

# *A Solo Sailor Meets His* **Storm of the Century:**

*The Day  
All Hell  
Broke Loose*

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*The author, Marlin Bree aboard his 20-foot cedar-epoxy sloop. (Photo courtesy of Good Age)*

*Sailing alone on a home-built centerboard sloop, Persistence, on the open waters of Lake Superior, Marlin Bree encountered his “storm of the century” with reported 110-mph winds. The killer storm emerged on 4 July 1999 from northern Minnesota, near the Canadian border, where wild downdrafts had resulted in one of the biggest blow downs ever recorded. This is his account of heavy weather boating in this “perfect storm.”*

A cold mass of thick, gray fog hung ominously across the Sawtooth Mountains, but in the small fjord-like bay, the waters were clear blue down to their icy depths.

I was at the helm of my 20-foot sailboat, *Persistence*, on the beginning of a solo adventure on Lake Superior. My 5-horsepower Nissan outboard was running easily at about a third throttle. I planned to sail through the proposed Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area along the Canadian north shore of the world’s largest freshwater lake. The area will be the world’s largest freshwater conservation area, an area of nearly 11,000 square kilometers that stretches from Sleeping Giant Mountain to the Slate Islands.

I felt reasonably confident. Early on, I had switched my VHF radio to NOAA weather radio, which had assured me that it would be the hottest day of the year with a possibility of thunderstorms later in the day. So far, so good. I tapped my onboard barometer, and the needle rose just a twitch to indicate fair weather.

On Grand Portage Bay, the small island was wrapped in the cotton-candy gray stuff and the north of the bay, where a historic 18th-century fort should have been showing its spiked wooden stockades, was wreathed in fog. In the marina office, I struck up a conversation with a local veteran boater. “Oh, the fog’ll burn off,” he said. “I’d go.”

So I shoved off, seemingly aloft on the transparent, glacial inland sea, ducking in and out of the spectral fog and running down my preset global positioning system waypoints.

In the fluky, light air, I was motoring with my sails uncovered, ready to hoist. Entering the chilly fog banks was like entering a tomb: It was cold and damp despite my layers of wool socks, thermal underwear and polar fleece. It was hard to believe that it was the Fourth of July.

Though I expected an easy run across the Canadian border to an island guarding the mouth of Thunder Bay, I had prepared my boat for the open waters of Lake Superior. All the hatches were closed and my boat's weight was centered. (I had taken my sleeping bag, duffle bags of gear, food and provisions, and anything else I could get out of the ends, and lashed them alongside the centerboard trunk.) I had carefully gone over the boat to be certain there were no loose lines and the rigging was taut. I buckled into my safety harness and laid out my GPS, chart and an area cruising guide.

My VHF was tuned to channel 16. I was in range of Grand Portage and its marina, but as soon as I crossed the border, I'd be in range of the Canadian Coast Guard station at Thunder Bay, Ontario.

When I emerged from the fog bank, my heavy weather precautions seemed unnecessary. The sun was high and bright. Below me, clear waters sparkled down to their glacier-carved blue depths, and off to port, beautiful little islands lifted out of the waterline, green with small trees. I began to enjoy myself.

As soon as I crossed the border, I began to rue my layers of fleece and thermal gear. Perspiration lined my brow, and my glasses wore a little haze from overheating.

Lifting my long-billed baseball cap, I brushed my brow with the back of my gloved hand and looked up at the shoreline's high crests. That layer of fog still hadn't burned off. In fact, it looked denser, heavier and slightly sinister.

My VHF radio was crackly, but its speaker blared an unmistakable klaxon. It was Thunder Bay's Coast Guard giving me a storm warning.

I looked around: I was out on the open water with an inhospitable shoreline to port and many reefs in between.

Ahead lay a small island with a tiny cove—only 20 minutes away.

I cranked up the engine to three-quarter power. Over the Nissan's racket, I heard the dread words, "Mayday, Mayday!" Somewhere a sailboat had overturned, and three people were in the water.

Out of nowhere, a monster jumped over the mountains and began to swing my mast from side to side. I heard the sound of a wall of wind passing through the shrouds, beginning with a low moan and then moving from a howl to a shriek. My boat bucked out of control, slewing to one side, as I frantically tried to get the bow downwind—the classic heavy weather storm tactic.

But the wind had the boat in its grip, shoving *Persistence* faster and faster. Suddenly, I was driven forward as my boat nosed into the waves bow down, stern up in a semi-pitch pole.

A sharp, stabbing pain hit my right side as I slammed into the cabin headfirst. Above me, a port light turned a bright green—the entire side of the boat was underwater. I saw water splash up through the centerboard trunk.

My boat seemed to teeter for a small eternity, balancing on its side and nearly turning over. I had an instant vision

of myself in the dark, trapped below, churning furiously in heart-stopping cold waters and having to swim down to get out. I thought of clambering atop my overturned hull to hang on for as long as I could while the storm carried me out into the middle of the lake.

Wham. A duffle of foul weather clothing followed by bags of groceries and a plastic carton fell on me.

The boat lurched again.

The wind screamed like a banshee. Behind me, my engine was howling—out of the water. My boat was out of control, caught in the teeth of the monster on Lake Superior.

Suddenly, I was lying on my back, looking up. I saw my alarm clock and other gear fly from one side of my boat to the other.

It took me several bewildered seconds before I realized what had happened. The winds had caught my boat and thrown it forward. It went faster and faster and stopped abruptly, with the stern flying up and the bow digging in. I'd been dumped forward into the cabin. I lay dazed in the starboard quarter berth with my feet over my head.

My mind sent out little queries. Was I in much pain? Did I break anything? What was I going to do if *Persistence* capsized all the way, mast down, bottom up? I braced myself.

There was another little lurch. Somehow, I pulled myself up and tore out into the cockpit. Rain like lead drops pelted my face as I faced my enemy.

The lake was cold and gray, its face blasted flat by the terrible wind. Long contrails of mist whipped across the water like icy whips. Four heavy rubber fenders that had been lying in the cockpit simply bounced up and flew away.

My boat teetered on its side, reeling with every gust. The starboard mast spreader dipped into the water, rose a little unsteadily, and then hung in mid-air.

I held onto the portside lifeline, still in my safety harness. Hand over hand, I worked my way back to the transom. My hand closed in a death grip on the tiller.

Another huge gust tore into the boat. I felt it go farther down.

I threw myself over the windward lifelines as far as I could, but the boat was on its side and out of control. I could only hang on. My weight seemed to make no difference. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, the mast soared upright and the hull came down with a mighty splash.

The engine's out-of-control racing stopped as the prop bit solid water. I could feel the rudder go back into the water.

I held my breath. Nothing was broken.

The boat picked up speed.

I jammed the tiller over. *Persistence* headed directly downwind, taking the wild gusts on the transom instead of the vulnerable beam. That didn't seem to help all that much. In the wind's gusts, the mast seemed to want to squirrel down into the water. The wind slammed into *Persistence* again. Down went the mast, up came the water, and out I went, leaning over the edge. It occurred again and again in a maddening battle of knockdowns.

I was shivering uncontrollably, soaked clear through. I couldn't see too well, since my glasses were misted over with water. I was in a world of hurt. I had to place to run, no place to hide and nobody to help me.

Another violent gust hit the boat. I heard a "ping." Something had snapped.

I watched the mainsail come loose from its shock chords. The wind's icy fingers began to shove it up the mast. The big sail reared a third of the way up, flapping, rattling and catching the wind.

My heart pounded. The boat was already on the edge of capsizing all the way. What would happen with some sail up? I could not leave the helm. The only answer was to run on with the wind until something else broke or the wind let up a little. I clenched my teeth and tightened my grip on the tiller.

I ran on into the raging lake until I sensed the wind letting up a little; at least the insane gusts were not shoving the boat down so far. "Do it!" I steeled myself. Timing the gusts, I shoved the tiller over hard—and hung on. *Persistence* did a dangerous dip to leeward, hung down on its rail for a moment, and the dark waters rushed up. I had turned the boat and was facing the wind. The sail rattled and whipped on the mast; the boat felt terribly unstable beneath me.

One hand on the tiller, I reached back and gave the engine full throttle and locked it there. I needed more power in the teeth of this storm. The little 5-horsepower Nissan outboard bellowed and dug in. The boat bounced up and down, careening sideways on the waves. Sometimes the prop was in the water; sometimes out. The little Nissan revved unmercifully and screamed.

Through my rain-soaked eyeglasses, I could make out an island ahead. How could this be? I had already passed Spar Island and had been abeam of the rock shoals leading to Thompson Island. I glanced at my water-soaked chart. I had been blown off course, circled around, and was now heading back to barren, rocky Spar Island.

As I fought my way nearer to the island, I could only hope that this side was bold and deep to its shoreline. I'd have to take a chance on the reefs. To starboard lay some rocky pinnacles, their dark teeth awash with white foam.

As I came into its lee, the island deflected some of the main blasts. I throttled back, judging my rate of speed with the wind's grip on my mast and boat. My heart was pounding and my muscles were knotted tight. I was shivering uncontrollably and gasping in the cold rain. I hurt.

Shakily, I wiped my glasses with my fingers. Ahead lay a row of spectacular rocky spars, slashed with waves and spray. They stretched from the northeastern edge of Spar Island out into the lake. In the distance, through the rain, I could make out a gray headland. It had to be Thompson Island.

I twisted the throttle, and the boat roared ahead and again caught the brunt of the storm. *Persistence* staggered—its speed diminished and its rail dipping low into the water. Wind shrieked in the rigging, wrestling with the mast. I edged out over the port side, my leg locked around the traveler beam, one arm around a winch. Small, rocky islets—spray everywhere—flew by. I was desperate to reach Thompson Cove.

I reached down for my chart and a cruising guidebook, which I had jammed to one side of my gas tank. Both were soaked; ink was running where I had marked my course. I dared not let the wind get these—my only guides to the Lake Superior wilderness ahead.

I glanced at my dodger, its back cover flapping wildly in the gusts. It added to the racket made by the partly raised main sail's rattling and flapping. The sail had been torn loose from its lashings by the storm, but at least it wasn't getting any higher on the mast.

I wished I could move forward to grab my GPS unit, programmed for the coordinates to Thompson Cove. But I dared not leave my steering. I'd just have to wait until I found the harbor.

I reasoned with myself through rain-clouded glasses. I was headed for a small cove on a small island. How tough could that be? I'd just run alongside Thompson Island, far enough out to avoid any reefs, but close enough to see the cove.

I checked my watch. I had told the Thunder Bay Coast Guard that I'd be in that harbor in 45 minutes. All I had to do was maintain course and eyeball the cove.

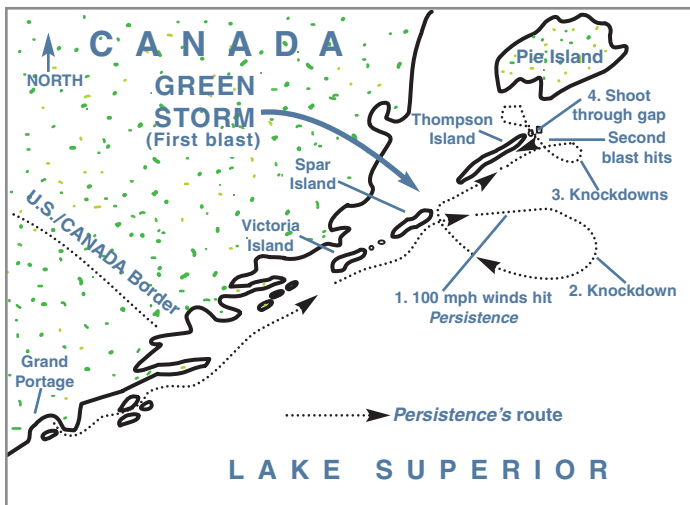
I had time to spare.

As I came under the lee of Thompson, the island shouldered the wind off me. I breathed a sigh of relief and scanned the shoreline. I slipped past a large cove, but there was no entrance. I was rapidly approaching the end of the island. If I ran all the way alongside to the island's tip, I'd have to come across the entry to the cove. Easy.

I glanced at my NOAA chart again to look at the tiny island. There was nothing officially designated as Thompson Cove. The name only appeared in a detailed drawing in my cruising guidebook. In the jouncing, rain-soaked cockpit, it was hard to read.

Scanning the shore, I saw a rocky cliff leading down to the water's edge, its crest topped with trees. Farther away, lashed by waves and spray, a small, round island stood its lonely sentinel. Off in the distance, I saw a dark blue line etched on the water. It was moving—rushing toward me. That much blue on the water meant only one thing: wind. Tons of it.

Howling, the wind had switched from the west, veering to catch me again.



Map shows an area of northeastern Lake Superior with a storm exiting land and coming onto the lake. The dotted lines show *Persistence's* route.

The first blasts shook my boat. The tiller twisted in my hand as my boat bucked and took a dive to starboard. The boat was down on its side, with the cabin going partly under and mast spreaders dipping in the water. Icy waves climbed the side of my boat, splashing into the cockpit.

Where was the cove?

I neared a dangerous place—a gap between the land and a small island. A wave tore at the rocks, flinging spray high into the air. As the boat raced on, I shuddered: a teeth of reefs lay just beneath the waves.

Beyond lay something green. I took a deep breath. Adrenalin surging, I charged the gap with the engine cranked up to full.

Suddenly, I lost control. In a heart-stopping moment, the boat careened dangerously toward the islet's foam-lashed reefs. I swore, prayed, steered and shifted my weight around. Finally, the boat came back up and obeyed me.

I circled to try again. This time, I went farther east, letting the tiny islet take the blast of the waves and wind. I braced myself, squeezing the throttle hard to be certain I had every last ounce of power the engine could give me. I charged—bouncing, careening and splashing. I made it through the gap.

Then, I was facing huge, square rollers—the worst waves I'd fought all day.

My speeding bow speared into the first oncoming tower; the impact shook the boat. The bow disappeared, but the water kept coming over the cabin top and hit me in the chest. I groaned at the chill. I climbed the wave, teetering at the top. For the first time, I could see what lay ahead. Something was terribly wrong.

It finally came to me. That big, distinctive island ahead of me was Pie Island. I had overshot my destination. I could not live out here.

Desperately, I timed the waves, and on the back of one of the steep chargers, I turned my boat around. I was flying now, surfing the waves, almost out of control. Ahead, the gap loomed, but I made it through. I was growing very tired; my reactions were slowing, and it was hard to think. I was doused in icy water, cold to my core.

I roared at full throttle back up Thompson Island, looking for the lost cove. Rocky slopes rushed close by my speeding boat. Beyond one crag, I saw something shining up high, above the trees. Unmistakably, they were the tips of sailboat masts.

As I cut in, the water widened. On one side was a high outcrop of rock, and on the other, a spruce-covered hill. In between, still, blue water. It was blessed, beautiful Thompson Cove.

Canadian boaters were helping me tie up when I heard my VHF: "Calling the sailboat *Persistence*." It was the Thunder Bay Coast Guard. I was overdue on my ETA, and they were ready to initiate a search-and-rescue mission. I had not heard them when I was in the cockpit, surrounded by the noise of the storm, flapping sail and engine.

"Sorry," I apologized. "But I've been little busy."

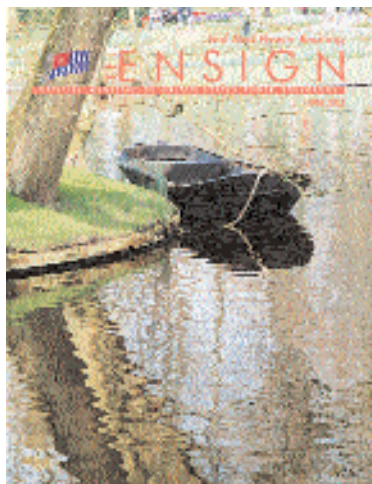
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