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Les Bon Temps

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Les Bon Temps

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Nonfiction Writing

by

Todd Schrenk

B.F.A. DePaul University, Chicago, 1993

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Dedicated to Patricia Nugent,
my loving wife, first audience, and first editor

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Abstract

Les Bon Temps is a collection of nine essays written about New Orleans between 2005 and 2007. Though not specifically about the effects of hurricane Katrina on the city, this collection provides a personal glimpse of post-Katrina New Orleans through the eyes of the author. The essays address subjects such as race relations, public protest, tap water quality, post-traumatic depression, energy monopolies, lifestyle, culture, and evacuation.

Keywords: New Orleans, hurricane Katrina, essays

Preface

When I first began to think about what has become *Les Bon Temps*, in the spring and summer of 2005, I envisioned a collection of essays that would look at New Orleans from unusual angles. I wanted to capture aspects of the city that I had not yet seen articulated, to present a kind of collage not just of “my New Orleans” but that of my family and friends, a limited but decidedly insider perspective. I was born here, as were my parents, grandparents and great grandparents on both sides of my family. My wife Trish, who is from Quincy, Massachusetts, has traced the ancestry of my paternal grandmother’s family in New Orleans at least back to the 1740s, during the French-colonial period. That would make my two brothers and me eleventh-generation natives. I say this not because I wanted to write about my family’s history but to suggest one reason for my interest in writing about the city and, perhaps, to lend some genealogical weight to the perspective I offer.

In a sense I have written the collection I planned to write but with one unexpected, and nearly all consuming, influence, which became at least the thematic subtext--if not the *raison d’etre*--for each of these essays: hurricane Katrina. Each of these pieces was written after the catastrophe that began on August 29, 2005. To this day and for many years to come, the citizens of New Orleans and the residents of the surrounding region will live with the ongoing repercussions of that event. In some ways New Orleans has changed forever, and one of our struggles is to reconcile the old with the new in a way that respects both. Of course this is a common challenge people face when the things they love inevitably change. Except in the case of death, though, these changes tend to evolve over time, and even death can be gradual. The change we experienced, as a city and as individuals, was acute. Some of what we loved has survived, some has been lost forever, but much remains on life support. Some of us are able to remain optimistic about the city’s prognosis, while others have succumbed to pessimism. I would guess most, though, fluctuate uneasily between the two. We live in a world of uncertainty in ways that those living elsewhere in this country do not. A writer living through this historic moment cannot escape its influence, nor should he try to. But to say that this is a collection of

essays *about* post-Katrina New Orleans would be misleading. I prefer to think of it as a collection of essays about New Orleans written from a post-Katrina perspective.

Some of these essays, such as “Let It Suck,” or “Cool It or Blow,” address what one might consider Katrina-related subjects: post-traumatic depression, the decision to or not to evacuate. “The Black Italian,” and “The Purpose of The Poet,” both address the subject of racial tension, which existed well before Katrina, but they do so from within the context of the world Katrina helped to create: one from the perspective of a bike ride through flood-ravaged Central City, the other through a poet’s dissent against added security at a music club. “Tap” and “Indian Red” also address preexisting subjects--the quality of tap water in New Orleans and concerns about the efficacy of contemporary public protest--but again these essays do so from a post-Katrina environment and perspective. “Eight-Percenting Us to Death,” analyzes and challenges the actions and policies of Entergy New Orleans following the storm, but the questions it raises may be applicable to any private energy corporation with a virtual monopoly on local service provision. “A Million Mardi Gras Now,” depicts one aspect of the city’s culture that promises to survive--though not unchanged. This essay looks at Mardi Gras both before and after the storm in an attempt to capture something of the true spirit of the celebration.

As Lafcadio Hearn wrote of New Orleans in the 1870s in a letter to a friend, “Times are not good here. The city is crumbling into ashes Its condition is so bad that when I write about it . . . nobody will believe that I am telling the truth. But it’s better to live here in sackcloth and ashes, than to own the whole state of Ohio.” Hearn’s sentiment is current and common among those determined to live in New Orleans today. For all its faults--and we do recognize them--even in its darkest days, the city has a allure, a beauty that for some remains irresistible and which others will never understand.

Part One

The Black Italian

In November 2005, on a bicycle I'd borrowed from my brother, I rolled through the quiet, dusty streets of Central City, New Orleans. The sun warmed the air from high in the cloudless sky, and a dry, steady breeze suffused the afternoon with a comfortable autumn coolness. Sudden gusts caused screen doors to slap open, cracking like gun shots against the clapboard walls of shotgun doubles. Strips of vinyl siding that had been torn loose in the storm dangled and flapped against the side of an abandoned corner store as I pedaled past. Birds sang in the trees and swooped from rooftops, and cats crept through rubble that had been scattered to the curb. An oily, black stripe across the fronts of houses, residue from the high water mark that left a filthy ring around everything, marked my fluctuating elevation as I cruised through the now dry neighborhood.

Central City lies just beyond the Garden District heading away from the Mississippi River. St. Charles Avenue establishes the boundary between the two neighborhoods, both of which were built between the 1830s and the 1840s. The Garden District was conceived as an upscale neighborhood of impressive mansions designed by talented architects and built by wealthy New Orleans society families; Central City was designed by real estate developers on the site of a mosquito-infested swamp, and consisted of inexpensive rental properties for working class immigrants.

Central City quickly evolved into an ethnically and racially mixed neighborhood where African American residents lived among German, Irish, Jewish and Italian populations. Central City was home to Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, Kid Ory, Papa Celestin, Pops Foster, and other influential jazz musicians. The famous Dew Drop Inn, where local and touring musicians gathered for late-night jam sessions that continued past sunrise, was located in Central City. The neighborhood grew and thrived into the 1960s, boasting one of the few commercial districts in

New Orleans where African-American residents could patronize stores free of harassment by white clerks and customers.

After the 1960s, however, Central City began to change. With the advent of integration following the Civil Rights Movement, other commercial districts became more accessible to African-American residents, and businesses in Central City, including many black-owned businesses, suffered. Many white middle and upper-middle class residents uncomfortable with integration began to flee to the suburbs, debilitating the city's tax base. Making matters worse, the national recession of the 1970s accelerated the decline of many of the predominantly black, working class neighborhoods.

Today, while the Garden District is famous around the world for its elegant and well-preserved antebellum mansions and lush tropical flora, Central City is known, mostly locally, for poverty, blight and crime. According to the 2000 Census, Central City was home to 19,072 residents. Eighty-seven percent of these residents were black. But in November of 2005, Central City was pretty much empty.

As I weaved through the streets with no particular destination in mind, I encountered scattered residents, nearly all men, among the mostly vacant blocks who returned to the neighborhood during the days to work on their houses. They shuffled through debris, gutted flood-damaged apartments, repaired roofs, sat on stoops, or stood talking in small groups. I waved as I passed. "How ya doing?" I asked.

They waved back. "All right," they said, a standard greeting, though clearly, things were not all right.

I saw an old woman sitting in a chair on the second-floor porch of a dingy, stucco house. She was eating something out of a can with a spoon. I waved.

"How ya doing?" she asked.

"I'm doing all right," I said. "And you?"

"I'm doing okay."

“Good,” I said, but my response felt inadequate. I wanted to say more, but didn’t know what to say. I wondered whether she was living in that house, whether she had electricity, whether she had heated up that can of food or was eating it cold.

I felt conspicuous riding through Central City. I projected suspicion into the friendly nods from the people. “Who’s this white boy?” I imagined them thinking as they watched me pass. I felt guilty, as though I were intruding, as though I were taking advantage of people’s absence to sneak a peek at something private. I tried to compensate for this sense of guilt by self-consciously projecting a tone of sympathy and respect through my greetings. I didn’t want to be mistaken for an opportunist. I worried, absurdly, that someone might think that I was out prospecting for cheap real estate--on a bicycle. I wanted to explain myself, to tell people, “I used to be afraid to come here.” To let them know that I wanted to connect, but I didn’t know whether that would be possible or what that would mean.

*

I was born in New Orleans, grew up here, went to high school here, and then left to attend college in Chicago. After college I lived in New York City for eight years, during which time I met my wife, Trish. We moved to Austin, Texas, lived there for two years, and then in the summer of 2003, moved back to New Orleans. I was thirty-two years old.

Having lived the first eighteen years of my life in the city, I never spent much time studying maps of New Orleans. I knew my way around, had my routes. I was content with my habitual haunts. When I returned for brief visits during the fourteen years I lived away, I expanded my range a little but pretty much kept to the same familiar paths. Over time, my regular routes became more deeply ingrained, solidifying a mental map of New Orleans that I had been unconsciously composing since childhood. When I returned to live here as an adult, I began to expand my childhood map, but there remained large sections of New Orleans, what one might call the inner city, into which I did not venture. I had no reason to go there. I didn’t have to go through these neighborhoods to get where I wanted to go; I could easily bypass them, and I did. Those places became voids in my mental map, empty spaces that blurred my understanding

of how the city fit together. When I returned to New Orleans, the population was close to seventy-percent black, and a huge part of this black population lived in these “voids.”

The old neighborhoods of New Orleans wrap around two bends in the Mississippi River. Although the river runs through the United States from north to south, the curves that snake past New Orleans flow, more or less, west to east, like a crude S that has fallen forward. This twisted geography has created a kind of paradox in which, if you wanted to cross the river from the business district to the city’s West Bank, to the west side of the Mississippi, you would drive due east across a bridge. Make sense? Because many of the streets that run parallel to the river change trajectories to follow its curves, and because many of the streets that run perpendicular to the river either converge or expand like spokes on a wheel (and some of the spokes are badly bent), the terms north, south, east, or west are useless for street directions in New Orleans. Two streets that appear to run parallel in one neighborhood because they both cross the same street at ninety-degree angles, intersect in another part of the city. Many of the neighborhoods that extend north from the French Quarter toward Lake Ponchartrain were actually planned and built as grids of square blocks, but many of these grids, because of the curves in the river, connect with adjacent grids at odd angles, so streets gradually change direction as you continue along them.

Though I felt as though I knew my way around New Orleans, my mental map of the city didn’t always adjust for all these curves and odd angles. I had no real sense of direction. Though I knew how to get from one street to another, I had no real sense of how certain streets curved or how the shifting diagonals changed my spatial relationship to different parts of the city. I’d seen maps of New Orleans but never studied them closely enough to reconcile the layout on an actual map with my more intuitively conceived, and deeply ingrained, mental map. And because my mental map suffered from what I perceived as void spaces where poor black people tended to live, my sense of the city never really coalesced into a tangible whole. I knew those neighborhoods were there, but I had no sense of how they connected with everything else. My New Orleans existed as parts strung together by avenues. I became familiar with some of

those parts, and I skipped over others. As I traversed the city, driving from one part to another, skirting the edges of unfamiliar neighborhoods, I often found myself looking down the streets that led into my voids, wondering what it looked like back there, what life was like in the void.

As a child I harbored a similar curiosity about the Lafitte housing projects. I remember passing these projects on Orleans Avenue in a car with my mother. We would sometimes take this route to get from Mid City to the French Quarter. And as we passed, my mother would warn me to make sure my door was locked. The projects were dangerous, she explained, and you never knew when someone might approach the car, open the door, and grab a purse. Or worse, put a gun to your head and take the whole car. These things sometimes happened.

I watched out the window with fascination as we passed the three and four-story, brick buildings that lined Orleans Avenue. I saw people everywhere: children, parents, grandparents. The projects didn't look particularly dangerous, but I believed my mother when she told me they were. I looked back into the grassy courtyards between the buildings, at the paved walkways that led deeper into the unknown, past the buildings behind those on Orleans, and farther, past buildings behind those. Oak trees shaded the courtyards, and the paths disappeared into what I imagined as a brown-brick labyrinth. Because I only ever passed the projects on one side, I had no concept of how far back they extended. For all I knew, they might go on forever. Such is the nature of a void. It often has no discernible boundaries, no limits. I tried to imagine what it might be like to walk back along those paths, to venture into the depths of the projects. What would happen to me? What was back there?

Even at age thirty-four, when passing the Lafitte houses, I would watch from my car. I saw children playing, families grilling burgers, boys and girls holding hands, men and women sitting on porches, drinking beer, laughing, talking. It still didn't look dangerous. Of course, newspaper accounts of crime, shootings, murders, contradicted the happy scene beyond my window and reinforced a sense of invisible danger. I knew these things happened, but all I saw as I passed were people living their lives. It depressed me to think that I couldn't go there, stroll down the sidewalk, say, "Hello. How you doin'?" There was no wall, no physical restraint

preventing me from doing so, but the psychological boundary established by race and class and solidified over generations felt palpable. And these psychological boundaries defined the geography of my mental map of New Orleans.

The creation of these boundaries, though, resulted from more than just psychological habit. The divisions between where I felt I could go and where I felt I should not go were also informed by a healthy dose of common sense. New Orleans has always been a dangerous city. Some years the crime rates go up and some years they go down, but when compared to national statistics for any given year, the crime rates here have always been high. For several years over the course of my lifetime, New Orleans has distinguished itself as the “murder capital of the country.” And in years when other cities have managed to surpass our penchant for violence, New Orleans has consistently ranked among the top five.

In 1994 New Orleans captured the most-murderous-city-in-the-U.S. distinction with a record-breaking 425 murders. This marked a 7.6 percent increase from the previous year, while the national trend for cities of similar size averaged a decrease of 3 percent. Over the next five years, the number of murders in New Orleans dropped to a low of 159 in 1999. By 2002, however, New Orleans had recaptured its title with 257 murders, the highest homicide rate that year among cities with a population of 250,000 or more. By 2004, the murder rate in New Orleans was nearly ten times the national average, and by August of 2005, up to the day before Katrina, the city had recorded 202 murders for the year, well on its way to yet another annual increase.

In the first weeks of September, following the hurricane, the local, state, and federal governments managed to empty New Orleans of nearly its entire population, close to half-a-million citizens. Unofficial speculation estimates that only about one thousand residents who refused to leave for the storm were able to elude authorities and remain in their homes during the subsequent mandatory evacuations. It wasn't until the first week of October, after hurricane Rita had passed, re-flooding some already devastated neighborhoods, that the city government began to officially allow residents of lesser-damaged areas to return home. My wife Trish and I were

among this first, lucky group. As the city gradually repaired some of its wrecked infrastructure, more neighborhoods opened. Some homes were habitable, but eighty percent of the city had flooded, and most homes could only be gutted as residents awaited word from their insurance companies. By the end of December, the New Orleans Police Department had recorded only two murders since the chaos following Katrina. With many of the city's poorer residents still unable to return home, violent crime had all but vanished.

In mid-November I decided to take the opportunity, while New Orleans was still "safe," to fill in some of the voids in my mental map, to venture into the neighborhoods I had previously been afraid to enter. Central City was one of these neighborhoods. I'd dabbled at its edges, where the early stages of gentrification had begun to creep in from St. Charles Avenue, but I'd never really burrowed into the heart of it, never gone straight through and come out the other side.

*

I kept alert as I zigzagged through Central City. Most of the people working on homes were older men, and their friendly greetings put me at ease. I passed a younger man, maybe a teenager--floppy braids and baggy pants. He was walking. I made eye contact. "How you doing?" I said. He nodded, cool, expressionless, not hostile, but not friendly either. Two guys cruised past in a car. I looked over my shoulder to make sure they hadn't turned around to follow me. They hadn't. The young guys made me more nervous than the old guys. Two guys more so than one. But no one bothered me or gave me any reason to feel nervous. The terrain was familiar even though the neighborhood was not. Central City looked like New Orleans. I don't know what else I expected.

I rounded a corner and saw a larger street ahead. A couple of cars whizzed past. Had I come to the end of Central City? I had lost my sense of direction, become turned around in the void, and wondered where I would emerge. I reached the end of the block and stopped. I didn't recognize the street. Where was I? I looked to my right and spotted a familiar store, Hub Hobby Shop. I was on Broad. I drove down Broad all the time; it was one of my regular routes. Maybe

six, maybe ten times a week I passed this intersection, but because I had rolled up from Central City, from a strange angle, it looked utterly foreign. I'd made a connection. A new section of my mental map clicked into place. I turned around and dove back into Central City.

When I hit Martin Luther King Boulevard, I found myself at the edge of a sprawling housing development. Four-story, tan-brick buildings lined M.L.K. for blocks. Acres of silent and abandoned projects stretched before me. Each building had a small concrete porch with an open doorway (none of these buildings had front doors) into a shadowy foyer with mailboxes on the wall and a set of stairs leading up, into darkness. A plastic grocery bag, puffed with wind, scraped across the street, an urban tumbleweed. I didn't recognize these projects. They looked more modern than the Lafitte or the Magnolia projects. And they looked desolate. When I reached the intersection of M.L.K. and South Galvez, I saw a metal sign on the median, "B.W. Cooper Apartments." So these are the Cooper projects, I thought to myself. I'd heard of them, but I never really knew where they were.

I'd seen photographs of the Cooper projects in the newspaper. The pictures were often similar: a body sprawled in the street, people standing around, children sitting on porches with unimpressed expressions, faces resigned to shootings, to murders. The body language of the people in the photographs betrayed a horrible familiarity with violence, with the sight of another young man, a boy they knew, gunned down in front of their homes. I turned onto South Galvez and entered the Cooper projects.

Oak trees lined the median that split Galvez, a relatively wide street. A couple of blocks in, the style of the buildings changed. These were smaller, two and three-stories high, with long, concrete porches and red, painted columns supporting second-floor balconies. The balconies had black, wrought-iron railings, and some contained shelves full of potted plants. These buildings had front doors as well as screen doors, and old, wooden window frames, as opposed to the cheaper-looking aluminum frames on the four-story buildings. I later learned that the buildings on M.L.K. had been constructed in the early 1950s, but these smaller buildings had been built in

the late 30s and early 40s. The older sections looked less institutional, more like a neighborhood, more like other New Orleans projects I'd seen.

The wide grassy spaces between the buildings had become overgrown with weeds and home to overturned shopping carts, discarded mattresses, flooded-out cars, and scattered rubbish. A beached motorboat lay in the grass beside a small porch at the back of one of the buildings. I wondered how its journey had ended there.

At the next corner I noticed the street sign: Erato, a street named for the muse of love poetry. But for me Erato evoked an altogether different mythology. I was riding in a car with my father. I was young. We must have crossed Erato at St. Charles Avenue.

"Don't ever go down Erato Street," my father warned. "The police don't even go down there. Once, someone found a severed head in the gutter. Just a head."

And now here I was: Erato. The word itself made me think of rats. My father's warning echoed in my memory. I continued on Galvez until I reached the end of the projects, at the Earhardt Expressway. Another piece of my mental map fell into place. I'd seen these projects from Earhardt. A high school friend used to cut down this street on occasion to get from the now defunct Mermaid Lounge, in the Warehouse District, back to his mother's house off Carrollton Avenue. I'd always called these the "Earhardt Projects." My map was coming together. I turned back on Galvez, back to Erato Street. It seemed foolish to pass up the opportunity.

Erato was a much narrower street than Galvez, more intimate. I followed Erato deeper into B.W. Cooper. The buildings surrounded me; they were all I could see in every direction, infinite projects. I saw a man standing in front of one of the 1930s-style buildings, an older man, maybe in his sixties, dressed in a charcoal-gray suit and a matching hat with a crisp brim. He was feeding a few cats from a large sack of kibble. I waved as I passed. "Hello."

He looked up and waved. "All right."

It occurred to me that this man and I could be the only two people in the entire Cooper projects--on Erato Street. I turned around and stopped in front of his building. "Feeding the cats?" I said to start a conversation.

“Somebody has to,” he said. His tinted eyeglasses sported squares of gold filigree where the wide stems met the frames. He looked slick and clean, out of place in the the ravaged projects.

“They look healthy,” I said of the cats. “Well fed.” They were large, muscular street cats, maybe four or five of them.

The man said he’d lost ten cats in the storm. Ten cats! How many cats did this guy own?

“Two from over there, one over there.” He began pointing out the different buildings around which the cats had lived. He said at first people hadn’t liked having all these cats around, but when they realized that with more cats there were fewer rats, people began to acquire cats and bring them into the apartments. But once the rats went away, the people threw the cats outside. “My wife and I spend about a hundred dollars a month on food to feed all these cats.”

He poured piles of kibble onto several metal baking sheets he’d placed on the ground. Cats came from across the street, from behind the buildings. After he had emptied the bag of kibble, the man began opening cans of wet food and spooning it out for the cats. He appeared in no hurry as he walked to the trunk of his car--a shiny, black Camry, or some similar new-model sedan--to open more food and then back to the various baking sheets to distribute it, talking to me as he went.

“This one here, this one’s called Adopted,” he said, indicating a large, black cat. “Because, you know, cats won’t let new cats into their group. They keep them out. But when the people who owned this cat put her out, the other cats accepted her. And so this one’s called Adopted. She’s the mother, and this one here’s called Little Adopted. That’s the son. So we have Adopted and Little Adopted,” he said looking around at the cats. “And that one’s White Tip because of the white on the tip of his tail.”

I later learned the man’s name was Carl. His face was round and benevolent, but his gaze savvy, watching from behind his gray tinted lenses.

Carl said he once had a dog, a Rottweiler, and that the dog hated cats. But the dog loved his wife and knew his wife liked cats, so he tolerated them. “Jingles was his name,” Carl said.

“Like Jingle Bells. He was the dog in Master P.’s first movie, *Bout It, Bout it.*” Master P. was a rapper, record producer, and filmmaker who had grown up in the Cooper Projects where *Bout It, Bout It* had been filmed. Carl said Jingles had died at age seven from cancer of the nose. “My wife took care of that dog. She’d take him to the doctor for anything, even if he just had a sneeze.”

“Once I caught my son hitting the dog,” Carl said. “I told him he either had to get along with the dog, or he had to go, out of the house.”

“Man, that’s cold,” his son had said, “siding with a dog over your son.”

Carl explained to his son that the dog took care of his wife, protected her when he went to work. “You do what you have to do to take care of your woman,” said Carl, “but this dog takes care of my wife.” His son could stay or go, no matter to Carl, but the dog stayed.

“When Jingles’s condition started to decline,” Carl continued, “my wife took him to doctors, to specialists, all kinds of people trying to find out what was wrong with him, but no one could figure it out. Eventually they found the cancer in his nose, but it was too late. When he died we got piles of letters, from all the doctors apologizing for not detecting the problem sooner.” As he said this, he pointed up to his apartment, as though the piles of letters were still up there. “We had him cremated and put the ashes in a jar. We took the ashes with us when we evacuated. We didn’t take much, but we took that. Whichever one of us dies first, me or my wife, is going to be buried with Jingles’s ashes.”

Carl maintained a vigilant eye as he ambled back and forth between his car and the baking sheets, always looking up and down the block, always checking. I followed his lead and also kept an eye peeled. At one point a pickup truck with three men seated in the cab came tearing down Erato from Galvez. The front tires of truck left the ground as it bounded up from a dip in the road. This is it, I thought. Here come the thugs. We both stood and watched as the truck barreled towards us, but then it just blew past and kept going.

“They moving like somebody’s chasing them,” Carl remarked after the truck had passed, but no one followed.

“Where are you staying now?” I asked.

“On the boat,” he said. Two Carnival Cruise ships had been chartered by FEMA to house policemen, firemen, rescue workers, and first responders as well as their families. Carl must have fit into the “family” category. The boats were docked at the Riverwalk near the French Quarter.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“It’s nice,” said Carl, a touch begrudgingly, after a moment’s hesitation. “But it’s not home. I’ll put it like that. It’s nice, but it’s not home.”

Carl said they could stay on the boat until March, and that he and his wife had lined up an apartment that they could move into after that. But he said a lot of people on the boat feared they would have nowhere to go come March. There had been a lot of talk in the newspapers about closing the projects. People didn’t know what was going to happen to them. They cried because they had no idea how they would get by in the future.

“My wife said to me the other day, ‘You know we’ve spent all these years talking about getting out of the projects, and now all I want to do is get back in.’” Carl dumped another can of wet food onto a mound of kibble.

I followed Carl around the side of the building to the back where he tossed two handfuls of empty cat food cans into a dumpster. He pointed up to an apartment that had been burglarized since the evacuation.

“People come home to get their belongings out of their houses, and they find that someone has broken in and taken their stuff, so they break into someone else’s house and take what they want. It’s like when I was in the army and someone stole my gear. I reported it to my sergeant, and his advice was to find someone close to my size and take his stuff. ‘That’s government property,’ he said. ‘You’re responsible for it. When inspection comes around, you better have what you’re supposed to have.’”

“Great values the Army taught you,” I said.

“The only value the Army teaches you is how to kill,” said Carl.

Later Carl speculated that the Mexican laborers who had lately migrated into the city to work, gutting and rebuilding homes, were responsible for robbing people's apartments.

"You'd have to be pretty desperate to rob from the projects. You see that woman there?" Carl pointed to an empty balcony across the street. The screen door flapped open in the wind. "Someone came in and took everything she had. And she had next to nothing."

I tried to get a sense of what the neighborhood might have looked like when people were actually living there, sitting on porches, crossing the streets, talking, fighting, loving. I tried to imagine the sounds, the activity, the culture and the crime: the projects. But all that remained were ghosts, flapping doors, and Carl.

Carl talked about race. He said when he was a child, his mother had an old picture on the wall of a man astride a horse. The man was wearing a full Indian head dress, and Carl had always assumed the outfit had been some kind of Mardi Gras costume. One day he asked his mother who the man was, and she told him it was papa.

"What do you mean, that's papa?" young Carl asked.

"That's papa," said his mother. "That's your grandfather." That was when Carl learned his family had Native American blood.

Carl gestured toward a porch behind us and said that once a young man he knew had been sitting right there, talking about how white people should be killed.

"You know, your father was white," Carl had said to the young man. When the young man claimed to have no idea what Carl was talking about, Carl went to the young man's mother. "I asked his mother how come she never told the boy his father was white."

"I thought he knew," had been the mother's response. "I would have told him, but I just assumed that he knew."

Evidently, the boy's father had been Alphonse Picou, a white Creole jazz musician whose picture, said Carl, "hangs in the jazz hall of fame right next to Louis Armstrong's." I began to wonder whether Carl had a tendency to embellish his stories. Not that I minded, but I did consider it. I'd heard of Alphonse Picou, and it's possible the story was true, but Carl could talk.

Carl said he had a daughter, living in California, who had married a white man and another daughter who lived just up the street, also married to a white man. He said his family had a white side and a black side, and when someone on the black side of the family died, the white side cooked food, and everyone got together. When someone on the white side died, the black side cooked and everyone got together.

“I read in the newspaper just the other day that when George Washington died, he left twenty-five percent of his property to the son of his wife’s servant, a slave,” said Carl.

“Must have been his son,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Carl. “All those guys did that. Jefferson didn’t even make a secret about it. He traveled around the country with his slave mistress. It’s like I told my wife, and she doesn’t like to hear it, but if they had never abolished slavery, everyone would be your complexion,” he said, pointing at me. “I’ve got white blood, black blood, and Indian blood in me, so I have nothing to say about race.”

Carl sounded as though he had quite a bit to say about race. And it was what I wanted to hear. It was why I was there.

As Carl named the cats and reminisced about his beloved movie-star dog Jingles, as he pointed up to the balconies of his former neighbors and gestured toward the now lonely stoops, as he looked up at his own now inaccessible apartment, which may or may not have contained a stack of letters from apologetic veterinarians, I could see Carl filling in his own void, envisioning the people who once lived there. The voids I sought to fill were empty spaces on a mental map, geographic gaps in my understanding of how New Orleans fit together. By biking through Central City, I colored in some of those spaces with a landscape desolated by flood and evacuation, emptied of a population to which I still felt no connection, a different kind of void. And though I lacked the necessary frame of reference to begin filling this flood-ravaged void, if only in my imagination, Carl did not. I don’t think of Carl as some kind of medium through which I was able glean an understanding of the lives of the people who lived here. I couldn’t see

the Cooper projects through Carl's eyes, but Carl could. And I could see that. And to me that felt important, worth witnessing.

I had wanted to explain myself to the people I encountered in Central City, to state my purpose. Because I felt out of place as I biked past their wrecked homes, I assumed that I looked out of place. I wanted those who lived there, those few who had returned, to know that I had never been through their neighborhood before, not because I didn't care, not because I wanted to pretend it didn't exist, but because I had been afraid. And I wanted to tell them that I was uncomfortable with that. I suppose, in return, I hoped they would tell me that that was okay, that my presence meant something, that they recognized and reciprocated my desire to connect.

I sensed that somehow Carl already knew all of that, not necessarily consciously, or specifically, but intuitively. I don't believe that feeling the need to explain myself as a white, middle-class man, living in a predominantly black and largely poor city, put me in all that unique a position. I imagine this feeling is relatively common and was probably nothing new to Carl. So when Carl talked about his daughters who had married white men and how the white side and the black side of his family came together for funerals, when he talked about his own mixed-race background and that of the young man who had advocated killing white people, and when he talked about the history of racial mixing in the United States, I understood his conversation as an indirect acknowledgment of the fact that he was a black man and I was a white man. And perhaps I'm projecting onto Carl what I wanted to hear, but it also seemed to me that Carl was trying, by talking around the issue itself, to let me know that he recognized this racial division as a social construct, as a reality of the world we share, but not as a fundamental distinction between people. In Carl I perceived both a reciprocation of my desire to connect and a validation of my need to do so. After talking with him, though I mostly listened, for what must have been close to an hour, the need to explain myself felt superfluous.

In the wake of hurricane Katrina and the subsequent evacuations, many thought we had an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild New Orleans from a clean slate. Months had passed without a single murder. Some said that the streets had been "washed clean" by the flood, that

the storm had cleared the city of its “undesirables.” One couldn’t avoid, however, detecting ugly racial undercurrents in such statements. I hoped for a different kind of cleansing, for a more spiritual cleansing. The city might now unite behind a common tragedy. Old boundaries seemed to have crumbled, metaphorically physicalized by the ubiquitous rubble, and as residents slowly returned, we might work together to prevent those boundaries from reemerging. That was what I imagined I was doing by biking through Central City, by visiting the parts of New Orleans from which I had previously felt separated due to racial and class divisions. I thought that the psychological boundaries that reinforced these divisions had allowed crime to thrive in the inner city, had allowed white residents to dismiss the violence as someone else’s problem, a “black problem.” A problem created by “them.” But the problems didn’t exist in a void. Everything was connected. We all create the world in which we live. And, naive though it may have been, clinging to the hope that some good might come from this tragedy, I told myself that by biking through Central City, I could in some small way help make New Orleans whole. I thought that by crossing the psychological boundaries reinforced by the voids in my mental map, by making geographic connections between familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods, I might begin to learn how to penetrate the boundaries that separated me from the people who lived in those neighborhoods.

After he had finished feeding the cats, Carl tossed the crumbs of kibble that remained in the bottom of the bag to a cluster of pigeons that had gathered in the street. He got into his car and took off his hat. His bald head glistened.

“When I first went to work for Carlos Marcello, we’d only spoken on the phone.” Carl smiled up at me. Carlos Marcello had been well known gangster; he headed the New Orleans Mafia for thirty years and died of Alzheimer's in 1993. This was the first reference Carl had

made to a possible affiliation with the mob. I can't remember what Carl said his last name was, but it sounded Italian and began with the letter B. He'd given Marcello his name over the phone, but when Carl actually walked into the room to meet Marcello in person, the gangster hadn't expected to see a black man. "At first he looked surprised," Carl said. "And then he laughed. He called me the Black Italian."

It didn't matter to me whether Carl had really worked for the mob. It seemed plausible enough but beside the point. To me his parting anecdote underscored the point he'd talked around for most of our conversation. Marcello was an outlaw and, as such, likely viewed many of society's conventions with an outsider's perspective, as is probably the case for people of most marginalized communities. I'm sure Carl, a man with black, white, and Indian blood, had his own outsider's take on the world. Because of Carl's surname and the fact that he was, as yet, just a voice on the phone, Marcello had assumed him to be Italian, which in part he may have been. But when Marcello saw Carl, he saw a black man. Marcello's wisdom, as I understood the story, was in his laughter. Startled, at first, to see a black man when he expected an Italian, Marcello immediately grasped the final meaninglessness of the distinction. Whether this is actually true, whether Carlos Marcello, the man, really transcended racial prejudice, also seems beside the point. Marcello, the character in Carl's story, had the wisdom to disregard conventional distinctions about race. Black or Italian, it makes no difference except to the extent that we are willing to recognize one. Marcello and Carl, fellow outsiders, refused. Their mutual refusal, whether fact or legend, was admirable.

The Purpose of The Poet

We'd seen this guy before, my wife Trish and I. The Poet, we called him. We'd met him once in a bar. Trish and I were having a drink, waiting for a table to become available at the small Italian restaurant upstairs, and The Poet had struck up a conversation with us. I can no longer recall the details of our brief exchange, nor can I remember The Poet's actual name, though I'm sure he gave it to us. Our conversation probably lasted about five minutes before a waiter informed us that our table was ready, but in that time, apropos of nothing, the man had identified himself as a poet. Due to this unsolicited revelation, I assumed he must not be a very good poet.

A good poet, I reasoned, a real poet, would have been more circumspect about revealing his status as such, would have at least demonstrated a greater degree of humility than was apparent in The Poet's proud pronouncement of vocation. Now, I'm not suggesting that there's anything shameful in being a poet, quite the opposite in fact. I'm sure that many poets would chafe at the thought of being considered "respectable," and the world is full of dogged utilitarians, or philistines if you prefer, who consider the pursuit of poetry a complete waste of time. Nevertheless, I respect and admire both poetry and poets. But for a man in a bar to inform a stranger, who hadn't asked, that he is a poet struck me as lacking in tact, lacking in the kind of self-awareness that would lead a true poet to consider such a claim unnecessary, even inappropriate. He might as well have told me that he was a prophet. Some might be able to accept such information without question, but it made me instantly suspicious of The Poet's motives and character. I asked myself, why would such a man, for no apparent reason, tell me that he is a poet? Perhaps because he wishes to be perceived as a poet. One way to accomplish this would be to write poetry and allow others to read it. If they liked it, then they would say so-and-so is a poet. If they didn't like it, they would say so-and-so writes poetry, which is not quite the same.

Having not read The Poet's work, I could only guess; but I suspected that he was just a man who wrote poetry. And I suspected that The Poet, in his heart, probably knew this. And there's nothing wrong with that. Writing poetry can be a wonderful thing. But if such a man fancies himself as something more than he is and wants to be recognized as such, without any other evidence to support his claim, he may have to resort to telling people what he is. Some of them may believe it.

Since that night at the bar, Trish and I had begun to notice The Poet here and there around town, usually out drinking and listening to music. Each time we saw him, whoever spotted him first would say to the other, "There's that poet." I even greeted him once, but he didn't seem to remember our brief conversation. No sign of recognition crossed his countenance, and I didn't try to remind him. I let the moment pass.

So in November of 2005 when Trish and I walked up to Tipitina's, a popular nightclub in Uptown New Orleans, to check out what *Gambit Weekly* had billed as "Indian Practice with Monk Boudreaux," I was amused to see a familiar face milling around the front door.

"There's that poet," I said to Trish.

It was a Sunday evening and the city was still struggling with the very first stages of post-Katrina recovery. Most neighborhoods were still dark at night and empty, but tiny islands of light and activity--the Sliver by the River, the Esplanade Ridge--shone faintly in the Gulf of Darkness and Devastation. In those small areas of the city, restaurants and bars were reopening, grocery stores were reopening. Every couple of days, news of a reopening attracted out attention. We clung to this miniscule sense of optimism as though it were the spark, slowly catching, that might keep the city alive. We became dedicated patrons, leisure zealots. We took it as our civic duty to eat at the restaurants, to drink in the bars. Each opening was an event, a little celebration of hope, sustaining the spirit of New Orleans.

Tipitina's announced the Indian Practice as the first in a weekly series of practices on Sunday nights, though I didn't quite know what that meant. I'd never been to an Indian Practice. I wasn't even really sure what a "practice" was, or what it would mean to attend one as a

spectator. Was it even for us, or was it for Indians who wanted to practice? We did get the impression, though, that the event was open to the public, so we decided to check it out, support Monk Boudreaux, Big Chief of the Golden Eagles Mardi Gras Indians, help keep the Indian tradition alive--even if our role in that process still seemed unclear.

Curious about the event, I later looked into it. Traditionally, the Big Chiefs of different tribes would hold Indian Practices on Sunday evenings. During the years of slavery in New Orleans, slave owners recognized Sundays as days off for their slaves. On Sunday evenings in Congo Square, behind the French Quarter, slaves gathered to make music, to sing, to dance. Different rhythms from different African nations mixed and evolved. The Mardi Gras Indians continued this tradition by holding Practices on Sunday evenings. Tribal members, family, friends would come together, usually at someone's house or at a neighborhood bar. They brought tambourines and drums. They gathered around the Big Chief who set the rhythm and selected the chant, established the response to his improvised calls, singing the legends of the tribe passed down and embellished through generations. Other tribes might stop by to pay respect to the Big Chief and join the Practice. But the flood had destroyed many of their homes and haunts, including the house of Big Chief Monk Boudreaux. Indians had been scattered across the country, many as yet unable to return; and the few who were still in New Orleans needed a base from which to keep the culture alive. Tipitina's and Monk Boudreaux had conspired to create that base.

When we arrived, the Practice had not yet begun, so Trish and I took a seat on a metal bench by the side of the club on Napoleon Avenue rather than wait in the crowd milling around the front door. A pudgy man, who looked to be in his forties, emerged from the club's side entrance, the "stage entrance." All business, he cut through the peanut gallery of eager spectators, and gestured to a Japanese duo with a professional-looking digital video camera and tripod and a young woman holding a notebook who had been standing on the street with the gathering crowd.

“Come this way,” he said, with man-in-charge authority. He escorted them away from the riffraff around the front door to the V.I.P. stage entrance and ushered them inside. “You can come in and talk to Monk now.” They disappeared inside and the door closed behind them.

After about fifteen minutes, Tipitina’s opened its doors. At the club’s entrance, the management had stationed a uniformed security guard whose job was to pass a metal detecting wand over the arms, legs, between the legs, up the sides, of anyone who wanted to enter. This was new. I had never seen a guard with a metal detector at the door to Tipitina’s before, and neither had The Poet. This was not the way things were done before the storm.

“I’m not going to be searched to go into Tipitina’s,” The Poet said as he reached the club’s door, loudly enough to be heard by everyone else waiting to get in. His protest held up the line. His defiance began to create a scene. Someone inside the club insisted that the Poet step aside. Others in line moved forward, raising their arms to submit to the search. “No,” cried The Poet. “I’ve been coming here for twenty-five years. I’m not going to be searched.” The Poet turned to face the crowd. “This is the beginning of the bad stuff,” he announced, moving away from the door.

“The *beginning* of the bad stuff?” Trish said to me. “Like the past three months have been great?” We continued to watch from our bench.

The Poet still was crying foul, attempting to engage the people standing in line. Most tried to ignore him, averting their eyes, casting sideways glances, remaining silent, intently indifferent. The pudgy manager, the same one who had admitted the reporter and film crew, stepped out of the club, pulling The Poet away from the line.

“It’s about language,” I heard The Poet say.

The two men stood perhaps twenty feet from where Trish and I sat watching the drama unfold. I could only overhear parts of their conversation.

“What else could I do?” asked the manager. “If something were to happen, if someone were to come in with a gun and start shooting, it would be all over.”

Tipitina's had not yet reopened as a business, as a Live-Music Venue. Indian Practice had been arranged by the Tipitina's Foundation, a nonprofit organization working to assist local musicians after Katrina. The Tipitina's Foundation had promoted the Indian Practice as a cultural event. To help preserve the Mardi Gras Indian culture, Tipitina's would host Practices and open them to the public free of charge. At these events, though, Tipitina's the business, the bar, would sell drinks. From what I could gather from the bits of conversation I overheard, it seemed that the manager felt pressure to be more cautious in order to ensure the foundation's nonprofit status, in particular its insurance policy. If some violence were to erupt in the club, the foundation could lose its status and its insurance and would be forced to shut down.

"What would you do?" the manager asked The Poet. "Try to see it from my side of the situation."

The Poet was having a difficult time articulating his outrage. "I understand your position," he said, "but you need to understand where I'm coming from." But when the manager asked The Poet to explain, The Poet either couldn't or wouldn't do it. "It's a long conversation," he said. "You and I would have to sit down and have a meal together. It's about language," The Poet insisted.

The two men continued to butt heads, neither conceding the other's position. The manager insisted that his hands were tied, that he had no choice, and The Poet kept repeating that it was "about language." Trish and I sat on our bench watching and listening. Soon the manager disengaged and turned to head back into the club.

"I'm going to write about this," The Poet threatened.

"Great," said the manager. "Write about it." He'd had enough.

"I'm going to put it in a poem."

"Do that."

Just as the manager disappeared inside, a man in a light-colored suit, puffing on a cigar, accompanied by a woman in a whipping, floral-print cocktail dress approached The Poet on their

way to the club's door. The Poet, now amped after his confrontation with the manager, accosted them with his grievance.

"That's the kind of guy who gives poets a bad name," I said to Trish, responding to The Poet's embarrassingly inarticulate protest. He seemed like a burnt-out hippy: "It's all about language, man. It's about laa-aanguage." As the late, great J.B. said, "like a dull knife, that just ain't cuttin'," The Poet was "talkin' loud and sayin' nothin'."

Yet, The Poet's reaction, however unpersuasive his appeal, made sense. Tipitina's was a departure for the Indians. Holding a Practice there made this traditionally black, cultural tradition available to a white, middle-class audience in a way that it had not previously been. Much of this new audience that turned out to catch its first glimpse of an Indian Practice would not have ventured into the neighborhood bars where Practices would normally have been held. Trish and I were among this group. By moving to Tipitina's, the Mardi Gras Indians had sacrificed a degree of cultural exclusivity that had been preserved, at least in part, by crime and fear of crime in those neighborhoods where the Indians lived. Though few would argue in defense of crime as a way to preserve culture, as a result of it, outsiders rarely attended Indian Practices. The Practices existed as semiprivate events, belonging to the Mardi Gras Indian community. Tipitina's, as a venue, made the event "safe" for outsiders.

I don't presume to know how the members of the Indian community felt about this sudden change. I would guess that different people felt differently. They hadn't chosen to be flooded out of their homes and neighborhoods. Relocating to Tipitina's and opening their tradition to new communities were decisions born of necessity, for survival. But they also hadn't chosen to be segregated into crime-ridden neighborhoods in the first place. I imagine some of the Indians welcomed the opportunity to hold their practices at Tipitina's and were proud to share their culture with new people. But they probably also felt a little protective of what had once been more exclusively theirs. At least I think I would have felt that way.

It was about language. In a sense the Mardi Gras Indians were guests, friends in need. The Tipitina's Foundation gave the Indians a place to practice, a place to gather and mix with

other communities. But what kind of message does it send when you feel the need to search your guests for weapons to preserve a sense of security for a new, mostly white, middle-class audience? One might--and I suspect The Poet did--interpret that message as: "We're happy to have you, but we don't trust you."

But the manager had a point as well. Crime was not a fairy tale, and gatherings of the Mardi Gras Indians had, as recently as that past spring, to everyone's disappointment, resulted in violence and friction with the police. Before World War II the Indian culture, which emerged sometime during the late nineteenth century, had been far more violent than it gradually became in the years following the war. In the early years, Indians used the Mardi Gras celebration to settle scores with rivals, and death on "the battlefield" was common. Allison "Tootie" Montana, Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Mardi Gras Indians for almost fifty years, is commonly credited with changing Indian culture from one of violence to one of artistic expression. Still, because crime continued to cause problems in the neighborhoods in which Indians lived, they couldn't escape it entirely, even though it was no longer a result of Indian culture itself.

Montana died of a heart attack in June of 2005 moments after presenting a speech at a City Council meeting in defense of Indian culture. The meeting had been convened to review allegations of police misconduct toward Indians during their celebration in the spring. Indians wanted to shed their violent reputation. I'm sure Monk Boudreaux was just as interested in keeping out the "bad element" as the manager was. It was a bitter reality, but a reality all the same. I watched men with tambourines, Indians from different tribes, approach the front door and lift their arms for the metal detector. They didn't seem to mind. They didn't protest as The Poet had. And if they did mind, they kept their cool.

Soon the man in the light-colored suit and the woman in the cocktail dress became weary of The Poet's righteous diatribe and walked away.

"It's about language," The Poet called after them.

"It's about rolling with it," said the man as he sauntered up to the door.

Though I had chafed at the way The Poet had lost his cool, I didn't like the way the man in the suit with the cigar had sauntered. His demeanor reeked of entitlement. If that guy thinks it's about rolling with it, I thought, then it's got to be about something else.

"This is the end of something," The Poet proclaimed, sad and disgusted, before finally walking away.

Now that the altercation had passed, Trish and I decided to enter the club. I wasn't sure what The Poet's protest had accomplished other than making him look like a soft-headed reactionary. He said he was going to write about it, put it in a poem. I hoped he would be more articulate in his writing. But now he was gone. He would miss the Indian Practice. Had he kept his cool, had he responded more gracefully, he could have both written his poem and supported the Indians. That was, after all, why we were there, right? To support the culture? I suppose he felt as though he was supporting them by refusing to be searched. But the Indians were searched. And they kept their cool. Maybe they didn't like it either. Maybe they had become accustomed to this kind of treatment, grown indifferent to regular searches by security guards or the police. They had, after all, grown up in a city where black men were routinely profiled as potential criminals. Just being on the street after dark made them suspect in the eyes of the law. Resisting a police officer's search was futile and usually resulted in routine arrest. After a while, I imagine, one might become conditioned to put up with a degree of harassment even if one didn't like it. They must have recognized the injustice of the search, but perhaps they had learned to keep their cool.

The Poet made himself look ridiculous in front of Tipitina's. I felt embarrassed for him and sensed the same, if not worse, if not some derision, from others, those who looked away, who shook their heads or rolled their eyes, who stepped past The Poet and raised their arms for the metal detector. The Poet had lost his cool and made a big stink. He failed to convince others, failed to reason with the manager; no one seemed to take him seriously. But he made his point. He objected to the search. He thought it was wrong.

Poets have a reputation for being passionate. Sometimes passion overtakes reason; emotion trumps intellect. In a civilized society reasonable behavior, rational behavior, cool behavior is often highly valued. It helps us to get along with each other, helps us work out our differences with the least amount of friction. We tend to frown upon the irrational, the disagreeable, or the uncool. Such dispositions can make life unpleasant. But sometimes “cool” can be a cowardly pose, can help perpetuate an unjust status quo. I kept my cool, succumbed to the search, and observed the Indian Practice. The Poet lost his, looked a fool, and went home angry. But had he not sacrificed his own cool, I don’t think I would have questioned the metal detector to the extent that I did. I might have thought the added security odd, unusual, unnecessary. I might even have thought it racist, but those thoughts probably would have come and gone. The Poet may have lost his cool, but perhaps someone had to. And if not The Poet, then who? On that Sunday in November, no one else stepped up.

On subsequent Sundays, when Trish and I returned to revisit the Indian Practice, we were pleased to note that the management at Tipitina’s had discontinued the security check at the door. The change may or may not have had anything to do with The Poet’s dissent; but, though I may have disliked his style, I do believe that The Poet was right.

“Indian Red”

I didn't want to go to the protest.

A week before at the second-line parade, organized by the Black Men of Labours Social and Pleasure Club, a young activist had handed us a card announcing the time and location of a protest to be held the following week, on December 10th, 2005. According to the card, a grassroots group called the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition, in order to raise awareness and support for their cause, had planned a series of town-meeting-style events to take place at various locations along the Gulf Coast. The group planned to conclude its tour by hosting a protest march at Congo Square in New Orleans. The purpose of the protest was to demand the “right of return” for all displaced residents, with particular emphasis on residents from a part of New Orleans called the Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly poor, black neighborhood. Many of the homes there had been obliterated by a breach in the Industrial Canal levee following hurricane Katrina, a breach that reopened and re-flooded the community during hurricane Rita three weeks later.

Representatives of the federal, state, and city governments, as well as a smattering of New Orleans locals, well-heeled and otherwise, had been making noises about “bulldozing” certain parts of the city--generally low-lying, poor neighborhoods--to create “flood zones” and “green spaces.” Many people who lived in the neighborhoods ripe for bulldozing had been unable--and in the case of the Lower Nine, due to the extent of the devastation, not allowed--to return home to defend their rights as landowners. Their very absence made them particularly vulnerable to the possibility of a governmentally sanctioned rip-off. The term “eminent domain” had been tossed around in public discourse with reference to the Lower Ninth Ward as well as to New Orleans East, a far vaster, also predominantly black, part of the city that flooded, and to which residents also had been largely unable to return. Someone had to stand up for the rights of the poor in exile, and I supported the cause. But a protest? On Saturday? I wasn't so sure.

My wife Trish and I had lived in Austin, Texas during the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. We had attended numerous “protests” held on the lawn in front of the

Texas State Capitol building. These events were always held on Saturdays. I assumed that the organizers had chosen Saturday to maximize attendance, figuring more people were likely to have the day off. Unfortunately, the government officials who worked in the capitol building, to whom I thought we should be directing our protest, also had Saturdays off. Thousands of like-minded, antiwar demonstrators gathered to distribute petitions and literature. Guest speakers stood behind a podium and testified to an already sympathetic audience (occasionally even hectoring their sympathetic audience for not being more actively sympathetic), leading chants of dissent that echoed against the pink stone walls of the capitol building, empty (I imagined) save for a largely Mexican cleaning staff busy polishing the brass railings and dusting the stiff portraits of former governors.

“What’s the point?” I complained with an increasing sense of futility about these seemingly self-congratulatory events. An invasion of Iraq seemed inevitable. I felt marginalized and ineffectual as a participant in a series of protests that amounted to the largest, public antiwar demonstration in U.S. history. The result? President Bush affirmed our right as Americans to express our opinions, while simultaneously dismissing what we had to say. He would do what he wanted to do, and that was that. And so he did.

But our demonstrations in Austin were lame, impotent events. The organizers had applied for and been granted permits by the government, whose actions we claimed to protest, to hold demonstrations on days convenient for said government, and were encouraged to ensure a minimum of civic disruption lest the government decide to reject future applications for permission to protest.

In my first year of college, some fifteen years prior in Chicago, several student groups had organized a protest against a marginal increase in student fees proposed for the following year, a petty cause to be sure. At a designated time, we were all to leave our classes *en masse* and converge on the administration building for chanting and general civil disobedience. As the hour of dissent approached, we raised the issue with our professor, Ric Murphy.

“You’re asking for permission to walk out of my class in protest?” he asked incredulously. Evidently, we had misunderstood the purpose of a protest. Our professor was “the man.” It was to him that we were supposed to “stick it.”

“At least shout, ‘Fuck you, Murphy,’ or something on your way out,” he requested after granting us permission to leave. “Just to make it seem real.”

As we scampered down the hall, giddy with revolutionary zeal, I shouted “Fuck you, Murphy,” just as the man had asked me to do. My fellow classmates laughed at my *faux* outrage. And so it goes.

In Austin, as Bush positioned troops in Iraq for the commencement of his “shock and awe” invasion, we should have shouted in genuine outrage, in the middle of the week, in the middle of the workday, as the Texas state bureaucrats pushed the papers that helped keep the whole horrible machine chugging steadily toward war. We should have walked away from our jobs, forced the whir of commerce to a grinding halt, disrupted the steady flow of traffic, and instigated a maximum of (un)civil disobedience. We should have demanded to be heard or arrested. But that didn’t happen. We were too polite. Didn’t want to alienate “the mainstream.” Hell, a lot of people favored going to war. And no one wanted to risk losing his or her job over it. The economy seemed to worsen by the day. People had bills and mortgages and children to take care of. Some people even liked their jobs, just as we had liked Ric Murphy’s class. And really, we just weren’t angry enough to disregard the relative degrees of comfort to which we had grown accustomed, not outraged enough to put ourselves out. It wasn’t like the invasion would really affect us, right? Not directly. Who’s going to risk jail time for some distant moral ideal? And, gosh, the moral arguments for and against war seemed to get so complicated so quickly. And anyway, the President had made it perfectly clear that our opinion meant nothing to him. So to ease our frightened consciences, we would gather on Saturdays for a few hours, when it was safe and sanctioned, and blow off some steam at an empty building.

When Trish asked whether I wanted to attend the protest on Saturday at Congo Square to stand up for the rights of the poor in New Orleans, I restated my old complaint. “What’s the

point?” I’d lost all faith in protest, by which I mean parading with a permit, corralled by the government, and marginalized by public opinion. This kind of protest seemed to me an utterly ineffective means of influencing anyone.

“What’s the point?” I asked.

“When they write about it in the newspapers and say however many people showed up, at least we’ll know we were two of them,” countered Trish. She’s good like that. The least I could do was to be numbered among those who said, “No.” So we went to the protest. Besides, I was curious to see how a post-flood New Orleans protest differed from the pre-war Austin protests.

“You think they’ll have a band,” I asked as I parked the car across the street from Congo Square just before noon. Trish scoffed. Or at least I thought she had scoffed. She later denied scoffing. “And beer? Do you think they’ll have beer? It is New Orleans.” This time her scoff was unmistakable.

As Trish and I passed beneath the arch at the entrance to Armstrong Park, in which Congo Square is located, we heard the sound of drums puncturing the cool, December air. Two men, two drummers, on a metal bench, one on conga and one on an African jimbe, had already begun to set the protest to rhythm.

“It’s Congo Square, not conga square,” I joked, acting like a real square.

Trish and I stopped and stood, aloof like cats posed in the very center of the large, circular “square” and took in the scene. I felt separated from the activity around me, like an interloper or a spy. I didn’t imagine myself better than everyone else, but insulated from them, acutely self-conscious--detached. From this feline perch I hoped, or at least tried to hope, to transcend my cynical opinion of the efficacy of conventional public protest.

“Definitely more black people,” I observed. The antiwar protests in Austin had been decidedly pale affairs. This observation proved to be more than demographic, just as the protest proved to be about more than housing.

A couple of stone-faced Nation of Islam brothers dressed in dark suits and bow ties stood around like members of the secret service, occasionally shaking hands with and greeting other,

mostly older, men. Several wore kufis, the round, flat-topped Muslim hats that I used to associate with jazz musicians. I spotted the young activist who'd handed us the card at the second line parade. "I want you to meet somebody," he was saying to a tall man carrying a leather business folder. The activist led him toward an old, thin gentleman with a pointed gray beard seated alone on a bench across the square. As they approached, the man rose on weakened knees. He held a cane, wore glasses, a slim three-piece suit and a kufi. He seemed to possess the dignity and poise of a community representative, a religious leader, an elder.

Women and white people also gathered and hobnobbed and passed out political fliers, but the older, black men emanated an aura of importance that captured my attention. I suspected many of these men had played active roles in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s, a graying crowd of heavy hitters whose achievements continue to command respect and admiration, lending the proceedings the revered atmosphere of an old-timers game. Many greeted each other for the first time since the flood, some maybe for the first time in years. It was difficult to tell the difference.

A younger man--baseball cap resting slightly askew on his head, slack jeans unwashed and hanging low--weaved through the crowd conspicuously carrying a twenty-four ounce can of Miller High Life and a lit joint. He stood out in ironic contrast among these sober freedom fighters.

"You don't want to talk to that guy," Trish warned as I watched him.

"Did I say I wanted to talk to him?"

"No," said Trish, "but you'll look at him, and he'll come over here, and he'll start talking to you." In spite of (or perhaps because of) any self-diagnosed sense of aloofness, I tended to attract the attention and conversation of random crazy people I encountered in the street. Now, it's quite possible that this guy wasn't crazy, but I'd have been more cautious than he about courting the attention of the New Orleans Police Department by waving a lit joint around in public.

A sizable contingent of what one of Trish's coworkers at Loyola University referred to as "anarchist youth" maneuvered through the gathering crowd dressed in thrift store rags, each emanating the same scent, a distinct (and, I might add, oddly pleasing) body odor that I assumed must be the result of communal meals and sleeping outdoors. Many, if not all, of these D.I.Y. punk-activists and hippies had bussed into New Orleans from up east and from out west under the auspices of a loosely defined group called Common Ground. They had come to help with the recovery effort, lived in tent communities, and provided free, hot, vegan meals to anyone who was hungry.

A man crossed the square with a tuba--specifically, a Sousaphone--slung over his shoulder.

I nudged Trish. "A tuba." She nodded, smiled. Then I spotted a man carrying a trumpet. Another, a bass drum. It looked as though there would be a band after all. And Trish had scoffed. I recognized the musicians, all members of the Soul Rebels Brass Band. I loved the Soul Rebels.

Everywhere I looked I saw people with digital cameras, film cameras, video cameras, busy capturing the moment, people carrying microphones and digital recording devices, wearing headsets and conducting interviews. The revolution might not be televised, but it would be heavily documented.

A man wearing a kufi, one of the old-timers, a big man with a big beard, dressed in baggy pants and a loose sweat shirt bearing the red, black, and green of African solidarity, took up a microphone and called the assembled to attention. He began by outlining the day's program, and as he ran down the list of scheduled events, our master of ceremonies happened to mention something he called a "libation."

I turned to Trish. "A libation?"

Trish shrugged. "I think that's what he said."

"Maybe we will have drinks." I smiled at the notion and actually scanned the area for a beer truck or some kind of concession stand.

The third definition of “libation,” according to my *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, is, “An alcoholic drink or the act of drinking: used humorously.” I should have instantly nixed this definition as a plausible interpretation of our Muslim-capped m.c.’s use of “libation.” The first definition, “the ritual of pouring out wine or oil upon the ground as a sacrifice to a god,” made far more sense. And were I a church-going man, perhaps I would have been more familiar with that definition. But since I am more of a bar-going man, I thought maybe the organizers had arranged to serve beverages.

The libation, as it transpired, involved the pouring of a clear liquid--water, I thought--from a plastic water bottle onto the gray flagstones of Congo Square. The m.c., assuming the role of a priest, asked us to call out the names of those whose spirits we wished to summon into our presence, to join us on what he called, “this holy ground.” At first no one said anything. Then someone, perhaps the m.c. himself, called out, “Elijah Muhammad,” or some other such luminary. I thought the idea might have been to call out the names of family members or loved ones who had died, perhaps names of those lost in the flood, but that first name seemed to set a standard for the kind of company we intended to draw forth from the spirit world.

“Malcolm X,” somebody said.

“Martin Luther King.”

“Gandhi,” a voice called out, lest our guest list become too Afro-centric.

“Sojourner Truth,” said the m.c., and with each name he sprinkled a few drops from the bottle onto the ground.

“The nameless.” A young woman’s voice emerged, sounding small and distant. “All the people whose names we don’t know.”

I thought about summoning my grandparents, but I didn’t. I didn’t think they’d show. Maybe I should be less cynical.

The event felt less like a protest than like a demonstration. A demonstration of what was at stake. This wasn’t about housing, it was about culture, about community. The people who had lost their homes and their neighborhoods, had lost far more than the roofs over their heads,

more than furniture and family photographs. They'd lost their worlds, their lives. If the government decided not to allow them to rebuild their own homes on their own land, but to raze the remaining structures and turn neighborhoods into green spaces or flood zones, the people who had lived there stood to lose far more than property.

I thought of my car as a crude analogy. I had an '88 Volvo with over 200,000 miles on it. According to *Kelly Blue Book*, it was worth about three hundred dollars. But the car worked fine. It was a little dinged up, but I rarely had to take it to a mechanic, and it got me where I needed to go. If I had lost the car in an accident and been compensated for its "adjusted value," I wouldn't have been able to replace the loss. My car's "value" as a means of transportation exceeded its "worth" in dollars.

Similarly, some nominal, market-value payoff wouldn't come close to covering what the people of the Ninth Ward, for example, stood to lose. Talk of potential "housing solutions," to accommodate those who would be displaced by a decision to turn neighborhoods into green spaces sounded insulting and condescending. The people of New Orleans demanded more than houses. They demanded a voice in the shaping of their future communities. They demanded the right of self-determination, or at the very least, to influence the decisions that would shape their lives, their communities, and their culture. But most of these people, because their homes had been destroyed, because they were poor, and because the government had thus far proven unable to provide alternative housing for them in New Orleans, were nowhere to be seen. Nowhere to be heard. They waited, dispersed throughout the country, physically unable to unify, while others presumed to plan their futures for them.

The m.c. asked us to form a circle and join hands, "In the name of Christ, Allah, Jehovah, Buddha." He rattled off a litany of religious icons to accommodate the potential range of faiths in attendance. I took Trish's hand and looked around for another to grab. Immediately to my right stood one of the stone-cold serious Nation of Islam guys, an imposing figure with his shaved head, squat, solid physique, cell phone ear piece clipped to his ear, wire running down beneath the collar of his black suit. I had the sudden urge to grab his hand even as I considered

the odd juxtaposition: one of Louis Farrakhan's million men holding hands with a guy who looks for a beer truck when someone mentions a libation. Our eyes met, and without hesitation he offered his hand, and so we stood, two men united in prayer on the holy ground of Congo Square.

As the m.c. delivered his words of inspiration, I was distracted by several photographers busy scuttling and crouching inside of our circle, snapping away, capturing the moment. I imagined a photo of me and my man from the Nation of Islam, holding hands on the cover of a political, Muslim newspaper. I assumed an expression of grave seriousness with maybe a tinge of restrained outrage. "That's right," I thought as I glowered at the cameras. "It's me and the Nation of Islam and we are pissed off."

After this opening ceremony, kind of a consecration of the event, a large woman, wrapped in boldly colored African robes stepped forward and, to a steady rhythm set by the two drummers, began to sing a mournful, heavy-hearted rendition of the Mardi Gras Indian song, "Indian Red":

Indians of the nation
The whole wide creation
We won't bow down (we won't bow down)
Not on this ground (this dirty ground)
I love to hear you call my Indian Red.

She sang with reverence, with crisply enunciated resonance, churchier and cleaner than other versions of the song that I'd heard, and still deeply soulful. And as she sang through the verses, true to tradition, her tone became lighter, her steady rhythm began to swing a bit. She brought it home.

Unlike the protests in Austin, this event contained moments of genuine beauty, an immense improvement over what I regarded as the crass, political desperation of the antiwar events. The protest at Congo Square would transcend demonstration and embody the threatened culture itself. It did more than "represent the interests." The event became an expression of the very thing we had come to protect.

On the other side of the square, a Mardi Gras Indian Medicine Man, dressed in robes, had demarcated a circle on the gray stones with a line of white powder and laid flowers around the inside perimeter. A drummer had struck up a deep rhythm. A man with a tambourine slapped and tapped a jumping pitter-pat counter rhythm, as the Medicine Man danced and chanted a song in the call-and-response Indian style. Two young boys sang back the refrain. The Medicine Man flicked drops of scented oil onto the people gathered around his circle. A drop of what smelled like rose water hit me on the forehead. Had I been baptized?

The Soul Rebels' snare and bass drums competed from the opposite side of the park. Sharp blasts from trumpet and trombone cut through the air. The warm, belly bass of the tuba bounced and blared, powerful notes. And soon the band began to march toward the Louis Armstrong arch, out of the park and into the street.

"They're going to second line," I said to Trish, and we left the Medicine Man to fall in behind the band. An older, black man with gray dreads and a scraggly beard marched arm-in-arm with a bespectacled, white woman of about the same age, both broadly smiling. Were they lovers? Friends? They shuffled in time with the second line. "Only in New Orleans can you get a second line at your protest," the man exclaimed, beaming with pride and satisfaction. A thin woman with long, curly, black hair and a hip hat danced as if she were born to do it. She'd pulled up a sign from the median advertising the re-opening of Liberty Bank. "I am coming home! I will rebuild! I am New Orleans!" read the bank's slogan. The woman held the sign above her head, waving it as she shut her eyes and shook a move loose. She said she'd just returned home. She'd been asking people around her to autograph the sign. Trish and I each scribbled our names, happy to return her enthusiasm. We spotted a friend, a musician who had been back and forth since the flood, living in New Orleans and then traveling and playing music in other parts of the country. He'd arrived in town earlier that day from San Francisco.

"This was the first time coming back to New Orleans that I've felt like I didn't want to come back here," he said as we danced up Rampart Street together. The prospect had depressed him. "But this is helping a lot." He grinned, and we all nodded.

“Say, we! We on a roll!” the Soul Rebels chanted. “We on a roll!” we cried. “Say we! We from N.O.!” Clapping now, in time with the rhyme, “We from N.O.!”

And so we marched and danced, friends reunited with friends, amid the rubble and the wreckage of homes and lives, and I experienced a moment of grace, a moment of joyful defiance of fear, sorrow, apprehension, loss. We danced on the crumbling asphalt of our own mortality. A beautiful illusion, from which I became detached not long after the procession turned onto Canal Street.

The day had been chilly and gray all along, but I’d been able to forget about it. As we marched along the main drag of old New Orleans, all the windows on the brick and stone hotels and department stores, which rose high on each side of the street, reflected the opaque dinge of the sky. Scaffolding covered the facades of some of the older buildings. A damp wind blew down the length of Canal. The buildings looked empty, hollowed. Everything around--toppled traffic lights, tattered palms, shredded awnings--appeared to be in a state of desolate disrepair. Three lone workers high up on a scaffold looked tiny as they watched us pass. I felt as though we were parading through a ghost town.

The band took a break, and the m.c., who had been riding in the bed of a pickup truck at the front of the march, took up a bull horn. “I’m back.” Call and response: “You’re back. We’re back. We’re back.”

I turned to look at those marching behind me. Many carried yellow picket signs that had been supplied by an organization called the Troops Out Now Coalition. The black writing on the signs promoted a number of different agendas. “STOP urban removal conspiracy, support the right to return,” read one. “Bush and FEMA guilty of racist genocide,” read another. And there were still others: “Stop Bush blocking Cuban and Venezuelan aid,” “Stop the December 13th execution of Tookie Williams,” “Anti-war movement in solidarity with Katrina survivors,” and “Power to Katrina survivors, evict FEMA.” I wondered how one might interpret a photograph of our protest if it appeared in a newspaper. Based on the signs we carried, no one would really know what we wanted. And some of the signs used language that I thought would unnecessarily

marginalize our cause, words like “genocide” and “conspiracy,” boogey man concepts (even if the charges held some merit) too easily dismissed by many of those who might otherwise sympathize with our message.

The march disbanded at City Hall, and a crowd reformed around the steps in front of the building. City Hall looked just as broken and abandoned as Canal Street had. Someone had set up a podium and the shrill, nasal voice of the first speaker cracked over the P.A. Cynicism and flashbacks to Austin darkened my mood. The white woman at the microphone chastised “white liberals” for not doing enough to support the interests of “poor black people.” A moment later she declared that whites needed to stop interfering in the lives of blacks. “Haven’t we done enough harm?” she wanted to know. She insisted that “we,” wealthy white people, had to give the people of the black community control over their own lives. “Put their lives into their own beautiful, capable, gentle, nurturing hands,” she said, and with that series of adjectives, her shrill screech gave way to a kind of syrupy, lullaby voice. Trish bristled at the woman’s creepy, patronizing tone and feeble-minded contradiction. I’d had enough as well.

As we walked away, we passed the Soul Rebels who had gathered around a table where a few women were distributing pre-cooked hamburgers out of an aluminum catering tin. Though the dry burgers looked unappetizing, the gesture moved me, brought back to me what this event was all about: not the divisiveness of politics, but the unity of community.

It seemed to me beyond dispute that the city, state, and federal governments had failed in their obligation to the people of New Orleans in the days and months following Katrina. Some may defend that failure, make excuses for it, rationalize it, but if the government’s lackluster response had driven home a single point, it was that one cannot rely on the government. From what I’ve observed and experienced, those who most need the government’s attention will likely find themselves, both literally and figuratively, shouting at the walls of empty buildings. The poor get screwed whether they live in Iraq or New Orleans. This is not new, though some people still act surprised when the latest outrage slaps them in the face.

I don't know what to do. Civil protest doesn't seem to work any more and revolution--so seemingly extreme a notion--would lead to more violence and bloodshed and dead poor people. Perhaps we all know this. Perhaps I need to adjust my expectations. Though the intent of the protests I attended was to demand change from the government, perhaps the real result was to unite communities of like-minded people under a common cause, even for a day, communities of people who might support each other when their government fails them. And if that's the case, I'd rather join those dancing in the street than those railing outside the walls. I'd rather listen to a song than a lecture. I'd rather seek solace in the beauty of our common humanity than in the angry camaraderie of impotent protest. And maybe that won't change a damn thing. Long-term political activism may still be the best way to achieve gradual progress, but the demonstration at Congo Square and the second line parade to City Hall put smiles on the faces of many who might not have been smiling otherwise. And that's something we can do, even when no one else seems to be paying attention.

Part Two

Tap

The woman at the next table had been eavesdropping on our conversation throughout the evening and, at times, even took the opportunity to interject a thought or two. She claimed to be the ex-wife of the restaurant's owner. She was dining with some friends, including her ex-husband's new girlfriend, who she thought was great and claimed to be thrilled for both of them. She had apparently already drunk quite a bit of wine by the time we arrived, which loosened her tongue, smudging the edges of her articulation. She seemed to be flirting with my father, but only vaguely. She mentioned several times that her ex-husband owned the restaurant.

My parents, my wife Trish, and I were dining at this woman's ex-husband's French restaurant in Uptown New Orleans, post-Katrina New Orleans, October 2005. My parents live in Mid-City--they made out all right with the storm, some damage, but no flooding in the house--and although there had been a lot of relief and rebuilding activity in their neighborhood during the day, at night everyone left. The neighborhood was deserted, the streets empty, nobody around. It spooked my parents, gave my father a grim feeling about the future of the city. So Trish and I lured them Uptown where there had been minimal flooding and where many restaurants and bars were open and packed with activity, every night, every place that opened, full.

When the waitress brought us our menus, she asked whether we'd care for some water. "Bottled water, or is tap water okay?" she asked. My mother looked at me. She knew my reservations about drinking the tap water. But the way the waitress had asked the question, "Bottled water, or is tap water okay?" seemed to me to imply, somehow, that tap water ought to be just fine, and that to request bottled water wouldn't be too much to ask necessarily, but might be somewhat... cowardly.

"Tap water's fine," said my father, a native and lifelong resident of New Orleans.

My mother, also a native, nodded. "Tap water's fine." And then she looked back to me.

I shrugged. "Tap water."

Trish, not a native, got tap water. We all got glasses of tap water.

At some point during the meal, my mother noted that I hadn't touched my water. I sipped my wine and said nothing. A little while later, gesticulating in support of some point I'd been making, I knocked my glass over, and ice-water poured across the table and into my father's lap. He slid back in his chair. "That's what it's like to take a shower back at the house," he exclaimed. Katrina had destroyed my parents' hot water heater.

"There, you see? I dumped it in his lap so I won't have to drink it," I said to my mother as I sopped the table with a napkin.

"Do you really think it's unsafe?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Even if it's boiled?"

I nodded, shrugged. "It's not so much bacteria that concerns me..."

"It's the carcinogens?" my mother finished my sentence.

"It's the carcinogens." Bacteria might give you a virus, you get the shits, vomit, spend some time in the hospital, sweat it out--no doubt, it would be awful--but, I figure, I'd probably recover. But carcinogens? Those'll kill you.

My mother brushed it off. "Well, it takes a long time for carcinogens to build up in the body before it affects you. I'm probably old enough now that I'll be all right," she joked.

The owner's ex-wife had been listening in. "Yeah, but who drinks the tap water?" she interjected.

"You do," I said, ready with my tap water rhetoric. "Do you go out for coffee?"

"All the time," she said, like, duh, who doesn't go out for coffee?

"That's what coffee is. It's tap water. Iced tea, tap water. All the food's cooked in tap water, washed with tap water, it's in the ice cubes in your cocktail," I said, rattling the ice of an imaginary drink at her. "You can't escape it."

She eyed me suspiciously, stung by my remarks, resentful, as though I'd behaved boorishly. "Are you a member of the scientific community?" she asked, more guarded now.

“No. But I drink the tap water.”

She bounced right back. “Well, I don’t think the scientists would lie to us.” And with that she dismissed my caution with another flip of the head, and shot my father a sultry look from behind her tousled hair.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I didn’t share that woman’s reckless faith in the pure honesty of the scientific community. They might lie to us. Why not? I wasn’t exactly sure what the scientific community at large was saying about the drinking water in New Orleans anyway. I knew what the scientists who work for the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans were saying. They said the tap water was fine. Drink it. But who paid those guys? I saw *The Insider*. I saw *Erin Brokovich*. And maybe they weren’t exactly lying, but they might not exactly have been telling the truth either. The truth has a way of getting lost among words. So post-Katrina, I hadn’t been drinking the tap water. No coffee from coffee shops (barring the very occasional cup), no iced tea at restaurants, no tap water. I hadn’t even been brushing my teeth with it.

But I’d harbored concerns about the water well before Katrina. Many had. I kept bottled water for drinking at home, though I willingly sipped from the tap in the moments when the bottled supply ran out. I told myself that I shouldn’t drink the tap water--a belief instilled in me from my childhood, when my parents first decided to have spring water delivered to our house--but I kept that notion in the back of my mind. To allow my doubt about the water’s safety to have full reign would have been entirely too disruptive, too restricting. So I proceeded with caution, adopting a casual philosophy that allowed drinking tap water in moderation. Permissible indulgence included water at restaurants, coffee and iced tea in restaurants and coffee shops, all food cooked in tap water, all ice made from tap water, and the occasional glass at home, gulped down in instances of irresistible thirst when bottled water would have required a trip to the store. And such self deception worked fine until this past August when, for several weeks before the storm, the tap water had begun to taste and smell like dirt.

“Have you noticed that the tap water tastes and smells like dirt,” I began asking around, looking for some explanation. Some people had noticed, while others, oddly, seemed oblivious. To me, the taste was not subtle. It was not an aftertaste. I could smell it as soon as I raised the glass to my lips. Dirty water.

“You can really smell it when you run the hot water in the shower,” my brother observed. And he was right. The shower water smelled as though it had been pulled straight from a lake. And no one had a good explanation for this. I saw nothing in the newspapers about it. No one was talking about it. It was as though it wasn’t even happening. I’d mention it, and some people would nod, slowly, as if making the connection for the first time. “Now that you mention it, the water does kind of taste like dirt.” Had they just taken this in stride? Had they not questioned the swampy taint in their drinking water?

The only explanation I had heard, from decidedly unofficial sources, suggested that because we hadn’t had much rain that summer, the resulting low level of the Mississippi River, from which we draw our drinking water, led to an increase in the growth of algae, which had seeped into the taps. This explained the dirt taste and smell. Allegedly, the water was still perfectly safe to drink (or at least as safe as it ever was), so nothing to worry about, which kind of made sense, but I didn’t understand how the level of the river altered the purification process. Even if low river means high algae, wouldn’t the various chemicals that the Sewerage and Water Board dumps into the water to neutralize all the other contaminants also eliminate the algae? Perhaps not. I was skeptical, but I had no better explanation.

Still, I refused to drink the dirt water. I couldn’t drink the dirt water. I might have been able to pretend that the regular, odorless tap water of old was safe to drink in measured amounts, but not this stinky dirt water. I could no longer pretend. This made it difficult to dine out, which is one of the things I very much like to do in New Orleans, a city that enjoys an international reputation for its food. There really are only a handful of sensual pleasures that I regularly indulge. By western standards, my lifestyle is far from extravagant, but I do like to eat good food. And when I eat good food, I enjoy it even more when combined with a drink.

I'll usually have wine or beer with dinner, depending on the menu. If I'm drinking wine, I like to be able to rinse my palette and wet my tongue with a glass of cool water. And it would take far too much wine or beer to wash down an entire meal. Drinks in restaurants aren't cheap. I have to be able to alternate my alcohol intake with sips of water to get through a meal on only one or two drinks. In cases when we start spending money, buying bottles of wine and so forth, I probably could wash down the whole meal with wine, but then my mouth begins to dry out. I need the water. I suppose I could order bottled water, but the free-flowing refills available with tap really are essential to the proper enjoyment of fine food (especially spicy, fine food). I don't drink soft-drinks. If I'm not drinking alcohol, I order an iced tea. And though the brewing of the tea disguised the dirt taste, it didn't hide the smell. That damn dirt water was disrupting my entire dining routine.

I placed a call to the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans in search of an official explanation. The city would lose an essential part of its appeal without its restaurants, and that dirt water was making it increasingly difficult for me to enjoy my meals. The receptionist transferred me to a chemist from whom I demanded some answers. Evidently, the algae explanation wasn't all that far off.

"The algae levels don't necessarily increase because the river is low," the chemist explained, "but because later in the summer the water contains less sediment. If you look at the river in the spring and early summer, it looks like chocolate milk. Of course it's brown later in the year too, but not as cloudy. In the spring, run-off from melting snow in the north begins to drain into the river and brings a lot of sediment down with it. The sediment makes the water cloudy, which prevents the sunlight from penetrating very far beneath the river's surface. But later in the summer, after all that sediment and run-off have passed, the river gets lower and clearer. The sun can then shine through the surface, deeper into the water, and that, coupled with the increased temperatures, facilitates the growth of algae."

Okay. I asked the chemist why the purification process fails to neutralize the smell and taste of the algae.

“Well, we could do that,” he said, “but it would be expensive.”

“And since the algae is harmless, there’s no point in spending the extra money to eliminate it?”

“Right.”

“I see,” I said, not quite reassured. The algae, though supposedly safe, still forced me to consider all the other tasteless and odorless contaminants deemed “safe” by those interested in cutting costs. If algae gets through to the taps when the river is clearer, what kind of muck seeps into our drinking water when the river looks like chocolate milk?

*

The native wisdom--and I’m not trying to be oxymoronic--on tap water in New Orleans goes like this: the water’s safe to drink because the Mississippi River is so filthy, so contaminated by industry, that the Sewerage and Water Board works extra hard to make that water extra clean. I’ve heard this explanation over the years from many a heavily accented native. I suppose the thinking behind this assertion follows that if we got our water from a natural aquifer, for example, maybe everyone would assume the water clean to begin with, and so we might not have a very rigorous purification system. And if some poison quietly leaked into our aquifer, some jet fuel or something like that, our purification system might not be beefy enough to take care of it. With the Mississippi, on the other hand, everyone knows it’s poisoned. So the S&WB shocks it with a super dose of chemicals to clean it. Chemicals to clean chemicals. It’s not the duck shit I’m worried about. It’s cancer alley, a hundred-mile stretch of the Mississippi, just upriver from New Orleans, chock full of petroleum refineries and chemical plants.

In the summer of 2005, pre-Katrina, the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans mailed to every household in the city a bit of literature entitled, “A Report on the State of Tap Water in New Orleans: Quality Water 2004.” The opening sentences of this report, printed in a larger font than the rest of the text, read, “New Orleans drinking water meets all federal and state

requirements. There were **no** [double emphasis theirs] violations of drinking water quality regulations during 2004.”

The center spread of this report featured a chart outlining twelve possible contaminants in our drinking water, whether our water meets with the legally permitted levels for each contaminant, the numbers representing the levels of contamination in our water, the numbers representing the highest levels of contamination allowed by law, and goals for decreasing our current levels in the future. Of the contaminants listed, four were chemicals added during the purification process, six were attributed to the natural decaying processes of metals and organic materials, and only two of the contaminants were attributed to industrial waste. One of those two contaminants was fluoride, which is added to the water anyway and supposed to be good for teeth.

Beneath the chart, in a smaller font, there were five footnotes. The first three defined certain technical terms and abbreviations used on the chart. The fourth clarified that n/a means not applicable. And the fifth footnote read as follows: “The State of Louisiana did not require monitoring of our tap water for the following EPA regulated contaminants--Combined Radium, Asbestos, Nitrite, and Dioxin.” If you ask me, that should have been the title of the report.

Now nitrite probably won't kill you. It's bad for babies, however. According to the EPA, an infant “could become seriously ill [from exposure to nitrite] and, if untreated, may die.” So mamas, don't let your babies suck ice cubes from your cocktails. And asbestos, evidently, is not as dangerous in drinking water as it is insulation. All you really have to worry about when drinking asbestos, so says the EPA, is an “increased risk of developing benign intestinal polyps.” They're benign. Forget about it.

Combined radium and dioxin, on the other hand, are carcinogens. The EPA lists “discharge from chemical factories” as a likely source of dioxin in drinking water. The “erosion of natural deposits,” again from the EPA, seems an innocuous enough explanation for the presence of combined radium. Perhaps we don't have to monitor the combined radium content because we have no natural deposits down here at the ass end of the Mississippi. It's a big river

though, passes deeply through a lot of land. But let's say we don't have to worry about combined radium. It's not in the water. We know that chemical factories line the banks of the Mississippi between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. But hey, maybe those factories don't contaminate our drinking water with dangerous levels of dioxin. Maybe they're all clean factories. Maybe they're green factories. Who knows? No one knows because the State of Louisiana does not require the monitoring of dioxin, combined radium, asbestos or nitrite in our drinking water. Why? Because the EPA has granted the state waivers in these four categories.

I read the footnote in question from the Sewerage and Water Board's report to a representative of the central office of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals. He pondered its meaning for a moment. "Seems like kind of a strange statement," he admitted.

"That's what I thought," I said, pleased with his evident concern.

He promised to look into the matter and get back to me the following day, which he did.

Apparently, the EPA does not require monitoring for nitrite by water treatment plants that disinfect tap water with chlorine. Chlorine, they say, effectively eliminates nitrite. So maybe it's okay to share a highball with your baby after all. But, according to the National Program of Cancer Registries, residual chlorine in drinking water, a result of chlorine purification, can lead to incidences of bladder cancer. Not much of a trade-off there, except that, according to the S&WB report, total residual chlorine for the east bank of New Orleans, where I live, ranged between 0.4 and 3.9 with an average measurement of 3.0 (numbers indicate the percentage of positive samples per month). The EPA sets 4.0 as the "highest level allowed." The 3.0 average for New Orleans suggests a greater frequency of readings closer to 3.9 than 0.4, but we still rank below the maximum level permitted by law. So that's safe, right?

There are two reasons why the EPA might exempt a treatment plant from testing for the presence of asbestos: either due to the absence of asbestos piping or because the water is not corrosive enough to deteriorate the piping and release asbestos into the water (i.e., water that contains low copper and lead levels). New Orleans has earned its waiver due to the latter. In fact, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, "New Orleans's reported lead level is

among the lowest of any major city reviewed for [its 2003 report, 'What's on Tap: Grading Drinking Water in U.S. Cities']." Still, the bit about "reported lead levels" as opposed to, say, "verified lead levels," appears to leave a little room for number fudging, but let's not be small about such matters. Remember, potential intestinal polyps would be benign anyway.

The reasons behind the waivers for the monitoring of dioxin and combined radium open the door for a more robust skepticism about tap water quality. In order to merit testing for dioxin, a "difficult and expensive process," said my source from the Department of Health and Hospitals, there would have to be a significant producer of that contaminant upriver of New Orleans.

"What about all those chemical plants?" I asked.

"Yeah, you would think, because of cancer alley and all that, that we'd test for it, but the EPA says it's not necessary." My man at the Department of Health and Hospitals then speculated that the EPA might have allowed the exemption because the factories spew their waste far enough upriver to leave N.O. in the clear. "Due to its rarity and volatility," he said, meaning dioxin's tendency to quickly evaporate, "New Orleans sits far enough down river to avoid risk of contamination." Ditto for combined radium, a naturally occurring source of radioactivity that tends to contaminate water by seeping in through the soil. Soil tests demonstrated that no source of combined radium exists close enough to New Orleans to merit concern. But again, the Mississippi runs long and deep through this country. Contamination may dissipate the farther it travels, but why not check, just to make sure, just to put my mind at ease?

*

So there I was, trying to come to terms with dirt water and dioxin, when Katrina bulldozed into the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans with what the news media popularly referred to as a "toxic soup." Sewage, gasoline, oil, chemical waste, decaying bodies, all seeping into the soil, got pumped into the lake, flushed out across the oyster beds and into the Gulf (threatening access to clean seafood, another assault on my fine-dining lifestyle). Water mains

and sewage lines broke as internal and external pressures shifted, and all that water mixed. The city declared tap water unsafe, dangerous. “Don’t touch it,” officials warned.

Several weeks after the storm, one of my father’s business associates returned to the city to check on his house and business in Jefferson Parish, a lesser-damaged region of suburbs just outside of New Orleans proper. Though officials had designated the water “untouchable,” even in Jefferson Parish, my father’s associate decided to go ahead and shower at his house anyway.

“Did all your skin fall off?” my father asked him over the phone, laughing. Evidently, he answered, “No. But I’ve got a rash on my leg now.” Both laughed, but the associate was not joking.

Also around this time, I heard about a guy named Dr. Lutz. Lutz had apparently assumed the role of medical representative for a community of stragglers who had never left the French Quarter, who had defied the mandatory evacuations before and after the storm, and who vexed authorities while becoming symbols of native perseverance for many concerned about the city’s prognosis. Lutz, scornful of the official hysteria over the tap water, publicly pronounced, in his capacity as a medical professional, that the water was perfectly safe. To prove his point, he walked around drinking glasses of the stuff. Lutz struck me as a bit foolish, gulping down all that water, but what did I know? He was a doctor.

When Trish and I finally returned to New Orleans at the beginning of October, conditions had somewhat improved. The city had placed a “boil-ban” on all tap water. You could drink it or cook with it, if you first boiled it, and the water was said to be safe for bathing straight out of the faucet. Yet, now more skeptical than ever about the quality of what sprang from our tap, Trish and I opted to drink and cook with bottled water and bathe with boiled water. We bathed out of a pot--a “whore’s bath,” Trish called it.

To stay abreast of continuing developments in the city, Trish kept a phone number written on a post-it note, an 887 number for some kind of City of New Orleans emergency information hotline. The line provided daily reports on the progress of various municipal relief efforts, which included info on water quality. Each day Trish called that number, and each day

the message about tap water remained the same: safe if boiled. Then one day, about a week after we'd returned, the message suddenly changed. The new message proclaimed the water unsafe. Don't drink it. Don't cook with it. Don't touch it. A mellow panic ensued.

First, Trish and I stalked around, indignant that the city could make such an announcement after well over a week of assurances that the water was potable. Then, we determined to find some answers. I got on the horn. I put a call through to the state's Office of Emergency Preparedness, or some such entity.

"I have a question about the tap water in Orleans Parish. I had heard that the water is safe for drinking and cooking if boiled first. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right," said the woman on the other end.

"That's what I've heard and what I've read in the newspapers, but this morning I called an emergency information line for the City of New Orleans, and the recording said the water's unsafe, even if you boil it."

"Yes, that's correct," said the woman representing emergency preparedness.

"Well, which is it? Is it safe if boiled or not?"

"Um... you're going to want to talk to someone else about that. Hold on for a minute while I transfer your call." I held on. And then I had the exact same conversation with the guy she transferred me to.

"Well, which is it? Is it safe if boiled or not?"

"You're going to want to talk to the EPA about that," the guy said. "Let me get you their number."

The EPA had no information specific to the quality of New Orleans tap water. All it had were general post-Katrina/Rita tap water advisories, applicable to the entire Gulf Coast region. "For more specific information you should contact your local news media sources," the guy at the EPA recommended.

I explained my concern to the woman who answered the phone at WWL-TV, our local CBS affiliate, and she transferred me to a reporter who covered water. "We haven't heard

anything about that,” he said, regarding the new message on the city’s emergency hotline.

“We’ll definitely look into it, and if that’s the case, we’ll report on it. But in the meantime, let me give you the number for someone at the Sewerage and Water Board. He might be able to address your question more specifically.”

I put a call through to the office of the Water Purification Superintendent of the S&WB of New Orleans. A woman answered the phone: “He’s in a meeting right now,” she said. “If you give me your name and number, he can get back to you later.” I figured there wasn’t much chance of the superintendent calling me back, but he called, about half an hour later.

“I’ve got a memo in my hand, right now, signed by Governor Blanco,” the superintendent said, “that effectively lifts the boil-ban for all of Orleans Parish west of the Industrial Canal. It’ll be in the papers tomorrow.”

“So the water’s safe for bathing?”

“You can do whatever you want with it. The water’s been safe for weeks. They were mainly concerned about e-coli, so we tested it and tested it, and we haven’t found anything. The Governor finally signed off on it this morning.”

“What about chemicals?” I asked.

“No chemicals,” he said. “We never had chemicals.”

“All right. Well...” This assertion sounded absurd to me, but I wasn’t going to argue with the guy. I had no proof. “Thanks for calling me back.”

“Who are you with?” he asked.

“I’m just a citizen.”

“Oh, yeah? I’m ‘naturally N’Awlins’ too,” he said, echoing the tag line of a local TV reporter, Frank Davis, who covers all things native. “How’d you make out with the storm?” he asked, another local tag line, on the lips of everyone you met on the street. And so the Water Purification Superintendent and I chatted about how we made out, and then that was that. I got the scoop. The water was safe. The governor had signed off on it. The next day the papers ran the story. Safe. Or at least as safe as it had been before the storm.

After the boil ban was lifted, the handful of coffee shops and restaurants that had reopened began serving coffee and tea, ice machines dropped coolers full of cubes for cocktails, and waitresses asked me whether tap water would be all right, a question I still couldn't really answer.

If the pre-Katrina presence of carcinogens in the tap water posed as serious a threat as I suspected, the cancer rates in New Orleans ought to reflect the danger, but while cancer *death* rates recorded for Orleans Parish exceeded the national average, cancer *incidence* rates didn't reveal any serious deviation from the national norm. The discrepancy between death and incidence rates might be explained in part by the exceptionally high incidence of lung cancer (a rate of 356 per 100,000 in New Orleans as opposed to the national average of 67.2, recorded from 1998-2002 by the National Program of Cancer Registries), a form of cancer unconnected to drinking water and for which treatment has proven less effective than with other forms of the disease.

Bladder cancer also ranked higher in New Orleans than the national average (72 instances per 100,000 locally, compared to 21 nationally), but the leading causes of bladder cancer are cigarette smoking and occupational exposure to carcinogens. Given the high incidence of lung cancer, it would make sense to attribute the increased incidence of bladder cancer to cigarette smoke rather than residual chlorine in tap water, a chemical used in our water purification process that has also been connected to incidences of bladder cancer.

In November of 2005, Robert Thomas, who holds the Loyola Chair in Environmental Communications at Loyola University in New Orleans, sent a letter to students in an attempt to address any potential post-Katrina environmental concerns they may have had. In the letter, he concedes that the data presented by the EPA can be confusing, "even for a scientist." Thomas attempts to clear-up this confusion by itemizing the ways he intends to apply the available data. When it comes to tap water, Thomas writes, "I am drinking the water from cleared neighborhoods (and allowing my grandchildren to do so, too)." Thomas concludes his letter by stating that "we must rely on the EPA and L.D.E.Q. [Louisiana Department of Environmental

Quality] to give straightforward, understandable answers [to our concerns]. Otherwise, those with no training in evaluating environmental data must make their best guess about what to believe--and risk their futures on that guess.” But what if we can’t rely on the government?

I don’t believe that the federal government is conspiring to poison me or the population of New Orleans, or any other population in the United States. It may be, but I don’t believe it is. Yet, the Bush administration supports only voluntary compliance with federal environmental standards and industrial self-regulation, so I begin to wonder whether any level or department of the federal government exists beyond the influence of industrial interest. I’m similarly skeptical about current state and local governments as well. Government tries to set standards for pollution that strike a balance between the safety of its citizens and the ability of industry to maximize profits. Money, as the song goes, makes the world go around, and when it comes to Big Government and Big Industry, I have a pretty good idea which way that balance tends to tip.

While the numbers that represent the levels of contamination in New Orleans tap water may meet federal standards (at least those the state deigns to actually measure), I remain unconvinced that those numbers indicate the absence of risk. Cancer incidence rates in New Orleans appear consistent with the national average, which seems to suggest less cause for alarm, or at least that there are other places more carcinogenic than here. And is the tap water we drink any more dangerous than the air we breathe? Also, with the continuing depletion of atmospheric ozone, we stand an ever increasing risk of developing cancer from exposure to the sun. It seems as though if one thing doesn’t get us, then something else will. Just as I don’t slather on sun screen every time I step outside--though perhaps I should--I might also forego a similarly absolutist approach to tap water: accept the inevitable and minimize rather than prohibit. Perhaps this attitude sounds depressingly fatalistic. I’m thirty-four years old, not an old man by contemporary measures, but I feel as though my world is pretty well poisoned. The amount of time and money it would take even to begin to reverse the damage we’ve done, not to mention the zero progress we seem to be making on this issue under the Bush Administration, makes me feel as though positive change in my lifetime is unlikely. But if we can rise above our self-

centered sense of time and make an effort to reduce our toxic output significantly, perhaps the earth can begin its slow process of regeneration before we render it untenable for human life, before we pollute ourselves into extinction.

In the meantime, *bon appetit*.

Let It Suck

Our friends Brett and Janine have a large, screened-in back porch. The porch serves as the site for a kind of informal salon, a fucko symposium, to use an adjective of Brett's that denotes a willful disregard for all things serious. These back-porch gatherings of friends and visiting guests have inspired countless moments of impassioned revelation, many of which, conceived in the heady hours of early morning, have been lost with the intoxication that fueled them. Some ideas, though, tend to stick.

Dreaming up clever t-shirt slogans is a popular pastime of back-porch denizens. Sometimes blunt, sometimes obscure, these slogans tend to infuse the pathos or outrage that inspired them with a defiant sense of humor. They broadcast both a message and an underlying sensibility--and, indeed, sometimes the sensibility is the message. Of course, there are underlying commercial ambitions. We tend to conceive these t-shirts as products to be sold, as money makers. The problem is that we are, essentially, idea people. The ideas come easily. Mass producing those ideas and distributing them to the public at large in the form of silk-screened t-shirts, on the other hand, requires far more effort, initiative, capital, planning, organization, business sensibility--areas in which we suffer a common deficiency. But what we lack in these areas, we make up for in our ability to value an idea in and of itself. Talking about the t-shirts can be as satisfying as actually wearing them.

Going into the summer of 2006, Janine wanted to produce a t-shirt that read, simply, "Let It Suck." We live in New Orleans, and it seemed as though everyone in the city was looking forward to the first summer after hurricane Katrina with anxiety. The season would soon be upon us, and the levees and pumps designed to keep water out of the city, protections that were compromised or destroyed the previous summer, were not yet ready to handle another hurricane. Some speculated that even a tropical storm could re-flood the city.

Prior to the catastrophe following Katrina, few in New Orleans took hurricane season seriously. Even many of those who were here for hurricane Betsy in 1965, the last major hurricane to cause serious damage to the city, seemed to have grown somewhat blasé about news

of another storm system in the Gulf. The handful of times over the past several years that residents had mustered enough concern to actually evacuate in significant numbers, the exercise had proven inconvenient and ultimately unnecessary. New Orleans seemed to be shielded by an invisible protective force. We'd been lucky. Almost everyone who evacuated for Katrina believed he or she would be able to return within two or three days.

I'd often wondered what kind of subconscious effect the annual threat of obliteration might have had on the residents of New Orleans, but those I spoke with claimed not to have given the matter any consideration. Their response was like a collective shrug. "No effect," they as much as said. We all knew about the worst-case scenarios. Many of us even felt that it was just a matter of time before the perfect storm, a system that fit the specific criteria necessary to bring about total annihilation, would fill the city with water, resulting in a commonly projected twenty-thousand deaths. How much time we had, though, was up for debate. Some said twenty years, some said fifty. I think I might have been on the eighty-year plan. These speculations were casually based on the rate of coastal erosion and the diminishing distance between the city and the Gulf of Mexico. But no one said it could happen "this summer." Although we all, somewhere in the backs of our minds, believed it would happen, none of us ever thought it could happen tomorrow. We all conceived of it happening in some vague future not close enough to cause immediate concern. And though Katrina was not the worst case scenario (the hurricane missed the city), we all learned how quickly that vague future could become our immediate reality. Now we know it can happen, and as the summer of 2006 approached, we expected, especially by August and September, that our collective sense of potential annihilation would be palpable.

One of my favorite ideas for a T-shirt slogan would have read, "Fuck da Future," with the letter C facing backward, maybe dropping the E at the end. The font would convey a kind of techno-cyrillic impression, simultaneously evoking the future and extinction, a nihilistic sentiment from the future ruins of a totalitarian past. And that was kind of how I felt, getting

drunk on Brett and Janine's back porch in the moldering ruins of New Orleans: fuck da future. Let it suck.

We were ready for anything. At least we told ourselves we were, but no one really knew what to expect. We anticipated several evacuations in the 2006 hurricane season. Early in the summer, speculation about how many evacuations we would suffer became a popular subject of conversation. Some guessed two, some guessed three. We all believed that the city and state governments would call for an evacuation in response to even the slightest tropical disturbance heading our way. Some set limitations on their willingness to comply: "I'm not leaving for anything less than a category three." I gave the government one good evacuation. "They've got one chance to get everybody out of this city," I said. "So they'd better use it wisely." If the government got evacuation crazy, I reasoned, people would stop listening. In a way it seemed as though the threat of a series of potentially unnecessary evacuations caused more concern than the possibility of another storm. Of course, that wasn't so. All that talk was merely a symptom of a much greater anxiety.

But we said, "Let it suck." Summers in New Orleans were difficult even before the city had become a partial wasteland. As the months drag by, the heat and humidity begin to wear on you. By the sticky days of August, you can begin to lose sight of the end, lose touch with what it felt like to be cool outside. The season continues through September, and even into October, when the weather begins to tease you with moments of fall, glimpses of relief, interspersed with inevitable reversions back to the seemingly unshakable summer heat. A friend once described the tactile and aromatic sensation of walking through the French Quarter in the summer as stepping into an atmosphere of hot, dog breath. Of course this description is less accurate to the complexities of the French Quarter's unique stench, but I think it does begin to describe the texture of the season as it bears down upon the city. The murder rate rises, productivity declines, and a kind of lethargy can set in, seeming to cling to one's flesh like the sweat that won't evaporate.

But this year we expected worse. Katrina's winds had torn the city's lush canopy of live oaks threadbare. Without the slight but welcome relief provided by their shade, the sun would beat down on us unmercifully. Piles of debris from gutted homes still littered the streets, attracting flies in increasing numbers as the season grew warmer, and we anticipated that the stink wafting from those piles would only intensify in the summer heat. Mosquitoes would swarm unchecked since the city government announced that it lacked the resources to rain down poison, as it had in the past, upon the breeding grounds: the puddles, swamps, and lagoons, and now the standing water around catch basins clogged with litter and debris, regularly replenished by afternoon thunderstorms. Random fires had begun to burn down buildings as the result of careless squatters or leaking gas lines, and we expected this trend to continue, perhaps even escalate. With the threat of all this and the possibility of another storm that could wipe out what remained of our struggling city, we braced ourselves for a summer of Biblical plague. Let it suck.

As it turned out, though, the summer didn't suck in the ways we thought it might. We had flies, but their numbers never became alarming. We had mosquitoes--some even claimed to have identified a new breed of mosquito--but again, their overall presence seemed average for the season. Though the garbage stank as it does every summer, the smell of the debris tended to remain relatively innocuous. The resilient oaks sprouted fresh leaves, and the city didn't burn to the ground. And most importantly, we made it to the fall without a single hurricane entering the Gulf and without having to endure a single evacuation. To be sure, the combination of summer in New Orleans and lingering post-Katrina devastation made for a difficult season, but the season didn't seem to intensify the effect of the blighted landscape. It just added another element to our ongoing struggle. We had prepared ourselves for some kind of sublime alchemy of misery, but instead we got post-Katrina conditions plus summer, which was tough enough.

I hesitate to designate that summer as a season of depression, since the depressive tendencies of post-Katrina life had been well documented before that summer and have continued to affect the population since, but to me it felt that way. Others have echoed this

assessment of the Summer of Suck. Rather than battling Biblical plague, by August I had fallen into a state of *ennui*. I remained unemployed all summer, waiting to resume my graduate teaching assistantship at the University of New Orleans in the fall. Driven indoors by the heat, I spent my days lying on the couch alternately reading and napping. I felt sluggish, stagnated.

At night we drank. Everyone I knew admitted to having increased their alcohol intake during the weeks or months of evacuation following the storm. Most also believed that, while they may have slacked off some since, they still drank substantially more than they did before Katrina. I say they *believed* this because many also admitted to having trouble actually recalling their pre-K drinking patterns. Acclimation to the acutely changed, post-K landscape and lifestyle seemed to have obscured our recollection of aspects of our former lives. Still, we all assumed that we were drinking more heavily, even if we couldn't be sure how much more.

I also experienced a similar inability to pin down the potential psychological effect my environment had on me. Newspaper articles reported significant increases in diagnoses of depression and antidepressant prescriptions for New Orleanians. Reports of suicide also made regular appearances in the local press. I knew that that this environment must have been affecting me in some way, but I had no sense of perspective, no distance, no objective point of comparison.

If I were to pick a single event that for me epitomized the application of the let-it-suck ethos to the summer-in-New-Orleans-post-Katrina double whammy, I think I would single out an event billed, promisingly enough, as The Beach Party. This party had not been designed as a product of the let-it-suck mentality. It had been conceived quite independently of that particular frame of reference. In fact, I believe, The Beach Party's organizers sincerely intended to create a festive oasis for their guests: in the middle of the summer, in the middle of the ruin, a beach getaway literally in their own backyard.

Cal, the host of this party, rented an apartment that shared a common backyard with several other houses on the block, and those who lived there referred to this connected space as the compound. In Cal's words, theirs was an "organic community." An amateur horticulturist,

Cal had cultivated a relatively large, organic garden in this communal backyard, and all the residents of the compound shared in the responsibilities of its maintenance and the rewards of its harvest.

On the evening of the Beach Party, I had fallen into a foul mood. My wife Trish and I had planned to grab a quick and inexpensive bite to eat before heading over to the party, a seemingly simple plan, which proved far more difficult than we had expected. First, we couldn't decide where to go. This was not uncommon. Either one or both of us had lost our appetites for the fare served at many of our usual cheap dining options. As we ran down the list, we instantly eighty-sixed many of the most convenient restaurants. We couldn't bring ourselves to compromise our limited budget for such unappetizing prospects. The one place we both agreed we might enjoy had closed for two weeks, typical of restaurants in New Orleans during July and August. With the season at its slowest, many chose to close their doors for a couple of weeks to give staffs a break and make renovations or improvements. In addition to the regular seasonal closings, many restaurants that had flooded had still not reopened, further narrowing our range of choices. We might have cooked our own meal, but our cupboard and refrigerator lacked provisions, and we felt too lazy to walk to the store, buy food, walk home, cook it, eat it, and then go to this party.

Finally, we remembered a southern cooking restaurant we'd been to a few times and enjoyed; but when we got there, we discovered that the entrees weren't as reasonably priced as they had been. It seemed as though the only menu items under ten dollars were two different chicken-liver dinners, and I didn't want chicken livers. By that point I didn't want anything. I focused all the frustration and anxiety of life in New Orleans in 2006 on my seeming inability to find something to eat.

I launched into a rant about how, since Katrina, everything in the city had become more expensive, while the quality of life had suffered a significant decline. We were paying big-city prices to live in a dysfunctional wasteland. Of course, New Orleans had always been somewhat dysfunctional, but it had charm. And part of that charm had been its affordability. Many found

themselves no longer able to afford to live in the city, which seemed insane when you looked at what one had to sacrifice to be here. The advantages were beginning to seem as sparse as our cupboard, and still the costs rose. Trish ordered a couple of side dishes, and I skipped dinner altogether and drank beer.

The compound, host site of The Beach Party, was in Mid-City, in one of the many neighborhoods that had flooded and now hung in an almost suspended state of recovery. Located a block from the once beautiful but lately neglected and overgrown banks of Bayou Saint John, Cal's house had been gutted and renovated; but many of the houses in the area remained empty, still awaiting renovation. Some had yet to be gutted. The owners of the house across the street from Cal's had gutted and raised it, a precaution against future floods, but at some point the process had stalled. Perhaps the owners were waiting for hurricane season to pass before continuing, or perhaps they had begun their project anticipating the receipt of certain funds that had not materialized. They had placed an enormous dumpster on the sidewalk in front of the house for gutted materials, but since work had stopped, (and because garbage collection in recovering neighborhoods could sometimes be unreliable or even nonexistent) the abandoned dumpster had become a public trash bin, stinking of garbage, and home to a growing population of rats.

The L-shaped yard of the compound extended back from Cal's house and the house next door for the length of about two city lots, then angled ninety degrees to the right for the shorter width of about two more lots. The longer section of the yard, in which the rows of Cal's organic garden once flourished, now contained the withered remains of that garden, silhouettes of leafless twigs and dried stems barely visible in the relative darkness of the muggy, August night. Sand, imported for the party, covered about half of the shorter section of the yard, which was otherwise more dirt than grass and more well lit than the garden area. But it wasn't beach sand, not the fine, white, squeaky sand of the Florida Gulf Coast. It was river sand, brown and silty and full of sand fleas. The hosts had scattered around several beach chairs and a few kiddie pools. The pools ranged in size from a plastic tub only large enough for dipping feet, to a

shallow, inflatable pool that must have been close to ten feet in diameter. The murky, lukewarm water in the big pool looked unsanitary.

Guests dressed in beach garb sat around the yard, some waded in the pools. Maybe a hundred people--hipsters, artists, professionals--had responded to the open invitation. The party was in full swing as Trish and I arrived. Cal's band, Whiskey Butt, played amateurish, sixties-era surf music from a makeshift stage on the back porch of a gutted house. The back wall of the house had been torn down or had fallen down, and a portion of the roof was missing. One could look past the band straight into the gutted darkness of what had once been someone's home. Whoever had designed this stage had arranged a string of multicolored Christmas lights into a proscenium arch, which lent the porch of this otherwise grim-looking shell a surprising touch of elegance. We spotted our friends. Janine stood beside a long, folding table that served as a beach-side bar.

"There's Trish, that bitch," Janine shouted as we approached. "Nobody give Trish a drink." Of course, Janine was joking and soon made Trish a drink, but the faux harshness of her humor fit right in with the grim decadence of the party and the general atmosphere of the city at the time. It was also very Janine, and Janine had a grudge. Trish had lately won a series of impromptu competitions we had devised to entertain ourselves over cocktails during the preceding weeks. We held a spelling bee, taking turns selecting words from a dictionary; a fashion competition, for which the men had to judge the complementary dynamic between the outfit each woman assembled and the cover art on different record albums each carried to accessorize her outfit; as well as a challenge of dexterity to see who could successfully place a magnolia flower into our friend Gianna's cleavage using only her toes. Trish was three for three, and Janine wanted a shot at the title.

By around midnight Janine was drunk and ready to get something started. In fact, it seemed as though everyone was drunk. Very drunk. As a woman in a black cocktail dress picked an unsteady path through the sand in shoes unfit for a beach, I overheard her remark to her friend, "This is a drunken party. I hope everyone gets home safely." For someone to single

out a particular party in New Orleans, a city known for its heavy drinking, as a “drunken” party, the level of alcohol consumption must have been downright shocking. I scanned the scene to confirm her observation and saw people staggering around the yard and passed out in beach chairs. I was staggering a little myself.

Our friend Jonathan had, some time earlier, stripped down to a pair of white briefs and a singlet, the kind of undershirt more vulgarly known as a wife beater. He had been in an out of the pools all evening and his wet underwear had become semitransparent. The image of him running around, laughing wildly in this state of undress, lent the event a kind of lewd bravado. Let it suck.

Alan, another friend, was bartending. Relatively early in the evening, beer had become scarce, while several varieties of cocktail and white wine remained available. Over the course of the party, the surface of the bar had become sticky with margarita mix, fruit juice, cheap wine, and the pulp from cut fruit. By midnight, the margarita mix was running low, but Alan had concocted a drink he called the Alan Special. From what I could tell, the drink contained ice, coconut milk, grapefruit juice, and a liquor called Guatemalan Everclear, some kind of grain alcohol. Alan offered me one, but I declined. I didn’t want to start drinking grain alcohol, though I did have a sip of Brett’s just to sample the cocktail, and it was refreshing.

At some point, Janine pushed past a group of us who were standing around talking and confronted Gianna.

“Butt debate!” Janine demanded. “Butt debate!”

“This butt does not debate.” Gianna lifted her chin and cast her heavy-lidded gaze away from Janine’s attempt at intimidation.

“No!” Janine insisted. “Butt debate!”

Gianna sat down in a beach chair. I didn’t know what a butt debate was, but Gianna seemed to have successfully deflected Janine’s challenge.

A moment later, as I was talking to someone or listening to someone talk, I sensed a disturbance behind me, some kind of commotion, and heard shouting. As I turned to look, the

people around me moved to make way for Trish, who came crashing into the wet, river sand at my feet with Janine almost sitting on top of her. At first I was alarmed, but Trish was laughing, so I assumed everything was all right, some kind of drunken accident I supposed. As I soon learned, this had been the first round of butt debate.

A butt debate, as it turned out, bore some similarity to sumo wrestling, and struck me as the crowning expression of the Let It Suck ethos. Two contestants face off in the center of a circle, butt to butt. Someone gives the signal to start, and each contestant attempts to butt the other out of the ring. When Janine challenged Trish and explained the basic rules, Trish knew she didn't stand a chance. She's a small woman, and Janine is far more powerful. But Trish knew the score. This was Janine's event, and Trish was going down. It might as well have been fixed. Because this was Trish's first butt debate, though, she didn't fully comprehend the various techniques at her disposal, such as how much back and thigh one could throw into the actual butting. She would have lost anyway; she was clearly outclassed. But she might not have lost so quickly and so spectacularly had she a better understanding of the physical leverage one could use. Nevertheless, her winning streak had ended. And so began the evening's main event.

After vanquishing Trish, Janine took on Gianna and then Val, Jonathan's girlfriend. The goal seemed to be not simply to butt one's opponents out of a circle, but to butt them into the sand, to knock them to the ground with one good thrust of the ass. Jonathan got up there, still laughing mad in his underwear and went butt to butt against Janine. Men debated men; women debated women; women debated men. Some pushed with their butts, pressing against their opponents, trying to force them toward and then into the pool; some thrust their butts back in aggressive flurries of short jabs, like some kind of hostile mating dance. People gathered around the butt debates, cheering and taunting, shouting and jeering as though at a horse race, as though at a cock fight. "Knock her into the pool," Brett shouted as the debate moved closer to the edge of the water, as though he had money on it. "Knock her into the pool." The butt debates gloried in the dirty sand, the sticky cocktails, the crumbling homes, the dead gardens, the foul moods, and the drunken souls that littered our wasted city. Let it suck.

After a while, as the fever subsided, people collapsed into beach chairs, too drunk and exhausted to remain standing. Trish's crotch, which had not been doused with insect repellent, had been eaten up by sand fleas. The last image I remember from that party, before Trish and I left, was of Jonathan kneeling in the murky water of the large pool, grinning in his singlet and briefs, spinning Val on an inflatable raft. She lay on her back in her beach bikini with her arms across her chest, laughing and spinning. Around and around Jonathan spun the raft, and she laughed and laughed.

"Jonathan stop," someone called out from a beach chair. "Val's going to throw up."

Jonathan said nothing but kept grinning and spinning Val, around and around, and Val kept laughing.

"Jonathan, Val's going to throw up," the person repeated.

"She wants to throw up," shouted someone from somewhere else in the yard.

And Jonathan just kept grinning, and Val kept spinning, as the rest of us were watching, and something in the pool was quacking like a duck, either the raft or the pool itself or some invisible toy, quacking and spinning and grinning and laughing. Let it suck. Let it suck.

Eight-Percenting Us to Death

At some point in the first few months of 2000, my girlfriend Trish and I moved to a new apartment in Jersey City, New Jersey. As is almost always the case when one moves into a new apartment, we had to contact our telephone service provider, Bell Atlantic, so that they could do whatever they do to turn on our phone. It wasn't a matter of simply flipping a switch on their end; someone had to come out to our apartment to perform some task on our end, and one of us had to be home in order to facilitate this operation. The phone company allowed us to select a day that would be most convenient, provided the day we selected fit into their schedule as well, which was eight to six, Monday through Friday. As it happened, Trish and I also worked during the day, Monday through Friday; so in order to have our phone turned on, one of us would have to take a day off from work. I volunteered.

Normally, I would have been perfectly happy for an excuse to take a day off. There are those who loathe taking time away from their desks, who force themselves to work, even through illness, thoughtlessly exposing coworkers to their contagion, out of some obsessive sense of responsibility to "the work." I did not fall into this category. I had no immediate deadlines; the work would be there when I returned. Still, I was paid by the hour, so time off did come at a certain price. And waiting in our apartment for people from the phone company to arrive was unlikely to be a very fulfilling vacation day.

We selected a day. Because we had no phone service or cell phones, arrangements could not be made from home. Our Bell Atlantic representative informed us that someone would arrive either between eight in the morning and one in the afternoon, or between one and six. The representative couldn't tell us which it would be, the first five hours of the day or the last five. This was a new twist. In my experience, a customer was usually allowed to select a window of time, wide though it may have been, in which he might reasonably expect someone to show up and perform a service installation, for which we would be charged approximately eighty dollars on our first bill.

“You can’t tell us whether they’ll show up in the first or second half of the day?” Trish asked.

“You can call us on the day you’re scheduled, and we can radio the truck to find out where they are on the list and maybe give you an approximate idea of when they might show up.”

Now, this may sound reasonable, but keep in mind, *we had no phone service*. My only option would have been to walk several blocks to the nearest pay phone to check on their progress, and I would have been willing to bet the day’s salary I stood to lose that the workers would arrive and leave in the fifteen minutes I was away from the apartment making the call.

So I waited. All day. And no one showed up. In the end it took three days before someone finally arrived to turn on our phone. As I recall, I lost approximately three hundred dollars in wages, not to mention the eighty we paid Bell Atlantic for the pleasure of doing business with them. Such are the pitfalls of dealing with a company that has a virtual monopoly on providing a service integral to modern life.

I say “virtual monopoly” because I remember a friend telling me that he had tried to purchase phone service through a much smaller business that had been attempting to compete with the Bell Atlantic behemoth. Unfortunately, the company was so small it had to outsource its field service to Bell Atlantic, the only provider with a fleet of trucks large enough to actually accomplish the job. If it took three days to get service as a legitimate Bell Atlantic customer, how long would it have taken as customer of “the competition?” I can’t imagine Bell Atlantic rushing to assist the customers of another company even if it were under contract to do so. After all, who else could the smaller company hire to do the job? Like us, they had to take it or leave it. Bell Atlantic had cornered the market on telephone service, and because of their virtual monopoly, they could charge customers for lousy service, and we couldn’t do a damned thing about it. We either had to put up with it and pay, or live without phone service. So we paid, and I raged against the unfairness.

It's now October of 2006, Trish is my wife, we live in New Orleans, and I find myself once again raging against the unfairness of a corporate monopoly, this time that of Entergy New Orleans, which provides the residents of Orleans Parish with electricity and natural gas. Unlike Bell Atlantic, Entergy New Orleans has an actual monopoly. There is no other company, small or large, through which we can purchase power. Entergy owns the city's power infrastructure--its distribution system and two local power plants--as well as contracts with other power plants able to supply the city with affordable energy. Either we buy Entergy's product or we live in the dark with no refrigeration, no stove, no oven, no heat, no air conditioning, no hot water, and, for that matter--since the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board is one of Entergy's largest customers--no clean water and no sewerage treatment. Businesses, hospitals, grocery stores, and gas stations are all completely dependent on Entergy. In short, without Entergy, we might as well be living in the Dark Ages. And Entergy knows this.

How is it, you might ask, that Entergy New Orleans is able to dodge the restrictions imposed by antitrust legislation and maintain an energy monopoly? Entergy New Orleans is what's known as a regulated monopoly, which means that executives at Entergy can't charge customers whatever they want--they can't "maximize their profit." A regulated monopoly is subject to oversight by a regulating body, and in the case of Entergy New Orleans, the New Orleans City Council has the power to authorize or restrict rate increases. This oversight is supposed to protect the public from paying unfair rates for a product they have essentially no choice but to buy.

Following hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of the city at the end of August 2005, Entergy New Orleans filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Though the company continued to supply the city with power and, according to New Orleans's only daily newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, "its assets exceed[ed] its liabilities," Entergy claimed that it did not have enough money to keep the system operating. Katrina had torn down power lines, destroyed transformers, and flooded the city with salt water, which corroded gas pipes beneath the ground, all of which required repair. The company requested \$718 million in federal aid to help pay for

the storm-damaged infrastructure and to cover the loss of revenue brought about by the evacuation of the city, the loss of power following the storm, and a returning customer base that had dropped to about forty percent of its pre-storm number.

A federal bailout of a publicly regulated, private utility company is not unprecedented. Following the disaster of September 11, 2001, Congress passed the succinctly titled “Supplemental Appropriation Act for Further Recovery from and Response to Terrorist Attacks on the United States,” which appropriated \$783 million in community development block grants (CDBGs), a portion of which went to ConEdison to help restore damaged utility infrastructure. Curt L. Hebert, executive vice president of external affairs for Entergy Corp., of which Entergy New Orleans is a subsidiary corporation, cited this precedent in support of Entergy’s position that the best way to ensure the future of Entergy New Orleans and the provision of affordable energy to the businesses and citizens of the city was for the federal government, which is to say taxpayers, to cough up \$718 million to help get the company back on its feet.

Some might find Entergy Corp.’s request for a taxpayer bailout of its smallest subsidiary company an inappropriate demand given its robust financial standing overall. In 2004 Entergy Corp. declared \$909 million in earnings. In 2005, Entergy Corp. took in \$10 billion in revenue; owned \$29 billion in collective assets; and, according to the nonprofit, online corporate watchdog, CorpWatch, at the end of 2005, CEO J. Wayne Leonard received a \$1.1 million bonus. Between April and June of 2006, according to the *Times-Picayune*, “Entergy Corp. reported earning \$282 million... on revenue of \$2.63 billion.” But because Entergy Corp. functions as a holding company in a limited liability partnership with Entergy New Orleans, it is not legally liable for the losses suffered by Entergy New Orleans.

The corporation is structured in such a way that, while Entergy Corp. collects profits from Entergy New Orleans, paid by the citizens of New Orleans, when business is good, it has absolutely no legal responsibility to Entergy New Orleans, and by extension to the citizens of New Orleans, when business is bad. According to the *Times-Picayune*, “Entergy Corp. has steadfastly argued that turning to its shareholders for money for Entergy New Orleans is not an

option. Ratepayers, not shareholders, bear the burden of repairing the system because the company is restricted in how much it can earn.” In other words because the New Orleans City Council can restrict the rate Entergy New Orleans can charge for its product, Entergy reasons that the responsibility should fall upon its customers to ensure that power continues to flow into the city when the business falters. Because Entergy is willing to accept a limited rate of return, it benefits from a limited risk.

It seems to me, however, that Entergy N.O. is more than compensated for its limited rate of return by being allowed to maintain a monopoly on power. Entergy N.O. does not exist in the free market; it has no competitor to which customers can turn for a better deal and, thus, doesn't have to keep its prices competitive to stay in business. And its product, if one wishes to live in a modern city, is not optional. So regulation, artificial though that may seem to champions of the free market, is necessary. Still, Entergy Corp. feels entitled to the additional benefit of protection from liability, and by law it has that protection. It, therefore, has no legal obligation to invest its own money in saving Entergy New Orleans and evidently recognizes no ethical obligation.

So Entergy Corp. sees no point in investing its money in Entergy New Orleans without realizing an acceptable rate of return on its investment. After all, Entergy Corp. has the interests of its shareholders to consider. It can't be expected to dish out money if it isn't legally required to do so. Shareholders might sue. If business is going to be bad in New Orleans, Entergy Corp. wants no part of it. If taxpayers or ratepayers aren't willing to step in and carry Entergy New Orleans out of bankruptcy and toward regained profitability, Entergy Corp. evidently sees no benefit in sustaining Entergy New Orleans. Of course, it would be happy, and legally entitled, to step in and collect profits if the public comes up with enough money to keep its business afloat. Other businesses in the city aren't receiving public subsidies to cover their damages and get them through this rough period. Loans are available at decreased interest rates, and of course private businesses have the right to raise prices as high as they like on products and services in order to cover the costs of continuing to do business in a depressed and struggling economy. And

customers have the right to stop patronizing such businesses if they feel the prices have become unreasonable or unaffordable. In some cases businesses have had to close, which is unfortunate, but in the free market another business can and probably will step in to fill the void. Entergy, however, is the only company in a position to supply New Orleans with electricity and gas.

Yet, if Entergy Corp. wanted to operate free of any ethical responsibility to sustain its business through a bad market, it should have reconsidered its decision to run an energy monopoly. Any company that enjoys exclusive rights to provide a city with a resource necessary to that city's ability to function, thereby enjoying the exclusive patronage of a guaranteed customer base, has an ethical responsibility to the people of that city. In Entergy's case, it has an ethical responsibility to do what it can to provide New Orleans with power. The city and many of its citizens are struggling economically, and there is no reason Entergy should be insulated from that struggle. It may be that the company would have to endure a slight decrease in profit while New Orleans attempts to rebuild, but again, that's a price an energy monopoly ought to be prepared to pay. If Entergy wants to profit when times are good, it should be prepared to cover its subsidiary company when business is bad. Of course I understand that Entergy Corp. has no legal obligation to do so, and it seems that adhering to the letter of that law and turning a profit for its shareholders are the only ethical obligations the corporation is willing to accept. So no matter how solvent Entergy Corp. is, its executives and shareholders evidently have no reservations about holding ratepayers, its customers, for ransom from the federal government, demanding taxpayer money to bail out their bankrupt business. And legally, they can get away with it.

Throughout the summer of 2006, Entergy Corp. and Entergy New Orleans threatened the citizens of New Orleans with a 140 percent increase in energy rates if the federal government didn't come up with the requested \$718 million to get Entergy New Orleans out of bankruptcy. Because the lawyers and executives at Entergy Corp. knew damn well that no one could force them to give up a dime in support of their subsidiary, they decided to put a metaphoric gun to the head of its customers and threatened to blow them away with an unaffordable rate increase if the

Bush Administration refused to subsidize Entergy New Orleans. In response, the Bush Administration, demonstrating a comparable capacity for hard-line business ruthlessness, called Entergy Corp.'s bluff, basically saying, "Screw you. Shoot 'em." The Bush Administration refused to give in to Entergy Corp.'s demands, taking the position that Entergy itself should pay for the losses of its subsidiary, not taxpayers. One shouldn't, however, overlook the administration's political self-interest with regard to its taxpaying constituency and the upcoming Congressional elections. It would not have reflected well upon the Republican party if citizens in Ohio, for example, knew that President Bush had used their tax money to support a private company in Louisiana.

So there we were, the citizens of New Orleans, pawns in the game, being offered a choice between a 140 percent rate increase or a blackout. Of course, a blackout seemed unlikely, but that was the leverage Entergy New Orleans had against the City Council when it presented its rate increase proposal in July of 2005. In that proposal Entergy outlined a plan that included a 25 percent rate increase, but only if the federal government came through with the requested \$718 million. When the federal government refused to play ball, Entergy continued to threaten customers with the dreaded 140 until October, when the Louisiana Recovery Authority voted to appropriate \$200 million dollars of CDBG money, given to Louisiana by the Federal Government, for Entergy New Orleans to repair and rebuild damaged infrastructure. According to consultants hired by the LRA, this money should decrease the need for rate increases to no more than nine percent. According to Entergy, however, unless it received an additional \$592 million in federal money (oddly, increasing their original request of \$718 to \$792 million, according to the *Times-Picayune*) it would be forced to increase energy rates by 120 percent.

The above sketches an overview of some of the numbers thrown around by Entergy New Orleans in its simultaneous attempts to raise energy rates as high as it could and to bag as much federal money as possible. Entergy also wanted additional fixed fees added to ratepayers' bills to recover "storm costs" and to develop a "storm reserve account," which would insure Entergy New Orleans in case a similar disaster, whether man-made or natural, were to befall the city

during Entergy's reign. That way the residents, captive customers all, will have paid in advance for the company's potential damage.

In newspaper articles covering the story, numbers crowded the text. The *Times-Picayune* explained the situation in real dollar value, rather than in the more abstract percentages thrown around by lawyers, consultants, and CEOs. The paper broke down potential rate increases "based on a typical home that uses 1,000 kilowatt hours of electricity and 5,000 cubic feet of natural gas" per month. The paper projected thirty-dollar-a-month increases in gas and electric, plus a \$9.20 fee for storm costs and \$5.85 for the storm reserve. The paper also highlighted a potential 160 percent increase in gas alone, "from \$15.72 a month to \$41.02 a month." The numbers swirled across *Picayune's* pages: 18 percent, 22.2 percent, \$88 million, 85,000 customers, \$71 million federal tax refund, \$168.93 to \$194.71 a month, \$3.5 million incentive plan, \$7.7 million bonus, \$45 a month, \$282 million last quarter, 1000 kilowatt hours, 730,000 ratepayers, 13 percent, 36 percent, 9 percent. The "Legend Consulting Group found \$88 million in charges that Entergy shouldn't be able to pass on to customers. If those charges were eliminated, rates would go down by 44 percent," proclaimed the *Times-Picayune*. I suppose all the numbers made sense in someone's notebook, but they didn't make for lucid prose. One might even have begun to suspect a deliberate attempt to confuse customers. I wasn't convinced Entergy had any intention of closing shop if the New Orleans City Council refused to meet its request for increases of 140 percent or 120 percent or even 25 percent. Entergy, the City Council, and the State and the Federal Government were playing a numbers game, a game in which the customers, the citizens of New Orleans, were the real-dollar-value pawns.

To a certain extent, the City Council, as a publicly elected regulatory body, represented our interests in this deal. Though the City Council no doubt felt an obligation to the city to keep Entergy, its only Fortune-500 company, happy, it also had an obligation to the people to make sure the city had power. To this end, it briefly considered buying the damaged infrastructure from Entergy New Orleans, turning it into a municipally-owned utility, and hiring Entergy to run it. This would have allowed the city to collect federal money to pay for the storm damage. But

Michoud and Patterson, the two generating plants actually owned by Entergy, which the city would have purchased, are old and inefficient and produce power at a high cost. As a result, Entergy New Orleans sells the more expensive power produced at its own outdated plants to other communities and has contracts to buy cheaper power from other sources for New Orleans. According to the *Times Picayune*, even if New Orleans were to buy the utility, Dan Packer, CEO of Entergy New Orleans, “[didn’t] think the contracts could be transferred to the city under a full municipalization.” Entergy would still have exclusive access to the more affordable power, and so rates for New Orleans customers would increase anyway. New Orleans risked purchasing, in the words of Alan Richardson, CEO of the American Public Power Association, a lemon. Without those contracts, all the city would own would be a dilapidated infrastructure and two inefficient power plants. The idea was shelved.

No matter how I looked at it, it seemed as though Entergy had the upper hand, and one way or another, the customers would have to pay. In response to this feeling of powerlessness and frustration, I concocted a fantasy scenario in which the customers, the people, could arm themselves with their own metaphoric gun and step up as a player, rather than a hostage, in this big-business stand off.

The way I saw it, Entergy’s trump card was necessity. We needed their product. It seemed to me that on a residential level, judging by my own utility bills, heat and air conditioning made up Entergy’s bread and butter (air conditioning in particular because of our semitropical climate). If everyone in the city opted to forego these two luxuries, we could put a serious, if not crippling, dent in Entergy’s revenue. We could still watch television, turn on a fan, listen to the radio, read by electric light, cook over a gas stove, and refrigerate our food; but we would do without heat and air conditioning. In so doing, customers could gain direct control over the flow of Entergy’s revenue and leverage to negotiate rates. If Entergy cooperated, we would live it up, crank up the cold air in the summer and the heat in the winter. If not, we would show Entergy executives and shareholders that we could get by without consuming their product

at such a profitable rate, for them. If Entergy agreed to play ball, it could make a lot of money, and we could live just as cozily as we liked for a fair price.

Heat wouldn't be as difficult to do without. I know some residents like to make a big deal about the bone chilling dampness of New Orleans winters, but the temperature very rarely drops below freezing. Overnight cold snaps into the lower-forties and upper-thirties Fahrenheit usually only last a few days before warmer weather rises from the Gulf. By wearing a hat and a sweater in the house, we could easily make it through the handful of relatively cold days. Summer would be the real sacrifice. The high humidity increases the discomfort of temperatures frequently in the lower-nineties, and the relief of air conditioning, for many, has come to feel like a necessity. But without sacrifice we wouldn't get anywhere.

The only leverage we have against Entergy is the power to refuse. If we strategically refuse to use its product, we might not gain the upper hand, but we could have an influence. This plan would take strength, endurance. It would test our mettle as Americans. This country was formed in part as a reaction against state taxation without reciprocal political representation. Today, as big business replaces the power of a government established by and for the people, we must stand up once again and assert ourselves this time against a corporate power monopoly.

This plan would require a high level of community organization. We would have to form, in a sense, a utility users union. I understand that our appreciation for unions has been sullied by corruption, but unions derive their power from numbers and represent the only way for the little people to stand up against a corporate behemoth, against a utility monopoly. Unions are inherently democratic and quintessentially American--by the people, for the people. United we stand; divided we fall.

We would circulate and sign petitions, pledge allegiance to the cause. Ugly though it might seem, we would have to establish an organized system of community vigilance. Volunteers would have to monitor electric meters in their districts. Districts could be ranked in terms of per-capita energy usage and the results published in the *Picayune*. Communities could take pride in their standing at the end of each week. Inter-district competition would create a

psychological incentive to conserve energy. Neighbors would have to support neighbors. Individuals tempted to switch on the heat or the cool air--“Just this once, I swear.”--would have to answer to the community if their momentary weakness developed into an obvious habit of abuse. We might even develop financial incentives, rewarding districts that consistently ranked lowest in per-capita use.

Businesses, of course, would refuse to comply, at first. They would continue to heat and cool their stores and offices. But with the residents united behind the cause, Entergy would undoubtedly feel the need to raise its rates--apropos of its typical game plan--to pick up the slack. Businesses would then be forced to shoulder the bulk of that extra financial burden. At this point residents would gain added leverage against Entergy as the business community used its political and economic clout to fight further rate increases. Pressure from all levels of society--from the working man to the business owner to the politician eager to please both--would force Entergy to the table and guarantee fair energy rates. If it refused, Entergy could always sell its holdings to the highest bidder, and customers could have the power to drive down the selling price simply by decreasing demand.

Unfortunately, on Saturday, October 28, 2006, the *Times-Picayune* ran a front page headline that read, “Council OKs 8% boost in utility rates,” destroying any remaining delusions I might have had about my plan’s speculative plausibility. Who’s going to endure the raw heat of a New Orleans summer over an eight percent increase? Of course, “eight percent” is a number game as well, a ruse. The deal the City Council made with Entergy also made permanent a “fuel adjustment increase” of about \$20 per month that Entergy had been tacking onto bills since Katrina, as well as an additional \$20 to \$25 per month for an average household, an increase that the City council had first approved on a temporary basis in June 2006. But I think we’re all expected to breath a sigh of relief that all this talk of 140 percent increases is finally over. With the eight percent rate increase, plus an additional \$40 to \$45 a month per household, plus the \$200 million community development block grant, plus whatever else it’s able to squeeze out of the situation, Entergy’s going to make its money, and we’re going to give it to them. Perhaps

one day soon solar technology will become a more affordable and realistic option for average citizens, allowing us greater independence from corporate utility companies. But until that time, as long as corporate energy monopolies such as Entergy retain the privileged legal status they enjoy today, we have no choice but to play their game. Unless we're willing to do without.

Part Three

A Million Mardi Gras Now

You're standing on the street in front of a bar, Bloody Mary in hand, watching the constant procession pass, everyone masked and motley in the Technicolor palette of the day. First you hear a sound, echoing through the narrow streets of the French Quarter, ricocheting off the eighteenth-century brick and twentieth-century pavement, through wrought-iron balcony railings, piercing the steady din of music and voices, of shouts and laughter, of Mardi Gras morning: the song of the whale, hypnotic peals and moans, an almost telepathic transmission from the deep.

You look down the street for the source of this strange emanation and notice others, standing near the corner, amazed by, pointing at, talking about something you cannot yet see. The whale song grows louder as whatever it is draws nearer. Then, what appears to be a giant, pink phallus begins to emerge from behind the side of the building at the end of the block. As it rounds the corner, you can hear Frankie Ford singing beneath the whale's wails: "Ooo-wee. Ooo-wee, baby. Ooo-wee. Ooo-wee, baby. Won't you let me take you on a sea cruise." Is it a... it's a squid, a giant squid, pink and pearlescent. And a bright-blue sperm whale, its wide tail flipped up and over, eight feet into the air, entangled in the squid's tentacles, the iconic, gargantuan struggle frozen in a fantastic *papier mache* tableau: the squid and the whale. And it's being driven--this is a vehicle--by a man dressed like Jacques Cousteau--white and blue striped shirt tight across his chest; snug knit cap--but with a big, black beard encrusted with sea shells and a starfish, and smoking a corn cob pipe.

The entire structure is built around a large tricycle with a mast extending up from behind the driver. Nautical flags dangle from a rope slung from the tip of the squid, to the top of the mast, to the tail of the whale. Bubbles rise from somewhere inside and drift over the scene with the breeze. The driver reaches up and grabs a strap attached to a brass bell and clangs the bell.

Behind the driver, facing the opposite direction and sitting lower in the structure, rides a woman wearing a captain's hat and a wool fisherman's sweater. She tosses oyster crackers over

the crowd like confetti as the tremendous sculpture teeters and rolls up the street. Some people cheer. Some catch the crackers and eat them; others let the crackers fall into the gutter. The woman on the float spots a couple in the crowd whom she knows, a man and woman dressed as a Mexican wrestler, *el luchador*, and a cat burglar respectively. She reaches into the head of the whale and withdraws two hand-painted, oyster shell medallions attached to strings of twine. She hands them to her enthusiastic friends who look pleased as they examine the necklaces.

You don't know this, but painted in red on the blue and green oyster shells is the year and the letters, "K de M." As the squid and whale pass, you notice the words Krewe de Mer painted in an ornate, gold cursive on the side of the squid. And if you're unusually clever or happen to know something about nautical flags, you might observe that the flags strung above spell out the same thing: Krewe de Mer.

I am the man peddling the giant squid and whale down Royal Street, and that's my wife, Trish, in the captain's hat, tossing oyster crackers. Or at least that will be us. Next year. This is our vision for our contribution to Mardi Gras 2008.

Every year Mardi Gras inspires me with the desire to play a larger role in its sprawling pageant. Carnival is, I think, perhaps the most perfect form of theater, one in which the play watches itself unfold. We're all in it, and though we cannot choose just *any* role for ourselves--only an elite few will ever ride as Rex, for example, the preeminent monarch of Mardi Gras, to whom the mayor of New Orleans symbolically concedes control of the city from midnight to midnight on Fat Tuesday--we are always free to create our own roles. Even if you can't be Rex, you could always be, for instance, the Captain of the Krewe de Mer if you really wanted to. As I think about the many potential permutations of Mardi Gras, I'm reminded of the title of V.S. Naipaul's book *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. You might have to adjust the scale slightly down from a million, and you could make the argument that ours is not a real mutiny but a kind of pantomime of mutiny--though I would argue that such a pantomime is itself a kind of mutiny. There is no *one* Mardi Gras in New Orleans. There are, in a sense, a million different Mardi Gras, and during Carnival season, which lasts for about two weeks leading up to Fat Tuesday,

one can begin to feel as though those million Mardi Gras are all happening *right now*. At any given moment, anywhere in the city, Mardi Gras can and does happen. It happens both spontaneously and by design. A million Mardi Gras now.

Mardi Gras isn't like a concert, which can be canceled if the performers don't show up or the venue decides to lock its doors. Last year, 2006, the first Mardi Gras after Katrina, newspapers reported an ongoing debate among city officials, residents, and a smattering of busybodies around the nation, about whether we should "have" Mardi Gras, as though it were someone's decision to make. Now, I understand that certain parades require city permits, and streets have to be blocked off, and a police presence has to be arranged, and bands hired, and dues paid, and trinkets purchased, and money spent, and if the city says no, then those parades won't run. And maybe the tourists won't come, and the newspapers will announce that "Mardi Gras has been canceled." But it's the same lesson the Grinch learned: you can take away the presents and the trees, but the Whos are still going to sing. Mardi Gras happens because we make it happen. It's a cultural event thrown by and for the people and guests of New Orleans in which everyone plays a role.

In 1979, when I was eight-going-on-nine, the New Orleans Police Department went on strike, and Mardi Gras was "canceled." No "official" parades rolled. But the private carnival organizations, called Krewes, still held their balls, people still threw parties, bands played, and smaller, "unofficial" parades rolled all over the city. We drank and ate and celebrated Mardi Gras. My family and others in our neighborhood organized our own parade. We decorated bicycles and tricycles and wagons to look like floats; we put on costumes and marched through the streets. I dressed as C-3PO that year, the harried, and somewhat faggy, android from the original *Star Wars* movie. I marched in our parade and threw strings of beads to neighbors who came out to watch and cheer and catch our throws. Mardi Gras happened, all over the city, in (maybe somewhat less than) a million ways at once because, during carnival season, everyone involved participates.

The conventional parade scenario, as practiced in most of the rest of the United States, divides participants into two main categories: those in the parade and those watching the parade, the spectacle and the spectator. Typically, the spectators play a passive role; maybe they wave or clap, but essentially they watch the parade. But in a Mardi Gras parade, the spectator plays a more active role. The spectating itself becomes part of the spectacle.

First of all, at a Mardi Gras parade, the people in the procession throw favors to--or in some cases at--the people watching. Known as "throws," these favors resemble the kind of loot you might expect to find in a pirate's treasure chest: strings of beads in purple, green, gold, pink, red, blue, silver, and pearl, of various lengths and styles, some rarer or flashier and therefore more coveted, others more common and so more readily disposable; colored aluminum doubloons, coins on the fronts of which appear the emblems of their respective Krewes--Hermes, Muses, Krewe D'Etat, Bacchus, Proteus, Rex, Zulu--and the years they were founded, with the current year and a depiction of the parade's theme on the reverse side; and trinkets of all kinds, from Krewe-specific plastic cups to lace panties to bamboo spears, from individually-decorated women's pumps to hand-painted coconuts. As each float passes, the spectators wave their hands and call out to the riders, hoping to catch some flashing medallion or string of pearls that has attracted their fancy. Children and girlfriends ride on the shoulders of fathers and boyfriends to get closer to the riders. Families erect rows of wooden ladders along the parade route to give the kids a better view, and to give the riders on the floats better targets for their throws. The crowd flirts and begs, cajoles and demands, trying to get its hands on that special something, that cheap piece of plastic that, within the context of this moment of theater, undergoes a kind of transubstantiation and assumes, if only for a moment, the value of genuine jewels. This is not a passive experience.

If you've never been to Mardi Gras, you may think that you'd be immune to this bead lust, that you wouldn't care, that you're capable of recognizing junk for junk and could just as well do without the beads and the trinkets. And you may be right. Some are less enthusiastic

about the beads than others. But you really have no way of knowing how you will react until you're there on the street and the parade is passing. My wife is an excellent example.

I'm from New Orleans; I grew up here. Trish is from Quincy, Massachusetts, just across the bay from Boston. She's a small woman, quiet at times, a little reserved, but she's sharp. She has a quick wit and does cut loose now and again. You should watch her on the karaoke floor as she sinks to her knees, belting out an almost incongruously raucous rendition of "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay." Anyway, I'd filled her in as best I could on what to expect. She'd seen the beads, even worn some of the finer sets, but out of context they had no meaning. Removed from the theatrical moment, they had lost their value, their luster. She'd heard about all the shouting and the waving for these plastic trinkets, and she just couldn't see herself doing it. It made no sense. Yet, after not much more than five minutes at her first parade, she was elbowing her way to the front of the crowd, slapping the sides of the floats, chasing them down the street, and demanding the finest junk the riders had to offer. She was hooked. And I've seen many initially skeptical, otherwise cosmopolitan adults succumb in much the same way.

But even if you don't go for the beads and doubloons, there are other ways to participate. Though the parades may function as a centerpiece, a *raison de soiree*, the scene along the parade route becomes that of a citywide block party. Before the parades, in between the parades, even during the parades, the thousands of people milling about the sidewalks and medians, mingling in the streets, flowing in and out of the houses on and off of the avenues become the spectacle. Because essentially, Mardi Gras is a street party of which the parades are only one aspect.

Besides the music provided by marching bands and dance troupes in the parades, a multiplicity of rhythms and melodies filters into the scene from car stereos, from the open windows of houses, from sound systems set up in yards. Just as Christmas has its carols, Mardi Gras has its own soundtrack of traditional songs: Al Johnson's "Carnival Time," Professor Longhair's "Go to the Mardi Gras," Bo Dollis and the Wild Magnolias' Mardi Gras Indian anthem, "Handa Wanda," the Hawkettes' recording of "Mardi Gras Mambo," or Earl King's "Street Parade," to name a few. Most of the season's songs were recorded by local musicians in

the nineteen fifties, sixties, and seventies and can be heard in regular rotation on radio stations, in nightclubs, and at parties throughout the city.

Colored beads in clumps and strands dangle from the live oaks that shadow St. Charles Avenue; broken strands litter the street like confetti amid crushed cups and discarded aluminum cans. People drag grills out to the parade route, set up tables and chairs, bring paper plates and napkins, plastic cups and plastic forks. They eat burgers and sausages, red beans and rice, fried chicken. They peel the shells off boiled crawfish that they pull from sacks or ice chests. People mix cocktails and pop open cans of cold beer. They drink wine and champagne, drink soft drinks and eat potato chips, smoke cigarettes and socialize, socialize.

Kids toss footballs in the barricaded streets, others ride bikes. Teenagers cruise in packs up and down the neutral ground, a grass and dirt median down the center of the avenue along which the street cars typically roll. Clusters of police officers stand around, drinking coffee and talking, or visiting with friends or family members who turned out for the parade. Friends run into other friends, meet guests from out of town. So-and-so knows so-and-so, who has a house on the route, and you can use the bathroom there if you need to; they have a giant pot of jambalaya, and help yourself to the beer. During Mardi Gras, the distinction between the “street party” and the “house party” can become as fluid as the invitations. Everybody knows somebody, and there’s always more than one place to go. A million Mardi Gras now. The spectators don’t just watch it. They *are* it, spectator and spectacle. And this dynamic becomes most apparent in the French Quarter and the Marigny neighborhoods on Mardi Gras day.

Throughout carnival season, spectators generally participate dressed in street clothes. Only the people in the parades wear costumes. But on Mardi Gras day, the spectator also dresses in costume, a tradition known as “masking,” which allows for a degree of anonymity and thereby greater license to indulge in the day’s excesses. As the streets fill with revelers in brilliantly colored costumes, looking fresh in the crisp light of a Mardi Gras morning, the pageant becomes truly democratic. Maskers delight both in seeing and in being seen, as exhibitionists and voyeurs, as well as in the somewhat less bawdy presentation and appreciation of costume.

In New Orleans there is a tradition called the “second line,” a way of parading that has evolved from the jazz funeral. In a jazz funeral, the deceased is driven through the streets in a hearse from the funeral home to the cemetery. Family members and those close to the deceased, those who attended the funeral, follow behind the casket, and they, in turn, are followed by a brass band. The band begins with a dirge, and those following the casket as it moves toward the grave step slowly, one solemn step at a time, heads bowed, hats in hand, in a gesture of humility, a symbol of respect for death. More mourners file in behind the band and follow the deceased to the cemetery. After the body is “cut loose” at the grave site, and respect has been paid, the band continues through the street but picks up the tempo, swinging into some of the old upbeat spirituals and second-line arrangements. Those in the procession pop into step with the band, dancing low, jumping up high, quick and graceful, and above all loose, loose. Everyone picks up the rhythm and celebrates the life of the deceased. As the parade moves through the city, others who came out to meet it or who just happened to catch it passing, fall in behind the funeral guests and join the parade. They become the “second line” of the funeral procession.

Today, second-line parades are no longer reserved for funerals. Second lines wind through the city, following routes that lead from one bar to the next, on Sundays throughout most of the year. The same inclusiveness that allows anyone to fall into a second line and dance along with the parade can be seen in the ever-transforming configurations of maskers on Mardi Gras Day.

The Krewe of St. Anne is a walking parade, a kaleidoscopic stream of maskers that can stretch for many blocks. It begins Mardi Gras morning in the Bywater, the next neighborhood down river of the Marigny, and weaves through the Marigny and into the French Quarter. Some join the parade at its starting point and follow it for the entire length of its route, while others meet it at some point along the way, watch it pass, and then fall in toward the end. As the parade progresses it grows in length, incorporating many of the spectators it passes. Some follow along for a while and then branch off to hit a bar or investigate some other of the many scheduled and spontaneous events of the day. Eventually, the parade itself dissipates and fractions off into the

Quarter, at which point it can seem to exist everywhere at once. It materializes in small bands of revelers, masked and intoxicated, assuming the role of the spectacle. A ragtag marching band accompanied by a collection of uniformly costumed dancers might emerge from the general hubbub, and pass as you sip your beer on the sidewalk. Inevitably, a second line of random maskers, friends of friends of friends, will follow the band, dancing and tossing beads, drinking and spotting people they know. Maybe someone you know spots you and steps out of the parade to chat. Maybe you jump in to join this person. As suddenly as a parade emerges, it can just as quickly vanish around a corner, blending back into the continuing commotion. Maskers fall in and drop out at will, combine and disperse.

For most of carnival, the distinction between the people *in* the parade and the people *at* the parade remains clear. On Mardi Gras day, however, that distinction blurs. There are still several “official” parades, Rex and Zulu being two highlights among them, but the “unofficial” parading adds a new dimension, offers different ideas about what exactly constitutes a “parade.” For example, can one person be a parade? I’ve seen costumes so extravagant, so attention grabbing, piled high with feathers and sequins, brightly colored fabrics, enormous hats or head dresses, and trailing gowns, that the people wearing them were forced, by the sheer size of their outfit, to proceed through the street almost as though walking a tightrope, their expressions semi-frozen in proud concentration. I would argue that an individual in such a costume would constitute his own parade. How much more arresting to see five or ten or even fifteen such individuals roaming the streets in a pack! Even simpler costumes command more attention when functioning together as a thematic group. One person dressed as a cockroach might seem a clever costume, but twelve cockroaches followed by a towering can of insecticide would turn some heads. Group costumes can range from the topical--in 2006 the Quarter teemed with groups of maskers in outfits made from blue, plastic roof tarps--to well worn classics--there is never a shortage of pirates or cross dressers--to the genuinely bizarre. Trish and I, along with a group of our friends and friends of friends, have been involved in the conception and execution of Mardi Gras group costumes for the past four years. This is how we have chosen to become a

part of the spectacle, and as a group, we frequently aspire to the more bizarre end of the spectrum.

There are those who will resist the group costume. They want to do their own thing. They don't want to conform to the group, don't want to commit to someone else's idea. Or maybe they dislike the group's concept. Maybe they think they have a better idea. And maybe they do. Maybe they should do their own thing. There can be a great deal of self-expression involved in the making of a costume, which is an important point to consider when developing a group costume.

Often what unifies a group costume is a simple visual uniformity. As with the cockroaches, everyone might wear exactly the same thing (except for the can of poison), or, as with pirates or cross dressers, the same kind or category of thing. For example, this Mardi Gras, 2007, I saw a group of four men dressed as a water skiing team straight out of a 1960s beach movie, through a post-Stonewall riot, acid tinted lens: coifed, colored wigs, tight bright trunks, buff bodies, dark sunglasses and noses white with sun block. At least that's how I remember it. Details can become muddled in the madness. They may have been wearing multicolored Esther Williams swim caps and goggles. Each, with arms outstretched, gripped the bar at the end of his tow line, which extended in front of him for about two feet of stiff rope, as though he were being pulled by an invisible boat. The four posed for photographs in competition formation. Their costumes were fanciful, colorful, and, with minor variations, fairly identical. Such uniformity can frustrate people with more independently creative personalities.

When we decide upon a concept for a group costume, we try to allow as much room as possible for individual interpretation. For example, this year we were a tossed salad. That was the concept. We made a decision to stick with a vegetable interpretation and avoid allusions to the sexual euphemism. I was the lettuce, Trish the onions. We had beets, shredded carrots, edible flowers, blueberries, squash, croutons, and salad tongs for the tossing: a strange salad. Stranger still, none of us chose a literal interpretation of his or her vegetable. Shredded Carrots didn't really look like carrots, and Squash looked nothing like a squash. Not a single person who

looked at us would have been able to identify us as a salad. Even after throwing actual lettuce into the air and telling people that we were a tossed salad, they would blankly stare back at us, or nod slowly with a confused smile, pretending to be catching on, if for no other reason than to soon move away from this so-called salad.

Janine was a Beet Poet, dressed in a tight, beet-red shirt onto which she'd written the phrase, "I saw the borscht minds"; hip-hugging, beet-colored capri pants; a beet scarf; a beet beret; and big, black movie-star sunglasses. She handed out colored, index cards onto which she'd typed verses of beat poetry, half shrugging with a kind of self-involved beat humility and saying, "Hey, check it out, a little something I wrote last night. It's pretty deep." Tatiana, as Shredded Carrots, wore knee high, orange, patent leather, platform boots; a pouffy orange tutu; a stripped t-shirt onto which she'd stenciled "bad carrot poetry" that she'd found on the internet; and a bright, orange wig. Squash was dressed as a clown, Squash the Clown. He'd honk a horn at you or unzip the fly of his black and yellow striped, hula-hoop waisted pants, and squirt you with a stream of silly string. Blueberries wore shades of blue: a pair of snazzy, light-blue leather shoes, a royal blue, silk slip with gray-blue sweat pants beneath; a light-blue tuxedo jacket with tails; and a brown fedora. Edible Flowers looked elfin, dressed in a green unitard, encircled by a creeping vine of plastic flowers and topped with a yellow, plastic, bobbed-hairdo wig; and Croutons looked like a man in a suit between two slices of golden-brown foam, with a fleur de lis drawn on the front of one, accompanied by the words, "Yeah, brah." Trish was Weeping Beauty, a white-skirted beauty queen with running mascara and a crown made of green and white onions. I was Head O'Lettuce. I looked like a leprechaun escaped from a St. Patrick's Day parade, and when we "tossed the salad," I threw handfuls of shredded lettuce into the air.

The decision to incorporate moments when we would actually "toss the salad" marked an important stage in the development of this year's group costume. True to form, the moment of inspiration occurred late one night, over drinks, in a bar. Having now participated in several different group costumings, I've begun to develop some theories on the subject. One theory is that every group costume should incorporate some form of group activity, something that

everyone can do as a group. The activity unifies the group and creates, through action, a level of spectacle beyond the costumes themselves; it creates theater.

One of our most successful combinations of concept and activity came together in 2005 when we were a Barnyard Gym Class. The concept itself was a hybrid that attained its beauty through the seemingly random juxtaposition of barnyard animals and a high school gym class. We had chickens in sweatpants, roosters with whistles and clipboards, cows in gym shorts, rats in warm-up suits; and we played dodge ball.

As we moved through the Quarter, traipsing from bar to bar, we would occasionally break into an impromptu game of dodge ball, right there in the street, shouting at each other and beaming each other with an increasingly grimy beach ball (it was a rainy Mardi Gras). Sometimes the ball would bounce up onto an unoccupied balcony overlooking the street, and our rat would shinny up one of the thin, iron support columns to fetch it. In this way the costume included more than just clothing; it incorporated behavior. We didn't simply dress as animals in gym clothes, we conducted a gym class, further enhancing the sense of spectacle.

To further my theory, I would maintain that not only is a group activity essential, but that the activity should also be real. As the Barnyard Gym Class, we really played dodge ball. The following year, however, in 2006, our group costume lacked genuine action. The concept was Superheroes--not Spiderman or Batman, but heroes of our own invention. This was the first Mardi Gras after hurricane Katrina, and we thought the city could use its own set of caped crusaders. Trish transformed into Super Dutch, a little Dutch boy with a gigantic index finger to insert into the holes of dikes. I became Absorbo--an actual mop top for a wig, a towel for a cape, a muscular chest and six-pack abs sculpted from rows of hand sponges--capable of super-absorbency in the event of any big spills. Refu-Jesus was the super-savior of those scattered by the storm. Replete with a golden crown of thorns and a jug of wine, she would lead the exiled, Moses-like, back into the promised land. And like any good team of superheroes, we attracted a contingent of super villains. Mold Man, dressed in a jumpsuit smeared black with mold, tossed poisonous spores, made from painted cotton balls, at unsuspecting citizens; and Colonel Loot-n-

Pooper--named for the legendary looters rumored to have defecated onto the floors of the homes they pillaged after the flood, a kind of scatological calling card--might just squat and leave a super turd on your head. We even had an evil, super-real-estate-agent who wore a cape fashioned from the real-estate section of the *Times-Picayune* and who plotted to buy up storm-damaged properties and exploit them in service of her nefarious master plan. But we had no group activity.

Someone had suggested that, as good and evil, we could “do battle with each other,” but unlike with our previous costume, we could only have pretended to do battle. The Mardi Gras Indians, an African-American masking tradition that has its roots in the allegiance between slaves and native Americans, once engaged in actual battles. The different tribes, or gangs, settled scores on Mardi Gras day, shedding real blood with hatchets, knives, and sometimes pistols. This tradition has since evolved, and Mardi Gras Indians now “do battle” by chanting, dancing, and designing ever more elaborate bead-and-feather costumes. I’m not sure, though, how we would have “done battle” as superheroes. Our activity, it seemed to me, would have been fake. The distinction is subtle, but apt. We didn’t *pretend* to play dodge ball--we *played*. Though many of the Superhero and Supervillain costumes were inventive and entertaining both in concept and execution, we never ended up pretending to “do battle” that Mardi Gras.

So when we came up with the idea of actually “tossing the salad,” this year’s costume acquired its activity. What do we do? We toss. How do we toss? To music. We would carry a jam box and choose from a list of pre-selected tunes-to-toss-to. At a subsequent group meeting at the Mother-in-Law Lounge we agreed upon a soundtrack and later burned a disc: Clarence Carter’s “Strokin,” The Rebirth Brass Band’s “Do Whatcha Wanna,” Cameo’s “Word Up,” and “Wake Me Up Before You Go Go,” by Wham!, among others, all made the cut. At any point during Mardi Gras day, someone could take the jam box and play a song, at which point we’d all toss. It remained unclear exactly what it would mean “to toss,” but we figured that would work itself out on the day.

As it happened we found different ways of tossing. Sometimes we'd stand in a loose group on the sidewalk dancing in place to "Tijuana Taxi," snapping, taking small steps, and I'd toss shredded lettuce into the air. (My contention was that the lettuce holds a salad together. Without the lettuce you're just a bunch of vegetables.) Other times we'd toss on the move, dancing and strutting down the middle of the street, flinging lettuce over ourselves and over those we passed as Kool and the Gang's "Fresh" bleated from our tinny box. We were at our finest strutting down some of the less crowded streets. Because our jam box was so cheap, even at full volume the music didn't carry very far amid the clamor of Mardi Gras. But on the quieter streets our soundtrack carried, and the people we passed grooved along with us, shouting approval, trying to figure out why the Irishman was throwing lettuce at them. Later in the evening, in the thick of the gathering crowd on Frenchman Street, back in the Marigny, our music carried for all of about two feet. So when we tossed, we had to lean in close to the box and just bob our heads to the tune. What we called "tossing," as it played out, combined dancing and parading, two things we could really do.

Having now tossed, it occurs to me that parading may be the most fundamental Mardi Gras activity. A parade can be as elaborate as you'd like, with massive, ornate floats and flashing lights, hundred-piece marching bands, dance troops and tens of thousands of dollars in blinking, glittering, gaudy trinkets to lust after. Or a parade can be simple, no more than a kind of heightened walking. It would seem that the ways by which you might heighten your walk into a parade are limited only by your imagination. Of course on Mardi Gras day you will encounter more competition than you would on an average day in an average street. Everywhere you look you will see people parading: some alone, commanding attention with spectacular or witty or nasty or alluring homemade costumes; some in groups, captivating crowds with collective themes, passing out odd favors, such as little rubber cockroaches or snippets of "beet" poetry. You'll see marching bands and dance troupes, *ad hoc* assemblages and roving percussionists, fantastic vehicles and rampant exhibitionism. A million Mardi Gras now.

For 2008, our friends have agreed to help realize the Krewe de Mer as a group costume. It's early yet, though, so the vision is liable to go through several different revisions before we settle on a single concept. We have a little less than a year to prepare. With the giant Squid and the Whale float as our potential centerpiece, we could roll with a "sea" theme, open to interpretation. And we would parade. It may be that we develop a more costume-specific group activity as we did with Barn Yard Gymclass, but what I realized this year by "tossing the salad" is that we can always just parade, find a way to heighten our walk into a procession. That in itself can become theater.

Whatever we decide, we will provide spectacle and contribute what we can to the million manifestations of the day. As a friend once observed, "Mardi Gras is like Christmas for adults." It wouldn't be right to show up without a gift.

Cool It or Blow?

Most whom I know evacuated in August of 2005, though a few stayed behind. Those who stayed still talk about it, still tell their stories, and these stories will become a part of the lore of New Orleans, an ever-evolving blend of myth and fact that settles into our collective memory through oral tradition. We practice our stories in bars and on back porches, boiling them down to their poetic essence, and in so doing, find our way from the trees of literal account to the grand forests of legend: the stories of those who stayed for the storm.

I left. I didn't leave because a massive category-five hurricane appeared to block out the entire Gulf of Mexico on television weather maps and seemed to be tracking a relentlessly direct path for the city of New Orleans. I hadn't seen a single weather report and had no knowledge of the storm's strength or dimensions on the Saturday morning my wife Trish and I decided to pack up our cat and head for my brother Jeb's house in Mobile, Alabama. I didn't leave because I feared for my life, or even because it was the responsible thing to do. Had I any sense of what was about to happen, I wonder whether I would have left so easily. But no one knew what to expect. We either stayed or left for reasons entirely inappropriate to the impending catastrophe. I left purely to avoid inconvenience.

Earlier that same summer, tropical storm Cindy had knocked out power to our neighborhood for three days. I've heard that Cindy has since been upgraded to a category-one hurricane, but I prefer to remember her as a tropical storm. July in New Orleans can be hot, and those days following Cindy were both hot and humid. Without the aid of even a fan to move the dead air around the room, Trish and I passed three long, uncomfortable nights on sticky sheets, sleeping restlessly. In order to combat our discomfort before retiring to bed, we submerged ourselves in tubs of cold water, attempting to lower our body temperatures. Candlelight flickered romantically against the bathroom tiles in our otherwise dark house as we took turns cooling in the tub. We lay naked and supine on our mattress, on top of the sheets, arms and legs spread so that no part of our bodies touched any other part, and waited for sleep or for morning when we peeled ourselves from damp pillows and returned to the tub for relief. Those three

nights weighed heavily in our decision to leave for Mobile on the Saturday before August 29th, 2005.

Another prior experience that encouraged us to leave in the manner we did inversely influenced my youngest brother, Matthew, who also lives in New Orleans, to stay. In early September of 2004, my parents, Matthew, Trish, and I evacuated New Orleans, along with an estimated 600,000 others from the area, with the approach of hurricane Ivan. Meteorologists had cast the storm's "cone of probability" across the entire Gulf Coast region. New Orleans fell into the westernmost edge of the predicted cone.

Trish and I moved our furniture away from the windows in our apartment and drove to my parents' house--packing cat, photos, and important documents--to discuss whether we should evacuate. My mother was in favor of it, and busied herself by packing what she thought necessary. My father stood in front to the television studying "the cone." Hurricanes had a tendency to veer east as they reached the United States, and with New Orleans on the western edge of the cone, the odds that we would be hit looked long. He flipped channels, considering different forecasts of the hurricane's potential path. Some predicted a sudden lurch west, closer to New Orleans, as Ivan approached the coast, an inexplicable deviation from an otherwise steady northwestern arc that suggested landfall in Florida or Alabama.

When Matthew arrived he criticized this predicted lurch. It made no sense, he insisted. He felt certain that the hurricane would continue to swing north, as it had been doing, hitting east of Louisiana, and therefore he was against evacuation. The school where he taught had announced that it would close for the two days following the storm's projected landfall, and he hated the idea of wasting valuable time off by fleeing a hurricane that wasn't going to hit us.

"You never know, though," our mother said. Her position seemed to be "better safe than sorry." Should we decide to evacuate, we planned to drive to Ville Platte, in western Louisiana, where some friends of our parents lived. Matthew suspected that part of our mother's eagerness to go, and our father's gradual willingness to comply, arose from their considering this

evacuation an opportunity to visit friends they didn't often see. Matthew did not share this particular interest.

For my part, I thought we were wasting time deliberating. The longer we postponed leaving, the heavier the traffic would be. I began to grow impatient. The storm was due to make landfall the next day, and it was already approaching three o'clock in the afternoon. "If we're going to go, we should go," I said. My father had often maintained that if you wanted to leave, you should leave early. After a certain point it makes more sense to stay because, if you wait until the last minute, you'll end up sitting in traffic trying to get out, which is exactly what happened when we finally agreed to evacuate.

Of course, Matthew never really *agreed* to leave. As he saw it, he had no choice. Our mother clearly wanted him to come, and our father adopted the same position. Matthew didn't want to be burdened with whatever repercussions he envisioned having to endure if he were to disobey their wishes. Our parents are neither vindictive nor domineering, and whatever stress that would have existed between Matthew and them, had he stayed, would have been, at least in part, due to their particular relationship with him. As the youngest of three brothers, he tends to be far more sensitive to parental criticism, both real and perceived, than I am as the oldest. As a result, my parents tend to be more vocally critical of him, and he more ready to find criticism where there may be none. For him, it was easier to go than to remain, though he resented every minute of it.

As children, growing up in New Orleans, we had never evacuated. Although each year's hurricane season had always threatened to send storms our way, and sometimes did, widespread evacuation was a relatively new phenomenon. My parents, also natives, undertook their very first evacuation in 1998 for hurricane Georges, and only because they thought that my grandfather, who was suffering the late stages of Parkinson's disease at the time, should be evacuated. If not for him, they would have stayed. I was living out of town at the time. My parents also, along with most residents, stayed in 1964 for hurricane Betsy, the most destructive hurricane to hit New Orleans before Katrina. Historically, people didn't evacuate. But lately,

with the increasing erosion of the Gulf Coast and barrier islands that once buffered Louisiana from approaching storms, scientists, public officials, television meteorologists, and citizens had all begun to discuss the possibility of “worst case scenarios”--20,000 dead, twenty feet of water in the French Quarter--the potential for total annihilation. I remember driving with a friend the night before we left for Ivan actually wondering whether I was seeing my city for the last time. With the increased threat and rising fear came a nearly ubiquitous advocacy for the need to evacuate. Not everyone bought into this “evacuation mania,” but hurricane anxiety was definitely on the rise.

When we finally hit the road to flee the approach of Ivan, the traffic out of the city had slowed almost to a standstill. It took us four hours to get from my parents’ house to Armstrong International Airport, a trip that would normally have taken about twenty minutes. It took nine hours to get to Baton Rouge, a distance of about seventy-five miles. Baton Rouge to Ville Platte, a distance of sixty some-odd miles farther, took another two hours. We arrived after four o’clock in the morning, frazzled and fried. Our hosts, aroused from slumber, provided us with whisky to ease our nerves and soon showed where we could sleep.

Around midday, as I recall, it became obvious that Ivan would not hit New Orleans. Matthew seethed. He knew it all along and was now stuck somewhere just outside of Ville Platte, amid cow pastures, squat suburban homes, and little else, unwilling even to attempt to make the most of the situation. After the trial of the previous day’s drive, everyone agreed that it made sense to wait a day before returning home. So we waited, and Matthew sulked. Our hosts threw a party that night, invited friends, cooked gumbo, poured whisky, but Matthew felt little consolation. He spent two nights in a hallway on an air mattress when he could have been at home, drinking beer with friends, enjoying a couple of unexpected days off from work.

It took us about two-and-a-half hours to get back to New Orleans the next day. The city looked unchanged except for the many leaves that had blown to the ground. When we arrived most businesses had not yet reopened, and the city still felt suspended in evacuation mode. Late that afternoon a pizzeria in our neighborhood opened, and Trish and I ran into Matthew and

some of his friends there. Among them was Kyle, who had not evacuated. He smiled and recounted the lovely afternoon he'd spent on his porch the day before, enjoying the cool breeze from Ivan's far-west periphery. As we ate pizza and drank beer, we swore that we'd never again evacuate. Trish was less committed to the vow than I, but many of us felt as though whatever dangers a storm might bring, staying would be preferable to the drudgery of the evacuation we'd just endured.

"Besides," Matthew added, "I'd kind of like to see what a major storm is like. Everyone talks about Betsy, but I've never been in a real hurricane."

A year later Trish and I once again faced the decision of whether to evacuate, this time from Katrina. Considering our experience from the previous summer, I recalled my father's words: "If you're going to leave, you should leave early." I had no intention of inching along in evacuation traffic. But neither did I want to spend however many nights in our apartment without power as we had done when Cindy hit. My brother Jeb, our middle brother, called and invited any of the family who wanted to come to his house in Mobile. He'd bought his house a couple of years before and had been slowly working on it since. Trish and I kept promising to visit but had not yet done so. This seemed a perfect opportunity. We both worked at universities in the city, which had already announced that they would be closed at least until Wednesday of the following week. Plus, Jeb mentioned that there would be a beer festival in Mobile that very night. We made the decision to go, not to evacuate, but to visit my brother until the storm passed.

As I saw it, our plan had two advantages. Hurricanes that threaten New Orleans, most often end up veering east as they near landfall. The west side of a storm system is weaker than the east side. As a result, unless a storm looks as if it may head toward Texas, people in Southern Louisiana tend to evacuate west, as we had done the previous year. Because of this, I reasoned that by heading east, we would avoid most other early evacuees. Traffic would be light. One might have said, as my father did when we told him our plan, that there's a good reason we wouldn't encounter much traffic heading east. True enough, but since my principal

motivation was to avoid discomfort, I countered by explaining that, should the hurricane hit Mobile, we could, once it passed, simply return to New Orleans. Both cities wouldn't lose power. One way or another I'd weather this storm in cool comfort. At the time Katrina was still an abstraction for me, little more than talk, and had not yet achieved its startling size and category-five status as it would by the next day. As it turned out we were without power in Mobile for five days following the storm. This, however, ended up being the least of our concerns.

My parents returned to their friends' house in Ville Platte and Matthew, truer to his word than I, stayed in New Orleans. On the Sunday before Katrina hit, during the first part of the day, Matthew had been helping his girlfriend, Jennie, move into a new apartment. Both my father and I tried to convince him by phone to evacuate. We each pointed out the discomfort he was sure to experience with the loss of power. He didn't care. He wasn't leaving. He planned to stay at our parents' house, which is located on the relatively high ground of the Metairie Ridge, near City Park. If the city were to flood, which had happened to parts of New Orleans during Betsy, our parents' house was likely to be safe. It's a two-story house, and everyone agreed that even in the improbable event that water should enter the first floor, it seemed almost inconceivable that it would flood the second. If one were going to stay in New Orleans, my parents' house was as good a place as any and better than most. With the truck they had used to move, Matthew and Jennie gathered supplies with which to weather the storm. Later that day Kyle, who had enjoyed Ivan from his own front porch, joined them, and the three slept at my parents' house on Sunday night.

The next morning, at around 10:00 a.m., Katrina hit New Orleans, tearing down oak limbs and power lines, snapping pines as though they were sticks, and peeling the roofs from houses. Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle moved from room to room watching the storm through the windows. Shingles and tree limbs flew past the house. Sheets of rain blew both up and down the street, moving in two different directions at once. The stained glass windows in the stairway rattled in their lead frames, threatening to shatter. The storm roared so loudly that no one heard a

small tornado blast the brick chimney off the roof. Water leaked in onto the upstairs ceiling. The three watched as the tin roof on the backyard shed peeled up like a pop-top, flapping as though about to take flight. The French doors that opened into the yard rattled so violently that Matthew wedged a chair against them to prevent them from blowing in. A tree from the neighbor's yard fell, crushing the fence and landing in our parents' swimming pool. A gust tore an old magnolia up from its roots, and it collapsed against the back of the house. The hurricane blew far more ferociously than Matthew had ever expected.

Late that afternoon, close to evening, after the storm had finally passed and the wind subsided, Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle emerged onto the front porch to assess the situation. The trees along the once shady, oak-lined street had been stripped by the storm. Branches covered the ground, and power lines lay strewn like piles of spaghetti. The three had survived. Sobered and wearied by the storm, Matthew placed a call to our father to apprise him of the damage.

"There's a bottle of Maker's Mark in the cabinet above the bar," our father said after hearing that the three were unharmed and that the damage to his house was minimal. "Enjoy it." And that's exactly what they did. Though the city had lost power, they still had ice left to chill their whiskies, and they sat on the front porch, sipping and talking as the neighborhood slowly descended into total darkness.

Matthew awoke the next morning, sweaty and mosquito bitten, to discover rising water in the street. Fish from the lagoons in City Park swam past the front porch. The news on the radio reported several breaches in the levee system, designed to keep the water in Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River from flooding into the largely-below-sea-level city. Ironically, once breached, this same system prevented the water that rushed in from flowing back out again. Overnight, New Orleans had begun to fill like a bowl. The pumping stations that were supposed to drain the water out of the bowl, back into the lake, had either flooded, been abandoned, or both.

The water destroyed the city's telecommunications system, preventing calls from coming in or going out. The blackout following the storm had forced the few cellphone towers that had

not been damaged by the wind to revert to generators for power, but one by one, those generators began to shut down. Matthew, Jennie, Kyle, and everyone else in New Orleans were soon cut off from the outside world, isolated in rising water.

Over the next three days we had no contact with Matthew and his friends, and began to worry. With eighty percent of the city under water, the news out of New Orleans sounded increasingly bleak. Television and radio coverage talked about people trapped in their attics for days, standing on their toes to keep their heads above water. We heard about doctors struggling to treat patients in hospitals with no power, flooded generators, and dwindling resources. With no way to get out, older patients were dying. The news media re-broadcasted, *ad nauseum*, reports of snipers concealed behind tattered curtains in the blown-out windows of abandoned, high-rise office buildings, taking pot shots at rescue vehicles and helicopters that pilots refused to land. We listened to radio accounts of thugs with guns shooting rescuers with boats and stealing the boats, bodies being thrown into the Mississippi River behind the Convention Center, eight-year-old girls being raped and murdered, their throats slit by teenaged gangsters, police officers beating and shooting suspects, citizens and police alike running wild in the streets, looting stores, and the bodies of the dead floating in the oil-slicked water or propped in lawn chairs and covered with blankets while authorities focused their efforts on the living. If the news were to be believed, civilization in New Orleans had vanished overnight, replaced by desperate, animalistic chaos.

“It’s been too long,” our mother said in Ville Platte, unable to control her tears, on the third day with no word from her son. She could no longer sleep at night.

“We need a plan,” our father said, fatigued by worry. He busied himself with concocting schemes to get Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle out, soliciting favors, pulling every string he thought he could. He made trips into Baton Rouge and met with politicians to whose campaigns he had contributed money, hoping they might be able to use their connections to alert rescuers to Matthew’s location. He considered chartering a helicopter and going in himself, but to hire a pilot with aircraft would have cost fifteen thousand dollars, exorbitant even with no other

alternative. Our father, however, happened to know someone affiliated with the New Orleans Museum of Art whom he'd heard was desperate to evacuate a Faberge Egg from the mounting chaos. Perhaps he could persuade her to split the cost of the chopper with him and pull both the egg and the deviant three out of the mix. Or, better yet, his host in Ville Platte was a judge, knew the sheriff, and the sheriff had agreed to help organize an armed flotilla across Lake Ponchartrain into New Orleans. They would travel up Bayou St. John to City Park Avenue, bank the boats, and proceed on foot to rescue Matthew and crew. The judge taught my father, a civil engineer, a city boy with no hunting experience, how to handle a sawed off shotgun. My father would guard the boats while the rest of the team, all Cajuns who'd been shooting since childhood, waded ashore.

The night before the expedition, my father lay in bed trembling, unable to sleep. The idea of staying behind, alone, and guarding the boats with a shotgun terrified him. The next morning Operation Flotilla fell through at the last minute. The sheriff had heard from reliable sources that the Coast Guard was turning back all boats that attempted to enter the city. My father returned to the drawing board where, as an engineer, he was more comfortable with his abilities.

Meanwhile, in Mobile, Katrina had knocked out our power and flooded parts of downtown near the bay. Jeb had invited a small group of friends from his job with the *Mobile Register* to his house for dinner. He grilled chicken by flashlight. As I ate my dinner in the shadows of his front porch, away from the flickering candle light and half drunk on red wine, I quietly cried, feeling guilty as I ate this hot meal while my youngest brother was stuck back in New Orleans struggling with who knew what kind of hardship. I tried to think realistically. They had survived the storm. Putting myself in his place, whatever that was, I figured I'd be able to handle it. I'd manage. So why shouldn't he? It was hard to think of him as a capable, twenty-seven-year-old man and not just my little brother.

"I try to imagine myself in his situation," I said to Jeb at one point, "and I think I'd be all right."

“Yeah, but Matthew doesn’t always make the best decisions,” Jeb said. “He did stay in New Orleans.”

Little did we know that back in New Orleans the most pressing concern facing Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle was their inability to call their families and reassure everyone of their safety.

Timmy, a neighbor who lived across the street from our parents’ house, had skipped barefoot across fallen limbs and power lines to join Matthew and company immediately following the storm. Timmy’s wife and children had evacuated the day before, but he stayed behind with the house and the family dog.

“This is crazy y’all,” he said, rattled and wild eyed when Matthew opened the door. Gusts of wind and rain still powerful enough to have kept Matthew inside kicked up behind Timmy.

Timmy had been entrusted with the keys to the houses of several other neighbors, and the four were able to relieve freezers of thawing meat to cook. Fresh fruits and vegetables were still edible; they hadn’t even begun to tap into the stockpile of canned beans and peaches yet. They ate red beans and rice with sausage, grilled chicken, barbecued shrimp; they drank wine, cocktails while the ice lasted, and cooled off in the pool, waving at the helicopters as they passed overhead on their way to rescue others from rooftops. They even managed to cook a pizza on the gas grill. Had they known that the garage next door housed a brand new generator with a full tank of gas, their lives would have been even easier, but they never discovered it.

They spent most of each day sitting on the front porch discussing what they should do. They speculated that they had enough food and water to last maybe a month, so, as escape wasn’t necessarily a pressing concern, they took their time debating their options. At night, the creatures took over. Frogs overran the neighborhood, chirping and croaking up a cacophony in the swamped streets. Timmy returned to his own house each evening after dark, and Matthew stood on the porch with a flashlight to guide him to his door. Nights were hot and without breeze, intermittently sleepless, and full of bugs. They had all heard many of the same reports we

had about roving looters and thugs, but because the street was filled with water and tree limbs, making passage difficult, they weren't too concerned about potential violence.

Considering the hellish experiences of many others who had remained in New Orleans--those whose homes flooded, whose loved ones died, those who sought refuge in the Superdome and Convention Center, who waited for days in the relentless heat without food or water, without medical attention--Matthew, Jennie, Kyle, and Timmy had it easy. Still, by Thursday, they decided they should try to get out. With each day they lost another convenience. First the electricity went out, then the telephone lines died. They lost gas to the house, then they lost running water. For a while they were able to flush the toilet by pouring buckets of water from the pool into the bowl, but by Thursday the sewage lines had backed up and the toilet no longer flushed. Unless they were willing to defecate in the yard--and many others put up with much worse--the time had come to make a move.

During the planning phase, Timmy had suggested that they might follow the railroad tracks out of town, but Kyle had cut a toe walking around barefoot in the post-storm debris and didn't think he could handle the hike. All for one, they scrapped that plan. They had managed to gather four kayaks from around the neighborhood, and thought they might be able to paddle out, with Timmy's dog, to Metairie, a suburb just west of New Orleans. Once there, they could follow dry ground to Timmy's parents' house where he hoped to find keys to a car he knew they had left behind. From there they could drive out.

Thursday morning, as the four prepared to leave, they encountered a lone member of the Louisiana National Guard wading up the street. His name tag read, "Bordes." He looked a little old for the Guard and suspiciously unofficial, wading up the street by himself. The four explained their plan, and Bordes advised against it, said it was too dangerous. "Too many armed ruffians shooting at boats," he said. He also warned that the water was so toxic, they risked contracting a "brain disease" should they fall in and it go up their noses. Bordes recommended that they wait for a helicopter that would take them to an interstate overpass where they could board a bus for Houston. The only catch, he said, was that Timmy couldn't bring the dog.

Timmy returned the dog to his house, left it some food, and the four made their way through the filthy water to a small bridge over Bayou St. John at Esplanade Avenue where a few people had begun to gather to await the helicopter. Hours passed, the number of people waiting on the bridge increased, but still no sign of a helicopter. A woman was crying. Rain began to fall. Lightening flashed in the sky. A Shell gas station across the street had opened, and the owner was distributing free water and Gatorade to anyone who needed it. No one seemed to know for sure whether the helicopter would actually arrive. Matthew began to wonder about Bordes. Maybe he was retired, some rogue ex-Guardsman who had taken it upon himself to pull his old uniform out of the closet, hit the streets, and do some good.

“Who was that guy Bordes?” Matthew asked, recalling the encounter. “He acted like he was in charge, but Guardsmen don’t usually ride solo.”

“Bordes,” Kyle scoffed.

Jennie agreed. Who was this Bordes, and where was his promised helicopter? Should they be looking for another way out? Were they wasting time?

Timmy paced the bridge, wrestling with his decision to leave the dog behind and fetch him later. At some point, without warning, Timmy slipped away. Matthew spotted him, running back toward his house, back for the dog. He couldn’t leave it, couldn’t face his children without the family pet. He put the dog in a kayak and, following the same plan Bordes had disparaged, paddled toward Metairie. He eventually reached his parents’ house, found the car and the keys, and drove out.

By mid-afternoon, the helicopter finally arrived. As it settled down on the lawn in front of the New Orleans Museum of Art, about a hundred yards from the bridge, Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle, committed now to the plan of escape via air lift, ran for it. They boarded with about ten others. One, older woman, terrified of flying, huddled in the corner clutching a bottle of Hennessy cognac. They rose from the ground and flew over City Park, gaining their first glimpse of the vastness of the flood, of the city’s situation at large. The football field at Tad Gormley Stadium, a concrete, Depression-era landmark mostly used now by high school teams,

was under water. They flew toward downtown, over neighborhood after flooded neighborhood, expanding out as far as they could see, over the Superdome with holes torn in its roof, a bird's eye view of the greater catastrophe from which they had emerged, unscathed. Their sense of deliverance was short-lived, however.

They flew to I-10 at Causeway Boulevard in Metairie, where hundreds of others waited in lines to board busses. One bus was present and boarding when they landed. The three considered making a dash for it, but given the line and the assumption that busses would continue to arrive throughout the afternoon, they took their time. The Red Cross was there distributing water and hot dogs to the thirsty and hungry. By nightfall regular deposits of airlifted evacuees had at least doubled the number of people waiting and a second bus had still not arrived. The orderly lines from earlier had disintegrated and moods had become tense, anxious.

Fortunately, either Matthew, Jennie, or Kyle had struck up a conversation with a middle-aged woman waiting alone for the busses to arrive. They introduced themselves, commiserated, and eventually the woman revealed that she lived nearby. Her house had not flooded, and though she had no electricity, the landline to her telephone still worked and she had hot water. She invited the three to spend the night at her house, rather than waiting on the interstate, and return in the morning for a bus. They accepted, everyone showered and placed calls to worried family members.

When I spoke to Matthew on Jeb's cell, I was sitting in Jeb's car, in his driveway, listening to news from New Orleans on WWL, 870 AM, the only official source familiar with the city of New Orleans, and therefore more able to contextualize some of the chaos. I had just listened to a rebroadcast of Ray Nagin's finest moment as mayor, the only time I had ever really admired the man, his telephone interview with Garland Robinette. From the depths of his own sorrow and exhaustion, Nagin shamed the Bush administration for its ineptitude and apparent ambivalence: "Don't tell me 40,000 people are coming here." Both his tone and his language perfectly articulated a widespread outrage. "They're not here. It's too doggone late. Now get off

your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country.” The next day the National Guard arrived in downtown New Orleans.

Matthew explained his situation and his plans for getting out in the morning. I presumed to give my little brother some advice, though I can no longer remember what exactly. Second guessing myself after we hung up, though, I called him back.

“I don’t know what I’m talking about,” I told him. “I can’t give you advice. Disregard what I said, and do what makes sense.”

“Okay, but don’t call back,” he said. He didn’t want to tie up the line because the woman they were staying with was expecting a call from her own family.

By morning, the woman’s land line had died and the scene at the bus lines had descended into utter chaos. Thousands now waited, and no busses had arrived overnight. As Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle moved through the crowd, it appeared that no one was in charge, as though the plan had at some point been abandoned. The water supply had run out, there was no food, people were defecating onto the muddy roadside. Matthew saw an old man lying on his back who may have been dead. When Jennie’s foot sank into some rancid-smelling, unidentifiable muck and emerged shoeless, the three unanimously scrapped the bus option.

The family phone calls each had placed the night before had set into motion a potential back-up plan. Jennie’s father owned a trucking company in Houston that had been contracted to bring emergency medical supplies into New Orleans. Her father said he would try to contact one of the drivers, ask him to look for Jennie, Matthew, and Kyle in the parking lot of a motel across the highway from the bus lines, away from the crowd, and have him pick them up on his way out of town. My father had relayed the message to Matthew.

“The truck should be there around nine-thirty,” he said. “If it’s not there by noon, start walking west, and I’ll pick you up in La Place,” about twenty miles away.

Everyone agreed to touch base in the morning to confirm the plan, but with the land line dead, the three now proceeded to the motel parking lot on faith that Jennie’s father had been able to schedule the pick up.

They waited until noon with no sign of the truck. If it didn't show, they planned to spend the night at Jennie's mother's house in Kenner, the next suburb west of Metairie and only a couple of hours away by foot, before attempting the long walk to La Place the following day. With plenty of time to get to Kenner before dark, they decided to wait a little longer for the truck.

The truck pulled into the motel parking lot an hour-and-a-half later, just as Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle had begun an impromptu game of bocce ball with the candy from a packet of Skittles. With the air conditioner blasting, the truck's cab felt almost like a walk-in refrigerator as they climbed aboard--sweet relief.

Matthew, Jennie, and Kyle, to a certain extent, had been lucky. They weathered the storm in a house that kept its roof and didn't flood, had enough food and water to last them as long as they had to stay, encountered no violence, and managed to get out fairly quickly after deciding to do so. They had family outside of the city with the means to help them and places to go once they got out. On the other hand, I don't think it would be quite accurate to attribute their good fortune entirely to luck. As a part of his decision to stay, Matthew had considered the possibility of a flood. He knew the elevation of his father's house, and had some sense of how high the water might rise should a levee break. You could argue that he was lucky to have this house at his disposal, a good point, but without it, I wonder whether he would have stayed. It wasn't luck that they had enough food and water to get them through. They were certainly lucky to have places to go when they got out, but they knew they had those options when they decided to stay. They hadn't disregarded the potential risks; they anticipated them, and made decisions accordingly. The wind could have done more damage to the house than it did, one of them could have been injured more seriously than Kyle's cut toe, but in retrospect, they never really were in all that much danger, especially once the storm had passed.

So now, two years later, the question occasionally arises in conversation: what are you going to do next time? Are you going to stay or go? One temptation is to think that, having now been through a major catastrophic flood, having experienced and witnessed what can happen, the

residents of New Orleans know what to expect. We would respond more sensibly to the chaos and confusion both inside and outside of the city, to the uncertainty that caused so many to panic and act inappropriately. We might proceed into the madness with cooler heads.

Some might argue, given what we now know, that the only sensible thing to do, the responsible thing, would be to have an evacuation plan in place and follow it when the time comes. And this would certainly be the easiest course of action, as long as you're healthy and have somewhere to go, but it wouldn't necessarily be the most interesting.

I'm envious of those who stayed for Katrina and escaped relatively unscathed. There's a pride among some who didn't evacuate, a camaraderie. It may seem strange to want to have been closer to an event that for hundreds of thousands of people may have been the worst experience of their lives. For them, Katrina was a hell on earth, and many feel ambivalent about returning to New Orleans at all, ever, not to mention staying there for the next hurricane. No one wants a repeat of what happened at the end of August 2005, especially not any time soon. But, though we might not like to think about it, we are all fairly resigned to the inevitability of some day facing another storm. Maybe it won't be as big, maybe not as destructive, maybe we'll be more prepared, but we will have to face another hurricane. And when that time comes, we will have to make a decision either to stay or go, to cool it or blow.

If I were to stay, not due to an inability to evacuate, but by choice because I couldn't resist "being in that number," as the song says, throwing my lot in with those who stay out of some going-down-with-the-ship love for New Orleans and a stubborn faith in their own survival, then there would seem to be at least two necessary ethical considerations. First, I would have to take responsibility for my own well being and ability to leave the city should I need to, though the goal would be to stay for the duration. I should not have to depend on being rescued, should not divert assistance from those who were unable to leave. This kind of self sufficiency, however, may not be totally under my control. Second, it wouldn't be fair to put those who love me and decide to evacuate themselves through the worry that we all experienced over Matthew,

Jennie, and Kyle, when we were unable to contact them. The ability to continue to communicate in the event of a general communication breakdown would be essential.

Considering that I left for both Ivan and Katrina, there's a good chance that I'd leave again. At the same time, though, I'd hate to miss something major. I once said, after Katrina, that if I knew in advance that a storm would be trivial, I might leave just to duck the inconvenience; but if I knew it would be an historic event, as Katrina turned out to be, I think I would want to be there, in New Orleans. I would want to be able to add my witness to the account. It's true that the hundreds of thousands of people who chose to evacuate in 2005 are also a part of this city's history, and their stories may also ripen into legend. But as I listen in bars and on back porches, those are not the stories I hear. The story I hear, in as many ways as there are people telling it, is the story of New Orleans. And if you're gone, you miss it.

Vita

Todd Schrenk was born in New Orleans where he graduated from Jesuit High School in 1989. He received a B.F.A. in Theater from The Theatre School at DePaul University in Chicago in 1993. He then moved to New York City where he lived for eight years, during which time his play *Stuck in the Groovebucket* was produced at Center Stage New York in 1998. He left New York in 2001 for Austin, Texas where his wife Trish earned her Master's in Library and Information Science from the University of Texas. He and Trish returned to New Orleans in 2003, where they currently live. This collection is representative of Mr. Schrenk's two years of work in the University of New Orleans's Creative Writing Workshop.