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Dinh: Your Five Day Accu-Weather Forecast

YOUR FIVE DAY ACCU-WEATHER FORECAST

Viet Dinh

Tomorrow

You will see a tropical storm forming in the Caribbean: the mass of disorganized winds spiraling together, blustery tendrils creeping towards the Texas shoreline. Every station in Houston runs their "Hurricane Alert" promos with bombastic tubas signaling doom, doom, doom. Everyone loves hurricanes. They're big news.

But, really, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's center in Miami thinks that Caryn will blow out harmlessly to sea. And as you prepare the clips for the afternoon forecast, you're inclined to agree: the jerky still images from the National Weather Service surely head away from Texas.

Frank "Stormy" Michener looks at the graphics and says, "That's it?" Other than Caryn, this month has been boring: no floods, heat waves, tornadoes, or freak thunderstorms. It bothers him greatly. Even though he's a fixture at KPRN—23 years as the evening weatherman—that hasn't saved him from ratings slippage. Two years ago, management moved him to afternoons—a position he hasn't held for over 20 years, and in the last two months, he's lost five percent viewership across the board. Males (all ages) have been consistently low, and his one respectable number (females, 55-70) has plummeted. More disturbingly, his follow-up, Chuck Wrigley, Mr. Sports Afternoon Preview, ranks first—which means that people flip away from Stormy for two minutes and thirty seconds, then turn back for Chuck.

"Cassie, please tell me what I'm doing wrong?" he says. This past year, he's been given a joke writer, a wardrobe revamp, and a make-up consultant. On air, his cheeks look rouged into submission, as if he's embarrassed to be there. He thumbs past the current conditions, day's wrap-up, coastal conditions, and

before he reaches your HurricaneWatch animation, he asks, "I'm not unattractive, am I? I mean, as a woman, what's your objective opinion?"

Tell him that you've never really thought about it. But Mike Trevor, the morning weatherman . . . rrrrwoar.

"Ah-ha," he says, lapsing into contemplation. He puts his hand to his chin and rubs. This usually means that he wants new graphics, real-time radar, hideously complex 3-D mapping. He says, "I need some help with some promos Friday evening. Do you think you can help?"

Say, yes, you will. You'd be delighted.

Wednesday

You know that Stormy has always aspired to the anchor desk, that if it weren't for his degree in meteorology, he'd be in the anchor seat instead of Dave Bellamy. So for 25 years, he's stood before the sea-green Chromakey, pantomiming high and low pressure systems. On his desk, he keeps signed pictures of Pat Sajak and David Letterman—weathermen who "made it." He no longer conceals the clicker in the palm of his hand but holds it like a detonator. He's requested that you condense the United States so that he won't have to move his arms as much. There have been rumors of auditions behind his back.

He's gotten worse since the station axed "Stormy's Hot Spot." *Not enough human interest*, they told him. "We showed drowned cattle in Bangalore," he rages. "Mudslides in Belize, droughts in Mozambique. How much more goddamned human interest do they want?"

The morning brings more bad news: Cecelia Barton of Channel 7 has had her market share shoot up 10 points.

"It's the breast implants," he says. "The only way she knows it's cold is when her nipples poke out of her blouse."

Marketing's latest ploy is to have him report weather readings from public schools in the area. He grits his teeth and mumbles: "Sam Houston Elementary says it's a balmy 95 where they are."

He has trouble with Native American names: "Con-e-hu-gow-wa-con High tells us it's a scorching 97." You'll be fielding angry phone calls about that one.

Today's forecast: 80% chance of precipitation as Caryn swats the coast. Then, as if bored, she will move into the Gulf, leaving high waves for Galveston surfers in her wake. Stormy clucks his tongue inside his mouth, and the boom picks up his disappointed sigh.

After the wrap, he wonders what happened to schools named after presidents. "These kids today," he says, "they couldn't take a temperature with a thermometer up their ass. Give me a good computational analyst any day." He's talking about your infallible accuracy, your ability to glean truth from rows of raw data.

But you know as well as I: these charts and graphs are meaningless. Calculations and algorithms only stab at the unknowable. You can make sense of waveforms and isobar graphs, but somewhere in Kiribati, a butterfly flaps its wings and lands on a fisherman's eyes. He falls into the water, and his body heat raises the water temperature just enough to divert the jet stream off its path, and the trade winds follow, inch by inch, until they've swirled past South America and into the Gulf.

That Caryn will bring rain, this surprises no one. They think two to three inches before drifting out to sea. But I'll tell you now: something big is coming.

Thursday

When you arrive at work, Stormy will ask you out for coffee. Even though a travel mug is still hot in your hands, accept. As Stormy goes to his office for his wallet, Chuck comes in. He doesn't break his stride even when he nearly runs face-first into the sliding glass doors. He stops when he sees you. When he smiles, his teeth are so white they're fluorescent.

"So, Cassie," Chuck says, "how do you like this weather?"

He makes this joke every time, his delivery progressively energetic. Today, he's a jack-in-the-box; you expect him to

explode with "From way downtown, boom!" or "Oh, yeah, that's the ticket!" His nerves are understandable, however; station reassignments come down this afternoon. "See you in Studio B," he says. He mimes a lay-up and leaves, laughing.

Stormy passes him and mutters, "I hate jocks."

In the coffee shop, Stormy lays out his promo idea. He wants a montage of himself—Stormy through the ages—with his baritone narration emphasizing experience, familiarity.

"Channel 4's Doppler 3000 is killing us," he says. "And it's their old system with a coat of chrome slapped on it. 'Taking you inside the storm,' indeed." He stirs his coffee into Charydbis. "You're a better forecaster than all their gadgets put together."

But we both know your secret, don't we?

Stormy regales you with weatherman gossip. Shawn Huckaby, part-time evenings for Channel 2, has been around for nearly as long as Stormy, but took a 5-year leave of absence after getting busted snorting cocaine with an underage hustler. ("We all got a good laugh out of that one," he says.) And in addition to her breast augmentation, Cecelia got a matching nose shave; her nose used to cast a small but noticeable shadow when she was in profile.

"Oh," Stormy says, off-handedly, "you *do* know that Mike Trevor is gay too, don't you?"

Don't be shocked: graduate school for meteorology is the third-largest higher education breeding ground for homosexuals, behind the beautician's academy and the seminary.

Back at KPRN, prepare two predictions: what everyone thinks will happen and what actually will happen. When Stormy reviews the latter, he'll look at you cockeyed. "Caryn heading back towards land?" He strokes his cheeks, as if massaging away the wrinkles. "Do you realize how unlikely that is?"

This is the curse of all who traffic in the future: though what you say will come to pass, no one will believe you. Stormy trusts what can be quantified, and nothing NOAA has said indicates Caryn's return, much less her fury. I know: this is less for you and more for Stormy. Only so much airtime can be milked out

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of a predictable disaster—but an unpredictable one? They give Edward R. Morrow Awards for that.

When you hand him the other prediction, the official NWS stance, he'll laugh and write off the truth as a joke. "You know," he says, "this is the only profession where people pay you to be wrong."

After Lisa Canady, the anchor, lobs her pre-scripted segue banter to Stormy, he's on his own. Watch him carefully. Think of how, even on his off-days, his forecast is more of a command than wishful thinking. His hands guide Caryn's swirl away from land; he's a high-pressure system unto himself. He's wrong, but you are awed anyway. Remember this well.

Outside, the sky has turned gray with cumulonimbi, like smoke from the siege of Troy.

Friday

Wear a black suit.

Pack an extra lunch.

It's going to be a long day.

The studio isn't free until after 11 P.M.'s "Last Live Look at the Weather," and you and Stormy wait in the wings as John Trevorino, the nighttime weatherman, finishes up. Chuck is also there. You wonder how Stormy has kept up; the crow's-feet around his eyes have deepened into talons. You can hardly recognize him in the archive tapes you've pulled. Twenty-five years ago, he was good-looking in a chubby-faced, Midwestern way. He hadn't yet developed his practiced Texan twang, but his excitement was unmistakable; he glanced at the monitors on either side of him as if stunned to see himself on screen. But, year by year, sadness creeps down the corners of his mouth, as if he's taken those angry calls about ruined picnics to heart. Perhaps this is why he wanted to be an anchor. There is comfort in reporting what has already happened.

All day long, storm clouds have hovered on the horizon; a lingering remnant from Caryn, says John. Off-camera, John

barely acknowledges Stormy. His avoidance means that Stormy will be moved to the weekends, where weathermen are born and where they go to die. Stormy doesn't know this yet, so there's still pleasure when he whispers to you, "John's wife is a bitch, too."

Stormy goes in front of the camera in his best suit. The crew is skeletal: these are the few who have volunteered their time, who have stood by Stormy through tantrums, through breakdowns. Stormy looks into the camera and says, "I've been with you for over thirty years now—" His voice is so commanding that even Chuck stops his play-by-play chatter.

Don't wonder if things could have been different, if you could have done more to convince him of Caryn's path, of his path, of yours, because before Stormy can finish, a messenger hand-delivers the official notice of his reassignment.

"We're in the middle of taping here," Stormy will say. You might want to close your eyes as Stormy's face flickers from annoyance to fear to fortitude. He tears open the envelope as if it's fan mail. Chuck steps forward, then back, as if knowing the inadequacy of *sorry*. If your eyes are still closed, you'll expect a sound: a sigh, a sob, a choke. But Stormy will only clear his throat.

"But," he continues, "I, and the KPRN weather team, will always be here for you, guiding you through the storm and into the future." He smiles, a gracious defeat. He stands up, right before the studio goes dark from a crack of thunder.

It's a brief darkness. When the lights come back, Chuck taps you on the shoulder and says, "Have you seen the weather? It's coming down like cats and dogs."

"What?" says Stormy. "Impossible." He connects to NOAA at the computer station and compares what he sees to the prediction you gave him yesterday. "Well, I'll be damned," he says. "I don't know how you do it," he says. There's pride on Stormy's face, an ineffable sadness. He puts an arm on your shoulder, like a father sending his daughter off to college. "I've got to go check on something. Can you put the rest of the promo together by yourself?"

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Walk him to the front door. The automatic sensor is waterlogged. You will urge him to stay inside, but Stormy pushes the doors open anyway. Already, the sidewalks have been swallowed. You can't tell where the parking lot ends and the road begins. Stormy stomps towards his car, the water above his ankles. His ripples are indistinguishable in the rainfall, but they carry back to your feet. He turns and mouths something, but in the torrent, you won't be able to hear him. Maybe it's *Goodbye*. Maybe it's *Wait for me*. Maybe it's your own imagination. The world looks made out of marble, gray and white—splotches, crests, waves. Stormy gets in his car. The lights come on.

This is the last time you will ever see him.

Saturday

Ah. I see you are upset.

True, there will be deaths, but Stormy will not be among them. In six months, you'll receive a postcard—a line of men in neon thongs before an unnaturally blue ocean. They are smiling and tanned. They wear sunglasses. The message on back says, "My kind of tropical disturbance." The postmark is from Miami.

But on the night of Caryn's flood, you will spend the night on the second-floor studio. The ground floor will take on five inches of water. For most of the night, you help the crew move computer and camera equipment to the upper floors. More than once, you'll be on opposite sides of a monitor with Chuck. Blame any giddiness on a lack of sleep, if you like.

You and Chuck camp out in front of the anchor desk. He gives you the softer of the two emergency blankets. The rest of the crew have spread into private offices and hallways and are now landmines of grumpiness and fatigue. There, in the studio, away from windows, behind sound-proof doors, in the very heart of KPRN, you find that you have nothing to say to him. Chuck's suit pants and dress shirt are on a hanger. Your jacket is next to his. He gratefully accepts your extra lunch. In his t-shirt and

boxers, Chuck has a certain charm. His sports show enthusiasm is an act as much as anything else. You lie head-to-head, stretching away from each other, staring up at the trellis, at the kleig lights. Here, truth is illuminated. Here, information comes easily. Maybe death isn't as harsh when it comes from a pretty face, a face of fatherly concern, a sympathetic face. Chuck talks about how he always wanted to be a sportscaster, ever since he watched his first ball game when he was six, but you fall asleep.

You wake up at five-thirty in the morning. When you stumble into the hall, members of the crew are stretching. Someone has put on a pot of coffee. It gurgles like a semi-clogged drain.

Outside, telephone poles stick out of the water like pier supports. Tops of cars are visible as they float by. On the fifth floor, the programmers have made do with a steady stream of infomercials and live satellite feeds from the mothership. The overnight station manager is panicking; the morning news anchors have called, unable to make it out of their houses. Lisa Canady called from an emergency shelter.

"Chuck," the manager says, "you're going to have to do the news. And you—" The station manager looks your way—"will have to do the weather."

Now's not the time for nerves, dear. You've seen Stormy do this a thousand times, swiveling his head to follow the red on-camera lights—a game of visual tag. You've seen him conceal his screen switcher in his hand, keep an eye on the projection monitor. Remember that it's not a mirror; what you see is what the audience sees, and they're desperate for information.

Tell them that this is Caryn, that she's mean and here to stay for a while. Tell them it's best to stay inside until the water recedes. There will be balls of fire ants, and poisonous snakes from the bayou, and toxic oil slicks on the surface of the water. Do not run water unnecessarily; the sewer system is overtaxed. The remote traffic cameras will capture kayakers paddling down the Southwest Freeway, and Chuck will say, on-air, "Wow."