater. This was too dangerous. Timing the waves, I jumped off the rock and ran over the sand to the other walkway hopped up past the three foot of broken stairs and climbed back up to the top of the dune. Looking over the ocean from the perch all I saw was wooden docks, pilings, telephone poles, debris from all makes and models, churning and breaking popping up and down in the roiling surf. A research team from Texas was there to gauge the in speed and isobar pressure on top of the dunes; they obviously heard this was going to be a storm unlike any other. I sat back in my Jeep for a second and thought what I was going to do. I thought I would have to go home and put all my important personal belongings in the attic, because this ocean may just flood the island to some capacity and my stuff better be up high where the water can't get it. I decided to drive the 10 minutes back to my house, opened the door and grabbed all my computers, hard drive, cameras, photographs, fishing rods and reels, anything I could physically put up there to protect it from any possible flooding. I felt pretty good about that. At worst, I'd have 2 to 3 foot of flooding in my house, but I can get a new couch or dinner table, so no worries, so long as the personal stuff doesn't get hit.

5PM

Great. All the good stuff is finally in the attic. That's when Matty Monagas pulled up. Matty is a local boy, 55 years old, white hair and mustache, drinkin man and masonry landscaper who has been through his share of hurricanes as a lifelong local.

"What's up Matty, you ready for this one man?!"

“Yeah, they’re saying this one is gonna be bad man.”

“You gonna ride it out? I’m staying.”

Yeah, I think I might too, but the cops just came by and told me to grab a magic marker and write my social security number on my wrist,” Matt laughed with a sense of uneasiness.

The Governor already declared a state of emergency; the island was to be mandatorily evacuated by 4 PM. It was 3 PM on Sunday, October 28.

“Want some rum?” I brought the bottle out and Matty took a long swig, smiled and gave the bottle back.

“I dunno Nick, I already went down to Ocean Beach and the road is flooded from the tide, I may have to get off the island for this one.”

Knowing Matty was planning on leaving didn’t sit well with me, he rode out every storm for the last 55 years, but this one was getting inside his head.

“Matty man, I think I’m gonna go too. Something doesn’t seem right with this one man.”

Matty's face went blank and his blue eyes looked down to the ground. “Yeah, everybody I talked to is leaving, I don’t want to be the only guy here if something goes down and I can’t get food or beer.”

We took another swig from the bottle and I said to Matt “Ok bro, stay in touch, I’ll see you in a few days I guess.”

Matt jumped in his white Ford F-150 rusted out and motored off to his house down the street.

My mother called my crying, frantic. “I want you to leave the island now Nicky! “ As a son, you can never, ever deny your mother when she is crying and honestly, I felt in my bones that it was the right thing to do. I wanted to stay, but I wasn’t going to make my mother worry beyond belief. Everything I had of importance was in the attic, good. I packed a knapsack with a pair of jeans, two t shirts, an extra pair of socks and a pair of fishing slicks and rubber boots to walk around the waters as the storm came. I also grabbed my laptop knowing that if I couldn’t get back to my house for two or three days, I could do my work and make my newspaper deadlines from Shannon’s house, where I was to stay for the night. I grabbed the handle of Morgan rum, and as I was about to leave through my front door, I turned around and said to my house. “You take care buddy, hold it down, I’ll be back.” I took a big breath, and it wasn’t a confident one, or a consoling one, it was like I just breathed in death. I knew it. I really did. I turned around and reached up high to kiss my hand and slap the Jesus cross I had hanging over my front door, and said, “see ya later bud.” Turned around, walked out that front door, locked the house, and jumped in the Jeep, put it in reverse and headed north to get off the island. I was headed to my ex-girlfriends house, Shannon about 15 minutes north in Brielle, over the 35 bridge and off the island, as they were closing down the bridges now. I drove through a section of Bay Head where the ocean just barely broke through the dunes and started rushing down to meet the bayside. My jeep ran through about 2 feet of saltwater for a good hundred yards. This shit was getting real, quickly.

6 pm

Got to Shannon's house, and the shit is really coming down now, winds are knocking down power lines, all traffic lights are out on Route 35, and the drone of air raid sirens permeates the air's eerie silence. I pulled into Shannon's and told her I was going to head back over the bridge to the Point side because I wanted to take pictures, this was going to be like something I may never experience in my lifetime again. Before I left the house the Weather Channel showed the eye of Sandy bearing down on us, in a direct path, only about 80 miles away now, and that the seas were 30 to 40 foot onshore with sustained winds of 90 mph plus. They charted a barometric pressure of 940 millibars, the lowest ever recorded by any Atlantic hurricane above North Carolina in recorded history, meaning things were about to get real mean. I went back over the bridge and now the roads were permanently closed off for a mile inland, nobody could get back near the beach. I parked my car at the Dunkin Donuts and decided to walk in. Rain was spitting in my face sideways, it was tough to even walk straight, but I passed Spikes fish market, then the co-op, and there was some coastal flooding already, about 1 to 2 foot, that I waded through, I really wanted to get pictures of the inlet in all its mad glory, and to see if Jenkinsons was breaking bomb like waves like it was D-Day. I kept walking and finally got to Jenkinsons to take a few photos, and what I saw was gnarly and destructive, as 20 foot waves were now breaking halfway into the inlet area, and I couldn't even get near it as the surge began to push up and over the inlet walls. I knew something bad was going down. I turned back around and jogged back to Ocean Ave when I saw something that struck me as deadly serious. Where I walked past through before on clear pavement was now 4 feet of water and rushing in. I looked around and saw a beach cruiser bike locked to a no parking sign. I broke it off the lock and hopped on it, stealing it, stopping near the inlet, but could only get within 300 yards as the rushing surge was already flooding into businesses and houses. I took a couple photos and a quick video then concerned myself with my life, and started pedaling out, a mile ride to the bridge and where my jeep was. All the roads I walked on an hour before were swamped with 3 to 4 feet of water. I kept pedaling through the rising tide, having to jump off and walk through the water with my stolen bike, jumping back on and finally getting back to my car, navigating between houses, over crab pots and avoiding washing debris until I got to my Jeep, slamming the stolen bike in the back of it, and speeding off over the bridge. I told Shannon there was going to be some serious things happening tonight. The sun went down and it was dark. But that was only the start of the darkness as the power finally went dead in Brielle around 6 pm and we broke out the candles to last the night out. And it was just about to get ugly.

Actual journal entry – October 28, 2012

At my beach taking pictures, waves already up to the dunes, way before storm going to hit, looks like a three day nor'easter already hit and nothing has begun, talked to Keith was bringing rum out the car door and clothes, prepared to stay, told him I was staying, talked to Jon Harvey, he said he was heading to Toms place in Philly, walked up Dennis and his family were already vacated, went to dunes took shots of the place to have documentation of what it was like expecting maybe half dunes to be gone. Took shots of T Bird too. Walked back down some guy bulldozing surf sand up on the dunes, saw Brezo's car there parked, Ellie was staying I hear. Everybody else gone. Packed up took shots in bay head and such Texas tech team there to check wind speeds, walkways already getting ripped off 4 PM. Decided to head back channel 7 news there on North Ave, put my rods from porch inside the house after thinking they may get flooded out or front porch may get ripped off, also cracked bottle of captain Morgan and had two tall boys there. Packed it up it was 5 pm after mandatory evacuation at four, sirens sounding and

such, police knocking on doors asking to fill out paperwork if you were going to stay write your social security number on your arm. Headed north to Shannon's Manasquan winds

Sunday night

WENT TO WALK TO INLET POINT SIDE WINDS HOWLING 50 TO 60 KNOTS NOW, RAINING HARD.

Stayed at Shannon's, winds blowing hard power went out at 6 pm high winds blowing trees around howling now the storm has come sandy is here on the mainland, high tides at 8 pm full moon. Destroying

October 29, 2012 – DAY ZERO - midnight

Night time set in, darker than any normal night without power, because it felt like we had demons cackling, screaming, outside trying to get into the house. You could hear trees cracking, transformers exploding, a steady, mean, hum trying to push through the doors as the windows rattled and breezes that slipped through the cracks blew out the candles. Staying with Shannon, her 17 year old son Kyle, and our shared dog, a spunky 5 year old black labby named Abby. We all had each other to rely upon and we all felt the real, genuine need that we may have to all rely upon each other for real. By midnight, things were wicked. I took a flashlight and shouldered open the front door to see any wreckage outside. I saw 30 year old pine trees splayed across the road, cedar trees bending and breaking as the neighbors tree across the street cracked and collapsed on his garage in front of my eyes. I told Shannon and Kyle to stay away from the windows and stay under the beams of the house. Surprisingly, my internet access on my Iphone was still running and I kept receiving Facebook messages from friends around the world on how I was doing. I responded as best as I could to let them know I was alright for the moment. Then at around 3 AM, I received some texts from a local who lived near me, Steve Brezo, who talked to my neighbor Richie who rode out the storm. He said "The ocean just broke through, the dunes are gone, a transformer exploded by the Thunderbird and started the fire. Everything is burning." That was all where my house stood. I wouldn't call it panic but a true and honest moment of "what the fuck is going on" moment happened right then and there. A time/paradigm shift in that a new reality was forming for me. A breach was one thing, but a fire too? I held onto hope that neither was to come near my house. There's no way this kind of hurt could be put on me. My little house may have been little, but she was strong. Then Brezo forwarded the video of the breach at Kupper Avenue, a hundred yards south. It showed a raging torrent of rapids that already demolished the dunes and it looked like somebody pulled the plug out of the bathtub and all the water was focused and funneled going down, or in this case, inland to meet with the bayside only 200 yards away. Right then and there, something changed, a switch flipped in my head, and things started forming a real ground in my psyche. I told Shannon that the ocean broke through and she tried to calm me, it may not be so bad, the eye of Sandy just went through Brigantine about 60 miles south, and high tide was to come around 8 AM. That didn't calm me, because I knew the killer part of any hurricane is in the northeast quadrant, where it sucks all the juice out of its beastly soul and spits it out. It was right then and there where all three pressure systems would collide and it happened between 3 am and 10 am, right at Ground Zero where my house stood. At 4 am, I kept texting Brezo, then Betty Ann, then Matty Monogas, to see if I could hear anything back on what was happening on the island. Silence. Communication just....stopped. I was to receive no more texts through

the night and I really began to worry, not only for my house, but for any of my friends who might have defied the Governors orders and stayed through. Things got serious very quickly. An ungodly rumble punched us all in the house through our bodies, then an explosion, and a rumbling quake that shook the house we stood in. Shannon and Kyle looked at me in wonderment as to whether the house just got crushed or not. I ran to the back door where I thought I heard the noise coming from and shone the flashlight and saw the 150 year old oak tree uprooted and fallen across the entire span of her backyard, crushing the fences, missing the house only 20 yards away. The moment of terror hit in for everybody and I tried to calm everybody down to stay put under the house beams at the strongest points. Another monstrous crack and in the front yard, the elm tree snapped in two and fell parallel to the house once again, missing the house by a miracle. I could only think of what was going on down by my home with this kind of force ripping through the mainland a mile in. Tornadic winds kept howling on. I felt exhausted, but kept up to insure Shannon, Kyle and Abby were ok, as I told them to try and get some rest, because it was going to be a long few days ahead for all I knew. My phone went dead with communication, nobody, none of my lifelines on the island were communicating anymore. Radio silence. My heart was pumping with adrenaline, my mind consumed with thoughts that I've never thought before about my life. I laid my head on the couch, under a house beam, with Abby at my side and closed my eyes for an hour and a half.

Actual journal entry from that night.

MONDAY

PEOPLE SENDING MESSAGES ON FACEBOOK. LEFT SHANNONS TUESDAY MORNING TO TRY TO GET ON ISLAND. Apocalypse. DRIVING THROUGH POINT BEACH GOT ENTREANCE OVER TRAAIN tracks blocked off, can't get into bay head, doubled back to go on bay aver got to bridge aver completely impassable with floodwaters, went back to 88 bridge, got onto route 70 trying to go Mantoloking bridge, police roadblock at route 88 and 70 can't get anywhere into near the area 5 mile radius, national guard got everything shut down sirens all over waking up at Shannon's to air raid sirens. Where is everybody from my home? No power no cell phones, no internet so went to Jamie's, stopped in to have a beer at 12 pm or so and he had some

Brezo told me he heard 12 houses were on fire from the camp, Richie said he could see them but Lavallette couldn't get in because of the floodwaters they said. Word has it camp Osborne wiped off the map, said the fire burned it all down. Then saw the video

October 30, 2012

5:30 am

Splintered sunlight sharded through the pane glass front window, and I awoke. The winds were a slight hum now, not a howl, and I went outside to feel what is usually a clean up breeze on the beach after a storm, a mild westerly wind pushing everything out to sea. The clouds were scattered and white and bright blue skies lay above all of God's green earth. I opened the front door and all I saw was – destruction. Power lines were down every hundred feet on the road, snapping and hissing, there were

more trees down snapped and busted than there were standing. A feeling of emptiness pervaded the nethersphere and everybody felt it. Neighbors were helping each other remove entire trees and limbs from rooftops, over garages, off cars. I sat for a second and wondered, what the hell is happening down at my house? I had no time to worry. I had to help out people right here right now. In a stupefied daze I began pulling trees off of cars and out of the streets to let emergency vehicles access the immediate area. There was no power anywhere. Serious talk began about regulating the consuming of food and keep the refrigerator door shut to keep the cool in and the food fresh, we didn't know how long it would be until power was restored as the entire infrastructure was wiped out. I helped all I could with Shannon's neighbors but then triage came through and I had to focus on what was going on at my house, as I held onto hope everything I ever knew lasted out the storm. I pulled the last remaining trees branches off Shannon's car and wiped my hands. It was noon and I told Shannon I am going to try and get on the island to see what happened and would be back. I jumped into my Jeep and from that moment on, sheer tragedy hit me straight to the spine in my soul.

NOON

There's a time when you realize the system is broken down and there is no law anymore. We hit the Apocalypse. I put the Jeep into gear and started weaving down the street avoiding monstrously smashed trees, seething power lines, cars, in attempt to navigate to Route 35 southward where my home was. It was physically impossible going only a half mile south. All access to the coastline was completely shut off. I put plan B into action, and wanted to circumnavigate the outside way on Route 70, hoping to connect with Mantoloking Road to access the bridge to the island there about 15 miles away. When I finally got to the Route 70 area, what normally takes 10 minutes after a two hour slow meander, I was completely stopped in my tracks. A 10 mile quarantine shutdown was put around the inland area of the barrier island. Stopped. I had nowhere to go. There was no law at this time, so I drove over a few lawns, some curbs and sidewalks and stopped the Jeep in a parking lot to attempt to text Brezo, Betty and Matty, whomever I could access. Cell phones were up, but static ridden and in and out. Waiting an hour in some parking lot, a few texts came back from Betty Ann and Brezo. They said they heard there was a fire and they heard some houses were still standing. They heard the surge came over the island and swept everything away. They said there was a new quarter mile wide inlet at the old Mantoloking Bridge where my house was near. The new inlet was pouring in with houses and debris and destructions. I didn't know what was happening or what to believe or not. Service went down and I called my buddy Jamie Heckle whose house was a half mile away. He was able to pick up and I drove an hour ride for a half mile to get to his house and sit down to assess the situation. Jamie lives with his wife, Dee, two children, River 5 and Raven 8 and his weimeraner dog Poe. His neighborhood, albeit 8 miles inland was a disaster zone with the same trees and power lines and telephones crisscrossing the entire landscape. People were outside their homes checking in on neighbors and the elderly, and everybody had a sense of pure seriousness on their faces. I walked in and both Dee and Jamie hugged me immediately and asked if I was ok. I said yes, and asked them the same courtesy. There was no real time for niceties because it was about 3 pm by now. Raven and River were running around like kids do and Jamie talked to them sternly stressing the importance of what was going on. They were clean out of power. It was wintry cold out. He was already in survival mode, rationing food in the fridge, looking to get firewood as

it was about 38 degrees out, and gathering candles and flashlights to fend for the next few days, so he thought. It was time for me to help however I could. I had to put my concerns on the back burner. Jamie and I quickly grabbed the ax and started chopping firewood, while Dee went over to her parents across the street to prepare any kind of meal, taking the perishables out first to eat. Jamie and I whacked up the wood when I heard a rumble up above me in the sky. I dropped the ax for a second and stared up skyward dumbfounded to see three Blackhawk helicopters above me in formation, as I heard President Obama and Governor Christie were coming in to assess the situation, and this was them. I don't know what they thought while flying overhead, but I was to know in my near future what they saw. I got back to the business at hand. I kind of looked back down at the ground and motivated to get back to the business of chopping wood because that's what needed to be done. There was no internet up and running now. Everything went kind of black for the rest of the day and night, and I laid down on the couch, curled up after a meal of Shrimp Scampi and Chicken wings, as we ate the perishables first, in retrospect, I suppose it was a meal fit for a king. I closed my eyes around 3 am. When I woke up at 6 am, what was to come blew my mind further than anything I could have possibly imagined in all my years of existence.

Actual journal entry from that day, I must've erased some of it, because it ends abruptly

Tuesday night

With kids chilling started fire, getting the first video of Blackhawk helicopter flying over the war zone, absolutely shocked, camp Osborne was obliterated, geysers of fires, going on. This was the (end)

October 31, 2012 – Halloween

6 AM

The weird thing about being awake all the time in a constant state of shock is that you don't know where days begin and where they end. There is no time. There is no real reality. Everything seems blurred and dreamlike and buzzing all the time. The constant drones of air raid sirens, ambulance and fire engine siren turbines, total destruction at every turn and eye spot, completely numb you into a state of war. You begin to make the move inward and go into default mode. There is no time to think, just to react at the immediate situation at hand. Like a soldier. You help. You fight. You survive. But you don't think or dwell or even rationalize. I woke up at 5:30 am and immediately started gathering fallen trees and cutting them up for firewood. It was too freakin cold the night before even with a raging fire. 37 degree nights without power or heat are not fun and Jamie had not just me to care for, but his family and I was a part of it. After we secured enough wood for a good week, Jamie and I decided to take a walk into Bricktown, because you couldn't drive anywhere as most of the roads were shut down, along with all the business and gas stations for now. We walked two miles to Brennan Marine? And this marina lays on Kettle Creek about 8 miles inland. All the 40 foot sport yachts were stacked on top of each other like cordwood from the back creek tidal surge. That surge reached this far inland? I thought. Hundreds of people were walking the major highways and roads like some weird Mad Max trip, occasional camouflaged military trucks rumbling through, ambulances and sirens omnipresent. I saw people taking pictures of the destruction inland. Everybody was out and about chatting it up like they

went through something fierce, but not close enough to touch them with the hand of fate. I knew in my soul, my hand of fate was going to be far worse, and I feel selfish for thinking this, but I felt anger towards them, they were taking pictures of destruction and debris inland, and I didn't know whether or not my life was dead as I knew it or not on the island. Then, walking down the middle of a normally bumper to bumper highway, I saw three teenage kids walking down to Forge Pond with fishing rods in hand, and all my anger went away right then and there. So what? I thought. So what if people are taking pictures and getting a story to tell their friends or kids or whomever? Those kids are out there now and they are going fishing, damn the fucking storm! I felt a little sense of relief for once that even in the greatest challenges of life, normalcy comes through again and my faith in true happiness is justified. Yet still, we had no television, no internet, nothing to tell me any idea if I had anything left of my life. Jamie and I walked back to his house and put a lunch together of Fruity Pebbles, Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a few leftover beers, and some TV dinners with chopsteak, peas and asparagus. I decided it was time to finally take a shower and feel human again. As I stripped down naked, I turned on the cold, rushing water, and let it run over me, but not too long, because there was no heat that reached the bathroom from the fire, got out, and began to wipe myself off. I then looked into the mirror. And it all hit me right then and right there. I fucking broke down. I broke like I've never been broken before. I tried to keep all my shit together for so long over the last three days, the unknowing yet of what my fate was, the knowing that it probably wasn't not only good, but that it was death as I knew my beautiful life once was, and I got hit hard. I cried. I sobbed, and I looked in the mirror and said to myself incredulously. "WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON???!!" It was the moment that shock was surpassed and I let the reality set in to internalize and absorb finally. I sobbed like a baby, tears running down my eyes, seeing the blood in my eyeballs for the first time from the stress, and I cried for a good two minutes but then realized, sitting there naked, that work needed to be done. I blew the snots out of my nose into the sink, wiped myself off, put on the same clothes I just had on, because that's all I had left, and walked out the bathroom door, out the front door, and joined Jamie to chop some more wood.

Actual Journal entry from that day

Wednesday

All day was zombieland. Dee and Jamie and kids went to their in-laws for a second, and I went in the bathroom to shower. I broke. Looked in the mirror with some blood in my eye and tears down my face. Not about why this happened, but about the missing for the nostalgia I lost, like watching yourself die over and over and not being able to do anything. Can't get into island, no access, waiting and wanting to know if I have any remnants to search out, fishing rods, reels, photos? Anything. But can't get in a constant thousand deaths over and over and can't do anything about getting in to see for closure. All power out at Jamie's, ran out of food, no heat, 40 degree nights, can't do anything, hands tied. Can't get gas all stations closed, n walked to brennan boats people taking pictures I feel sick to my stomach, everybody talking about trees down and broken windows and stuff and I lost my life's possessions. People get happy when they feel they survived with cool downed trees and broken things but I've bottomed out, my life's work and goods and all my possessions and intellectual work are gone to the ocean and the winds and the fire. Cleaning out peoples fridges eating shrimp cocktail and fruity pebbles in same meal

November 1, 2012

It's Jamie's birthday today. We got up just like we went to bed, gathering and chopping wood for the fireplace, but went across the street to see Dee's parents for breakfast where they cooked up English muffins, butter, bacon and potatoes. It was a meal fit for a king, but I could barely eat it as my body was in autopilot shutdown mode. After breakfast and some coffee, Dee's parents brought Jamie in some cake which they had obtained a few days before, and we sang happy birthday to Jamie and Raven and River were so happy singing to their daddy, and we all enjoyed some birthday cake. I felt human at least for a second again. It was truly beautiful. We got back to Jamie's house and Raven was able to get online for a little bit, and we were able to see the first footage coming in of the destruction on the Barrier Island. I forgot to mention, across the country, outside of the Sandy affected area, people were able to see the news, and when I had cell service in and out, some messages came through telling me of what the news stations were reporting like CNN and FOX, and that they said there was plenty of footage of my area completely engulfed in flames and totally submerged where the ocean and bay met, but nobody could give me a clear idea if it was my direct stretch of beach or not. Finally, I was able to see a helicopters view of what looked like my area, but I couldn't tell, because it was not anything like what looked like my area. They said it was the Camp Osborn section of Normandy Beach and Mantoloking, but all I saw were fires raging inside a vast waterlogged ocean. I couldn't say either way if it was my place or not, there were no landmarks, you simply couldn't tell what you were looking at, except that it was total annihilation for a good 4 miles. I prayed it wasn't my home. I decided it was time to leave Jamie and Dee to deal with the oncoming burden of keeping their family alive without having to worry about another mouth to feed, so I thanked them graciously, and I jumped in my Jeep and headed back to Shannon's.

NOON

The governor now declares gas rationing. Lines to get gas for cars or generators are a 5 hour's wait, if you're lucky they don't run out. I realized I only had about a 1/8 of a tank of gas left in my car, and I already passed hundreds of derelict cars on the side of the road that ran out of gas, so I told Shannon I would stop at the Hess gas station near her house to try and get some gas. When I got there, I was stopped in my tracks in a line that was 2 miles long waiting for gas. I got out of my car and asked anybody if they knew what was going on and one guy told me they were only giving out 2 gallons at a time and that nobody is guaranteed anything. I decided to run on fumes to Shannon's house instead of waiting, to at least get to her house without having to abandon my Jeep on the side of the road. I made it back to her place. She had cleaned up most of the debris with her dad who lived next door and her dad Bill said he could give me a few gallons from the lawnmower tank, and we put that in my Jeep. After that, I had nothing to do, nowhere to go. So what do you do then? Of course, I put the collar and leash on Abby and walked her for a good mile down the block and back again, amid destruction and destitution, and for once I felt normal. I saw people helping each other out, removing trees and debris still, the roads here were now navigable to some degree, and it looked like life was gaining ground again. When Abby and I got back, I went into shutdown mode. I asked if anything else needed to be done and Shannon told me to get some rest, that I looked like a zombie. I did just that. I laid horizontal on the floor, sleeping on top of Abby and crashed for three hours straight.

6 PM

Shannon's friend Cindy, who lived four miles away inland, said she didn't get hit too bad, the power was out, trees were down, but they had a working car and that their generator was working fine and that her husband waited in line for 8 hours and got gas for the generator so we could all have a cooked meal and some beer. We all packed up our cars and went over there. Once we got there, Cindy had her whole family and in laws over there, and it felt a little like thanksgiving of sorts, there was decent food on the table chicken wings, pizza and warm, comforting food, plus plenty of beer and wine. I ate what my stomach would let me and I drank all the beer I could. I played guitar with her son for awhile and he was really good, taught me some new blues riffs. I was in a constant daze of confusion and numbness now, and I laid down in his bed where he walked out of the room and let me sleep for another hour. I woke up around 11 pm, in the same way I went to bed, totally confused. I got another beer or two and went outside to breathe in fresh air when I got a text that my friend Brian Keating BK, who lived in Island Heights, just over the Route 37 bridge, was able to sneak on the island via his boat to see the carnage. I was more that excited than depressed to what I may hear from him! I called him immediately and the call finally went through. BK said he motored the boat over to the island and docked it at his parents place in Normandy. He said what he saw was nothing that has ever been seen by him before. Complete and total annihilation. I asked him over and over if he saw my house and he said he just couldn't tell what or where anything was. I said keep your door open, I'm coming over now and we are going to go over there by boat. He warned me that the Army and National Guard came in and locked down the island since yesterday, equipped with machine guns securing the island and that martial law was enacted, and that anybody attempting to access the island b boat would be shot at. I said I didn't care. We were going tonight. I walked back into Cindy's place and Shannon pulled out a \$100 bill, then her husband placed a 100\$ bill in my hand and said to take it. I only had 20\$ on me and obviously couldn't access any money anywhere. I denied it but they both insisted and I put my pride aside and thanked him. Then, Kyle, a 17 year old high school kid, took \$16 out of his pocket all crumpled up, came up to me as I was about to leave and said, Here, have this Nick. I accepted without a fight and told him thank you man to man. Shannon followed me outside and before I got into my Jeep she broke down and cried hard. She said she wished she could do more for me. I told her she's done so much I could never repay her back. I pointed the Jeep to Island Heights and realized the 20 mile ride ate up those two gallons of gas her dad gave me. I got off exit 82 n the Garden State Parkway toward Seaside Heights, and was about to run completely out of gas as the alarm went off in my car and cruised into a quarter mile line at the WAWA. My luck didn't run out, nor did my gas as I was able to fill it with 5 gallons of pure righteous gasoline, as I finally got to BK's.

The actual journal entry from that day.

THURSDAY

Woke up with Poe staring me in the face, Jamie and kids and Dee at in-laws, Jamie back went over to bob and Nancy's and had breakfast of bacon, potatoes, English muffins. Cutting wood with Jamie's, still can't get enough charge from car to update friends return texts, look at facebook or any possible news on the airwaves. Headed over to at Shannon's decided to look for gas to get up north, called mom and

dad they don't have gas up there would meet dad halfway to fill up rest of my tank. Can't do it sat on Shannon's couch and just went horizontal. Shannon came over with Abby and Kyle I took Abby for a walk around AgnesJane Velez wanted to interview me for HLN news, cancelled it later, at Cindy's where there is a generator and nice spread of food. Where I can type this.

I go to sleep, have a few drinks, then wake up. And the weird nightmare starts all over again. There is no sleep, its just zombieland. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to use, try to find food, no power, no clean clothes, its like you really might wake up and its all just somebody else's problem, but it's yours. That reality is so weird. It's not too real, but it's a sick groundhog day over and over again. Try to sleep on a short couch, pass out with the hood over my eyes and hope to wake to something new, but it's the same. Can't get out of town, can't get to my house to see it, gas stations closed, no power, food running out.

November 2, 2012 – Clock hits Midnight

Finally at BKs. I parked my Jeep at BKs, got out of the car and knocked on the garage door. He opened it up and he greeted me with an open hug, his black dog Mundus gave me a few tails wags and I walked into the Kitchen, to where a local friend of mine, Darden, a late 50's gray shaggy haired local painter and friend was standing, he was Displaced as well. Displaced. That was the term that the government put on us. We were all labeled "Displaced" residents. From what I heard in the newspapers. Darden and BK were sufficiently drunk. I plopped my backpack down on the dining room table and asked BK what he knew, and I didn't sit down, because I knew it was bad and you should never take bad news sitting down. BK stated talking about what he saw when he was able to get over to the island yesterday. "Dude, it wasn't pretty man. There was nothing left. I couldn't see anything that resembled what was there. I docked the boat at my parents to see if it was there and it was and walked over the all the shit down a few blocks to see where Matty was. It's not good man." I kept asking him if he saw my house and all he could tell me with a sober face was that he honestly didn't know, he was walking through the warzone and he couldn't differentiate any landmark, any assemblance of where anything was or where it was previously. Even D&R Boats, a three acre marina wasn't discernible, all the boats, over 200 of them were gone, or on Route 35, or in houses or toppled over into where Route 35 used to be. He told me that he walked around and saw 30 foot geysers of spewing flames shooting up from the ground every hundred yards or so, burning viciously since the natural gas lines were still burning, New Jersey Natural Gas left the lines flowing, and the gas was still on fueling all the fires. He told me everything was smoldering and still on fire, and that a few random locals he suspects, old and frail were walking around in a zombie like state, around 8 foot potholes, burnt debris, power lines, crumbled houses, and that one man even checked his mailbox to see if he had mail, but his house was obliterated. Total and inconceivable shock. This was before the Army got on the island to secure it. BK said he just didn't know what was happening there, he couldn't even fathom the destruction and I didn't have any answers. It was then that Nick Spino, a tall 6 foot 4 big guy about 260 pound, gregarious and laughing all the time came through the door. We all said Hey to Nicky, and for the first time in the 15 years I knew him, he wasn't smiling. Nick lived a hundred yards south of me. Nick stayed through the night of the living hell and the story he told was unfathomable.

1:30 AM

Nick began to tell a story. From his mouth the words started pouring out, "The fire started after a transformer or something blew up on the oceanside. The winds just fueled it man, it was one house, five houses, ten houses they were all on fire. The whole Camp was on fire! I heard the rumble coming through. I was in my attic, you know trying to get to higher ground. There was only about 2 feet of water connecting the ocean to the bay and then I heard it. I heard it! It was this loud, explosion of a rumble like the earth opened up. And then it happened. It was a fucking wall of whitewater man! nothing I have ever seen in my life. It came from the ocean you could see it in the glow of the fires that were a few hundred yards north of me. It was a wall of water from the ocean 8 foot high that came in and just came over the island in an instant. I was thinking, what do I do? Where do I go? I'm in my fucking attic man! I have no higher ground to go to. There is a monster firestorm a hundred yards north of me and the wind is pushing it to me, there are about 50 houses on fire and it's coming my way faster than I can think. And then this tsunami came in and now there's 8 feet of water up in my house. I felt my house shift and move and then it started floating off the foundation. I swear on my life, I was going to die man. I was going to die. It was either get burned alive by the fire or jump into the ocean at my feet. I dunno man, if I had a gun I don't know what I would have done." I sat there astounded at Nicky's revelation and thought thank god he didn't have a gun. Then he said. "Right then and there, I hear a voice underneath my house, saying Nicky! Nicky! Jump Jump! And it was Jack Buzzy. He had Matty Monogas' kayaks that he took from his house floating around, he said Jump! So I Jumped and I landed in a pool where I didn't touch ground. I reached for the kayak and got into it and we paddled about a ¼ mile away toward Lavallette where we could stand."

I didn't care about my home or anything I had then and there. I thought about how lucky I was to have Nicky still alive and him standing in front of me in total disbelief telling this story. He then told me that Jerry, another late 50's year old guy stayed in his attic with the storm. And then Jerry walked into BKS house. He was completely pie-eyed and in another world. Jerry sat down and started mumbling words like "unbelievable" and "nothing left" and "should be dead". After he sat down and had a shot of whiskey, Jerry then formulated some thoughts. He said he saw the surge come in and that he thought he was going to die too. Jerry lived closer to me, about 50 yards away, and I thought maybe he could've seen what my house might have looked like or if it was still in the realm of possibility that my dreams were saved. Jerry then asked me "You lived in the light blue house in the Camp? Right?" My prayers were answered. I thought YES! My house is still there after all the fire and surge and shit! Jerry then told me, "Man, I'm really sorry, I saw your house floating down Route 35 south on fire and it broke up then the big part of it hit a car and the car exploded." That all happened about 50 yards from Jerry's vantage point in his attic he had to get to higher ground trying to cut away a hole into the roof. In that moment, I thought to myself, so this is it. THIS WAS IT. I know now right? But maybe it was a house from Mantoloking or something I thought, maybe it was another blue house or something. I still held onto the faintest of hope from what I knew. Just then Betty Ann texted me and said there was a fire at the Camp, but she heard from Richie who had a house 50 yards from me and who stayed in his attic, that her house was still standing, and that two of the houses on the median where mine was were still there. I held onto that hope with all my soul. BK, Nicky, Darden, Jerry and I all drank Jameson shots and beer and it

was about 1:45 AM when we all finally decided to go to get an inkling of rest, for tomorrow had a lot on the plate. But not yet.

I told BK "We have to go see right now what's going on. I said grab the fishing rods, if we can't land on the island or get shot at, lets at least fish the new Mantoloking Inlet, because we will be the only people ever to fish this spot, and I want to go down in history as the guys who fished it." Clearly, I wasn't thinking straight, but BK saw the look in my eyes and semi-obliged. I ran out to the garage and got some of his rods and reels together along with some fishing lures. I went to my car and loaded them up. BK came outside and said to me in a sober voice, " Nick you know I want to help you, right? But I don't think it's a good idea to do this right now. They have the island locked down and guns pointed at everyone trying to access it. Yesterday was a different story. I tried to go back today and had to navigate around houses floating in the bay. It's not a good idea to go out there at dark and do this. We will run the boat into pieces of floating houses and cars and it's just dangerous man. I love you but I can't do it." I knew he was right. I didn't care about being shot by the Army, that didn't make one instance of threat to me, but to hit a house or car at nighttime in the frigid, churny, and debris filled waters of the bay would mean sure death and for a moment of clarity I told him it was OK.

2:00 AM

Instead of going on the boat, I asked Brian to go out for a few drinks. We went to McIntire's Pub, a dirty, rundown Toms River establishment and I looked the part. Apparently my stress caught up with me on the inside and my left eye was blown out with blood vessels so it looked like I had one red eye. We drank some more shots of blackberry brandy and all around I saw people in my situation, some familiar run down faces from the island, like Snacks. But he always had Kenny with him. Kenny, none of us heard from in three days. We thought he was dead. Kenny lived on swordfish way and was one of the local boys, I texted and called him the past three days and heard nothing back. I asked around to the people I talked to if Kenny made it of the island and I heard he tried to ride it out I thought Kenny might have been killed. Kenny looks like Gallagher the comedian guy, bald on top crazy hair on the sides and a nutty look in his eyes all the time, one of the good guys who wouldn't hurt a fly. After another shot of blackberry and McIntyre's I looked up and saw Kenny's grinning ass come through the doors and knew it was alright.

Now in the bar, on the mainland, we were called the Invaders, all the displaced locals were drinking at the mainland bars and though there is always a gang fight mentality of islanders and mainlanders, it was all quelled among beers and brotherhood as we drank hand in hand with each other, even though we were called Invaders. I wanted a sense of normalcy. It didn't have to come from a home cooked meal or getting beers so I asked BK if Delilah's Den was open, a go-go joint a few miles away. He said they should be so we hopped into the car and went to Delilah's there was no cover charge, and the go-go girls, at least three of them, were still working. I went in and it was me and BK with two go-go girls on stage. It was absolutely surreal. I had barely slept a wink in the last three days, had the same clothes on because that's all I had left, and was handing out dollar bills to girls. But they ended up just sitting down next to me in their bikinis and just talking about what was going on. I don't know why or how, but I was laughing and having a good time with BK, just talking to go-go girls. Nobody was in the place. Every single one of

the girls came up to me, opened their purses and offered me all the money they had. I said I couldn't accept it. They insisted and all the girls gave me over \$500. I cried on their shoulders and every single one of the workers told me it was going to be OK. I have eternal gratitude to those girls for helping me. It was about 3:30 now and we decided to head back to BKS place and maybe get some rest.

Actual journal entry from that day

FRIDAY

Police going door to door checking for survivors marking them with a spray painted black x moving house to house on the front door, 12 cops walking out with shotguns and pistols. Jack buzzy saved Nick Spino on his roof when house dislodged foundation and smacked into his and pushed them further bayside.

WOKE UP ATE BREAKFAST, CINDY GAVE ME 100 SHANNON 100, HYLE 16 BUCKS from his wallet, Shannon broke down wanted to say she wished she could help me out, hugged her said she did walked back in back to take a dump, headed out to go to Keatings route 37 not enough gas as parkway north instead of south, eighth tank left now make decision to go, got down exit 82 Wawa 37 east only 10 minute wait for gas got to BKS got Jogo cheese steak, catch up on emails, charging everything. Saw new footage of brick township coastline, Mantoloking houses beyond destroyed my blackfish house marker is gone, new Mantoloking inlet looks very fishable, heard governor on TV say they are building temp bridge at Mantoloking to get construction stuff in to clear and rebuild route 35 to get stuff down, may be weeks before locals can access with police escort. Don't dwell on the past, look to the future. Wanted to do a black ops midnight run to the island with martial law intact. Talked out of it by everyone but Keating would go, decided to go fish the new Mantoloking inlet instead and make new waves and history! Talking over Jameson and blackberry shots, to go in and gather my goods, but talk about piracy and localism and my red eye at McIntyre's pub looking like a rogue, went to the office for beers then Delilah's den to get some stripper perfume on us for 45 minutes the chick at front desk lost her house so we bonded,

Everything looks like Dresden, bombed out, mangled destruction and gas spewing everywhere. BKS videos show no surviving structures, incredibly disgusting and ugly and completely devastated. You realize what you bring with you and what you condemn. My last look cleaning up my stuff to bring out at 5 pm on Sunday looking around, what I condemned to death and what I took out. Nick Spino got plucked off the roof on Monday night fire was coming in flames were going to engulf him flood taking his house. Jack buzzy took Matty Monagas kayak and got him. Jerry saw a burning shed floating down route 35 that hit a car and exploded the car. What actually happened? Did the fire hit me first, then storm surge from Sandy? Did Dave's place burn down first? Now about Betty Ann's? Was it standing then burnt down?

November 3, 2012

6:30 AM

I slept a good solid three hours straight, but woke up at sunrise again. Everybody in the house that was crashing there was asleep on the floor, in the other bedrooms, the living room, it was like a homeless shelter. I didn't have anything to do or anywhere to go now so I laid back down and slept until 11 am. With a moment to myself to actually start thinking, I started to realize what I may have lost now, but I still didn't know the extent of it, because I had to see it with my own eyes to be sure. There was too much talk going around that it was total destruction, that some houses were still standing that there was a breach and a new inlet, all of which I could only surmise from the cable news channels, repeating the same footage over and over of what looked like my area, but I still couldn't tell. I had to start taking care of the business at hand. My first priority was trying to get on the island, some way somehow, but it was on military lockdown now. Rumors of martial law and \$6000 fines for bringing your boat to the island floated about.

NOON

Emergency shelters were being set up all over now, and I had made a few calls to FEMA to get started with the disaster process. BK had run to the local market and they were open with generator power and he brought home some coffee, and bagels with bacon and egg. It was nice to have a warm breakfast. Matty Monogas came through the door, he had stayed at his girlfriends house in Brick, the last I saw him we were evacuating the island together. He told me that he heard from his sources that it was all gone. His house withstood the surge, but everything in it was destroyed. Matty had also talked to FEMA and we both had an appointment to meet the FEMA worker near Baywood Marina, which sat off of Drum Point road, a good 5 miles inland on Silver Bay. The worker said for us to meet him there and to bring any identification we had. What's normally a 10 minute drive took us 2 hours to avoid bulldozers plowing houses out of the streets, pushing cars to the side of the road. We made our best guess as to what road was what since no street signs were still standing. I couldn't believe that 5 miles inland the place was wiped out. 20 foot high piles of rubble lined the street sides like garbage snow piles from the plow. All you could hear anywhere was still sirens, and the drone of the engines of heavy machinery everywhere. Matty pulled down a side road that looked as if it was Baywood Marina, and he called the worker and we were on the right street. People were sobbing in the streets. Matty and I got out of my Jeep, closed the doors and looked around. It was like as far as you could see was shelled with bombs. All of the houses here were flooded out to complete losses, but the entire place was absolutely littered with the destruction that took place on the island and was floated and rammed over the baywaters with the surge into this neighbor hood. Broken rooftops lined the streets, refrigerators, cars, dining room tables, toys, surfboards, half houses, benches, anything and everything that defines civilization was jumbled in a mangled distorted mess that enveloped the bayside neighborhoods as far as you could see and more. I began to walk around a little bit when my eyes caught the sight of a rooftop that had the same exact light blue siding I had on my house. I could see the Thunderbird hotel three miles across the bay, right where my house was placed next to it. It was conceivable that the surge pushed my house directly across the bay onto this land here. I couldn't see with a sharp enough eye to tell if any houses were still standing there, all I saw was the silhouette of the three story hotel, but I thought, well damn, maybe this is the upper part of my house over here laying in the marsh. I crunch walked over wires, some car tops and other debris, bent down and tried to look up inside the roof to see if it was my wiring

job inside it to determine if it could have been my house. Matty pointed out that my house had different cross beams and wiring in it and came to the conclusion that it wasn't mine. We kinda laughed at the whole thing, as I shrugged my shoulders at the unbelievableness of what I was actually doing and said, oh well, fuck it, not my house. We backtracked and the FEMA worker was finally ready for us. He ripped off a couple sheets of paper and asked us for two forms of identification to prove who we were. That was the first realization that my former life as Nick Honachefsky was gone. I had nothing to prove who I was. No drivers license, no birth certificate anymore, no passport, no bills, nothing. I then remembered that my car insurance and registration was in my car. I said to the worker, this is all I got. He then guided us through the paperwork and asked us questions like, how much damage did you sustain. Damage? I said I think the top part of my house is in the marsh over here, but I'm not sure. We were 5 miles inland from where my house had stood. Matty and I laughed at the insaneness of this whole line of paperwork questioning. I told him I had no idea what was going on with the damage yet, but I was pretty sure I was wiped off the face of the earth. The worker felt some sympathy for me and said, he would fill out all the paperwork for me, and that I would be put at the top of the list. By this time Matty already cracked a cold beer which he brought with him in the car. He brought two and that was nice of him. We hopped back in the Jeep and I went to another emergency shelter where supposedly we could sign up to reinstate our identities through the post office. Now, not only did I feel like I lost it all, I even lost who I was to the government. I had no name anymore, nothing to prove who I was. For a few fleeting moments, I honestly juggled the idea that I would leave the country and never come back. Live in the Caribbean as a shadow among society, nameless, with a total slate wiped clean and no way of tracking me. I still needed to get on the island. I needed the closure to know if I had a house and my life or if I didn't.

4 PM

Matty and I pulled into the newly designated hub post office in Brick inland. I had to officially change my address from my Mantoloking mailing address as the post office there was now underwater and no mail would be filtering through there for at least another year or so. I saw Mary, my post office agent there, and she was such a sweet sight to see, as her kind, gentle attitude I always looked forward to seeing every day when I picked up my mail. She didn't look as happy anymore. I smiled at her and I saw the gravity of what she was feeling, that we wouldn't be seeing each other for a long time anymore. But it was familiar, interacting with her, almost normal as I had last seen her about a week ago at the post office. She told me that the island was on lockdown by the military and that they were in the process of using cadaver dogs to sniff out any dead bodies in the wreckage now. I told her not to worry, everybody we knew together got off the island, and she smiled a little bit. We filled out paperwork together to change my mailing address to my parents place, I figured that was the only place I really knew that was legitimately OK as they were 80 miles inland.

7 PM

We got back to BKs house and I was able to finally have reliable internet access. I checked all my facebook messages and I was absolutely floored with what I saw. I was overwhelmed with love. I couldn't believe how many people reached out to me. Friends I talked to everyday, but old

acquaintances I hadn't spoken to in over 15 or 20 years or more, all were worried about my condition, if I survived the storm, if I was alive. I got back to each and every one of them and thanked them graciously for thinking of me. It was then that the outpouring of total love and care came my way, something that I could never have dreamed of on the finest Christmas morning. All of a sudden, I had no control. Things were in motion. People started gathering clothing for me, toiletries, food, magazines, books, fishing gear – anything that they thought I needed. They asked where to send things, where to ship things, how they could come and help, that I could stay with them and their families. My family was of course always there, as well as my immediate friends in the situation, but now my support system was nationwide. For once in the last week, I actually teared up because of joy and not sorrow.

Actual journal entry for that day

SATURDAY - Going into default mode

Wanted to get up to fish northwest 20 to 25 knots gusts to 30 to dangerous to leave at 530 in the dark so went back to bed until 11 am, couldn't really sleep though thinking about the things I lost. Got up BK went to get bagel bacon and egg and coffees, matty Monagas at Kmart broke down battery dead we went there to jump him and get the starter started he called triple a we brought Mary Ellen back then went to post office to pick up mail and change my permanent address saw Mary there, and she looked like her cat just died, was so sad for me, I thought she was going to break down, but I held as strong as I could and Chantel was also there, I kissed them both and said I would be back soon enough. Picked up matty and we went to meet the Mike FEMA guy in Baywood Marina area, destruction on the bayside too, houses roofs that floated across from where I was saw a clear view of the T-Bird and my home across the bay, was really weird looking over there, filled out forms and drove around the circle a bit looking at the 4 foot high waterline all around and flood damage and debris everywhere. Drove back to drop matty off at the dump truck and forklift and went back home stopped for pizza and told guy there my story, everyone in the place was stone cold after I told him that. Back to BKs ate sub watching college football talked to discovery channel guy Dick trying to get on to film our plight and to tell our story. Now heard 6000 fine for any boat docking up and arrested on site. National guard has secured the area, the military now has domain over the island. Cadaver dogs German shepards sniffing around the rubble piles Its weird seeing facebook, it almost looks like I'm looking at my own obituary as if I had died with all the outpouring of love and memories and such, but it's so good to be alive and not burned to death or drowned in a surge of saltwater. Actually really tired today, I think it's all catching up to me Shannon is getting donations sent to her house and its massive.....I've come to the realization that I am homeless.

November 4, 2012

6 AM

The island is still on lockdown and seems to be so for an indefinite period of time. Through some facebook page on Normandy Beach, I was contacted by the Discovery Channel in the previous day and they wanted to see if they could follow me around in my attempt to access the island. Ben the cameraman was sent out to meet me at BKs. He was a younger guy in his mid 20's but he was serious and understanding of the situation, he actually looked more shell-shocked than I did and commended

me on how I was handling it all. I told him it is what it is and that's how I accepted it. But the gnawing pain was not knowing what I had left or didn't have left. The mystery was unbearable. Ben promised me he would get me in on that island and would pull any punches he had with Discovery to work the police and township to get me out there, not to film, but to do the right thing. We heard word that in 2 to 3 weeks, we would be able to access the island and that wasn't good enough for me to live in this hellish limbo. There was one access now to the island, across the Route 37 bridge from Toms River into Seaside Heights. They finally cleared off all the rubble and were letting construction vehicles and military vehicles through. Checkpoints were set up now at all potential access points and for good reason. Looting was now taking place, with all the million dollar mansions around, it attracted professional looters dressing up with stolen firefighters uniforms, stealing art and valuables from West Point Island where Joe Pesci and other celebrities live. We heard through the grapevine that Tony G's surf shop Ocean Hut, got looted, and a few local boys caught the guy stealing surfboards out of his shop, but local justice prevailed. The locals beat this guy down to a bloody pulp and left him in the street. No names were mentioned who did the beatings, but we know who they were. By the third day, the National Guard secured the island, declaring martial law, and are licensed to shoot first ask questions later. They have authorized use of deadly force, if you enter island by boat or walking down towns, you can be shot on sight. The National Guard began raiding houses to confiscate guns on the island. Now, I had nothing to lose and asked Ben if he wouldn't mind trying to get across. We waited in a mile long line to get in and there were three checkpoints before you even got to the bridge. We came upon the first checkpoint and it was a local Dover Township cop. Ben spoke up and said we were filming a documentary and offered the cop his credentials and we moved along to the next checkpoint. The next officer was more stern looking and was a state trooper. Ben and I presented the same credentials and he denied us entry. But Ben insisted and he called in a superior, who allowed us to move forward, almost over the bridge and onto the island, but one more checkpoint existed. We got to the last spot over the bridge where it was a u-turn or onto the island and the final state Trooper denied us entry, no discussion about it. He said we couldn't be on the island and there was no arguing or he would have to call in an escort to get us off the road. We made a U-turn driving the wrong way down route 37 because there was no law in place now.

2PM

Hours upon hours went by where I thought about any access point onto the island, and I knew the Point Pleasant Canal access was destroyed, the Route 37 bridge was inaccessible and that left the Mantoloking Bridge area. Hopes were up big time until we heard the real news – that a two hundred yard wide new inlet was now raging where the Mantoloking bridge once stood. There would be no access there. Ben put a call into the Sergeant of Dover Township to tell him about the documentary and my plight to see if I still had a life and see if he could pull strings to get me on the island. He said to stop into the VFW in Bricktown tomorrow and the Army Corp should have the inlet bulkheaded and stopped with enough sediment packed and laid down for construction vehicles to go over and that if we asked the police officers there, one might take us in, but there would be no promises of it.

8PM

The day ended pretty much as it began, no access to the island to see if anything remained, but Ben and I became fast friends and had a few beers to ease out the day at BKs. Tomorrow we would be heading to the VFW to conjure up a miracle.

Actual journal entry from that day

SUNDAY

Woke up this morning and got myself a beer. 6 am. Finally a really nice night of sleep straight from 12 to 6. Still every morning I try not to think about the wonderful heirlooms I've lost like my grandfathers bench, dads NJ outdoorsman magazine with note, all the cards of love from family and friends.

What's going on with all my professional business tackle shop marina charter friends? Betty and Nicks flooded enough to put the kibosh can't get to IBSP grumpys fared well he was 4 feet above the 3 foot surge in seaside hear birds are diving on bass schools now, this is the best week of fishing through my logbooks.

FILMED with discovery channel Ben today talking about everything, heard may be able to get on island with police escort in 2 to 3 weeks. A big Nor'easter coming in on Thursday to fuck things up even more with no dunes to protect, but what do I really Care? Honestly nothing to lose. Though I wish the best for people. Ben from discovery was a true professional and seemed to really care, wants me to get on the island not for him filming but for me to get there, and worked talked to Sgt. Zuidik to get us on in the morning, we will see. I hope so.

November 5, 2012

Strangely enough, here is where my daily journal entries began to fade, most probably because I finally found the answer to my questions.

10 AM

Ben and I rode over to the VFW, where the township set up a disaster center, and police officers were there to assist in any way they could. Foodstuffs like Froot Loops, bagels, bread, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, clothing of all makes and models from the Salvation Army, crates and crates of water, and all ranges of survival goods were stacked into the hall. Ben asked for the sergeant he had spoken with before, but he wasn't present. I spoke to one officer and told him I needed to access the island to see if I had a life anymore. The officer sternly told me there was no way it was going to happen and to not even bother anyone else with the request. Dejected, I exited the VFW walking with my head down to my Jeep. It was just another disappointment and I would move on. But Ben came running to the car and told me to hold on, he said this is wrong and he was going to get me on the island. I started the Jeep awaiting his return to drive back to BKs, when he came running out and said, "grab your stuff man, we're going in. "

1130 AM

A police officer who asked me never to mention his name, which I will forever hold dear, pulled his cruiser around the back of the parking lot and Ben and I jumped in. HE told me to keep my head down as we exited the parking lot. We drove a mile to the checkpoint at Mantoloking bridge and the cops there waved us through being that we were in a police vehicle. Coming over the top of the bridge, I can't even write this without tears right now, I saw – the end of the world. My eyes could not believe, literally, could not believe what I saw. A raging inlet was half contained where once stood 10 monster beach mansions. The army corps had half the inlet cordoned off, enough to get emergency vehicles and construction bulldozers over to the island. From the vantage point I looked left all the way up route 35 and south all the way down, and it was sickening, yet strangely intriguing. It was mass destruction on a level as if an A-Bomb hit. I was mystified by so much open space where houses once stood. Everywhere else was total and utter destruction to the utmost level. There were cars and boats strewn about on the road, twisted in wreckage like they shouldn't be. There was not one thing standing that was normal, save for one lone mansion in the middle of the raging inlet that stood against Sandy, defiant and true. We made it over the bridge and onto the Bay avenue road that was semi cleared through a criss cross of rubble and debris of gutters, woodsheds, automobiles, boats, lawnmowers, which we had to navigate through. For the first time, I felt my heart pumping blood and adrenaline through my veins like no other time I had ever experienced. I started to feel like I was out of my body. Everything I passed didn't look like how I knew it. Any landmarks I could recognize were no longer, and I honestly barely knew where I was in respect to the road and the island. We made a turn down Downer avenue and to the south side the roads, what were left of them, were pretty clear, albeit the pavement totally jagged and uprooted. To the north, I glanced and saw absolute mayhem with pieces of houses stacked up on Route 35, all the telephone poles were laying across the road and it was a 20 foot high field of jagged, confused rubble as far as I could see. I hoped that wasn't what my home looked like. We made it down to the split in the road a half mile down and at the junction, where three camo army trucks were parked, four soldiers in army fatigues pointed M-16s at us as they stood around a 50gallon barrel drum which had a fire lit and raging out of it to keep them warm in the 40 degree weather. They waved their guns at us to pass on by, and I knew now it was only a half mile to where I would find out my fate.

12 NOON – MOMENT ZERO

I was astounded by everything my eyes took in. It seemed like time was nonexistent, like I was in some weird netherspace where I lived all my previous lives and all my future lives all at once. As we passed the jumble of debris to the left and right, I saw the Thunderbird hotel in the distance, but it was disconcerting because I should be able to see the Thunderbird from a half mile away. The police cruiser slowly crept up to my home area. Time ticked like an eternity and I told the officer to slow down right here. As we slowed down I told him to come to a stop. He did. And then my life stopped, then and there. HE asked if this was it. I said I think so. He said let's make a U-turn right past this burnt out Mercedes to get on the north side of the road. He made the U-turn and pulled the car onto the side of a sandy outcropping in front of my home. I got out of the car, and what I saw, I have no words for. The first thing I noticed is that everything around me was still smoldering or burning. The scent of unreal toxic fumes permeated the air in a truly unholy deathly fashion. I set my eyes upon where my home was. Ben asked me, "Is that it? Is that your home?" The only thing I could say to him was "Well, it certainly isn't how I

left it. “ And at that moment, reality dropped in like a 500-pound weight falling onto my head. It was gone. Not gone in the sense that I could see that some of the house still stood and that I could see my windows or a dining room ripped open or some sort. It was all obliterated into nothingness. There was not one piece of recognizable material that I could claim as mine. In fact, many other pieces of houses, twisted wreckage and metal, gas tanks, grills, charred remains of I don’t know what was sitting inside oozing cesspools of toxic sludge. Tree limbs jutted out from seemingly nowhere from the toxic mess, a half a rooftop was partially buried in the sand into a deep dark, oil sludge pool, power lines and burnt charred pieces of wood were sticking up and down, in and out of the mangled mess in front of me. I looked around behind me towards the ocean, where there should have been 58 other houses. It was a total vacant landscape. Not one thing was standing. Not one foundation was left. And in that vacant landscape were five spouting geysers of fire reaching 30 feet into the sky, burning and spewing natural gas burning off. It looked like Kuwait when it was bombed, that’s all I could think of. Natural gas was bubbling up in the sludge from the ground, the lines still flowing freely with gas. I continued my 360 degree survey standing in one spot. I noticed that I could see the ocean at eye level, because there were no more 30 foot sand dunes. I focused my eyes again on where my home once was. I immediately began to walk into the debris. The officer said, “ Hey Nick, I’m sorry I can’t let you go into that. I’m already putting myself on the line for this.” I understood completely and walked back toward the police car and stood in the road looking my life in shambles. This was truly it. The day, the moment of reckoning. Ground Zero. Right then and there, I thought of the unquantifiable things I just lost. As a writer, all my 15 years of hard work and hard drives were gone. 40,000 photos from traveling the world the past 15 years were gone. All my personal photos from my entire adult life, every joyous moment, every birthday, every girlfriend, every family dinner or Christmas or Thanksgiving, every college memory, to capture those wonderful moments in time, every last, single memento from my life was sent into oblivion. Death of my previous life overcame me and I knew I was no longer the person that once was, but a newly reborn man. I thought of the table my Grandfather made me before he passed away, about the rosary I received when I entered my first Holy Communion, my surfboard collection, my diploma from Villanova I worked so hard for, my first Jitterbug fishing lure that the Tooth Fairy put under my pillow that I held onto to spark my life as a fishing writer, all my tens of thousands of dollars worth of fishing gear and tackle, my first fishing rod I ever got from my father, my mother’s sweet and dear letters of inspiration all through my lifetime, my brothers Yankee baseball bat we got in 1983 from Yankee stadium with our father, all the memories I kept so close to me to live with so that I could always hold onto them and never forget where I came from, or where I was going in life, to remind me of the joyous life I have always lived, my clothes, my furniture, my refrigerator, my carpet, my tables, my TV, my everything – my life. It was gone. All of it. I was wiped off the map. I realized all I had left were the clothes I had on my back, and that was the only tangible aspect I had to show for the last 15 years of my previous life. I didn’t feel any pain. I don’t know what I felt. I wasn’t in a stupor or anything, I just kind of shook my head in affirmation and said aloud, “ Well, that’s it. “ Like I just right then and there died. In the weirdest sense of the word, I felt free. Like a spirit that just got released and I was no longer in the body I once was, but a new existence was born.

We all got back in the car, and Ben asked me off camera how I was feeling. I smiled and turned around and said to him “At least now I know. That’s all I wanted.”

Actual journal entry from that day

MONDAY

FRANKS SPIRIT WAS THERE AT THE VFW, allowed me to go.

Perseverance pays off to get in

Stay in Florida asshole.

May God have mercy on your soul Thomas Brancato.

DAY ONE

The total Blackout in 90% of New Jersey enters its 15th day. The gas rationing ban has been lifted. On the barrier island, everybody who lived there year round, hundreds of families and people, are homeless. The daunting task to find food, clothing, shelter from all locals point of view. The week between my day of reckoning and now was spent living at BKs, dealing with FEMA and beginning the process of filing insurance claims, but there was another tough moment to have – to head back into the rubble and dig out what I could find.

November 19, 2012

8 AM

Brick Township allowed the people in our zone of the island, Camp Osborn, to all ride on yellow school buses to access the island formally now, supervised under police watch, and to bring one luggage piece to carry anything out that you may be able to find. I knew going in that I didn't need any luggage piece to carry anything out. I was allowed to bring one person to help and I asked my friend Mickey to come join me on the bus ride and he obliged. We met at the WFV at around 8 AM, and it was the first time I saw some familiar faces again. People who had owned houses in the Camp Osborn area all showed up. Out of the 78 homes that were destroyed there, only 5 of us were local, year round residents, so I didn't really know the other 73 people by name, or even at all in any way shape or form, but only by occasionally bumping into them during the summer months. It was overcast with a light rain outside, 45 degrees and chilly. When we all finally loaded up on the bus, I started to feel a weird way, angry in fact to some degree. People began sobbing and crying hysterically all over one another. I just sat there in my seat with a rake and a pitchfork, heavy boots and protective slicks on and listened to people talk about how much they lost, about how they hope to see their summer house again, about watermelon beach parties on the fourth of July with the kids, that it couldn't be that bad, about how they couldn't even think of the possibility of not having a summer beach house to spend weekends in July at. Honestly, I felt like I was on a bus full of idiots that had no idea what was really going on. Watermelon parties. Ice Cream sundaes on Memorial Day. Laying out in the sun on the weekends. I can't lie to you and say I wasn't angry. That these people, sure they lost summer houses they depended on for family vacations, but I lost my life's possessions, work and memories. It's not to say mine were more valuable, it's just that the thought of people crying and sobbing and talking about how much they lost was all numb to me

because I knew they were all going to jump in their cars, and head back to north Jersey, open their refrigerator, cook a nice hot meal on their stove, sit by the fireplace, eat some cookies and milk, then hop into a warm bed with nice flannel sheets and four soft pillows, and sleep nicely through the night, waking up to put on some nice clothes and go back to work, and do it again, day after day after day until summer came around again and they thought of their summer house again. Fuck you. I turned to Mickey and said, "Wait til these guys get over the bridge."

10 AM

As the bus plunged forward we finally got to the checkpoint at the base of Mantoloking Bridge. We were waved through and as the buses engine began to rumble as its low gear engaged to move forward, we reached the pinnacle of the bridge, and everybody looked out the windows with a collective gasp, then started howling in crying fits and despair, with plenty of Oh my Gods and I can't Believe its. The howling of despair coming from 60 people on the bus hurt my ears, but I was honestly just numb to it, keeping my eyes forward and waiting to get off the bus to see if I could rake out anything from the debris piles that would give me any sense of tangible remnant of my past life. The bus weaved in and out of the detoured streets and finally parked in front of what was the Camp. Now's when it became real for everybody on the bus. People were wailing and holding each other and crying hysterically, and I just wanted to get off the bus and start digging. As Mickey and I finally were able to step down off the bus, it was the first time I was to set foot on the spot where my house once was, but by now, in order to clear the roads, the bulldozers had gathered much of the debris and had already been processing it through the sand sifters and disposal crushers, so I don't know what was taken away that might have been there for me to find, and I will never know. I remembered the toxic chemical stench from before and the township offered up HazMat suits for us to wear as we sifted through the rubble, which I gladly put on, along with an air filtration mask. I walked onto where my home once stood and some other person's roof and eaves were sticking up out of an 8-foot toxic sludge pothole right in the middle of it. I grabbed the rake and sunk its teeth into the rooftop to see if I could move it this way or that to look under it. It didn't work. I began to rake around the area digging through sand to find things buried underneath. Then my eyes caught something to the left of me, it was my mattress. I could tell from the blue and red hibiscus pattern that it was mine. It was half burnt and it was sticking half up and half down into the sand. That meant there might be more of my stuff around, and it gave me hope. I looked at a few of the Austrian pines that somehow survived the storm surge and in their branches, 8 feet up, was debris like clothing and toys hanging from them. You could easily see now the path of destruction. Everything was burned out, but the breach started on the south side of the Thunderbird hotel and that's where the ocean pushed through and came raging across, the swipe path taking everything across into the bay. So I decided to look near the bayside to see if any of my stuff migrated there. I began to plop down wooden sides of houses planks to traverse the sludge pits and sinkholes, walking toward the bay with my old neighbor Jackie, who has lived next door to me for over 50 years, two hundred yards toward the bayside, Jackie nearly collapsed by my side. The top of her house was smashed up against another remnant of a house, but I could clearly make out the number 4 on her shingled side. She went to her knees and started sobbing hysterically and I told her not to worry, I would climb up in it and see what I could find for her. She begged me to please help her, crying and holding onto me, and I said I would, I

would. I climbed up into the debris and began to rake and pitchfork it pulling tarred shingles and wooden beams up, until I saw a fishing rod. Selfishly, I thought it might have been one of mine, something I could now hold onto, but when I pulled it up I knew it was Jackie's deceased father Buddy's fishing rod. I held it up and Jackie began sobbing again and I told her I would keep digging and finding more fishing rods and fishing lures for her and kept them so she could have something to hold onto. I then took a hoe that I had found and pried off the number 4 for Jackie, jumped down off the debris pile and handed it to her. She cried and held it close to her chest and thanked me over and over again. She was in a total state of shock. We walked back to the roadside and one of the overseer police officers was there. Lt. Ling, sitting in his car. Jackie, in her state of shock, went over to LT. Ling and began to cry and sob and say thank you to the policeman for all his hard work and caring, and that she couldn't believe what was going on. I thanked him for being there and that it must be an immense burden to have to be on the island everyday and witness this pain and suffering. The LT very cordially told Jackie everything was going to be OK, that she was going to be alright, and that he would always help her, even after this, and I could hear in his voice he meant it and his words were true. Jackie kept crying and thanking him and he sat there stoic and brave, and then I noticed that from behind his mirrored sunglasses, a tear slowly rolled down his cheek. He tried to wipe it away nonchalantly so that we wouldn't notice, but I noticed. I looked around for Mickey and I could see in his eyes that he had had enough of this misery. He helped me dig around for a bit, but I think he got overwhelmed with the sadness around. I was already numb to it. One of the next buses was leaving soon and I told Mickey he could go back on that one but he said he would wait for me as long as I wanted to stay. I went back to digging around near my home's location and in one rake, I hit something kind of hard in the black sludge. I reached down and pulled it out, and what I held made me begin to tear up. It was my dog Abby's food bowl, and on its side it said Sweetie Pie. Somehow, it made it through the fire, the surge and the punishing destruction intact and just laid there on top of the sludge. I held it close to my heart and said a prayer and put it in my backpack. Mickey and I took the next bus back to the VFW.

A week later, the state of NJ issued Barrier Island passes to primary residents so they could access the island without a police escort. The fluorescent green sticker was the badge of burden, and anyone that saw it immediately respected one another. This time, my brother and father came in with me to dig, poke, and prod anything I could find again as the organized bus trip only let us have two hours time limit to do so. This time, we were to enact a more thorough search, and I wanted to come away knowing I did all I could to locate any remnant of my past life before I put it behind me. My brother had brought a metal detector this time, and we began to work over the area of my lot. Immediately, we got a hit and I started to dig down deep. I hit a black piece of metal, thinking it might have been my computer but after a few more shovel fulls I pulled up a cord and latched onto the end was a smashed cablevision receiver unit. That had very special meaning to me as the past two weeks I had been harassed by the cable company to return the receiver, and I had great, unbridled joy the moment I had to call them and tell them that they could have it back, and to come get it, it was smashed, burnt, and sitting in a pile of toxic ooze on a quarantined island. My brother kept getting hits on the metal detector and this time I reached down and felt a black strap. I gingerly pulled it up and out from the sand popped some woman's lingerie. Billy and I had a gut wrenching laugh. We kept searching and searching and we couldn't believe it, but we found three more pieces of woman's lingerie all in different areas. Strewn about the various debris

piles were also myriad porn mags. I really began to think just what was going on in all my neighbors houses around me. Finally, my brother and I hit paydirt. After a pretty serious beep near the footprint of my home, I dug down to where I could find the top neck of a guitar. It was a Fender Sonora! That means it was most decidedly mine. I grabbed the neck and dug deeper to unleash it from the sandy grip, but I pulled it up easily and without strain as it was only the top neck of the guitar, the rest of it apparently burned up as the charred edge told its story. It made me wonder, just how and when and where did things happen? How did the whole story unfold? My house probably has one hell of a story to tell if it ever could. I held the guitar remnant like I was playing it for old times' sake and put it in my backpack. I felt like I had finally covered all the ground, the bayside, the Oceanside, hundreds of yards up and down the road north and south into people's hollowed out houses, everywhere I may have been able to find any possibly mementos from my home, and that was it. A dog bowl and a burnt piece of guitar. It was time to pack it in, and I knew now I was satisfied as I could be with searching for any of my past life's remnants. As I was walking back toward the Jeep I spotted a few blue beads on the ground. I bent down and picked it up and they plinked out of the hardened sludge. I held up a Rosary, all burned and charred and somewhat melted. It kind of looked like my First Holy Communion rosary, but that I'm not too sure of. All I know is that I put it in my backpack and hopped in my Jeep and drove off the island, not to look back and search anymore.

November 28, 2012

It's been a month since Day Zero, and the outpouring of love from family, friends, and acquaintances has been completely and utterly overwhelming on an emotional level. I feel like I can *feel* again on some level. To that end, my friend Mickey, who is in a band called Ween, organized a concert at the Saint in Asbury Park, a benefit fund raiser to help me with my costs from the disaster. If there's one thing I know about myself, whether you're having a fine day or despair is staring at you in the face, go out and have some laughs with some good friends and family and have a few beers. Life is way too short for dwelling on anything, even if you did lose your past life. Mickey put a dream team of musicians together that all volunteered their time for no cost and any proceeds for the 20\$ cover fee would be given as a gift to me. To say I was humbled is not the word. I realized any pride I had went out the window and that all the while people were helping me, giving out of the love of their hearts and souls, offering up places to stay with their families, their rental houses, giving clothing, food, shelter opportunity, replenishing me with not only life's goods, but with life's human caring and spirit, and I finally broke my hard face and smiled true and sincere and cried again, not out of despair this time or out of loss, but out of being the fullest, most filled up with love and respect and honor and caring and happiness that any man could ask for as a human being. I felt honored to have such people in my life, some I never have even spoken a word to or have even met. My faith in humanity when the cards were down surpasses any possible depression or despair or hardship life can throw my way, and I only feel like that now, because of everybody else. It didn't come from inside me. It was given to me from the beauty of the collective Human Element that we all share in. And I am so thankful for it, words cannot express the emotion. Anyway, My concert sold out in about an hour's time from the moment Mickey put it out to the public and the owners of the Saint simply could not pack any more people into the venue. I got to the Saint that evening and walked through the front door and saw all my family and friends faces smiling back at

me in unison, cheersing beers and all having the time of their lives. Mickey and his band with Guy Heller, Claude Coleman, Glenn McClellan raged on an on through the late night hours, blasting serious riffs and insane threads on through the night. We partied and hollered and cheered and yelled all night long in joy, having fun into the darkness, knowing that the sun was going to rise again tomorrow, and a new day would be born.

A NEW LIFE

My life two years afterwards has been a sick, adventurous, tiresome, drawn out mix of roller coaster emotions and situations, dealing with every single facet of a disaster and battling the politics involved with getting some sort of assemblance of normalcy. The system has helped me and it has also kept me down. Two years have gone and I am no closer to even starting the process of having the right to rebuild my house that has existed there for 80 years. I once had worked hard enough to buy myself a home on the beach, lived and worked out of it joyously for 15 years. I now live in and out of my Jeep to this day. Right now I am writing this in a hotel room at Island Beach Motor Lodge, nearly two years after Sandy. I have lived in and out of hotels, sleeping on floors, couches of friend's houses, parent's places, and assorted rest stops for the last two years and counting. I don't know where I am sleeping tomorrow. I am in the same spot with rebuilding since Sandy hit, there has not been one inkling of progress. The township, my condo association, are politically motivated to prevent us from rebuilding and I fight that battle every single living day, I am never away from it. It is absolutely criminal what is going on. Insurance companies, Mortgage companies, government programs and all the red tape to dive through, it's my daily routine, a full time job. I still continue to pay 75% property tax on land that is quarantined and a full mortgage on my land, and that eats up all my insurance money. I lost all my photographs and writing for work, so I am starting from the bottom once again and making the bills are hard to do with no established portfolio. There's another book coming about this recovery process, Part Two, but it's not the place or time to hear it here. Stronger than the Storm, but apparently not the government and insurance companies. Stay tuned. I have another story to tell.

EPILOGUE AFTERMATH – SEPTEMBER 18, 2022 – ALMOST 10 YEARS LATER

Let's just say things have been pretty bizarre in the last 10 years since Sandy. Reading back through this last, final paragraph, I see and know my bitterness due to the lack of answers and governmental structure and legalese to move forward. Let me be clear, I am not and have never been, bitter, toward Superstorm Sandy.

However, the morass of bureaucracy and greed that any hurricane survivor has to endure to get back home is unpalpable and unconstitutional to what we are as Americans. Ten years later. Wow, 10 fucking years later.

And here's the catch - I am still not home. In August 2021, was the first legal time I could actually have a developable, buildable lot again. 9-1/2 years it took for me to have an approved lot to either rebuild on again or to sell. Think about that. For 9-1/2 years, I had to pay a full mortgage on a house that didn't exist, plus full property taxes to the township, and held hostage battling the property association to pay outrageous infrastructure costs that barely went to my home for years on end. But enough of that.

I got married. My wife Emily and my family is my shining light, not only through companionship and love, but more like god-sent angels that understands and holds me when I'm down and out. I rekindled relationships with friends I haven't spoken to in years and now we're on day to day speaking basis. Old, hardcore friends whom I consider family have been at my side relentlessly in any time of need, just to pick up the phone, a text a laugh and to hang out. That's some amazing shit. Totally random people reach out for advice, or to say they are thinking of me and I tell them I am thinking of them, building bonds and new friends on a daily basis. Love keeps coming. Non stop.

Out of it all, the insanity, the hurt, the live, the pain, the craziness, one mantra always rises above which I wholeheartedly believe in:

The Ocean has given me back way more than it can ever take away from me.

Stay tuned for the next chapter of this book. It's a good one.