

HURRICANE KATE WON'T GO DOWN IN HISTORY BOOK

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Tell the truth.

Aren't you just a little disappointed that Hurricane Kate didn't hit here more dramatically? Weren't you hoping for something to write back North about? Nothing too catastrophic, just enough for a snapshot – maybe a flooded garage or an authentic uprooted coconut palm. Or maybe the family cat would get swept away by the gales, a bewildered puff of calico tumbling through the streets.

None of this happened, of course, because Hurricane Kate is a another washout for South Florida.

Consider us poor wretches in the journalism business. Every time there's a hurricane, this paper spends a fortune deploying reporters and photographers to every crevice of the Caribbean.

This is done in grim anticipation of the killer hurricane that won't veer away, a sinister reprise of the Labor Day storm of 1935, which mangled Miami. Such a storm has not yet come, but it will.

My first big hurricane was Donna in 1960. I don't remember much because my father had shuttered the house so impenetrably that a Shiite truck bomber couldn't have dented the place.

Since then I've chased several dud hurricanes, including a joker named Alberto. They never go where they're supposed to, and they have no respect for newspaper deadlines.

In hurricane times, all editors demand that you go get quotes from:

Some stubborn old-timer who refuses to evacuate (“Son, I stayed through World War I, the Great Depression, and the flood of '26 so I ain't about to leave for no damn rainstorm. Heh, heh, heh.”)

Some brain-damaged surfer at Haulover Inlet who thinks the storm is great fun (“Man, these waves are just incredibly gnarly.”)

Some grizzled pioneer who once survived a terrible hurricane (“I'll never forget it! There was water over the roof! That was '26. Or maybe '27. No, it was '26.”).

Then you have think up about a hundred dramatic hurricane verbs, old standbys like: churned, crawled, swirled, steamed, veered, rumbled, roiled, boiled, rolled, charged, raced, swept, zigzagged or hopscotched.

If the hurricane actually hits someplace, then the verbs become cataclysmic: blasted, raked, walloped, pounded, scoured, swamped, slammed into, chewed its way through, obliterated, annihilated or atomized.

It's insane to risk your life for a newspaper during a hurricane, because whatever you write is absolutely useless by the time it appears in print. Unlike television, we can't possibly tell you where the storm is, only where it was.

Long after the presses rolled early Tuesday morning, Hurricane Kate kept shimmying west way through the Straits, so that the map that appeared in the morning paper was about as indispensable as the 1977 Dolphins roster.

This unavoidable time-lag creates hopeless problems for reporters and headline writers. Obviously we can't publish a big banner that says "KATE ERASES KEY WEST" before the actual erasure.

So what we do, basically, is hedge like crazy:

"SOUTH FLORIDA BRACES FOR KATE."

Can't argue with that. Doesn't say the storm is hitting; doesn't say it isn't. Just says we're good and ready for it.

Another safe one:

"KATE TAKES AIM FOR THE COAST."

Which coast? Doesn't matter. The darn thing's aiming someplace, and we all know there's plenty of coasts out there.

Unfortunately, hurricanes don't allow newspapers the luxury of specificity, which is why you won't see headlines such as:

"KATE TARGETS LEISURE CITY."

It's even risky to say Hurricane Kate is a has-been. Should it diabolically change course while we're going to press, you might be reading this column on some like raft adrift off the Marquesas.

In which case I'm sorry, but at least you've got something to write home about.