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You can't take the wind out of their sails

Maritime grit: While Noel flung boulders straight out of the ocean onto the beach, it also lobbed them across the highway above the beach, right into the houses on the road's far side

by Dawn Rae Downton

When Noel hit Atlantic Canada the weekend before last, most observers said the storm tracked wider than 2003's Hurricane Juan, but packed none of Juan's punch. Clearly, they weren't at Queensland Beach—and now they never will be.

Juan rearranged many of the splendid white sand beaches just southwest of Halifax but spared Queensland, the biggest and the best. Now, four years later, thanks to the extreme winds and waves that Noel triangulated there, that once-glorious quarter-mile stretch of sand has turned to rock.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, sand to rock. And rock to sofas, too. While Noel flung boulders straight out of the ocean onto the beach, it also lobbed them across the highway above the beach, right into the houses on the road's far side.

On Sunday morning, I went down to look. The driving was bad. The shoulder of the road was gone, and great peaks and gouges pocked the asphalt where rocks the size of beach balls had slammed into it and stuck. Windows were out and the power was too, but Queenslanders were already wheelbarrowing boulders out of their front rooms and off their lawns.

"A wreck of nature!" a tiny girl pronounced as she picked her way through the stone porridge where all that splendid sand had been. A sure-footed matron in Wellies trotted by with her Westie. For the disaster he wore his Sunday best, a tartan doggie coat. Above us, a few ducks paddled on a lake.

Lake? What lake? I looked again at the huge lot where the beach's car park had been. Noel's 135 km/h gusts had flung the ocean 14 meters straight up over the beach and filled it in overnight.

On the car radio, callers were treating the local CBC station's storm coverage as if it were Swap Shop. Have you seen my canoe? one caller asked, and gave her number in case you had. She was phoning from far down the shore, but I'm pretty sure I'd seen her canoe all right, bobbing in the car park with the ducks.

Someone called in about a flagpole. At first light it was bent a little left; by now it was horizontal. But most callers phoned in about the morning's church services. They weren't canceled by the winds, the blackouts, the trees on the roads. They were simply moved as necessary, everyone welcome. Maritimers don't miss a chance to thank God for a catastrophe, and parking lots brimmed outside every church I passed.

Canoers, left-leaners, church-goers all cheek-by-jowl—and, that Sunday morning, all arse-over-teakettle. *So* Nova Scotia, as we say down here.

And so unexceptional. Except at Queensland, Noel was nothing very new. The hurricane season was milder this year, meteorologists tell us, except in Atlantic Canada, where we had our second wind catastrophe in four years. But even without hurricanes and storms, we have some of the greatest winds in the world. Sure, the rest of the planet has its blowhards—southern California's hot Santa Anas, or the cold French Mistral that ruins half the year in Marseille. Canada itself has the welcome chinook and the unwelcome Alberta Clipper. Ellesmere Island even has the cow storm, said to blow horns off muskox.

Four strong winds you'll find elsewhere, but down here we have more strong winds than that. On Prince Edward Island, people are said to go mad from the constant blow. In Cape Breton *les suetes* bring hikers to their knees, literally, and sometimes within an inch of their lives. Named after the French for southeast—*sud est*—these demonical southeasterlies can funnel down from the highlands at 150km/h. You can't stand up in them, let alone back away from the cliff edges they blow you toward. You get down on your knees and crawl away.

But Newfoundland has more strong winds again. The Rock has its stun breezes, as they're called, but at its southwest tip around tiny Wreckhouse, winds blow trains from tracks and 18-wheelers from roads. Newfoundlanders say the blizzards near Wreckhouse make the winters like living in a flour sack.

The Wreckhouse winds employed Lockie MacDougall, a sort of wind-whisperer or human wind sensor, for decades. When he died, his wife Emily took over, drawing \$20 a month from the Newfoundland Railway till she moved away. Why did she move? You have to ask? Noel ruined Haligonians' last great beach. And then, as Maritime storms always do, it moved on east to Newfoundland—where, as Maritime storms always do, it got rapidly worse. Noel's highest winds, even higher than when it began in the Caribbean as a certified hurricane, were clocked at a whopping 180km/h at Wreckhouse.

But none leaves the island, Newfoundlanders will tell you—none but the lads off to Fort McMurray, and they'll be back. Nothing much discourages a Newfoundlander. They're a pragmatic people, and strong, not given to prayers much either. No one leaves for good, certainly not because of weather.

What of Emily, then? Turns out she didn't mind the Wreckhouse winds at all. She didn't leave; she only retired and moved down the road to Port-aux-Basques.