

Interlude

A Modest Proposal

When Katrina's corkscrew reached the tip of Louisiana's boot in 2005, I was safely ensconced in Baton Rouge 85 miles away from New Orleans with my fiancée, who had evacuated the city the day before. Our electricity failed just as an oak tree branch broke through the living room window. After the wind had safely died down that morning, I checked into work at the Advocate newspaper and drove around town taking inventory of uprooted trees and broken windows. News was not yet trickling in about the devastation to the south. Baton Rouge had survived the storm with some relatively minor damage and an extended power outage. I was really preoccupied by our engagement the day before. I had proposed at a farmhouse north of Baton Rouge of my friend Prentiss, who was out of town. During our first glass of champagne, Prentiss's in-laws came up the drive. They had evacuated from New Orleans, bringing with them freshly caught fish and homemade mayonnaise. We sat around the kitchen table eating fried fish and discussing wedding plans in what was the last stretch of levity before an enduring shadow. In the following days, Jessica would discover the loss of her apartment, car, and most of her belongings. She spent her remaining year of medical school on the move, volunteering at medical shelters around Baton Rouge, and she finished the year at Baylor University in Houston, which had taken on students from her class. I filed the last of my Katrina stories before leaving for San Diego in 2006 for Jessica's residency in the navy. As a Louisianan, I spent the formative period of my life in New Orleans, where I attended college, met my fiancée, and started my career at the Associated Press and Mayor's Office. For the next twelve years, I watched from afar the uneven recovery. I missed Louisiana, terribly at times. New Orleans at one point sat almost completely empty of people. Each had to decide on their own whether to return. Post-Katrina recovery was an invitation to explore my own politics of belonging.

We were lucky. We were out of the city before the ordered evacuation. We had a place to stay. We were not marked by race. No coerced busing, dallying governors, or nervous Samaritans. No guarded bridges or barricades. In the days following, the

Baton Rouge Convention Center became a shelter for evacuees. The LSU basketball arena was a makeshift hospital where Fats Domino was discovered by his niece and put up in the LSU dorm room of the football team's quarterback. The most destitute were plucked from rooftops and picked up in volunteer ski boats and makeshift rafts, then dropped on patches of dry land from where they trudged to the gathering masses at the Superdome and the Convention Center and on highway overpasses. Amid the chaos, there was also a familiar specter of the black threat of fear-based rumors that had spread—discourses of looting, rapes, and violence. Rescue boats had SWAT teams with rifles hoisted ready. Governor Kathleen Blanco had announced that National Guardsmen had returned from Iraq and were there to prevent looting. “They have M16s, and they’re locked and loaded,” she said. “These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary, and I expect they will.”¹

Evacuees bused and flown to cities throughout the country in a massive dispersal of poor people were treated, if wearily, as visiting guests that would hopefully be on their way. Some ended up staying where they landed. Others moved on. Ten years after the storm, there were at least 100,000 fewer people in New Orleans, most of them African American. Where did they go? Lolis Eric Elie, a writer and former columnist for the *Times-Picayune*, wrote a piece for the tenth anniversary of Katrina to try to answer a question that only a few people seemed to be asking: Why come back? “Some of us came back because we had a cousin or auntie, and they said we could stay by them until we got it figured out,” he wrote. “Some of us came back because we knew they didn’t want us back.”

I met an evacuee in 2007 while I was reporting on wildfires outside of San Diego. He had been bused from New Orleans to Nevada, where he ran into trouble, got arrested, and ended up working in a prison fire brigade program to support western US fire suppression. “You from New Orleans?” he asked. “You were in the dome?” I was not in the dome. I was lucky . . .

“Some of us came back because Richard Baker, the Baton Rouge congressman, was right: ‘We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.’ Some of us came back to fight for our homes in the Lafitte, in the Magnolia, in the B. W. Cooper, in the Melpomene, in those timeworn fortresses, those unflooded, moldless bricks.”²

Katrina-related flooding between New Orleans and Baton Rouge disturbed five hundred industrial facilities and five Superfund sites. Six major oil spills occurred, and seven underground oil storage tanks were disturbed.³ Floodwaters rushed into the city until they rose to the equilibrium of sea level. Waterlines stayed fixed at attic levels, over cars, at the front doorbell, for over a week until temporary repairs could be made to the levee system and the water could be pumped out again.

Three weeks later, Hurricane Rita collided with the western half of the state and reflooded some of the loosely patched levees. By then, the city’s borders were manned by sandbags and National Guardsmen. When we crossed through on my press

credentials two weeks after Katrina to salvage Jessica's belongings, we opened the door of her duplex to a hot stench of mold. Her toilet and sink were stained with dark brown film. Everything had floated and swirled around the room. A chair was wedged waist-high into the bedroom doorway. The grass up and down the street was dead. There were no birds in the trees. The water level was above the roof of her car. As we attempted to lift and remove the waterlogged futon mattress in the front living room, I dropped the mattress, walked outside, and started to dry heave.