

# A Season of Night

New Orleans Life after Katrina

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## One Rowed Home

I fled my New Orleans home in a car speeding up the old River Road the day before Hurricane Katrina struck. I crept back to it two weeks later in a boat, drifting slowly through the ruined urban wilderness of brown floodwater and battered houses that had been my neighborhood.

We floated up to Canal Street on the wrong side of the frontier separating the empty, dry wards of the evacuated city from the empty, flooded ones. Military helicopters hammered away overhead, whole black flights of them in formation or individual machines flying low with crewmen framed in their open doors, scanning the wretched blocks below. Occasionally, a fan boat roared down the wide city boulevard. These are the type of shallow-draft watercraft built to carry hunters through Cajun swamplands, though now they were bearing armed posses. Their low decks were crammed with guys dressed in a full catalogue of law enforcement uniforms and toting M-16s or combat shotguns, wearing mirrored sunglasses and flak jackets strapped over sweat-soaked T-shirts. They streaked through flooded traffic intersections, skimming this way to dodge the dinosaur limbs of felled oak trees languishing in the water, cutting that way past a reef of car roofs and truck cabs lined up in their submerged parking spots.

The desperate rescue work of lifting people off rooftops and embarking them from their porches and balconies was over. The thousands of people trapped at the Superdome and convention center or stranded on the blistering highways were all gone, trucked out to other stadiums and churches and convention centers around the region. The fires that had clouded the skyline were mostly out. The thugs and looters who had rampaged across the city were gone or subdued, finally outgunned and hiding out or simply funneled into the crowds of exhausted people pressed into buses and airliners and dispersed across the country.

About all that remained was the water, a vast city street grid of channels and canals lined with ruined homes and businesses and patrolled over by the helicopters and swamp boats. We watched a fan boat cruise by as we idled in the shadow of a flooded church, basically hiding until it passed. We were doing nothing wrong, but the mood over the city was tense. The boatloads of armed men radiated the don't-fuck-with-us vibe even from a good distance away. The grip of order imposed on this suddenly wild, broken place seemed tenuous, something achieved with firepower and mass evacuations. There was no telling where anyone really stood. The deputies and the game wardens and the soldiers looked strange gunning down the flooded streets. But I knew I would look strange to them too, floating along in a small, commandeered craft with a skinny man and a nervous woman, the three of us slowly moving into a neighborhood from which people had been fighting with tears and frantic effort to escape just a few days prior.

The skinny man was Keith O'Brien, a news reporter and a close friend, and the nervous woman was a news photographer we had met an hour earlier. Our boat was a little flat-bottom skiff we had found abandoned a few blocks away, where a ridge of land above the flood level had served as a grassy landing pad for helicopters for a while during the evacuation. We were in the Mid-City neighborhood in the heart of New Orleans and we were heading for my house.

We advanced at the most incrementally slow pace, moving a meter or so at a time as we negotiated tangles of branches and countless snares concealed under the brown water. The plodding pace allowed us to take in with slack-jawed wonder the surreal landscape—the pickup trucks with bathtub rings of grime leading laterally down their sides to the water line, the oak trees rising up from streets that now looked like long, straight swamp passes, the houses with boarded-up windows or kicked-in doors, the horrific sound of dogs howling and moaning from unseen windows after two sweltering, abandoned weeks.

This was homecoming, a moment for which I had wished and schemed practically since the storm hit. The disaster was over and the recovery had yet to begin. The city's odds and future were being determined elsewhere—in Washington, in Baton Rouge, in of-

fices and conference rooms and wherever New Orleans people had found refuge to try to sort out their displaced lives. But New Orleans itself was under the pall of trauma. It was a flooded city without life, the skeleton crew of its population made up entirely of military people, media people, and the few remaining residents hiding or negotiating to resist evacuation like cornered stowaways. Everything looked doomed, and somewhere along the way as we floated through Mid-City in our little boat I decided I wanted to return for good as soon as possible.

Two weeks earlier, Hurricane Katrina was just the latest in a long line of storms to menace the gulf, and our city was complete in all its glorious, troubled, storied, simmering ways. I had lived in New Orleans for six years by then, and it turns out those had been six quiet years for hurricanes. People talked with reverence about the killer storms, Betsy in 1965 or Camille in 1969, and whenever a hurricane looked like it might head toward Louisiana there was quickened talk about the Big One—the storm that could come straight up the river, swamp the levees, and inundate New Orleans. But it was still all a little hard to grasp. The Big One was a threat so terrible and unstoppable that a lot of us regarded it in mythological terms, like the prospect of the moon dropping through the sky to crush Australia.

When a storm reared up, I took the same hurricane precautions I saw other people taking around me. But it really didn't have much sense of gravity. One year, my friend Rene and I cut sheets of plywood to fit over my windows in advance of a storm that looked bad at first but showed up in New Orleans only as overtime weather coverage. Many people evacuated the city for that storm, but we stayed at my place, and, when we heard the storm would hit elsewhere and that we were safe, we went outside with buckets of house paint and decorated the plywood over the windows. We reasoned that we would need to use them again for another hurricane at some point and felt we should at least make them colorful. On the boards over the first-floor windows we painted a smile with bulbous lips and a bushy mustache, and on the boards over the smaller attic windows above we painted happy, lolling eyeballs. From the street, it looked like the house had a big, stoned, grinning face, and everyone

who saw it laughed and eventually agreed the face looked a lot like Rene's. So, that year, my most ambitious hurricane preparation de-  
veloped into an art project.

Officials often urged people to evacuate during hurricane scares, but again I always based my decisions on whatever my New Orleans-bred friends planned to do. These were guys who had grown up interpreting the TV weatherman's hurricane warnings as advertisements for at least one day out of school, and maybe more if the storm made landfall nearby and happened to do some damage to the local utility network. They never left during a hurricane scare in the years I had lived in the city, and neither did I. Two days before Katrina, on Saturday, August 27, 2005, everyone was taking it easy.

But when I got around to calling people the next morning, my friends were already on the road, stuck in traffic and freaking out. The storm had made its fatal turn during the night, and it suddenly looked very much like the Big One. I took stock of my nearly bare bachelor's cupboards, my lean supply of bottled water, my complete lack of preparation for myself or my dog—a plump yellow Labrador named the Amazing Dr. Watson—and I quickly decided to leave. I secured the comically painted plywood over the front windows of my house and packed an overnight bag, a move that later proved rather meager but at the time seemed completely rational. Sure, there was a potentially killer storm en route and at least in theory I understood that I was fleeing for my life, but I was sure we really would be returning in a day or two, just like all the city's other close calls when my friends had enjoyed free days off from school.

I loaded Dr. Watson into my beat-up old Cadillac—a dented, beautiful, rusted, 1971-model sedan with leaks and laughable gas mileage and what I regard as real style—and we set off for the relative safety of Baton Rouge, where my friend Kathleen Lousteau had offered emergency lodging. I was not even sure my rumbling old heap could make it eighty miles north under normal traffic conditions, never mind when the blazing highway was packed with fleeing families. Friends had already called in with the dread news that they were still within city limits after two hours in their cars. But I took a chance on the River Road, the largely forgotten, pre-highway connection to Baton Rouge that winds along the serpen-

tine course of the Mississippi River. All the twists and turns add up to many more miles than the same trip on the interstate, but there was hardly anyone else using it even during the huge evacuation. The dog and I slid past an alternating landscape of old plantation houses, cottages with rusted tin roofs, and gigantic oil refineries by the riverside, and, as the radio gave increasingly calamitous predictions of Katrina's size and strength, we made it to Baton Rouge and Kathleen's house on just one tank of gas.

O'Brien arrived a few days later, after we learned that the levees had failed and when the agony of New Orleans was at its height. He was a New Orleans friend who had moved to Boston just a few months before the storm. He worked as a freelance writer there covering everything from neighborhood news to science industry issues, but, when the storm hit, there was probably no journalist in New England with a better block-by-block knowledge of New Orleans than O'Brien. Never mind that while living in the city he could get lost and fly into a panic just by straying a few blocks off familiar main drags like Magazine Street or Claiborne Avenue or Elysian Fields. He still knew where those main drags were, and that was much better in terms of crisis reporting from the scene than anyone else from out of town was bringing to the situation. While the captions of international wire photos would sometimes mistake St. Claude Avenue (remarkable for its neglected homes, weed-choked sidewalks, and burned-out cars) with St. Charles Avenue (remarkable for its postcard-worthy mansions, historic streetcar line, and live oak canopy), O'Brien knew the territory and the people. So the *Boston Globe* hired him and sent him to New Orleans along with a photographer whose previous assignment had been to follow troops fighting the Taliban in the mountains of Afghanistan.

O'Brien's arrival jolted me out of the numb shock that had been gumming up my skull since I learned my city was flooded and being torn apart in unchecked bedlam. The hurricane had enough fury when it passed over Baton Rouge to knock down many trees, one of which simultaneously cut the power to Kathleen's house and blocked our cars in her driveway. So we got most of our early news about the disaster sitting around the kitchen table in her sweltering house and listening to unbelievable radio broadcasts. It unfolded like

a story told in pieces rather than something we could see ourselves, even through the proxy of TV. But O'Brien went to New Orleans immediately after he arrived and began feeding us daily firsthand reports in the evenings when he returned. That made this thing suddenly real to me and aroused a fierce desire to get back into the city, even just for a glimpse.

At the time, I was working for Hibernia Bank, which was a big-time bank for Louisiana, a homegrown thing since Reconstruction but small potatoes compared with the large regional and national banks. It was the kind of New Orleans company that was listed on the New York Stock Exchange and had all the normal midtier corporate trappings but also had senior managers who would sneak out for fried oyster po-boys from a downtown diner whenever they could evade a more official luncheon with unpromising banquet food. In the summertime, bankers here still broke out the blue-striped seer-sucker suits, and whenever the bank hired a brass band to play for a company party even the most buttoned-up among the executive administrative assistants could be relied upon to get down and dance just as though the marble-trimmed lobby was Tipitina's music hall. The bank quickly reorganized its management structure in Baton Rouge on the heels of the storm, and I caught up with my bosses at the capital city's downtown branch where the executives were all but bivouacked in the hallways and offices and lobbies. Some of them, like me, were still wearing the clothes they had evacuated in a few days earlier.

For a displaced New Orleans guy, a paying job with a company that could manage to keep its direct deposit clicking even though its payroll offices were destroyed by the storm was suddenly a very precious thing. But to me the job was also a great frustration. I was working day and night for my little part in stitching the bank back together, while O'Brien was making daily forays into New Orleans during what anyone could see was a monumental time in the old city's history. He would return deeply upset and on the verge of tears, but we were all deeply upset and on the verge of tears. If I had the choice of crying in a borrowed Baton Rouge bank office or crying back in my city and seeing my house and crawling around



the bizarre disaster zone and hearing people's stories, I would take the latter.

After a week or so, a growing number of my friends had begun sneaking back into New Orleans. The city was officially closed, blockaded on the highways by the National Guard, but people found ways around that with passes, by calling on friends with pull, or by simple subterfuge. It seemed like a lot of people I knew were visiting their houses in the unflooded neighborhoods, putting tarps over shattered windows, securing doors, getting a tiny bit of peace of mind that the place was still there, and grabbing little niceties like a change of shoes and those insurance documents some of us had neglected to take in our frenzied flight from home. I badly wanted to get in. Finally, two weeks after the storm hit, I got a day off from work and started planning an excursion.

O'Brien and I and another journalist friend from New Orleans, Paul Rioux, came up with the idea of getting ourselves back to town in time for the broadcast of the first New Orleans Saints game after the storm, which fell on Sunday, September 11. If listening to a football game on home turf seemed like a trite goal surrounded by the enormity of loss and fear that was consuming our lives then, there was also a symbolism to it that we couldn't resist, like defiantly running up a flag on the front lawn after a national tragedy. We were going to New Orleans, and I was determined to get to my house in the flood zone, but along the way maybe we could manage a tiny, symbolic dose of that long-gone normalcy from pre-Katrina life. In this case, that meant cheering on the home team in a New Orleans barroom.

We knew the pub Molly's at the Market would be open. It was one of a handful of bars that managed to remain in operation on the high ground of the French Quarter, reopening just a few hours after Katrina had passed and while the flooding and looting were hitting their stride elsewhere. O'Brien had been there on his news reporting visits, and, even though Molly's had no electricity, we were all sure it would have the game playing on a battery-powered radio. Just in case, though, we stopped at a Wal-Mart on the way out of Baton Rouge to buy our own radio and batteries. While we were there, we also decided to buy some supplies to donate to the pub's cause, cut

off as it was from power and deliveries but admirably still serving drinks. We filled our rented Jeep with beer, cold cuts, Band-Aids, hand sanitizer, lighters, and as much ice as we could store.

I also picked up a coach's whistle from the sports department and used its lanyard to hang my corporate ID around my neck. O'Brien and Paul Rioux had legit press passes for getting in and out of the city, but I would have to bluff it by flashing my meaningless Hibernia Bank badge to the soldiers at the checkpoints. Virtually everyone who was making it back into New Orleans at that point had some kind of ID on a lanyard, as if the whole city were some job site or movie set that required credentials. We reasoned that my photo and an obscure bank name under a sheen of laminate would seem official enough.

The ruse worked, and, with O'Brien lead-footing the Jeep between checkpoints on the otherwise empty highway, we cruised past the storm-whipped cypress forests separating the two cities and into New Orleans's battered suburbs. We pulled off the interstate, crossed one final checkpoint at the parish line, and were in the city again.

Everything looked pretty good at first. I was ready for Armageddon, for block after block of burned-down buildings and bodies in the street, as we had heard about on the radio. But Uptown New Orleans seemed fine. It was empty and violently pruned, but clearly intact.

As we moved downtown we started seeing people. Virtually all of them looked official in some way, and most were also armed. Men walked around casually with shotguns held against their chests or sidearms riding openly on hip holsters. Uniformed military patrols trooped by with machine guns. From army units to private contractors, everyone was coming to New Orleans as to a war zone. We crossed Canal Street, the historic division between the old French Quarter and the American sector. The wide downtown stretch of the street was now a parking lot of giant, sleek motor coaches, RVs and tractor trailers packed with equipment for the national media, with armed men sauntering everywhere in between.

We drove to Decatur Street and parked in front of Molly's. Jim Monaghan, the bar owner, came outside to the sidewalk as we pulled up. His eyes were dark and heavy-lidded, his bearing fatigued. If he

had gotten any sleep since the storm, it didn't show. A couple of liberally tattooed men followed him outside, like midshipmen backing up their skipper, and they looked us over as we prepared to show off the bounty we had delivered from Wal-Mart for their benefit.

"We got beer," O'Brien announced. "We got food. We got"—he paused for a dramatic beat—"ice!"

"Great," Jim said, sounding sincere but exhausted.

"Where do you want the ice?" Paul asked.

"Oh, ah, fellas." Jim motioned to the other men behind him. "Put these bags in the back with the rest, please."

"The rest?" I asked. "You have ice?"

"Oh yeah, well, we get pretty regular deliveries. Every news guy in town right now brings us ice and beer. I guess they want to make sure they can get a cold beer somewhere."

Sure enough, our contribution was just another brick in the wall of provisions Molly's had amassed. We walked into the bar with our stuff and dumped the beers in the bin of the powerless but already brimful ice machine. There was a veritable sandwich board of cold cuts and white bread on a table in the corner. The bar looked fully stocked with liquor.

The wide French doors at the front of the pub were open, but the sunlight penetrated only a few feet, leaving most of the place in shadow. There were four or five people in the bar, most of them just hanging around, drinking cans of Coke. It was dead quiet. A young guy sitting close to the door was carefully examining a porno magazine by the sunlight falling on the bar, turning over each page delicately as if inspecting a catalogue for an expensive purchase.

"You'll get hairy palms," Jim told him in deadpan. Then he served Paul Rioux and me two of the beers we had just brought in and poured O'Brien a gin and tonic. "You want a lime in that?" he asked. "Someone brought us limes yesterday."

The Saints game might have been the organizing principle for the trip, but, after cheering to the little corner radio for a few plays, we all grew more interested in getting out to the city around us. Paul Rioux went off to do some reporting from Chalmette, and O'Brien and I set out to find a way to my house, picking up a new *Boston Globe* photographer along the way. The plan, for lack of a better word, was

to drive around the edge of the flood zone and try to find an abandoned boat we could take from there.

When we got back in the Jeep, the trip around the city quickly became a rush of frantic movement. New Orleans may have been under de facto martial law, but no laws or rules at all seemed to concern the few drivers on the storm-wracked streets, ourselves included. Many streets were blocked by heavy equipment, trailers, or piles of storm debris, and any street that was clear became a free-for-all. One-way street designations were out the window through the tight grid of the Central Business District. We swerved around water-filled craters in the middle of streets, the abandoned police barricades here and there, and the mounds of fallen bricks from century-old buildings crumbled in the storm or subsequent fires. We flew through intersections and careened around wreckage and street corners on our way to the edge of Mid-City.

We tried a few routes into the flood zone, but everywhere the water grew too deep before we could find any sign of boats. We traced the crescent of dry land back through downtown again, sweating copiously in the heat of the day and punching through block after block fast. We passed the French Quarter and headed up Esplanade Avenue to the end of Bayou St. John, an old urban waterway and the spot where the floodwater began again in earnest. Our luck swung around completely here, and we found boats of every description for the taking on the yellowed grassy banks of the bayou, marooned there as the floodwater began its slow recession back from the brink. There were canoes and flat-bottom skiffs painted in camouflage hunting schemes, but also sizeable cabin cruisers and small fishing boats, plus a great variety of washed-up industrial debris and household items ditched there as people fled.

The crowning glory of it all, though, was a destroyed helicopter lying on its side on the grass by the bayou. I had heard a news report about a helicopter crashing in the area near my house after the storm, and this must have been it. The crew had reportedly walked away unhurt, but the machine still looked impressively shattered. Its tail was crumpled, and its rotor blades had snapped off after gouging deep troughs in the ground around it. It was as gruesomely captivating as a dead whale beached on the shore.

Before the storm, I had taken my dog jogging on this same stretch

of bayou where we stood now with gaping mouths and unbelieving eyes. Friends gathered here on New Year's Eve to watch fireworks and drink cheap champagne, and on cool afternoons there would be picnics all around while kids learned to fish along the slim, meandering bayou's edge. Now the area looked like a recently contested battlefield with its helicopter carcass and washed-up Dunkirk flotilla. There were even a few dead fish drying up in the sun where the retreating floodwaters had left them.

We grabbed the nearest boat and launched it at the water's edge. As soon as I climbed in, water began to gush from a hole that would have taken a wine cork to plug. I hopped out, getting only slightly wet, and we tried again with the next closest boat. This one proved seaworthy. We found a broomstick and some thick palm fronds on the ground that we could use to propel the craft, and O'Brien and the photographer slipped into the thick rubber waders they had brought along.

We set out down flooded Jefferson Davis Parkway, passing the ominous hulk of a community hospital, the column rows of live oak trees with torn-out limbs, the snapped light posts, the dangling power lines, and the roofs of sunken cars. Our slow, sloshing progress sent ripples over the still water toward the doors of my neighborhood's houses. It was too familiar and too weird all at once, and I responded by mouthing an inchoate stream of cussing that I remember as being remarkable even by the high standards for outraged vulgarity of the time.

"I know, man," O'Brien counseled me. "I know."

My curses were starting to take on at least coherent form as we approached the major roadway intersection at Canal Street. On one corner was a Methodist church, a large, sturdy, conservative-looking brick building. The cross atop its tall steeple was bent severely on its side as if it had been hit by something heavy way up there. Back down on the street, the church had one of those letter board signs outside where inspirational messages were posted for passing motorists. There was a tangle of broken oak limbs around it now, and it was streaked by black stains from the higher floodwater, but the lettering was still intact and rose just above the current water level to show its prestorm message, which read, "There is a dawn in every darkness."

The photographer snapped pictures, and we huddled there a while, floating in the shadow of the church, as one of the fan boats full of armed law enforcement types buzzed past on the other side of Canal Street.

We were getting closer to my house, but first O'Brien and the photographer had to visit a specific block of the neighborhood for their stories. They wanted to document one defined area from flood through whatever the months ahead would bring. We picked a stretch that had Finn McCool's Irish pub on one corner, a plumbing supply house at the other, and, in between, the homes of a diverse mix of single people, young couples, gay guys, black people, white people, and retired people. It was a good slice of New Orleans diversity that was now also flooded and deserted. We paddled from building to building as O'Brien and the photographer inspected houses and took pictures and notes. I sat in the boat on the verge of panic, as tense as a bathwater soap bubble trying not to burst, convinced that we would be taken for looters and shot at by antsy deputies.

But at last we started to my house. We had been in the water for a while now, and the photographer was getting cranky about it. There was also the looming curfew to consider. We had to be gone or hidden by 6 p.m. But I didn't care about any of that. My house was only two blocks away and we were going there.

Every foot we traveled through that water was achingly slow, like trying to wade through sand. The closer we got, the more familiar but disjointed everything looked. The houses all had sunlight reflecting back up from the water in shimmering patterns on their walls and porch ceilings, like the kind of undulating light play you see on the hulls of boats riding gently at mooring. Some of the big neighborhood trees had been snapped in half, and one had dramatically torn the entire rear wall off a two-story Victorian house, which stood with its bedrooms exposed in the manner of a life-size dollhouse. Looking up at it from the water, we could see the beds and their sheets, the lamps and the dresser with clothes still sticking out of its drawers.

We turned the corner and entered my block of South Scott Street. I knew every single house on the block and everyone who lived in each one. There was hardly a sound besides the distant cries of another trapped, starving dog. The pallid water stretched out before

the bow of the boat and down my street for as far as I could see. The houses here are all raised up at least a few feet above the ground, and I noticed immediately that none of them was still flooded. Weatherboards were stained with horizontal black lines about a foot above the porches, but the water had clearly come down since that high point. My clenched heart opened with hope as we neared my house.

But my calculations of water depth ended with a bolt of fear as we passed Miss Anne's house. Miss Anne had lived on my block forever and she lived alone. She was fiercely independent. She had a gold-painted 1973 Cutlass coupe that she drove to the grocery store three blocks away and to the beauty parlor a few blocks past that. Whenever it rained, she went outside with a plastic rain cap over her hair to cover the car's leaky windshield with a tarp. It was her prized possession. As we floated by in the boat, I saw the half-submerged Cutlass parked in front of her porch. I pictured Miss Anne. If the car had stayed behind, she probably had too. I pictured her dead on the moldy floor.

"Miss Anne!" I cried out. Then, to O'Brien and the startled photographer: "My neighbor. That's her car. She might be in there. Old lady. Miss Anne!"

We all started calling her name up at her silent house. I poled over to her porch with the broomstick, but the Cutlass blocked my way. O'Brien waded around and pushed on the front door. It hadn't been locked or even latched and opened without effort. "I don't smell anything dead," he said encouragingly before ducking inside. He came back outside after a minute and announced there was no one inside.

We kept going. My house was just three doors down, and in a minute I was floating right up to my front steps as if to a marina pier. I disembarked carefully from the skiff and stepped onto my muddy porch. My hands were shaking a bit, but with some concentration I made them fish the house keys out of my jeans.

"Here goes," I said over my shoulder to O'Brien, trying to sound nonchalant for some reason.

I pushed the door open, feeling a little like an archeologist on the brink of a buried Egyptian cell. But there were no old bones here—just my living room, and it looked a lot like I had left it. The

couches were wet and there was gunk on the floors, but the place had drained out. The paintings and photos were still on the walls. Bottles of booze clanged together a bit on the rickety bar when I walked past it. The candles and bits of costumes and other doodads I had set up altar-like on my mantelpiece were all where I had left them.

The place smelled, but more like the mildew of moist neglect than the reek of moldy flood. I trotted through the house. I was on a mission to grab a few things, but I was incredibly disconcerted, almost dizzy. I was aware of my feet on the floor, of my hands touching doorknobs. I felt like I was watching myself move through a dreamscape. Still, it was clear even then that I could repair this place. It still felt like home.

O'Brien and the photographer were waiting outside in the water, and the afternoon was drawing closer to curfew. There was no time to do anything useful to the house besides open a few windows for venting. I stomped upstairs to my bedroom and grabbed a pair of dress shoes, which somehow seemed important at the time. I riffled through drawers frantically to lay my hands on insurance papers. Passing my little bar on the way back outside, I grabbed a bottle of champagne I had put away a few months before the storm for some special occasion. This, I figured, had to qualify.



## Two From Pillar to Post

Back in Baton Rouge, time passed like the days on someone else's calendar, quick and meaningless. There was much work and worry, but most of all each day just marked off time until I could manage another trip back to New Orleans.

The work at the bank continued at a furious pace as we tried to shift operations to other sites and find scattered employees and reassure frantic customers. O'Brien continued his daily trips back to the city and fed us reports. The floodwater had been drained out of Mid-City just a few days after we boated through my neighborhood, and one afternoon O'Brien sent a text message to say he was driving down my dried-out street and past my house.

It was killing me. If I was with him, I could be in my house. I could be trying to salvage flooded belongings or at least taking stock of how things stood in my neighborhood. I was stuck in Baton Rouge, earning money I was desperate to have, but stuck nonetheless. Everyone I knew from New Orleans was stuck somewhere else, searching for glimpses of the city we recognized on TV or Web sites, trying to piece together some kind of plan on secondhand reconnaissance and make some sense of all the conflicting predictions from officialdom. Distance made me feel helpless and irrelevant to what was happening in my city, even if all that was actually happening was the slow, silent retreat of floodwater and the rapid bloom of mold and reek. So when the bank managers gave us another weekend off, I knew I had to make another run back home.

In the morning, I topped off the car with gas, bought canned food and cleaning supplies, loaded Dr. Watson into the back seat, and hit the road. Once again, the highway was empty, and I had the interstate to myself as I drove as fast as my old car could manage. I had my bank ID badge ready as I pulled off the highway near New Orleans, but this time the combat-armed National Guardsmen just

gave a casual wave as the car bounced over the parish border and into the city.

The streets were impassable at some points, but after an improvised and circuitous route around the side streets I was back in Mid-City and driving along the same blocks I had floated over with O'Brien two weeks before. I parked in front of my house and let the dog out. Dr. Watson sniffed the air, and I took a big look around. Somehow, the place looked worse drained than it had flooded. The water, at least, had covered up all the damage and debris. With the novelty of floating along my block now gone, I could more fully appreciate the true extent of the devastation. Everything was crusted over with a strange residue. The pavement and even the dead grass crackled as my shoes and the dog's paws padded over it. Miss Anne's flooded old Cutlass was just down the street, its vintage gold paint job clouded now, and there were plenty of other cars left flooded and destroyed along the block.

Inside my house, I began to lay a more detailed and realistic inventory of damage over my first rushed, happy assessment of the place from the flood visit. Everything on the first floor would have to go. All the kitchen stuff was ruined. Mold was blooming here and there on the walls. Amazingly, the floors still appeared fine, the century-old boards unbuckled and still tight. The electrical system was cooked, as were the AC and the water heaters in the shed out back. Upstairs, a number of windows I hadn't boarded up were broken, but the rooms still looked more or less intact.

I went back outside and looked up and down the empty, shattered block. Occasionally a pickup truck rumbled down a side street a block or two away. These were the first of the rebuilding crews, and most of them were newly arrived Latino men. They crammed in eight or ten to a truck and drove to whatever address the owner had hired them to gut sight unseen.

I had one errand ahead of me before I could get into my first pass at debris hauling and cleaning. Via text message from Baton Rouge, I had promised to make a supply run to my friend Todd Windisch, who was living back in his apartment about a mile away from my house. Todd was a building contractor and had a pass to get back into town and get to work. He basically smuggled his wife, Erin Peacock, through the checkpoints without a pass by telling the soldiers

at the parish line that she was a stripper and had been called in to entertain the troops at a Bourbon Street club. In reality, Erin was an office administrator for a health care company, but Todd's story impressed the soldiers, who waved them through with big smiles.

Todd had been text messaging back and forth with his displaced friends scattered across the country and running all over town to their houses and businesses to put plywood over missing windows, nail their kicked-in doors shut again, and check on roofs. He was essentially giving emergency first aid to buildings before their owners could make it back, and I figured anyone performing such noble service deserved a care package from the well-stocked grocery store shelves of Baton Rouge. So I had a cooler in the back of the car for him loaded with fresh produce, Diet Coke, Italian meats, bread, beer, and ice. I found Todd on the roof of his landlord's apartment building, using a torch to melt a tar roof back on the badly damaged property, while Erin sat downstairs devising homemade fly traps against the sudden and vicious swarms that besieged everyone who ventured into the damp, stinking neighborhoods.

Back at home, I spent the rest of the day hauling out the contents of my flooded rooms and working bleach into the floor and the baseboard molding and everything else that had been covered in water. I called it quits later in the afternoon and took a cold shower. There were no lights and no gas for hot water, and it seemed a bit incredible that the plumbing still worked. I was just overjoyed to find myself standing in my own tub, in my own house, doing something as mundane as showering back in a place that a few weeks earlier I was unsure I would ever see again. I dried off with the same towel I had left on the hook the Saturday before Katrina hit and dressed in my bedroom with a pleasant breeze licking over the jagged glass of the room's broken window. O'Brien was in town again, and he came around at sunset to find me in the house with wet hair and a hyperactive heart. Not only was I back in my house—damaged but intact and still my house—but we had a social agenda to see after.

Just before the storm hit, some friends had opened an ambitious new business called the Savvy Gourmet, a cooking school and kitchen store for well-to-do Uptown foodies. The building made it through the storm fine, but no one back in New Orleans was at all

interested in enrolling for classes on cooking with garden herbs or the benefits of braising. Still, the owners picked up the early whiff of opportunity floating in the air just above the fog of despondency. While the city was still drying out, they turned their gleaming new teaching kitchen into a commissary for quick take-out meals. There was hardly anywhere in the city to find hot meals besides the emergency kitchens and Red Cross stations, so the Uptown people who were back flocked to the place.

The Savvy Gourmet also hosted what its owners dubbed “de-vacuation parties,” which served as welcome-home events for anyone who wanted to stop by their big and mostly empty retail space. People brought their own beer or wine, sometimes raiding once-sacrosanct collections for precious bottles that had been left too long in the late summer heat without air conditioning to keep their goodness much longer.

Later on, we went down the street to a bar called Le Bon Temps Roule. Like every other unflooded Uptown bar that managed to open so soon after the storm, the place was packed. This one had live music, provided by the Hot 8 Brass Band, which at the time had only six of its eight members accounted for but still managed to play like at least a dozen. They played loud, blowing the big New Orleans street sound with throaty trombones and belly-deep tuba lines. People were moving and hopping and yelling on the dance floor and were jammed around the bar. The crowd even packed into the tavern kitchen, which was out of action and had no food to sell anyway, and people watched the band there from perches on the inert stoves and sinks.

We stayed late and left happy. O’Brien and I were glowing from the music, the drinks, and the reassuring company of people as we climbed into the car and headed to my house across town. I had only made it to the corner, though, when a group of soldiers emerged from the shadows, maybe eight of them in camouflage and all of them watching us intently as they walked into the street and in front of the bumper. They held assault rifles across their chests, and the nearest one waved us down to stop. Others were methodically scanning up and down the main drag of Magazine Street. It was like they had been lying in ambush outside the bar, which was loud, bright, and filled with people just a few yards away from my idling

old car. We could still hear the tuba inside even as the military radios crackled with patrol updates around us. One of the soldiers approached the car window.

“Do you know we have a curfew in effect?” he said.

By this point the curfew for unflooded areas like Uptown was midnight, and we well knew it but scoffed at the idea anyway. The bar was open, the brass band was playing, people were drinking and laughing. So what if it was past midnight? We were all back in New Orleans and celebrating. But now we were outside all of that. We were in my car, and the man confronting me at my car window was holding an assault rifle.

“Curfew starts at midnight and it’s 2 a.m. now,” the soldier said, sounding more like a cop with a ticket book than a trooper with a patrol of heavily armed men backing him up.

O’Brien and I had brought our half-finished drinks from the bar with us in the car. Driving with open drinks is illegal in New Orleans, just as it is anywhere else, but is nonetheless quite common. And on these virtually empty roads, with one-way street directions universally disregarded, with trucks parked across defunct streetcar tracks and on sidewalks in front of shuttered hotels, and with streets in some parts of the city still actually holding neck-deep floodwater, I gave no more thought to putting a beer in the cup holder than I did putting the key in the ignition.

Our drinks were very much on my mind as the soldier at the car window advised us about the curfew restrictions in force. But after a quick look inside the car to make sure we weren’t hauling looted TVs and such, they dismissed us with instructions to head straight home. We did, and as I steered toward Mid-City things grew progressively stranger than even this roadside encounter.

Electricity was being restored very slowly around the city, coming on by sections that seemed to be defined by the boundaries of major streets. As we drove through Uptown, streetlights were lit up and so were the windows of some businesses and a few houses here and there. But as we neared Claiborne Avenue, we could see in the distance ahead where all the electricity was cut off. It was desolate enough as we approached it, with abandoned cars partially blocking the road and the beached rescue boats tilted on their dry keels where the receding water had left them. But there were still

streetlights here. Up ahead, where the light ceased, was the mouth of darkness, and we plunged into it as suddenly as if a closet door had been slammed behind us.

This was my first night back in the city since the levees failed, and all the daylight time I had spent in my neighborhood did nothing to prepare me for it. Suddenly, the Uptown bars and civic-minded parties were far away. We had crossed the line back into Mid-City, into the realm of the flood, and a dark curtain of gloom had fallen over everything we could see. I was grateful that O'Brien was sitting in the car next to me. We crossed a small overpass, and on the pavement rushing under the car's headlights we could see messages written in spray paint and intended for passing helicopters at the height of the city's desperation when this elevated ramp was a rare summit above the floodwaters. They were simple pleas like "HELP" and "NEED FOOD" and "SICK BABY" in eight-foot-long letters.

We turned onto a side street, and the view through the wind-screen grew darker still. The canopy of surviving oaks covered us, lacing their fingers together to mat the sky above the car and hold back the moonlight. There was not even the hint of a person to be seen along the way—no headlights anywhere and no lights in the hundreds of houses and businesses we passed. We went through a few miles of this and made it back to my street. The blocks here gave no evidence of any of the activity they had seen earlier in the day. The crews working in the neighborhood had split before curfew. My car was the only one around besides the flood-ruined hulks left in front of the empty houses.

We got out of the car and looked up. Over the roof of my house the night sky spread constellations I had never seen before with all the usual lighting down below getting in the way. The night also revealed just how much noise I had taken for granted under normal circumstances in the city. Even when it was "quiet," there was still noise—the neighbor's air conditioning unit, a car driving on the next street over, or just the condenser on a fridge turning over in the night downstairs. But with all of this gone, the silence was truly startling. There was just nothing for our ears to register, nothing on which we could set a standard. As I walked up the stairs to my darkened house, I knew my footfalls on the steps were the loudest sound being made for blocks around.

O'Brien and I lit candles inside the house, poured wine into plastic cups, and took the Amazing Dr. Watson for a walk through this once-familiar, now-surreal scene. The silence was all around us and impossible to ignore. It filled the space between us as we walked, and it filled our ears and our mouths as we tried to talk to each other. We instinctively spoke in whispers so as not to challenge the silence. We didn't have much to say anyway, mostly just whispered exclamations and breathy, unbelieving curses. Eventually, I noticed the sound of the dog's metal nametag clinking against the chain of his collar. It seemed so sharp, ringing out through the ghostly street like a small bell tolling as we walked. We continued to Canal Street, which should have been humming with cars and trucks even at this hour on a New Orleans Saturday night but was now as empty as the silent houses and churches and stores that lined it.

"Well, I need to pee," I announced and did so in the middle of the street. It was so dark that I could barely make out O'Brien's form a few feet away, but I heard him doing the same. The neighborhood was so weird, so distorted, that even marking the street like an animal seemed a reasonable thing to do. It almost seemed like an act of pride, like a declaration of our presence in this otherwise lifeless expanse of destruction. Dr. Watson sniffed around at our puddles on the street, looked up at us in the darkness, and wagged his tail furiously.

The next morning I woke up in my own bed with Dr. Watson curled on the floor beside a pile of bleached-stained work clothes. The silence of the night was gone, and noise was back early. Chainsaws were cutting into dead trees and diesel trucks were chugging off with loads of destroyed furniture.

O'Brien was back to work hunting down stories. I had a day of cleaning and scrubbing and demolition ahead of me before I would head back to Baton Rouge. I moved more furniture and boxes of stuff to the street and continued spraying bleach over my house. The fridge had to be ejected. It had seemed empty enough before I evacuated, but now was somehow filled with an unholy stench, and its electrical circuits had anyway been flooded. I found a skateboard in a pile of debris outside and used it as a dolly to wheel the leaking thing from the kitchen through the dining room and living room

and out to the porch. It teetered there at the edge for a moment on the skateboard before I gave the hulk its fatal shove and launched it from the porch to the ground three feet below. From there I rolled it roughly in a series of boxy, denting thuds to the sidewalk, finding that the release of a little aggression on the ruined appliance was a soothing exercise.

I took the dog outside a little later that day and found Miss Anne stacking the fallen branches of a magnolia tree in front of her house next to mounds of stinking debris near her ruined old Cutlass. Miss Anne had bought her house in 1947 and had lived there by herself for many years before I arrived in the neighborhood. Feeding the cats that roamed the streets here had been something between her hobby and her calling for years. Every day, before the storm, she had set up a collection of saucers on her front porch filled with canned cat food, water, and sometimes even delights like milk and chicken livers.

I thought she hated me when I first moved into the neighborhood. Sometimes the Amazing Dr. Watson wandered off from my porch to visit the much more appetizing buffet on hers, and when he did it usually led to a thunderous confrontation. Miss Anne would stomp over a few minutes after the dog's feast and holler at me from the sidewalk, reminding me in hard terms that poor old women couldn't be expected to feed my dog every night. But after a few months she abruptly dropped the whole issue and reversed course. She decided she loved the dog and would chastise me if I didn't let him bound up to her well-stocked porch for a snack when we walked past her house.

She was the only other person on the block that morning, but I wasn't all that surprised to find her there cleaning up storm debris in her yard. She wasn't the type to wait around for anyone to tell her how or when to do something. She was wearing a neat, striped blouse and slacks and had a kerchief tied around her neck, which was completely normal for her, though a little dressy for someone making an early visit to a flooded New Orleans neighborhood on a sweltering morning. She also had curlers in her raven-black hair, which I had never observed her wearing before. This was the first time I had seen her since the storm, and I asked where she had been.



“Where have I been? Honey, I been from pillar to post. Let me tell you.”

And she told me, breathlessly. The following was delivered at machine-gun pace: “I stayed, honey, I stayed for five days. I had to. I had two cats with me. It was okay, the water only came in the house up to my ankles. I been through hurricanes in this house. I been through Betsy. I been through Camille. You just ride it out. Plenty of people rode it out. Them people across the street there rode it out. Leonard next door rode it out with his boyfriend.

“I had plenty of water, plenty of food. I was doing fine upstairs there. After I think it was four days, a boat came by picking people up. Leonard was leaning out his window shouting at me, saying, ‘Anne, you got to go. Anne, you got to go. Anne, you got to go.’ Just like that for ten minutes. It was so annoying it gave me a headache. But you can’t just jump in a boat like that. I had to get my cats together, I had to get my bags, get my purse together. So I told them to go ahead and maybe I’d go the next day. I tell ya, the one thing that did make me want to leave was that I was listening at WWL on my radio. Thank God I had enough batteries still. And they were saying about looters coming through. I tried to lock my front door here, but I couldn’t because the door was all swelled up from the water. I couldn’t get it closed all the way. So I thought, if I’m upstairs and I hear any footsteps coming up, well, I’m going to be dead.

“So the next day when a girl came by in a canoe I hollered for her to stop. I said, ‘Please, just let me bring my cats. I have them all ready to go in these carriers.’ And she said, ‘Absolutely not. I’m going to bring you down to the Bayou St. John by Mercy Hospital and a helicopter is going to take you out of here.’

“So what could I do? I said goodbye to the cats and got in the canoe and we went down to where the helicopter was landing. There were six men on that helicopter and then me. Have you ever been in a helicopter? Well, this one didn’t have any doors on it and it took them about ten minutes just to strap me in. First time I ever been in a helicopter.

“They brought me to the airport and then I was on a plane that took me to Arkansas. We were at an army base, Fort Chafee, near Fort Smith, Arkansas. Now by this time I hadn’t eaten anything except a peanut butter sandwich the day before. So we get there and

they want to feed us, but I couldn't eat what they had. Honey, I wouldn't give this food to your dog. It was this macaroni, not even warm and with no gravy on it. So I said no thanks. Everywhere you went people were handing you water, so I figured I'd just fill up on water.

"Well, I find a bus and it takes me into Fort Smith, into the town. But now it's Labor Day weekend. I had completely forgot about the holiday. All the stores were closed, even the little lunch counter at the bus depot. But someone there says you can get a meal at a place a few blocks away. So I'm outside walking, hauling my bags and wondering if I'm even going to make it a few blocks because I haven't eaten in so long. And that's when this girl pulls up in her car.

"There must be an angel watching over me because every time I really needed something there was someone there to give it to me. Just like that girl with the canoe outside my house, here comes this other girl, and she gives me a ride to the restaurant. So I get in and she brings me to the restaurant. And do I eat? I had eggs and bacon and a waffle this thick with butter on top. It looked like an ice cream scoop of butter and it melted all over it. I just ate and ate. Every time the waitress came by I asked for more coffee, even if I wasn't empty yet. Before I knew it I had three cups of coffee.

"I noticed that the couple sitting behind me was looking at me. You know how you can see it out the corner of your eye? And I thought, 'Oh well, they probably think I'm a bag lady.' I have all these bags with me and I'm eating like I haven't eaten in days. Well, I figure I better turn around and say hi so they know I'm okay. They said hi back and asked if I was from around here. I said, 'No, I'm from New Orleans, Louisiana.' And the man says, 'Oh! I've been there, I know New Orleans! Which neighborhood?' I say Mid-City. And he says, 'I know there. Carrollton Avenue and Canal Street!' And I say, 'Boy, you do know it.'

"So later on the waitress gives me the check and I bring it up to the cashier and I give her the check and I give her a ten-dollar bill. And she takes the check but pushes back the money. So I push the money back to her and she pushes it back again. And I push it back again, and this time I look away, like maybe she doesn't want me to see her take it. But she pushes it back to me again. So I say, 'Well, what's going on? I'm trying to pay.' And she says, 'You can't, it's al-

ready taken care of.' And you know what? I think those people I was talking to signaled her or something and took care of it.

"I'm back now. I'm living out in Metairie with my girlfriend and her boyfriend. She gave me her little Mercedes to drive since my Cutlass was flooded. She wants me to buy her car. You know what? It's a piece of junk. You can't drive it! I miss my Cutlass. That first big boat that came along to get me in the flood ran into it and broke the front window. I know it was flooded, but none of the windows broke until that boat hit it.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. You will too? That's so good to hear, babe. We need to get people back in the neighborhood. I don't care if I have to drive to Metairie to get water and do errands. I don't care about the inconvenience. I just want to get home and live here again. Does your dog want a little biscuit?"

She produced a dog biscuit from her pocket and adroitly flipped it into the Amazing Dr. Watson's mouth. I took out my camera and asked Miss Anne if I could take our picture together.

"No, baby, no," she said. "Look at me here with my hair curlers in. I'm in no shape for a picture."

But I insisted and she relented. First, though, she had to put on her sunglasses and the breathing mask she had for working in her house. It would be her disguise, she said, so no one would know how she looked with her curlers in. I reached my arm as far out as I could, pointed the camera back at us and we put our heads close together for the photo. Between her oversized breathing mask and her big, cat's-eye sunglasses, the only parts of her face to be seen in that picture are the little crow-claw creases around her eyes that let you know she has a big, broad smile underneath it all.