



WILD WEATHER

BY ZOYA PATEL



When the alerts arrive, they are a series of beeps, increasing in volume and frequency depending on the level of urgency. Sonia is attuned to these sounds in a way that feels intuitive, beyond just the sounds hitting her ears.

The control centre is quiet except for these machine noises, everyone glued to the screen in front of them. The circular room is framed around floor to ceiling windows, giving Sonia and her colleagues an incredible view of the surrounding land from the outskirts of Sydney. Despite the enticement of the vista, Sonia rarely looks up from her screen, waiting always for the next call to action.

She reacts immediately, before her brain even has time to catch up. A click makes the alert appear on her screen, the words large in a red box that takes over, pushing all other activities to the periphery.

A cyclone is due to hit the east coast of Viti Levu in Fiji within the next 48 hours.

The warnings have been flagged for weeks through the weather forecast, but now it is imminent, and the need for crisis supplies of medication and treatment
GEAR IS URGENT.

Sonia clicks through to the full request, and notes down the total number of items requested - gauze, bandages, dressings, antiseptics, antibiotics, saline drips, pain medication, the list is long and thorough.

She calculates the weight in a few more clicks and generates the order form, including the number of drones, the items allocated to them and the total flying distance.

Outside, she can see the sky bright and blue still. It's strange to think that they are only hours away from Fiji in flying distance, here in Sydney, but that, not far from where she is, people are boarding up their windows and tying down any outdoor belongings, getting ready to weather another horrifying cyclone.

The drones will leave from Brisbane tonight, and should reach the medical facility in Suva within 10 hours. The wind means she will have to deploy the sturdier model, which slows down the flying speed but is much more reliable given the conditions.

Sonia pictures the view from a drone, sweeping through the sky on a pre-programmed flight

path, driven by the algorithms they have created here in Australia, to deliver supplies to another country. It's a feat of technology she knows her generation takes for granted, but her Nana still marvels over it whenever she calls him.

'Beta, the way the world is today, I could never have imagined,' he says, his voice crisp over the digital phone network, all the way from Lautoka.

Whenever she hears him speak, Sonia's homesickness doubles, causing her stomach to clench and her head to spin. Nana's voice sounds like home, it reminds her of eating raw mango dipped in chili in the holidays on the farm, his strong hands holding her little ones while he taught her how to slice the mango flesh into slivers for dipping and chewing.

Even five years later, Australia doesn't feel like home, and, on days like this, she feels especially alone and vulnerable, so removed from the people she loves the most. Will the storm be as bad as the last one, that almost took the roof off her grandparent's house? Will this be the time that someone she loves is injured, or dies, like so many other Fijians do every time one of these weather events occurs?

Sonia shakes herself back into the present and tries to quieten the worried thoughts in her mind. At least her Nana and Nani aren't alone. Her brother, Ranjiv, will be there, helping them prepare the house. He will bring his wife and children and stay with their elderly grandparents until the storm passes. This

reassures her, but the guilt is still a ball in Sonia's chest.

She was only going to stay here until she finished her degree. That had been the plan, and the agreement with her mother. But then, when she had passed away suddenly in Sonia's third year of university, it seemed less urgent to return to Fiji, to ensure someone was there to live with her mother after Ranjiv was married.

She applied for permanent residency without fanfare, barely discussing it with her brother. She pretended it wasn't a big deal to contemplate leaving her homeland permanently, that she could make the decision without it meaning a fundamental change in her life.

And Ranjiv was so encouraging.

'There's nothing here for you, Sonia,' he told her over the phone. *'Think of the jobs and opportunities you can have in Australia. Maybe one day, I can come over too.'*

Now, watching the screens in front of her swirl with the satellite projection of storm clouds circling over the region, she wishes they had made a plan, arranged for Ranjiv and her grandparents to move sooner.

'Probably best to head home early today,' a voice comes from behind her. Sonia turns to see her boss, Adam, standing in the doorway. *'Might need you to be here late tomorrow, when the storm hits.'*

'Got it,' Sonia says, and she starts clicking out of the programs on her screen. She's dreading the hours ahead, at home alone, worrying about her family.

.....

The emergency centre in Suva is already bustling with activity. The function room at the Novotel has doubled as the emergency meeting place for years now, despite promises of a new convention centre being built.

Epeli surveys the crowds from behind his table, where he is busy unpacking and organising the medical supplies that arrived from Brisbane this morning. The drones all landed safely, thankfully, with enough power left in them to make the trip home.

He has created piles of wound treatment supplies, pain medication, antibiotics, and treatment creams for cuts, scrapes, and burns. The most common injuries that occur during cyclones are from people having furniture or other items fall on them while they try to move them, or from glass windows breaking.

One time, Epeli treated a man whose calf muscle was almost sliced clean off when a piece of tin roofing flew into him while he was running towards shelter. Epeli had to hold the muscle in place while he stitched the man up, knowing that his patient needed more comprehensive care, but also aware that Epeli was the most qualified person available.

That was when he was still a student, volunteering at the emergency centre through

the hospital where he was undergoing practical training. Now, he is a fully qualified doctor, and yet he is still doing the same things, because, in a country where medical professionals are always leaving, a doctor has to step outside of his role all the time just to make things happen.

Even as he thinks this, a nurse hurries towards him, clipboard in hand.

'Doctor, they need you at the assessment queue, I can take over,' she says, reaching him.

Epeli nods, and quickly walks her through his system, before beginning to weave through the crowds of firefighters and paramedics, social workers and government officials who are trying to create a sense of order in the centre before the chaos begins.

The storm is due to hit over the coming three or four hours. Through the function room windows, Epeli can see the clouds gathering, grim and dark on the horizon.

'How long until you think it will start?' Aysha, a fellow doctor from the hospital, is lining up intake documents on the desk, getting ready for the flurry of activity that will take place when patients begin arriving.

'Maybe sooner than we thought,' Epeli responds. 'You needed me?'

'Yes, I need you to check on the mobile response units,' Aysha points towards the door, where he can glimpse the compact units lined up in the corridor. 'Can you make sure they're stocked up?'

'When will they be deployed?'

The units have been a gamechanger in the Fiji response to crises. Filled with emergency supplies and equipment, powered through a strong but light self-contained battery pack, and easily attached to an ATV to enable medics to reach difficult places, they are a resource Epeli can't imagine doing without.

'Probably from lunchtime,' Aysha casts another worried glance at the windows. 'The sooner, the better'.

.....

Ranjiv feels the wind pushing against him like a wrestler, the weight of the pressure making him bend at the waist to be able to stand up. He has almost finished the cyclone-proofing, with all the windows louvred and boarded up, the door ready to be bolted across the middle, and everything external safely stowed away in the outbuilding.

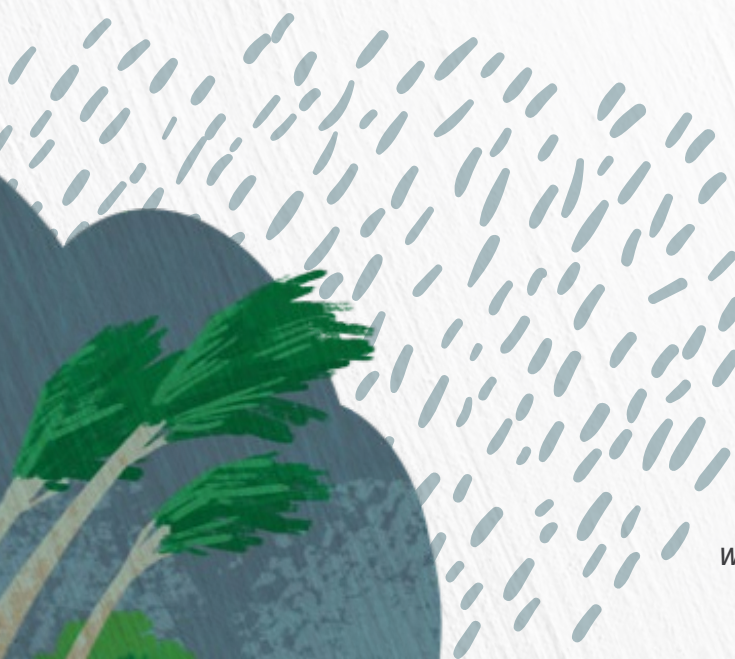
Nana and Nani are inside with Maya and the kids, and he glances over towards the house quickly, reassuring himself that the doors are firmly closed, and the people he cares about safe and dry.

He just needs to double check the animals are securely inside the barn before he can join them.

For his entire childhood, they never had any undercover shelter for the animals. Their goats and sheep roamed free, and Nana's philosophy was that they were safer during a storm if they could find shelter themselves.

But with the frequency of the cyclones now, and the scarcity of healthy livestock, they relented and built a sturdy concrete barn to avoid too many losses.

Ranjiv cracks the door open, using all of his strength to prevent it from flying open with the wind, and checks that the animals are



comfortable. He can see the hay and water Nana dragged in earlier, and a rough headcount reassures him the animals are all accounted for.

As he starts his hurried march, bent against the wind again, Ranjiv feels a drop of rain hit his cheek. Before he can even look up, the clouds dissolve above him and rain thunders down, the drops are big and as hard as river pebbles.

He runs, hands trying to protect his face and feet slapping against the deluge of water. Only when he reaches the door does he pause to survey the yard one last time.

The ground is already turning to mush, and the long palm trees that line the driveway are swaying dangerously. The sky is black and angry, and he can't see another person outside, the neighbour's house dark and quiet, like theirs is about to be.

With a mighty tug, Ranjiv yanks the door open and slips inside, shutting it with relief against the howling storm.

.....

Mere is trying her best to hear the Chief over the rushing sound of the wind and the staccato pelting of rain, but she can only catch a few words at a time.

'Straight into Using the radio Will be expected at all time...'

She glances at her fellow quad members, and then turns back to the Chief. She can't get distracted. She has to pay close attention,

because it's quite literally life or death out there now.

The ATVs are loaded, fuelled and ready, the mobile response units locked in and the tyres checked.

Mere has driven ATVs for years, taking the units to remote villages for monthly health checks, or to call outs for emergencies. But she hasn't yet done a cyclone response, and her heart is racing.

Her unit is being deployed to the city centre, to assess damage and help any civilians they find. Despite being advised to stay indoors in a safe dwelling, many people can't bring themselves to leave their businesses and storefronts when their livelihoods are at stake. The mobile unit patrols are crucial in these cases.

'You ready?' Jo, one of her colleagues asks her, as he straps on his body protector vest. The ATVs are still an older model and have a risk of rolling over when going over rough terrain too fast. People have died before, so now they wear body protectors.

Mere walks with Jo towards the lineup of vehicles, and starts checking hers swiftly, ensuring the mobile unit is correctly attached and nothing is likely to fly off when she hits the road. The wind is howling still, and, in a few moments, they'll be leaving the safety of the garage and entering the wild weather.

'Sure,' she replies to Jo, keeping her expression stoic.

They mount their ATVs and start the engines, waiting for the signal from the Chief before they kick into gear and roll out.

Outside, the rain is still pelting, but the wind is more inconsistent, seemingly dying down only to whip against her again a moment later. Mere's goggles keep her eyes protected, but the rest of her body is soon wet.

It's hard to see clearly, but the streetlights are still working, amazingly. She peels off from the group when she reaches her designated route and begins the process of driving slowly up and down streets in the city, keeping her eyes alert for any small movement.

Mere's heart is bouncing in her chest, and she's aware that her hands are sweating under her protective gloves. The heat is still palpable in the air, humidity making the atmosphere clammy and thick.

As she gets deeper into the city, the roads become darker and she can see most shopfronts boarded up with plywood across windows and doors. Loose fixtures like hanging signs have been ripped down by the wind, but most places are free from the worst debris.

Mere's eye catches movement ahead, and she speeds up, letting the ATV coast towards a storefront shrouded in darkness. As she gets closer, she can see a window has shattered, and there is something moving in front of it.

Parking the ATV, she jumps off quickly, pulling a torch out of the toolbelt around her waist.

'Hello?' she calls above the sound of the storm. 'I'm a paramedic, is there anyone here?'

'Help!' a faint voice calls, and she rushes towards the sound. Where the window has broken, shards of glass litter the floor, and a man is lying on the ground, clutching his leg. A jagged piece of glass is embedded in his thigh muscle.

'Sir, I'm here to help, just remain calm,' Mere says, her training rushing back into her mind. 'Can you tell me what happened?'

'I couldn't afford to board the windows,' he gasps. 'I was going to shelter upstairs, but I just wanted to check everything one last time, and then the window broke.'

Mere crouches beside him and tries to assess the wound. She knows she has the supplies she needs in the unit, and suddenly her feelings of anxiety dissipate, replaced by an adrenaline-fuelled calm.



She knows what to do. She's ready to take action.

.....

The coffee is stale, but Sonia drinks it anyway, glued to her computer screen. She's been watching the alerts all afternoon, as the storm got closer to Fiji, and now it is nighttime and the cyclone has well and truly hit.

'Any word from your brother?' Adam asks from his desk across from her.

'No phone reception,' she replies. 'I'll hear from him when the storm passes.'

She sounds more confident than she feels. She knows there's nothing she can do about the lack of communication options, so Sonia tries to focus on what she can control.

'I think we should prep another drop for tomorrow,' she says. 'They'll need more supplies for the rest of the weekend, especially for injuries sustained during the clean up.'

'The drones are charged, but we can't send them until the wind drops down,' Adam says.

'Well, I'll get them loaded anyway,' Sonia says, opening up the system on her computer to begin the order process.

Being able to contribute to the response definitely makes her feel less helpless than before. It's strange to think that, just a few decades ago, her parents would have been weathering storms somewhat like this one, without drones to drop supplies, or the mobile response units that Fiji relies on now.

Of course, the storms weren't as frequent. These days, between storms and floods, the weather system is much more erratic.

Sonia knows Ranjiv will have done everything he could for the farm, and that the house has withstood many cyclones in its time.

Even though they're so far away, she can feel her family's pulse, beating in unison with her own, determined to weather this moment like they have

.....

The centre is still crowded, but the energy has become lower now that the worst of the storm has passed. Epeli has spent the last 24 hours working non-stop, with only a few restless hours of sleep snatched between patients and inak

All around him, medical staff are treating patients, everything from small wounds to significant injuries, and people whose existing conditions have been exacerbated by the stress.

Earlier he helped with a young woman who was eight months pregnant, whose blood pressure was soaring. Now he finishes wrapping the sprained wrist of an older man, and says his goodbyes, ready to take a short break while he can.

His phone is buzzing with messages, with reception finally reappearing. Epeli knows some will be from his parents, who have been anxiously watching coverage of the storm from their home in New Zealand.

Please let us know you're ok, one reads, from his mother.

Epeli quickly responds *Sorry, have been working. Everything fine here*, and sighs, knowing that this won't satisfy her anxiety.

They moved to New Zealand when Epeli was 17, following in the footsteps of so many of their family who left Fiji as soon as they could. If the country was economically challenged before, the past decades of climate change decimated the jobs market, and forced many people away from the coast, destroying the tourism industry.

When Epeli told his family he wanted to return to practice medicine in Fiji, they were shocked.

'Why would you choose to go back there, when we have worked so hard for you to have the opportunity to live here?' his mother asked.

'I want to help our people,' Epeli told her. 'I don't want to be yet another Fijian who leaves.'

They didn't understand, but they couldn't see how important it was to stop the 'brain drain', to keep talent in their country.

Whenever he works through a crisis like this, Epeli remembers why he made this decision. His hours were long, and his body exhausted, but he had helped people tonight.

That was always his vocation.

.....

Ranjiv blinks his eyes against the light, unused to it after the dark of the storm. The yard is strewn with debris, plants have been flattened in the fields, and the cover has blown off their shed.

Overall, though, it is not as bad as he thought it would be.

The ground is still soaked, and his feet stick to the mud as he walks around the perimeter of their land, surveying the damage.

There is probably only a few days work to do to get things in order again.

Even messy like this, the air still thick with moisture, Ranjiv is struck by the beauty of their home, with the mountains rising ahead and the lush greenery carpeting the ground ahead.

Every storm takes it out of him, but he knows that he would do anything for this land, for his family and his country. It is who he is, in his bones.

A sound makes him glance up, in time to see a small fleet of drones travelling far above him. He can see the green and gold logo of an Australian aid organisation on them. Ranjiv pauses, and shields his eyes from the sun with one hand, watching the drones slowly make their way in the direction of Suva.

They are strangely
beautiful, these metal birds.
**Like messengers
of survival,**
travelling with purpose
to their destination.

