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Power

Becky Retz

University of New Orleans

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Notes:

The set consists of two worn wooden chairs, center stage, facing the audience and flanking a small table between them. On the table are an unlit candle, matches, and a book. An ice chest sits in front of the table.

Characters:

MARGIE is a youngish 40-something woman who is dressed for hot weather. She wears a tank top and baggy shorts. Her hair is pulled into a high messy ponytail. She has on no make-up. Her feet are bare. She is a New Orleans girl – happy and practical in nature, kind in manner.

JAMES is 30-something. He is an American male, handsome in a well-groomed, academic sort of way. He's dressed in khakis and an oxford cloth shirt. He carries a satchel over his shoulder. He is serious and on a mission.

Setting:

The front balcony of MARGIE's home, after a storm. The electricity is out.

(MARGIE sits in one of the chairs. She is in quiet repose – body relaxed, eyes closed. She opens her eyes and sits up when she hears a voice offstage right.)

JAMES

Ah, hello? Ms. Gauchet (Gou-chet)? It's James Sanders. Dr. Roger from the university sent me.

MARGIE

Come on in. I'm on the balcony.

(JAMES enters and extends his hand.)

JAMES

Thanks for seeing me, Ms. Gauchet, especially at a time like this.

MARGIE

It's actually pronounced Go-shay. It's French. You know, French town. And I'm happy to help, if I can. The storm's over. The electricity's out. My schedule is pretty open. So Dr. Roger said you've come from Washington to do some type of research?

JAMES

Yes, I'm here to study post-storm response, in order to ascertain the relative strengths and weaknesses of municipalities' emergency systems. We're taking a bottom-up approach, if you will, looking at the problem from the citizen's point-of-view. The data we collect will then be analyzed, and the analysis published in a report to be presented at the International Symposium on Catastrophic Strategies.

MARGIE

And that information will then be passed on to local communities to help improve their emergency efforts?

JAMES

I suppose it could. I'm on the academic side. But, if nothing else, adding to the body of knowledge is always a step forward.

MARGIE

I guess. Where did you ride out the storm?

JAMES

Oh, I didn't. I helicoptered in a couple of hours ago after the last squall had passed.

MARGIE

Here from Washington two hours after a storm. Y'all have really upped your game.

JAMES

Sorry?

MARGIE

Never mind. You were saying?

JAMES

Yes, that's why I'm starting with you, because your neighborhood was within walking distance. My shoes got rather wet, but that's the price one pays for being in the thick of it.

MARGIE

Yes, wet shoes are one of the pitfalls of storm season. We need to get you some swamp boots.

JAMES

Pardon?

MARGIE

Nothing. You really should take those off and let them dry out.

JAMES

If you don't think it would be inappropriate. They are quite uncomfortable.

(He takes them off.)

MARGIE

It's fine. Power outages are very casual affairs.

JAMES

Now, Ms. Gauchet...

MARGIE

Please call me Margie.

JAMES

Very well. And I'm James. Now, from your experience, how long will it take before the electricity is restored?

MARGIE

It's hard to say. The utility poles are still up. That's good. My guess is two to three days.

JAMES

Two to three days?

MARGIE

It could be sooner. It is an election year.

JAMES

What do you do till then?

MARGIE

Mostly, sweat. *(She smiles.)*

JAMES

Yes, it is rather warm.

(He pulls on the front of his shirt to let in air.)

MARGIE

You haven't seen anything yet. We'll be heading into the hottest part of the day pretty soon.

JAMES

Yes. I've looked over the numbers for post-storm temperature and humidity levels relative to time-of-day. So, I'm prepared for that.

MARGIE

Me, too. Wine?

(She pulls two glasses and a wine bottle from the ice chest.)

JAMES

No thank you. I'm working. Besides, it's not nearly five yet.

MARGIE

You're thinking of regular time. It's always five o'clock when you're on storm time. *(She pours the wine in her glass and raises it in his direction.)* To gaining knowledge.

(She takes a sip.)

JAMES

My next question: There's an awful lot of debris in the street. How soon will the clean-up crews begin clearing it away?

MARGIE

(She laughs.)

Well, I'd say about six-thirty or seven o'clock, when it starts to cool down a little, my neighbors and I will grab rakes and a bunch of garbage bags, and get to it.

JAMES

You mean you do the work yourselves? The government doesn't take care of that?

MARGIE

I think city hall's a little busy right now, trying to get the electricity back on, and making sure people in hospitals are OK, and trying to keep the inmates in parish prison. Of course there will be workers to clear giant fallen trees in the road or downed power lines, but this is our neighborhood. We take care of it. We're not a wealthy city. We don't expect other people to come along and clean up our messes. We take care of our own. Speaking of which, you're starting to look pretty overheated there.

JAMES

I am feeling a bit hot. I have some water in my bag.

(She takes out a water bottle, opens it, and gives it to him.)

MARGIE

You're alright. Just drink it slowly. And when you finish, why don't you at least roll up your sleeves and relax. It's only going to get worse.

JAMES

But I'm supposed to interview three more people today. I have a deadline.

MARGIE

James, there are no deadlines when you're on storm time. Just kick it down a notch...or ten.

JAMES

(Drinking his water and recovering somewhat)

You were saying that this isn't a wealthy city.

MARGIE

It never has been, well, except around the 1810s, but that was because the Americans had taken over and moved the center of slave trade here. And surprise, surprise, if you're willing to buy and sell people, it's not that hard to make a lot of money. But I digress. Please...

JAMES

With a lack of a robust economy, in a city known for its laissez-faire attitude, and a failing education system, what is the impetus to stay in such a place?

MARGIE

Wow, you just asked me whether I choose to live in a poor city because I'm lazy or because I'm stupid.

JAMES

Not at all. I know that the city's culture of food and music and flowing libations is quite alluring to even the most intelligent...

MARGIE

(Interrupting, she fills both their wine glasses as she speaks.)

Culture, James, is not about eating and dancing and getting drunk. Culture is about the world people create, based on their philosophy. But I'm afraid you won't understand, because you come from one of those grid places.

JAMES

What?

(He absently rolls up his sleeves as he listens.)

MARGIE

Washington, D.C. It's one of those places where the streets are laid out in a grid. In such a place, the prevailing philosophy is that man holds the ultimate power on earth, and therefore imposes his will on nature – in the form of an orderly street

grid. Here, our streets bend and wind, because they follow the curve of the river. We don't impose our will. We respect the awesome power of nature.

JAMES

So you resign yourselves to a perpetual state of victimhood?

MARGIE

No. Man has power. He's just not the only force in the universe. Nature can take control at a moment's notice. In our three-hundred-year history, we have been constantly reminded of that truth – including with our most destructive storm, which was able to wreak havoc only after it overwhelmed levees built by Washington. Maybe that wasn't so much a lesson for us, as it was for y'all. (*She smiles.*)

JAMES

Alright, say all that is true. Why would you stay in a place where you are constantly faced with such an awful truth?

MARGIE

Because it isn't awful. It's awesome. Where you live, man is in charge. That leads to a desire for the most competitive business environment, the best schools, the highest standard of living. Where I live, man and nature exist in a continuum. That means man's not always in charge. Sometimes, like right now, he can let go and just be.

(She sits back in her chair and closes her eyes, adopting a pose similar to that she was in at the opening of the play.)

JAMES

God, it's hot.

(He grabs his glass of wine and takes a big swig.)

MARGIE

That's just nature, in her awesome power, kicking your ass.

JAMES

(Looking over and noticing her with her eyes closed)

Did you pass out from the heat?

MARGIE

(Smiling, but not opening her eyes)

No. I'm just enjoying the breeze.

JAMES

I don't feel any breeze.

MARGIE

(She opens one eye and playfully looks at him.)

If you can't feel the breeze, you're not being still enough.

(She turns her head forward again, closing both eyes. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He takes a sip of wine and sits back, emulating her pose. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. His body relaxes. He smiles.)

JAMES

I feel it.

(She smiles in response, as the lights come on.)