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Nova Scotia could only pray while Juan raged

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It was late Saturday the weekend before last, with stores closing, when Nova Scotians began to realize they should brace for Hurricane Juan. By then, weather forecasters were doubting that the cool North Atlantic between the province and the approaching doom would slow the storm down after all. But the next day -- the day we might have been buying sheets of plywood to board windows, and hardware to shore up the boats and wharfs and roofs that went down to the bottom later that night -- that day was Sunday, the Lord's Day.

Premier John Hamm's Day.

In Nova Scotia on Sundays, we're not allowed to shop, not even in order to gird our loins for dire emergencies. In Nova Scotia on Sundays, come hell or high water, Nova Scotians are made to pray. For years, under a succession of God-fearing governments, Nova Scotians have not enjoyed Sunday shopping. The current premier Hamm, a dour Presbyterian Scot, says if it's Sunday, we rest. Even in Arkansas, there's more separation of church and state.

Nova Scotia is a province of prohibitions. The last time the prohibition on Sunday shopping really socked it to my family was three years ago, when we lived at the end of a dirt road in near-wilderness on the province's north coast. Most of the time that was rural bliss, but one winter a long snowstorm left us stranded for five days.

The county's snow-clearing budget had been exhausted a month earlier, in February. A grader finally got to us -- on Sunday. Another day of prayer, but without shopping for what we'd run out of. Still no coffee and cat food, only Kraft Dinner from the cupboard that we made without milk because we'd run out of that too.

We really began to doubt Nova Scotia politics then. I've lived here most of my life, and for me Nova Scotia is like a chronic illness I've grown accustomed to. But my husband is from out west, and he can't figure it. He's been here years now and he can still be shocked by the perfection of the province's political ruin.

Out west, votes aren't bought, as they used to be here by rum and as they still are by tax rebate cheques that arrive days before an election.

Out west, there's still a bit of health care. In Alberta, even in British Columbia, you wait a day or two, not a month or two, to see your family doctor. Out west, you can still get a family doctor, and medical emergencies are still just that. There, a kidney stone is treated in a day. Here, you wait a month. Here, if you have chronic pain so bad your doctor can't help you, you wait 21 months to be seen at the pain clinic. Out west, you wait perhaps a week. In Nova Scotia, you wait about four months for an "emergency" colonoscopy to confirm cancer.

Here, the Nova Scotia government pours millions into race tracks; more into ITT Sheraton and its casinos; and passes gas. Royalties accruing to the province on its natural gas exports have been calculated on the net, not the gross. My husband, from Alberta, buckled over and held his middle when he heard that, as if he had an intractable pain. In Nova Scotia, the premier tells us to be grateful we have the highest insurance rates in the country. He says that gives us a stable insurance industry which won't raise rates again for awhile.

With or without Sunday shopping, Nova Scotians could not have saved their trees, it's true. I think that I shall never see a thing as shattered, splintered, uprooted and vaporized as a century tree at the mercy of a force one hurricane that, because of a constellation of environmental accelerants, hit with force three fury.

But if they could have got to Piercey's, Home Depot, or even a hardware store, Nova Scotians might have saved some of their windows and roofs and bolted down the boats and the century fish stores that, until Sunday, dotted the waters so charmingly along Peggy's Cove and St Margaret's Bay.

Now they've all gone the way of too many good things in this province: down.

Nova Scotia is a province of political disasters. God and his natural ones should stay away.

Dawn Rae Downton has written the memoirs Diamond and Seldom. She lives on St Margaret's Bay, where Juan made landfall. She had her phone, power, and water restored six days later, on Saturday. On the seventh day, Sunday, she rested, as provided by law.