

Disaster As Joy in Australia: Cyclone Debbie Strikes

Townsville, North Queensland

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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"If the building starts to break up, protect yourself w[sic] mattresses, rugs etc under strong table or hold onto solid fixture." -Queensland Ambulance, Twitter, Mar 28, 2017

The eerie sense that something is about to happen, with unsolicited fulsome vicious force was hard to avoid. There is a pregnant sense in the air, the pre-moisture in the winds that tease the leaves, caress the branches with harshness, the palm leaves bending painfully in worship before a divine storm.

Whilst sultry, the air is dry enough to suggest that the cyclone is short of breath, free of moisture. No greater mistake can be made. She is ready, pouting, and a natural consequence of all that heaving moisture she has been gathering in making her journey from Papua New Guinea. It is like waiting for a ridiculously overqualified date, a creature with more credentials than a Nobel Prize winner. When she appears, you know you have been had.

The weather maps released with each tracking announcement from the meteorology department start looking more strikingly consistent, a beautiful set of inner circles of velocity: the most destructive winds located in a red inner core, the slightly less disastrous ones following the middle rim and then mere destructive gale force winds on the outer. For the rest, it is biblical deluge.

People were scurrying into their suburban hutches (well, homes) and darting about the suburbs with excitement, securing the necessities. The cut lawns fill the nostrils, and the bins that are so characteristic here are still out.

"If you are to put out the rubbish bins on this Monday, it will be collected," claims a jocular radio presenter on a pop radio station. "Do not do so on Tuesday. Your bin will be elsewhere."

Cars were being re-parked into areas of seclusion before the ghastly divinity's roar and fury. Everybody knew that Cyclone Debbie was on her way, a huge weather system threatening with 230 km per hour, then increasing to 240, a busting wondrous effort of nature that would remind us where our car and house insurance papers were.

The journalists not otherwise familiar with north Queensland were getting ready to cover the disaster story with a lecher's relish over a fleshy encounter. Scribblers and anchors from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne were waiting to see the hicks swim and flail against the tropical disaster.

Locally, the complacent went about fishing at weirs and dams with their ineffective weapons, awaiting a catch as the sun dipped into the blood red horizon, the pastel coloured fluorescence before the storm dazzled eyes now more attuned to numbing Facebook than attuned literacy.

Cyclone Debbie had barely had much of a resume (we were told by the Bureau of Meteorologists that she would be impressive) but here she was, howling with green adolescent insistence that there was something worth considering.

She, in short, was out to make an impression, the debutante about to remind everybody that she was the great show on the stage. And my, had she grown, from a tropical depression to a raging Category 4 force able to rip homes from their supports.

The entire disaster response team was there to cheer her on. The great contradiction on responding to disaster in Australia is that it is phlegmatically assumed, much like a bad toilet motion. For that reason, teams for “disaster management” are created in advance of imminent disaster. It is the embryonic assumption, the sense that the worst will happen. For that reason, we need the paperwork inked even before Debbie makes landfall.

The residents in Bowen, North Queensland were already claiming that they were waiting for her, a sort of reverse date. (The idea of gendering and sexing a cyclone is itself absurd, but this was what was happening.) Tables were taken in though no gourmet assortments would be on offer. If Debbie liked canned food well and good, but most preferred her to stay outside.

But the language, in an artificial sense, was the same as one anticipating a rendezvous with someone dashing. This was cyclonic erotica, the sense that the immensity approaching had a presence worth noting, a catwalk of destruction making her presence felt with more than nudging appeal. She had the full show, like a Kardashian and more so: an update every hour as she approached in vengeful awareness, a true live show.

The walk towards the Irish liquor dispensary – or bottle shop, as it is termed in Australia – was itself revealing. Dan Murphy is the name associated with cheaper options Australians flock to, filling their shopping trolleys to the point of immobility. Here, in Townsville, the thirsty punters were crowding and ready: they knew that Dan’s would be off the radar of purchase for some days. The cities of Mackay, Townsville, and Bowen would be hitting the bottle hard. Truly, cities driven to drink.

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