

STORMY WEATHER

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I was sharing a quiet pot of tea with Kathy last Thursday afternoon when all hell broke loose. At exactly three o'clock the sky darkened, the wind rose and rain began to gust into the patio. Between one sentence and the next, our words were torn out of our mouths and the table we were sitting at was awash with water. I shouted for Wayan, who was ironing in the kitchen, but she couldn't hear me for the hammer of the rain on the roof. I raised my voice a few decibels, wrapped Kathy in a warm shawl and began to race around unplugging all the electronics, inside the house and out (I'd once had a spectacular modem meltdown during such a storm). I grabbed and wiped dry the laptop, its cable, the lamp, the mosquito machine and my camera and carried them out of harm's way as the storm gusted through the patio.

Chiko the parrot loves dancing in the rain and I moved his perch into the weather for a bath. He screeched with delight for a while then abruptly stopped. By this time the thunder and lightning had started, and I quickly brought him in to join us in the wet patio. He was soaked through to the skin, and the ensuing crashing and banging and fireworks rendered him uncharacteristically silent for the duration.

As fast as we dropped the bamboo blinds on the north side of the house, the squalls blew them into the patio. Ornaments and vases crashed to the floor. The rain, blown horizontally by a fierce north wind, drove into the patio and soaked the table, chairs, cushions and carpet in moments. And us, of course.

Wayan and I raced around stacking cushions and rolling up carpets. The storm had worked itself up to a vortex of electrical activity that seemed to be hovering directly above the roof. Lightning snaked around the garden, immediately followed by roars of thunder so loud that the house shook on its foundations. I like wild weather but this made me sit down abruptly on a bare bench and gather Kalypso into my arms. The old dog was trembling so hard I had to hold her tightly so she wouldn't shake herself right off my lap. Hamish, the fearless one, rolled his eyes apologetically and hid his head under my long skirt. A leak opened directly over my head and I shifted the three of us a few inches to starboard. Every time the thunder crashed overhead Wayan screamed with might have equally have been excitement or terror.

A cataract of water poured out of the roof gutter and into the pond, filling it to the brim and beyond. I feared for the fish. The lights went off, blinked on, then dimmed again. A papaya tree laden with unripe fruit cracked and fell over, scattering green papaya all over the grass. Nyoman had been diligently pushing water off the patio and back into the garden where it belonged, only to have it blow back in his face. In a break from this futile activity, he reported that the avocado tree in the front yard had been blown over.

Now, nascent gardeners from cold climates share a particular affection for the avocado. The small, hard fruits that retailed for several dollars in northern winter supermarkets evoked warm winds and exotic climes. We wrapped them in newspaper to ripen and later suspended the seeds over glasses of water with strategically placed toothpicks. Gratifyingly often they would germinate, and I know people who kept an avocado plant in a pot for years, a triumph of willpower over latitude.

I'd optimistically planted an avocado seed from a particularly succulent specimen soon after my house in Ubud was built, and it grew into a sturdy tree of over 50 cm around and 10 metres high. In its seventh year -- just as the books said -- it bloomed with delicate white flowers and produced fruit for the first time. I knew I'd been taking a chance, planting a fruit tree from seed instead of grafting, but it rewarded my naiveté by giving us the most wonderful avocados. For over two months it produced dozens of huge, rich fruits, some of them weighing over 700 grams and as big as my head. I rarely had the opportunity to taste one, however, since the dogs immediately devoured most of the fallen fruit and the others would disappear in a most mysterious manner. One day the tree would be loaded with almost-ripe avocados and the next there would be a big pile of them in the kitchen. Wayan would make smoothies for Nyoman, visiting friends would take some home and large bags of them would go back to the family compound. Suddenly I would be out of avocados until the next batch fell. But it was gratifying to brag about my avocados to snowbound Canadians.

The avocado has been cultivated in Central and South America for about 8,000 years. The Spanish first described it in 1518 and quickly added it to their diet. The Aztecs used it as a sex stimulant; the doctor to King Charles II wrote during a visit to the Caribbean, "It is one of the most rare and pleasant fruits of the island. It nourisheth and strengtheneth the body and procures lust exceedingly." (This seems unlikely, but I am happy to be corrected by more knowledgeable readers.) The Spanish later used oxidized liquid from the avocado seed as ink on their documents, which are still legible today. In 1856 avocado trees were planted in California from Mexican stock and the rest is history.

Avocados are a healthy fruit. They contain no cholesterol, but are a good source of oleic acid and mono and polyunsaturated fats which help to lower cholesterol and protect against breast cancer. They are a good source of potassium, folate, vitamin E and other vitamins. Avocados are rich in the essential Omega-3 fatty acids (in alpha linoleic form), usually found in fish, which help fight cardiovascular disease. Another abundant nutrient in avocado is vitamin K, a fat-soluble vitamin essential for blood clotting. It is also surprisingly high in fibre. Nutritional attributes apart, growing my own avocados fulfills a unique, northern-latitude fantasy. The sex life of the avocado is very complicated, as the tiny flowers can be either male or female depending on the time of day and the temperature. After trying to get my head around whether the flower is a he or she on the afternoon on the second day when the temperature is 70F, I have decided not to carry my research further. But I assure you that it's a bit of a miracle that we get avocados at all.

Losing this tree was a blow. A healthy avocado tree will continue to bear fruit for up to 200 years. Although I only had 11 years left on my house contract, I was counting on another decade of home-grown guacamole. The tree, laden with blossoms for the next crop, had succumbed to the strong wind and weather. But instead of falling across the garden or taking out a wall of the bathroom as it could easily have done, my tree had laid itself down most politely next to the house. The only damage was a single cracked roof tile.

Once the worst of the storm had passed, we went out to survey the damage. The fallen tree filled the narrow space beside the house. "Kasian," mourned Wayan when she saw that every branch was thick with bloom. She grew up poor, and hates to see food wasted. I looked at its roots, exposed by the fall. They were small and lateral, not a tap root as I'd expected. This big tree had not been well anchored for a powerful storm. Nyoman told me that avocado wood was good for nothing but burning, so I went to bed that night saddened by the loss of a tree that had given me much pleasure.

But the next morning found a trio of concerned Balinese in consultation around the fallen tree. One was Komang, the gifted gardener who worked for my neighbours. Komang had actually attended horticultural school and understood these issues. He opined that it was worth the effort to try and save the avocado tree, and my staff enthusiastically agreed. Within an hour most of the higher branches had been carefully removed and a system of ropes and bamboo props had pulled the heavy trunk up off the ground and buttressed it up. Every day they pulled it a little closer to vertical. Komang comes over every day to take its pulse.

The garden has been swept of fallen leaves and branches. Wayan has taken all the green papaya home to her pigs. The fish survived. The only memento of the storm is the severely pruned avocado tree, leaning at a slightly drunken angle but still bravely blooming on its few remaining branches. Perhaps I will get a few avocados this year after all.

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

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