

Island hermit rebuilds like spiders after Andrew

By CHRISTOPHER SULLIVAN
Associated Press Writer

DISMAL KEY, Fla. (AP) — Before the storm, he built a coffin-like "clamshell" of hinged plywood and two-by-fours away from his cabin on this island where he's been the only resident for five years.

The pine box would be a last refuge or a place for a hermit to die.

But as Hurricane Andrew bashed and tore trees all around, the old cabin bowed but didn't buckle and he never had to flee for the box. Afterward, he celebrated by playing a tape of Verdi's "Requiem" as his neighbors, the woodpeckers and butterflies, reappeared.

That's about it. Life goes on pretty much as it did before on this mile-long spit of oyster shells and mangroves, one of the so-called Ten Thousand Islands peppered Florida's southwest coastline. It's a long hour's boat ride to the nearest mainland fishing village.

Follows spiders' example

With a machete to clear paths of branches, the human inhabitant of Dismal Key follows the lead of the golden orb spiders perfecting their web outside his door.

"They were doing a lot of repair work right away. They didn't have to wait for FEMA," laughed the man who calls himself Niranjan. ("It's a taken name," he said, not explaining.) FEMA is the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which he knew from portable radio broadcasts was working in other places hit by the hurricane.

The radio, the tape player and a few other conveniences give Niranjan a toehold in society, but the few people who know him describe him as a no-fussing, real-life hermit, the latest in a line who've occupied the cabin for decades.

One of those acquaintances is Pam Ball, a boat captain at a marina near Everglades City, who conducts nature cruises of the ragged coast and its waters that teem with manatees, dolphins and game fish.

She described Niranjan, whom she greeted as "Ni" during a visit last week, as a kind of caretaker of Dismal Key, cutting trails and making sure no visitors harm it.

"I mentioned to him once that it seemed nice, that I'd like to live on an island," she recalled. "He immediately said, 'Well, there's not room for two on this island.'" She laughed.

Moved away from 'real world'

During an interview on the porch of his two-room cabin, with netting and a few blasts of diesel fuel spray keeping away the mosquito swarms, the hermit told a little about his past in a "real world" he now shuns, about a wife who died, about his sketches of a sailboat he'd like to build someday, about life on Dismal Key.

"It's quiet," he said. "And I listen to it."

He reads. He meditates. He observes everything around his cabin: a spat between a bobcat couple, a big black vulture that squeezes into his birdbath "then tries to look proud," rattlesnakes, insects

and exotic birds.

As he spoke a cuckoo issued a call, like something on the soundtrack of an old Tarzan movie, from the woods that embrace his house. The green-painted, tin-roofed cabin rests in a little notch at the top of a low rise.

He's not completely without human companionship.

He still goes to the mainland for groceries, because he doesn't want to hunt what little wildlife Dismal Key supports. "The critters out here have a pretty hard life," he said. "There isn't any fresh water except what falls from the sky." For them and himself, he collects rainwater in two cisterns. He takes in repair jobs for boat owners sometimes, generating a little income.

Reluctant to explain 'why'

Boaters occasionally stray into the channel that passes his dock; those who stop are surprised to learn that the 50ish man who looks like a hermit, with shoulder-length graying brown hair and a beard, actually is one.

"I'm a sociopath. Is that the word?" he said, then corrected: "No, I'm not a -path," the suffix meaning suffering a disease.

During a visit that he could not have anticipated because he has no phone, he was friendly to a reporter and only held back when pressed on the most obvious question about his life here: Why?

He'd begin to talk about his old life — "I was a federal bureaucrat once upon a time; and I was a salesman" — but shift to a detailed discussion of the "wondrous" silvery wings of a butterfly.

He offered a little about his wife, who he said died of cancer; his 28-year-old son, living somewhere in New England (Niranjan is from Massachusetts); and his sister, whose family he phoned after the hurricane, "to avoid having them call the Coast Guard and put people to all kinds of work for no real reason."

"Sometimes," the hermit said, "I think that if I was extremely fortunate I might think of something worthwhile to do on behalf of my co-inhabitants of the planet, but so far I haven't really thought of much."

Cabin housed many hermits

He'd rather talk about his pine cabin. It was built around 1935 and had been occupied by a succession of hermits. Their maintenance of it and the surrounding land — thickets on three sides and a trimmed front "lawn" dominated by a huge, now fractured, fig tree — allowed it to weather the blasts of Andrew and previous hurricanes.

"House holds," he wrote in a log he kept as Andrew made the structure bend and vibrate. "Thought the old metal roof would be gone by now, but it holds also. Trees and big branches continue to fall."

Getting through the storm may have strengthened his resolve to stay here.

"With the hurricane damage, there's years of work to do out here, to just pick up some. I don't mean to make it into a garden; just to pick it up," Niranjan said.



The man who calls himself Niranjan sits in the doorway of his old cabin, built in 1935 on Dismal Key, a tiny island off Florida's southwest coastline. The modern-day hermit prepared for Hurricane Andrew by building a plywood "clamshell" refuge, but he weathered the storm inside his cabin.

AP LaserPhoto

'Bad time for badminton! We're rockin' and rollin' now!'

DISMAL KEY, Fla. (AP) — Here are excerpts from a log kept by Niranjan as Hurricane Andrew swept over the island where he lives alone.

"0330: First gusts of wind and rain. Yesterday boarded up cabin ... moved most of stuff up from low ground."

"Andrew arrived Miami 0500, faster than expected. Winds to 130 mph, plus or minus Category 4 (expletive) ... Headed here. Will stay. Last minute preps to do. Will sit it out in cabin."

"0800: 'Rain here is equally ... Wind at ground level 40, gusting to 80 ... Am amazed at wisdom of this site selection and the various prior hermits' care for the trim and type of trees. Building is buffeted but not as severely as I expected. Am VERY grateful for trees."

"As of now, Shanand (his sailboat, visible through a window) riding on my last anchor ... 'Will try to go out to check rain gauge. Well, no! Just had a gust that had to be 100. And another. Have been in two Category 1 and one Category 2 storms, so feel estimate is justified ... 'There is a roar, like an overloaded train going by at 40 miles an hour about 100 feet away."

"0835: Can no longer find Shanand. Boat house doors blown out ... Train is closer. '0900: Dismal is now getting it heavy. A heavy trim job. Skyline around cabin is VERY changed. Big thick tree north is gone. House has been hit by several big branches, and vibration adds its own roar to exterior train."

"North wall was flexing inward three inches, plus or minus, so I built a brace plate system using one of my oars ... Still in all, the old Dade County yellow pine (original framing of cabin) holds. Thought the old metal roof would be gone by now, but it holds also. Trees and big branches continue to fall ... 'Now 0915, and still house holds. But when I started this sentence I found it hard to believe that only 15 minutes had passed. Bad time for badminton! We're rockin' and rollin' now! 'Whoo-ee! May have to head for my hidey-hole ... 100-plus gusts are not just gusts, they're blasts. Come more often and hanging around more, pushing, poking — anything to give? Trees not around to help so much, so building quivers, sometimes just bends ... 'Where the hell do the butterflies go in this ... '0940: Been watching a gumbo-limbo (tree). ... When a gust hits, the stem goes horizontal ... Building still amazes. When America consumes all the resources and has to build housing out of wood again, maybe we should re-investigate the old style of construction and let buildings twist in the wind. '1015: Gust just hitting from the south snapped two trees that had survived all the north wind ... Walls of water cascading over northeast corner ... '1200: Worst of storm Andrew past now, I think. Still get gusts of 70 or so ... Surge is six foot plus. My boat reappears. 'I listen to Verdi's 'Requiem' with the red-bellied woodpeckers and the cardinals."

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TOP VIDEOS

By The Associated Press

Here are the weekly charts for the nation's most popular videos as they appear in next week's issue of Billboard magazine. Reprinted with permission.

VIDEO RENTALS

- 1 "White Men Can't Jump" (Fox)
- 2 "Fried Green Tomatoes" (MCA/Universal)
- 3 "Wayne's World" (Paramount)
- 4 "Medicine Man" (Hollywood)
- 5 "The Prince of Tides" (Columbia TriStar)
- 6 "The Hand That Rocks the Cradle" (Hollywood)
- 7 "The Lawnmower Man" (Columbia TriStar)
- 8 "Final Analysis" (Warner)
- 9 "Memories of an Invisible Man" (Warner)
- 10 "Hook" (Columbia TriStar)
- 11 "The Mummy" (Warner)
- 12 "Rush" (MGM/UA)
- 13 "Grand Canyon" (Fox)
- 14 "Bugs" (Columbia TriStar)
- 15 "Cape Fear" (MCA/Universal)
- 16 "American Me" (MCA/Universal)
- 17 "Fiercely The Last Rainforest" (Fox)

- 18 "Father of the Bride" (Touchstone)
- 19 "Shining Through" (Fox)
- 20 "Ladybugs" (Paramount)

VIDEO SALES

- 1 "Wayne's World" (Paramount)
- 2 "Fiercely The Last Rainforest" (Fox)
- 3 "Hook" (Columbia TriStar)
- 4 "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (Live)
- 5 "Rock-a-Doodle" (HBO)
- 6 "The Great Mouse Detective" (Disney)
- 7 "101 Dalmatians" (Disney)
- 8 "Casablanca 50th Anniversary Edition" (MGM/UA)
- 9 "Playboy Wet & Wild IV" (Playboy)
- 10 "The Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (Live)
- 11 "Playboy's Erotic Fantasies" (Playboy)
- 12 "Thelma & Louise" (MGM/UA)
- 13 "Eric Clapton: Unplugged" (Warner Reprise)
- 14 "Kiss: X-treme Close-Up" (PolyGram)
- 15 "Disney's Sing Along Songs: Be Our Guest" (Disney)
- 16 "Penthouse: The Great Pet Hunt, Part 1" (Penthouse)
- 17 "Playboy 1992 Video Playmate Six Pack" (Playboy)
- 18 "Billy Ray Cyrus" (PolyGram)
- 19 "The Silence of the Lambs" (Orion)

BEST SELLING AUDIO

By The Associated Press

Here are the weekly charts for the nation's best-selling recorded music as they appear in next week's issue of Billboard magazine. Reprinted with permission. Platinum signifies more than 1 million copies sold. Gold signifies more than 500,000 copies sold.

HOT SINGLES

- 1 "End of the Road" Boyz II Men (Motown)
- 2 "Sometimes Love Just Ain't Enough" Party (MCA)
- 3 "Baby Baby" TLC (LaFace) (Gold)
- 4 "Humppin' Around" Bobby Brown (MCA)
- 5 "November Rain" Guns N' Roses (Geffen)
- 6 "Stay" Shakespear's Sister (London)

- 7 "Jump Around" House of Pain (Tommy Boy) (Platinum)
- 8 "Just Another Day" Jon Secada (SBK) (Gold)
- 9 "She's Playing Hard to Get" Hi-Five (Jive)
- 10 "Please Don't Go" KWS (Next Plateau)

TOP LP'S

- 1 "Some Gave All" Billy Ray Cyrus (Mercury) (Platinum)
- 2 "Unplugged" Eric Clapton (Duck)
- 3 "Ten" Pearl Jam (Epic) (Platinum)
- 4 "Beyond the Season" Garth Brooks (Liberty)
- 5 "Bobby" Bobby Brown (MCA)
- 6 "What's the 411?" Mary J. Blige (Up-Town)
- 7 "Boomerang" Soundtrack (LaFace) (Platinum)

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