

Waiting for the Storm: A Green New Deal Novel

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Monday September 17, 2040

A Storm is Coming

When Jazz walked into Barney's Brew Pub, in the old downtown of Dover, New Hampshire that Monday morning, she already knew that a storm was coming. Everyone knew that a storm was coming. Most everyone had seen the report on the evening news, or heard it on the morning news, or from Twitter, or Spin, or chat-rooms, or Instagram, or from 3F, Friends-For-Friends.

Waking up in her flat in the new Station Square, with the Monday-morning light shining in through the windows overlooking woods and the river, Jazz took her emotional temperature and found that she was actually feeling rather content. a feeling she wasn't used to. She had only

been living in her own place for a few weeks, since her return from Alaska, but it felt right. She had grown so used to Alaska—the wide-open spaces, the single-family houses on five-acre lots. Everyone she knew said it would be impossible to live cooped up in an apartment. But this wasn't bad at all.

Living next to the DART light rail station, in downtown Dover was easy, it was convenient, and it was companionable. She had no utility bills; electricity was provided by the solar panels on the roof, and there was so much insulation that the building used hardly any heat or cooling, and what was required was provided by efficient heat-pumps.

Most important, there was a sense of community. Back in Alaska, the isolation—the “every man for himself” ideology—was out of control, and face it, it just wasn't fun. Of course, “Live Free or Die” New Hampshire had many of the same types, but Dover and The Corridor of apartments and condos along the new DART light-rail, attracted the more community-minded folks. All of it was new since she'd left nearby Durham after college ten years before.

It was a beautiful fall day, sunny and warm with just a hint of a breeze, as Jazz left her flat and headed out. on the short trail along the river to then across the bridge over the river and past the solid, four-story, blocks-long buildings old brick textile factories that made up the center of town.

Jazz wasn't particularly worried about a storm; Dover was a good fifteen miles from the coast. Still, the Cocheco River running through Dover emptied into the Great Bay, close enough to actually have a tide station right in town. Hurricanes brought rain, and if the tide was high, and the rain couldn't drain into the bay, then what? She would be fine; her friends, for the most part, would be fine. But no one could say what would happen on the coast, or to farther-flung rural towns that had not been as proactive as Dover.

Sometimes it helped to just talk to people. And if you wanted to talk to people, Barney's was the place. Barney had started it as a brewpub, but by now it was so much more; right now, it was the breakfast place in town where the old guys had their table in the corner. Barney himself, who had just turned sixty, was a bit paunchy; in his usual overalls and plaid flannel shirt, with the remains of his red hair in a ponytail he presided behind the breakfast bar, wiping down the huge pine-slab counter that had been a feature of the place since the very beginning. Truth be told Barney no longer had to come in himself and make espressos in the morning, but was where he wanted to be, his command post. This morning, the TV was tuned to the Climate Channel, and all eyes were on it. As usual, Maya was holding down the morning desk.

The storm now had a name: Hurricane Mitch. It had first been announced just a few days earlier when it was east of the Bahamas. Now the prognosticators, the meteorologists, were all over it with their different projected storm tracks. And the previous night, they had drawn a track that might take it all the way north to Cape Cod, Boston, and right here in New Hampshire.

"This storm is going to hit New England," Maya said, "so we are bringing in Eric from the National Weather Service in Gray, Maine, to analyze this for us."

She cut to Eric, at the National Weather Service office, just over the border in Maine. Now Eric was explaining the highs and the lows and the winds with maps and charts. "If you think this can't happen here, folks, let me review for you," Eric said. "The projections are pretty close to the track of Hurricane Bob, back in 1991. In North Carolina, 100,000 people evacuated to escape Bob. In Massachusetts, 50,000 evacuated from Cape Cod and Bob did a billion dollars' worth of damage."

“But keep in mind, that was almost fifty years ago. The population on the coast has almost doubled since then. And storms have been intensifying. So, picture Bob at twice the intensity and with twice the number of people impacted.”

“And let me remind you,” Eric went on, “of the famous Hurricane of 1938. Before they could even warn people, it had made a direct hit on Long Island, crossed the Sound, devastated Connecticut, and then made a direct hit on Rhode Island, pushing a 25-foot storm surge into the harbor and devastating Providence.”

When Eric put up the photo of a devastated Providence, Jazz remembered that her great-grandmother talked about a two-story house floating into the Providence harbor and out to sea. Hundreds drowned in their homes or cars, and many were simply lost in the tides and the seas.

Modern reanalysis, Eric was saying, showed that the 1938 hurricane had deteriorated to a Category 1 by the time it hit New Hampshire. But, still, hundreds of thousands of trees were blown down by ferocious winds—more than 160,000 acres of forest. There on TV were the black-and-white photos of apocalyptic forests, acres of downed trees criss-crossed like matchsticks, as if some kind of infernal tornado had blown through.

Harrison, the retired lineman at the end of the bar, chimed in: “I remember Dad and Grandpa worked in the forest for years cleaning up that one, hundreds of thousands of feet of lumber.”

Then all of the old guys chimed in:

“Yeah, Grandma remembered that they sent in the CCC to help with processing the timber.”

“People thought it was a powder keg, all those dead trees.”

“You know, so many miles of forest roads are left from that one blow-down; someone told me it was 10,000 miles of roads and trails.”

“So, folks,” Eric was saying on the TV, “get ready. I mean, tie everything down. This thing could be here before we know it.”

“Wow,” said Jazz. Everyone was just staring at the screen.

“We’re already hearing warnings from Florida,” said Eric, “and North and South Carolina, and... hold on a minute ...,” Eric listened intently to his earpiece. “There will be an announcement shortly from the Governor of Massachusetts. Stay tuned here, folks.”

Barney’s Brewpub, Solar NH, and The Rump Caucus

Barney had started his brewpub in the vast basement of one of the huge, abandoned one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old, mill buildings in Dover. By the mid-twentieth century the mill owners closed up, and moved jobs to the south, where labor was cheaper. The old mills stood empty for years. When Barney started back right after college, downtown Dover was a dead space, and the mill scene was far from trendy. Barney was one of the first of the young entrepreneurs to begin to revive the area by converting them to businesses, and then trendy lofts and offices for tech companies.

Barney, Katrina, and Chip had all met as students at UNH, majoring in sustainability in the mid-2000s. When they graduated in 2006, Chip and Katrina started their solar installation business, Solar NH, and Barney had his brew pub up and going, at least the beginnings of it, with

the live edge bar with taps behind, an assortment of antique tables and chairs, a few snacks, but not much more.

Still, they wanted to continue their work as activists focused on the livability and sustainability of the Dover-Durham region as they faced radical climate change. So they gathered a few of their college friends, and began meeting on Monday nights to try to figure out how they could influence progress in their local region.

Planning would have to link efforts in housing, transportation, and energy so that, locally and regionally, people did not have to drive polluting, gas-guzzling cars from their rural and suburban homes to work, school, and strip shopping malls. Electricity production would have to rely more on renewables, and grid transmission had to be modernized. And they would have to address housing; affordable housing was scarce in the entire region, and what housing there was had been built in areas nearly inaccessible without a car. There would be an opportunity to build new housing along rapid transportation corridors.

It seemed an unlikely group. Spencer, a freewheeling New Hampshire surfer, was working at a sports shop. Alex had grown up in the North Woods and became a civil engineer. Nic got a job in the planning department at UNH. Avery went to MIT for a master's degree in planning.

At first, they worked with groups in New Hampshire, and throughout New England, and through existing channels like the planning commissions, and the legislatures, but they found it frustratingly difficult to make any real impact. That's when they decided on their radical go-local plan. The whole region might not adopt radical change—there were too many holdouts in New Hampshire who would never give up their waterfront property or their rural lifestyles or their SUVs and pickup trucks—but at least they could institute change in their small part of the world.

Katrina, always the planner devised a three-pronged plan. First, they would have to understand how local decisions were made. Who made the decisions, and where did they get their information? How could they intervene? Then, they could reach out for expertise, make their own plan, and finally, they could get their members onto the boards and commissions that made decisions.

From the very beginning, they dreamed of a light-rail connection between Durham, the home of UNH, and the larger city of Dover. They referred to it as “The Connector” or DART--- the Dover-Durham Area Transit. They had always envisioned it as the driver of the new economy connecting the two towns, only six miles apart—but more importantly, it would anchor what they were calling “The Corridor.” Gradually, they began to realize that they would have to do an end run around the official county and town planning groups if they wanted to get anything done and they began calling themselves the Rump Caucus.

The Rump Caucus adopted the long game, each working their way up in various administrations. Nic got a job in the planning department at UNH. Avery got a job in the planning department for the City of Dover. Others got themselves elected to local commissions and planning boards. Chip and Spencer won election to the New Hampshire State House.

Together they were planning the entire time, and the game was to be ready with detailed plans when the time was right. When the Green New Deal money finally began to flow, they were ready to make their small part of the world more sustainable for their community, for generations to come. All the while they had their eyes on the prize- they envisioned a light rail connection between Dover and Durham becoming the spine of all new sustainable developments.

Right from the beginning, Barney and friends worked with UNH faculty in Durham, many of whom they had conveniently gone to school with. UNH planners created a strategic

growth plan that recognized the challenges of climate change, they started by adopting a 100% renewable energy goal which they achieved by 2020. That turned out to be the easiest part.

While Chip and Katrina themselves had focused on solar energy for individual homes, the entire electric grid was a bigger problem—an artifact of the mid-twentieth century which, at the time, had not been modernized for decades. New Hampshire’s utilities commission had entirely failed to upgrade to a smart grid, which might have provided incentives for consumers to alter usage during different times of day based on pricing signals.

Transportation and housing were the next issues. But it was a chicken-and-egg problem. People did not see the point of living clustered along the train tracks if there were only one or two trains running each day. Detractors complained that it wasn’t practical to increase train service or build light rail, because everyone already had cars and wouldn’t give them up. Year after year, all through the 2000s and 2010s, New Hampshire (like all the other states) spent billions on expanding interstates from two lanes to three, and then four—and still the traffic got worse.

And they had been successful! The University in Durham had worked with the community activists on the plan right from the beginning, even before they had managed to pack the planning boards in both Durham and Dover. With some prodding from activists the university resolved to build all its new buildings in The Corridor: every new dorm, all new faculty housing, and most of the new research facilities and classroom buildings. The rest of the campus—the legacy dorms, administration, classroom and office buildings, and labs—would be accessible with the electric, self-driving “last-mile autonomous vehicles” (LaMAs) and UNH’s electric trams, which ran every five minutes. The Transportation Project Lab had designed those too.

By the time Jazz had returned to Dover, sustainable, affordable condos, apartments, and retail establishments had grown up on the Dover end of the DART, including the townhouse and apartment project where Jazz now lived once a barren parking lot for the Amtrak rail station that carried commuters to Boston, now no longer needed, thanks to DART. Beyond Dover, more apartments and condos, as well as workshops, light industry, and business, had grown up along The Corridor.

For those who lived and worked in The Corridor, the LaMAs and trams weren't even necessary; no buildings on The Corridor were more than a five-minute walk from the DART.

Jazz remembered living in one of the older-style apartment housing complexes, built out beyond the city centers, because that was what was available—and because they provided parking, which was essential in the old economy. She and her roommates had had to drive everywhere. All of them had been raised in the old economy, relying on cars. Many needed cars to get to a job, or to get home to visit their parents in rural or suburban New Hampshire or Massachusetts. It was a self-reinforcing circle. But the new dorms and apartments on The Corridor broke the circle for new students. There were many jobs available at UNH, or in Dover or Durham—no car necessary.

Jazz enjoyed the expanded sense of community she found in Dover. She loved the solemn old brick mills and the vibrant feel of downtown Dover, now enlivened with the new development along The Corridor. She loved how easy it was to get around on the new DART and the LaMAs. Things had changed a lot in the ten years since she'd left the area. Jazz now worked for Chip and Katrina at Solar New Hampshire after finally leaving behind a failed

marriage in the far-flung oil town in Alaska where she grew up. Thankfully, she had used her time there to become a certified electrician, making it easy for Chip and Katrina to hire her.

In the middle of the Climate Channel's discussion about storm paths, Jazz got a text from her work partner, Jeff; he would pick her up at the DART station in Durham to begin their workday. Time to go. As she walked the four blocks from Barney's in the Mill District up to Station Square to catch the DART, she thought about how much she appreciated just being able to walk, and the sense of community she had here. That was one reason she had had to leave Kenai, where she and her husband had lived in a single-family rural home, in a community of oilfield workers, surrounded by actual oil and gas fields, with strip malls strung out along fifteen miles of highway. She had to drive everywhere, and then drive the kids everywhere. It was tough leaving the kids, but it was all just too much.

At the DART station, Jazz stopped at the Nature/Nurture takeout café to get a sandwich, a granola bar, and an apple for lunch and a quick check in with Joon, behind the counter.

"You heard about the storm, right?" Joon asked. She had the TV on behind the counter. "Do you think we should worry?"

"I think it's going to be the big one, and it's going to hit the coast," said Jazz. "At least that's what Eric at the weather service station in Maine is saying. And Barney is concerned."

"But will it affect us here, fifteen miles from the Seacoast?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows," said Jazz. "Remember how much rain North Carolina got a few years ago? Eric on the TV was just starting to explain about extratropical storms and rain bands when I left. We could get a lot of flooding. And the Massachusetts Governor is about to have a press conference announcing evacuations on the Cape. Starting now. Sounds pretty real."

“What are the guys at Barney’s saying?” asked Joon.

“Barney is talking about laying in extra supplies. I guess I would too if I were you.”

“But the storm isn’t supposed to hit until Wednesday, right?” asked Joon. Two days off could seem like a comfortable amount of time to someone who didn’t want to get anxious or begin planning, or getting upset, or anxious. Wanting to at least put it off for some less definite future.

“Yeah, but it’s going to hit Connecticut and Rhode Island Tuesday night,” said Jazz.

“Things will start to get really chaotic. I mean, suppose they decide to evacuate part of Boston?”

They both fell silent. Evacuating Boston was too big to think about. How many people would that be? Where would they go? Certainly, Bostonians couldn’t wait until Tuesday night to start packing—and Tuesday was tomorrow. They would have to start evacuating today. Too hard to imagine. Jazz said her goodbyes to Joon, picked up her lunch, and headed for the train.

Of all the things that had improved since she had graduated from UNH, Jazz thought that this whole new transportation network was the best, including trains that actually ran on time, and frequently, every ten minutes or so, and were free. No more checking watches or schedules like she had when she first got to the campus in Durham, or timing trips to coincide with buses on the hour or half-hour.

One thing Jazz especially liked about the new light rail was that it forced everyone out of their cars. Getting to and from the DART, everyone was a pedestrian. It made dropping in on a small shop easy, enticing, convenient. In the old days, and even now back in Alaska you jumped into your car in front of the house, drove to a big parking lot, and went into an office or shopped in a warehouse store with few people even around to help. In fact, they had already replaced

most of the checkout clerks with machines. It seemed like human contact was over, and it was depressing.

Bringing back human interaction in daily life had been another goal of The Corridor's planners. The streets and walkways were now full of small shops and cafes, and every dorm and apartment or condo building had plenty of public space on the ground floor that was designed to be used: cafés, co-working spaces, small shops, game rooms, gyms. And the plan was working well.

Back in 2020, workers in trendy Portsmouth had already been moving to Dover and other towns in Strafford County, drawn by the more affordable housing. The trend only accelerated during the pandemic, as those who worked at home and could afford the price tag began to flee Boston and New York City, pushing housing prices even higher in Portsmouth. But transportation was horrible back then. There were busses, but the busses didn't run after 10:00 PM, completely ignoring all the restaurant and bar workers who got off work at 1:00 or 2:00 AM. Back then, almost everyone just drove, one person to a powerful gasoline-powered car, and then spent ten minutes trying to find a parking space, and ten more minutes walking to wherever they needed to be. It was all such a colossal waste of time and energy, not to mention all of the land taken up by parking lots, where those expensive cars sat parked all day.

Waiting on the station platform, Jazz greeted people she recognized. Some were being dropped off by LaMAs — the Last Mile Autonomous vehicles that provided that last-mile transport from home to station. Some people still drove cars, but the old park-and-ride lot was much smaller than it had once been. And new housing had been built on the excess parking area, including the mixed townhouse and apartment development Jazz now lived in. Jazz pondered all of this as she hopped on the sleek electric DART train. As the last of Dover slipped by, she

began to see the small workshops, IT businesses, and small manufacturing facilities, interspersed with small farms. In less than five minutes, the UNH Corridor began.

After passing some of the new condos and university offices, Jazz got off the DART at the Durham Station. Jeff was waiting in a yellow e-truck with the yellow-and-red Solar NH logo on the doors. He already had his computer out, going over the client notes for the day.