

5-20-2011

Writing Home

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Writing Home

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, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Nonfiction Writing

By
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B.L.S. Loyola University, 1994
M.A. University of New Orleans, 1998

May 2011

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
George and Viola Molnar, with whom I shared many homes.

Also, I would like to thank the many generous teachers who
helped me along the way: Dr. Kris Lackey, Dr. Carol Gelderman,
and last, but never least, Dr. Randy Bates

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Abstract

The following group of themed essays explores the author's relationship with the many homes she has had. The works are autobiographical, and they begin during the author's childhood as an Air Force Brat. After exploring a series of homes across the United States, including Honolulu, the work focuses on the author's transition from living in many places to life in one city, New Orleans, Louisiana, where the author grew up.

This collection also examines homelessness. Just as the author was searching for a new home along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, she became homeless after hurricane Katrina. Although the author had had the opportunity to make many apartments a "home," homelessness offered her the opportunity to explore what it is that makes a house or apartment a home.

Key words: home, homelessness, longing for home

***For the real houses of memory, the houses
that are rich in unalterable oneirism
do not readily lend themselves to description.***

Gaston Bachelard

Prologue:
More Than a Place to Hang My Hat

My fascination with living spaces began during my nomadic childhood. I was an Air Force brat, and, before I walked into a kindergarten classroom, I had crossed the United States from coast to coast and moved to an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. My father, mother, two older sisters and I resided, it seemed to me, more often in our '56 Plymouth -- our home on wheels -- than in a house. Early on I began a mental list of all the places where we lived. It was my way of remembering all of the homes where we celebrated Christmas, had visits from family, and lived -- usually happily, occasionally not.

When the traveling ended and we went to live in my mom's home town of New Orleans the list of homes grew longer. After so many years on the road, my parents could not settle down and buy a house. Just as we had moved every few years during my father's Air Force career, every two or three years we found a new apartment in New Orleans. We lived uptown, downtown, and once on a wide boulevard that cut through town, Elysian Fields, where I used to pretend that I lived among the heroic Greeks I read about in my sister's mythology books. But mostly we lived in Lakeview, a neighborhood near Lake Pontchartrain, the large body of water that is the city's northern border. After I flew the familial coop, I added each apartment I lived in as an adult to my list.

At the late age of forty-five, I began to yearn for a small house that belonged only to me. I wanted a place where I could plant hyacinth bulbs in

October and know I would be there in April to see them blossom. And even though I was not sure how I would pay for it, I wanted a mortgage. I believed that signing a document that said a certain structure was mine would define a new relationship between me and my living space.

Just as it seemed that the American dream to own a home was within my reach, I became homeless. Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast in August 2005, and it forced flood waters onto the streets of New Orleans and tidal surges onto the Gulf Coast. Over a hundred square miles of homes from New Orleans to the Alabama Coast were destroyed. Bay St. Louis, the small waterfront town in Mississippi where I hoped to buy a home, was hit by a twenty-five foot tidal surge. Many of the small, wooden houses on my list of potential purchases were washed into the Gulf. The city's seeming invulnerability – much of Bay St. Louis sat upon a high bluff – was destroyed along with the city. Thousands of its residents – some of them my close friends – lost their homes.

When I returned to New Orleans from my evacuation and viewed flood-ravaged houses, my fascination with living spaces transformed. I had always thought of living space as a kind of sanctuary. The devastation revealed how fragile houses are. And I realized that my list of homes - almost as old as I – was a mere recitation of the locations where I'd lived. Addresses seemed meaningless as I toured darkened streets that had been thriving neighborhoods only weeks ago.

Just before Christmas of 2006 an acquaintance of mine made an off-the-cuff remark that, although insignificant to her, solidified the idea that I needed to rewrite my list of homes. I no longer remember the name of the woman who I arranged to meet in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi in December of 2007. I can see her pale face against her cropped red hair and her large brown eyes. I imagined that she, like my sister who sat across from me, was really a brunet. We had all met in the Bay because it was a convenient place to return a manuscript to the red-haired lady and meet my sister, who lived in Mobile, for a pre-Christmas lunch.

The three of us were sitting at a table near a window in the Mockingbird Café, a coffee shop about four blocks from the Bay. In the Bird, I watched Katrina babies who were just beginning to crawl and stand on their own as grave markers were still being placed in the cemetery a block down the street. In hurricane time, a year is no time at all.

My acquaintance, my sister, and I were making polite conversation, and, inevitably, the storm came up. Perhaps I asked the woman if she had finished fixing her house, or how her house weathered the storm. I don't remember the exact question I asked, but she assured me that her house had taken the storm well.

"Roof damage, that's all. But we got it fixed right away." Then she went on eating her sandwich.

"That's great," I said. I had tired of the endless recitations of how people had gutted their houses and thrown out pictures that could never be replaced. It was good to hear a story with a happy ending for a change.

"The hardest part for me," I said, "was that, for the first time in my life, I was homeless. I found it," and I hesitated for a moment because my homeless period often brought me to tears, "Let's just say, it was one of the hardest things I've lived through."

The woman stopped eating long enough to say matter of factly, "Oh, home is anywhere I hang my hat."

No home I've lived in, however temporarily, had been just that – a place to hang my hat. I remembered fondly even my most temporary residences. More than forty years after I lived there, I still remembered the too-small apartment my parents, sisters, and I lived in for a few months in downtown Honolulu before we got base housing. That apartment might have been too close for five people – we always seemed to be in each other's way – but it was two blocks from Weikiki Beach, and, for a short while, I was a five year-old beach bum. I went without shoes most days, rode in beach buggies, and hung out with surfers who lugged their boards back and forth to the water all day long. A place where I hung my hat? Never.

I thought about the apartments and houses where I'd lived and I wondered what had made those many places home to me, rather than the anywhere, anyplace shelter where the woman at the table lived. What had I

found homey about them? Why had I viewed them as a sanctuary? Like a person solving an intricate puzzle, I wanted to know the essence of homes.

I began to rewrite my list of homes, which appears in the final pages of this work. As I wrote, my list transformed from a recitation of geographies to a celebration of what made the places I remembered more than just a house or an apartment.

I realized that although I'd lived many places, I'd had but two homes – my father's home on the road and my mother's home in New Orleans. I was on my way to a home of my own in Bay St. Louis when my search for a mortgage got interrupted. I can recall all of the homes I lived in still, perhaps not as well as I used to, but the memories remain.

My Father's Home

Something I'll Never Forget

My father loved traveling. He also loved flying. And in that way that fathers who want to see the world sometimes want to show the world to their families, Pop showed the United States to my mother, two older sisters, and me. Every time the Air Force moved my father, Pop moved us. We crossed the country from shore to shore until we settled near the beach in Hawaii. By the time I was seven, my father's poor health had ended his Air Force career and our traveling days came to a sad and final end. But until that happened, life with Pop was a stream of plans to move, to travel, to fly.

When I was a child, my suitcase was always packed. I was born in Baltimore, although I missed a Florida arrival by only months. While we lived near the capitol Pop carried me, on his broad shoulders, to the top of the Washington Monument, up and down the Smithsonian Mall, and around every monument that could be walked or driven past. When we moved to Fourteenth Air Force Headquarters in Georgia, we visited my mother's family in New Orleans whenever the opportunity presented itself. From the same shoulders that had supported me when we walked around the Smithsonian mall, I watched Mardi Gras parades in a clown costume. From the South we moved west. We walked through national parks, saw Old Faithful erupt, visited Indian reservations, passed through the Mojave Desert - probably as we traveled along Route 66- went up and down the Rocky Mountains, drove through the middle of giant

redwoods older than I imagined a tree could be, and visited Disneyland all before we wound up in the middle of the Pacific.

We moved from the mainland to Honolulu at the end of the summer of 1960, when we left Warner Robbins Air Force Base outside of Macon, Georgia, for Hickham Air Force Base outside of Honolulu. It happened this way: one day Pop came home from work and said, "You've got a choice – do you want to live in Alaska or Hawaii?" Because of my age – I was five that summer – I asked my oldest sister Liz where these places were.

"Alaska is cold; Hawaii is paradise. Go tell Pop you want to live in Hawaii," she said.

I didn't know where paradise was, but I knew I wanted to live there. When my father came home from work that evening, I was waiting for him. As he walked into the kitchen, I said, "I want to live in Hawaii."

Pop was taken aback. His choice was Alaska, but Mom and my older sisters had already begun to talk about beaches. Usually, he gently coerced me into seeing things his way, but not this time. My father stared down at me and sighed.

"Don't you want to see the Aurora Borealis?" Pop said.

He was disappointed to learn that I did not. In the face of overwhelming opposition, my father requested traveling papers for the Pacific by the end of the week.

Before we left the continental states, Pop decided that he wanted us to see "See America." He devised a plan that involved driving us from the Atlantic to the Pacific. My father had not crossed the continent other than in a plane since he was nineteen when, clad in jeans and a leather jacket, he left his family home in a small, coal-mining town in Pennsylvania on his Harley. Because it might be years before we returned to the continental United States - Pop was already planning to move to Germany after his time in Hawaii was over - he wanted to show us the countryside he had seen when he was a young man.

We began the process of giving away furniture, clothes, my swing set from the back yard, and the family pet - a parakeet I loved. A few weeks later, we left the blood-red clay of Georgia behind us in less than a day and were on our way to see America.

My parents, a study in opposites, occupied the front seat of our red fifty-six Plymouth. My father, a seasoned combat veteran and career soldier, had a broad chest and forearms that looked fiercely strong. He wore his hair, just beginning to gray, always in regulation crew cut, and he carried about him an attitude of quiet strength. His numerous tours of combat duty had taught him to remain calm especially when he was frustrated or tired.

Mom was almost five feet five inches tall, but her slender build made her seem smaller than she actually was. Her beautiful jet black hair reminded me of Snow White, and whenever I looked at my almost transparent, flax-colored hair, I envied the statement her dark hair made. Bright red Fire and Ice lipstick

accented her hair and complexion, and the flowery scent of Chanel No. 5, a gift from one of Pop's overseas trips, drifted off her body and into the back seat. But while Pop was a warrior, Mom was a worrier, and she often became impatient and flustered in difficult circumstances.

Opposites in appearance and disposition, my parents' feelings about traveling were also disparate. Whenever Pop was transferred from one part of the country to another, life on the road presented them with a challenge. Beneath their manners lay the struggle between my father's wanderlust and my mother's domesticity. Yet they loved each other, and, even when they fought, they seldom got ugly. Their disagreements were usually battles of will. My father used his passive aggressive quietude to his advantage. Mom's solicitousness, sometimes about events that had not taken place, was useless in the face of Pop's stoicism. To Mom's consternation, he usually won any argument, although he never gloated.

I spent our months traveling in the back seat of a car without air conditioning sandwiched in between my older sisters, Liz and Patsy. My middle sister Patsy had just turned thirteen. Her dark hair was bobbed short under her ears and her upturned nose and dimpled smile hinted that she would become the cheerleader. From Georgia to California, Patsy squirmed her way across the country as if the same hormones that were transforming her into a young adult were propelling her into constant motion. I rebelled against her assaults to use

me as a pillow or to push me closer to my oldest sister so that she would have more room, but with little success. All day long, I worked to dislodge Patsy's bony elbow from my ribcage when she shifted in her seat.

My oldest sister, Liz, one of the tallest people in my family, was as patient as Patsy was melodramatic. She, too, had dark hair and glasses. Liz read constantly, and she was my lifeline of information. She showed me the route we traveled on the map. When we crossed state lines, Liz we told me what states we were entering.

"Look, Barbie," she said, "here's Mississippi and here's Louisiana. We've been to Louisiana before."

"Uh-huh"

"We're going to see Aunt Carrie in New Orleans before we move on to Texas," she told me.

I'd heard the names Mississippi and Louisiana when we visited mom's family. Texas, though, was unfamiliar.

"Liz, what's Texas?" I said.

"It's a state."

I considered her answer before I asked my next question "Liz: what's a state?"

After a few unsuccessful attempts explaining state and federal governments to me, Liz sighed and said, "Oh, Barbara, one day you're going to understand."

I tried hard to believe her.

The country my father wanted us to see passed in front of me. Interstate Highways were new fangled in the early '60s, and Pop avoided them. In a homage to those trips he made in the thirties on his Harley, we traveled mostly on two-lane state highways and straight down the Main Street of countless small towns. This route offered few amenities to a traveler with a needy family, and when I said that I needed to use the bathroom, Pop searched for a stretch of road that offered a large bush discreetly tucked away from the road. After I assayed the situation, I offered him the only response that a loyal daughter could give to the father she loved – a quiet and dignified “No.”

“One of your sisters will go with you,” he said.

“No.”

“Young lady.”

“*Mom.*”

We were all Daddy’s Girls, until he treated us like soldiers on bivouac.

As we traveled along the Gulf Coast, we stopped for a couple of days in New Orleans, my mom’s home, to visit her family and walked down Decatur Street to Morning Call where we lunched on café au lait and beignets. Then we headed on to middle America, where we passed through cow field after cow field, wheat field after wheat field, and eventually from plain to mountain.

For five months, I lived in a hot, red Plymouth. Those were the closest quarters I ever occupied, but they had great view. Pop glanced back at us from time to time and said, "Girls, you're seeing America. You're never going to forget this."

We nodded in silent, skeptical assent.

Pop had wanted to show us the beauty of the mountains since we left the driveway of our home in Georgia. He believed that sunrise in the mountains was beautiful, and, once we arrived in the Rockies, Pop roused us out of bed, fed us, and had us on the road before daybreak. Coffee cup in the hand that didn't hold the steering wheel, Pop drove silently into the dawn. Sleepy-eyed, I watched the sun peek over the mountain tops and light up the hard, brown flanks of the Rockies. I hung my head out of a window to see the light as it crept into the valley and revealed life in the void beneath us. Hot air whipped against my face as the car turned upward to the top of the mountain, higher and higher, until it appeared to me that my father was driving us into the clouds. The mountains seemed to be a sacred place, like church, but much different.

We never saw Pop consult a map, but we knew that he had flown around the world. Proudly he told us about the times when his instruments failed him while he was flying and he had to "fly by the stars." We had no hesitation about driving off into an unknown destination with my father.

Day after day we circled around a mountain to reach its top, and then circled down to begin the process again. Two weeks later, the experience was no longer sublime. Often, we saw no other cars for hours. We couldn't find clean bathrooms, or a decent restaurant where we could stop for lunch. The hotels we located offered few amenities – no television for my sisters and me to watch after a long day in the car. And they were not clean, at least not by our standards.

For months, my sisters and I had been relatively well-behaved. But the asceticism of the Rocky Mountains' back roads made us cranky. I complained loudly about Patsy's gyrations in the back seat. Liz tired of my endless questions. My parents took it in stride. When our complaints took an urgent tone, Pop looked back at us in the rear view mirror, and we quieted down. Although he traveled in civilian clothes, the soldier was always beneath the sports shirt. A stern look from my father could silence a room full of recruits, and it had the same effect on us.

In spite of having lived out of a suitcase for months now, Mom had managed to look pretty in the heat. But she, too, was beginning to tire. She had agreed to Pop's "Let's see America" plan with minimal resistance, but the idea no longer held the charm it did for her back in Georgia.

One afternoon, Mom was tired, and, because it was late in the day, my sisters and I were fidgety. Mom wanted Pop to find a hotel for the night, but we hadn't seen one for hours.

"You don't know where we are, do you?" More of a statement than a question as Mom spoke her voice had an accusatory inflection.

"Of course I do," my father said.

"No, you don't."

"I do," my father said firmly.

My mother shifted in her seat. "Then why are we still on this mountain? The girls want to eat. I want a bath. You can't get us out of here, can you?"

"I know where we are. You forget, I flew over the North Pole with only the stars to guide me."

My mother frowned. "You don't know where we are, do you?" she said again.

"I always know where we are. You're never lost as long as you can find a star."

"It's daytime, there are no stars, and *you* don't know how to get us out of here."

"That's enough," my father said.

"No, tell the truth. You're lost, aren't you?" Mom's voice began to take on a grating tone, and I watched Pop's face tighten. Even as a five-year-old, I knew that Pop, proud of his flying and navigation skills, would never admit to being lost.

"That's enough." Pop's voice had an edge to it.

Mom had hit a nerve. Their interchange went on for about half an hour, there was a small stretch of silence, and then the litany began again.

"Just admit it. You don't know where we are," my mother said.

"*That's enough,*" he said and became a wall of silence. Pop's passive aggressive military training had taught him how to handle people. Mom did not appreciate being handled.

"Stop the car. *Stop the car,* I mean it. I'm going home to my mother."

Most arguments between my parents involved Mom's announcement that she intended to go home to her mother, yet she never left. She never packed a suitcase or touched a door knob. She also never won an argument. Determined in his ability to resist Mom's nervous energy, as soon as those words came out of Mom's mouth, Pop would calmly look at one of us and say, "Go open the door for your mother. She's leaving us." Then he matter-of-factly went about what he was doing. My sisters and I usually giggled. Sometimes Mom did too. But months into our trip, hot and tired as we were, no one was giggling.

Again Mom said, "Stop the car. I mean it, George. I'm leaving you."

Unlike Mom, Pop was aware of the International Rules of Politics. One of the most important rules is never threaten an action you're not prepared to carry out. If you do, you give your enemy a weapon to use against you.

The next thing I knew our car stopped dead in the middle of the small, poorly traveled mountain road that we'd been on all afternoon. There we were,

in a car, not moving, in the middle of a deserted road, high in the Rocky Mountains, and Mom was going home.

My sisters and I watched as Pop slowly leaned over Mom, opened the passenger-side door, and calmly turned around to face the back seat where my sisters and I sat watching. Then we heard those words we'd heard many times before, "Say good-bye to your mother, girls. She's leaving us."

I watched Mom shift in her seat and stare at Pop. We waited in palpable silence until Mom, still in the car, slammed the door shut. Less than a minute later, Pop slowly moved on. I looked at Liz who only shook her head from side to side indicating that now was not a good time to ask a question. My father had called Mom's bluff, and she was in a tricky place. She did not, as we already knew, intend to leave. She had also lost another argument.

For the next two days, my parents said nothing to each other. When Mom wanted something, she got one of us and said, "Tell your Father that...". Pop seldom resorted to communication by proxy. He preferred instead not to talk and silently perform any duty that was necessary. My sisters and I knew that all we had to do was wait for this to blow over. Our parents fought, but they seldom remained mad at each other. By the third day, the tension disappeared. We were in California, and, in another day, we arrived at Disneyland. From there, we went on to see the giant redwoods of upper California. We settled down for a few days in San Francisco, and then we took our leave of the continental United States for the next two years.

By the California state line, the argument was a memory, but one that has stayed with me. What I discovered as an adult about our life on the road is something that, as far as I knew, my parents did not anticipate. Although I remembered as much of the scenery as a five-year-old could and many of the wonderful places we visited, I absorbed them as if they were background and not the main event. My most vivid memories from our long trip are of that microcosm of the world where I spent the summer of 1960 – our red Plymouth. I remember Patsy's unrelenting efforts to find comfort in a venue that offered little of that quality. I remember the endless questions I tortured my oldest sister with until, with a sigh, she said, "Don't worry about it, Barbara. In a few years, you'll understand." To this day, she still speaks to me like that.

Most of all, I remember the disagreement between my parents on top of a mountain. I remember my father's face when my mom accused him, the great explorer, of being lost. I remember equally as well Mom's face when Pop called her bluff. No matter how much of America I saw that summer, the trip would have lacked something without my parents' argument.

Until my mother's memories were lost in dementia, I would sometimes bring up that late afternoon high on top of the mountain. Everytime I did, her lips pursed and she said, "Your father." As much as she grieved for him when he died, she never gave him any slack for winning all of the arguments.

I'm not surprised that I grew up to love a good road trip. Whenever I find the time and gas money, I go out on the highways. I still prefer two-lane, state

highways that cut through small towns to the fast-moving, generic interstates. I feel at home there. I will be forever accustomed to their gravel-paved roads, punctuated by an intermittent white stripe. I love to stop and eat at roadside diners. The only adjustment I've made is that I order salads now instead of the bacon sandwich that was the staple of our road trips.

If I'm tired or have something to think about, these state highways are my sanctuary. As I drive, I often remember our time in the old Plymouth. I can feel the summer heat on my skin in that car and the excitement of the road. And I can see my parents locked in what passed for mortal combat between the two of them, and I smile. Pop was right; I'd never forget that trip.

Although my mind sometimes flashes shadowy memories of hallways leading to bedrooms decorated in little-girl pink and white, or basements that housed black-and-white console television sets and stacks of board games and assorted toys, the first home I remember is the 1956 red Plymouth we drove across the continental United States. I remember its shiny redness, and the wings that sprung from its back, almost as if it would take flight. I can no longer recall the color of the seats, but I can still vividly picture the round, Flying Tiger decal in the rear, driver's side window. The tiger's visage was ferocious, as if by his looks he was letting you know he would countenance no foolishness. If the Plymouth looked as if it might take to the air, the tiger's body was already poised ready for flight. He was both terrifying and fascinating.

I think of those early years of my life as my wonder years – traveling, traveling, and always meeting people. Many times I've heard civilians say, "My children won't break their routine for a week. I feel sorry for military kids who have to make new friends and go to new schools every other year." But my sisters and I weren't sorry. We knew that our cousins lived differently, yet we imagined that their lives were boring. No new places to see? No new people to meet? Their static lives seemed a living death to us.

We were not alone on the highways of America. Other wanderers were on the road with us. It was only a year or so after our trip that Steinbeck's Travels

With Charley appeared in bookstores in 1962. For the rest of Pop's life whenever the book was brought up, he said "We beat him out onto the road, you know."

The Beats had been on the road for years, but my parents were not aware of them. The Beats would only have been part of that group of people with whom my older sisters were not allowed to associate. I supposed that we were part of some post-war boom in which a number of people with access to a car and relatively cheap gasoline collided with the idea of getting in touch with their country. Whatever the motivation, we were out on the highways of America that hot summer, along with the Beats and, according to my father, Steinbeck was at home packing.

All of the places where we lived were my father's many homes because his home was the road. Pop was at home in a plane, on a train, in the car, in any vehicle that traveled. We teased him that the Hungarian blood he passed on to us was part gypsy. My father had many homes, but none of them were where he hung his hat. They were places from where he saw the world, and he saw the world most vividly from the cockpit of plane.

The Color of Paradise

The sun was a bright, yellow ball high in the mid-day sky, but the trade winds that blew across Honolulu tempered the heat. My sister and I sat comfortably on the front lawn making leis. As I threaded each dark pink hibiscus onto the cord, a viscous liquid stuck to my fingers. The flowers I had picked for my lei were on the grass beside me, and they made a splash of hot pink in the middle of the sea of green.

When Liz told me Hawaii was paradise, she had not mentioned that our lives there were going to be filled with color. In Oahu, even the beach was colorful. The water reflected the deep azure of the sky, and, as tall waves thundered toward the shore, they licked the sand with phosphorescent foam. When we departed the mainland, after spending months looking at wheat fields, cow pastures, the desert, and the sublime, yet austere Rockies, I thought I would never see color again. I could not have been more wrong.

After our car trip across country, we arrived finally in San Francisco. Impatient, I begged to be taken to China Town. I was a travel-hip five-year-old who knew that San Francisco had wonderful places to see. But we were on stand-by for military transport and so, instead of driving through China Town and taking a trolley ride, we stared at a small, black-and-white television. For three days and two nights we sat in a hotel room on the outskirts of San Francisco waiting for the call to report to the airport. Our bags remained packed while

my parents glanced solicitously at the phone. Just as it appeared that we would never leave the hotel room, our status was finally changed from stand-by to report to the airport.

In 1960, a flight leaving for a place that had recently been a territory was still uncommon and costly. My father, in his dress uniform, handed over our tickets along with his orders as my mother, in her best Sunday dress with white gloves on her hands, glanced nervously around her. She was not fond of flying. My sisters were hard on my parents' heels, and I dragged along behind them trying to take in as much as I could of San Francisco. The stewardess who leaned down to greet me asked me the name of the doll that I carried in the crook of my arm.

"Pixie," I said.

"Would you like a ticket for her?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I said shyly. Soon after I settled in my seat, the stewardess placed a ticket for Pixie in my hands.

It was same stewardess, minus her smile, who took away my tray a few hours later because, as children sometimes do, I coughed up my lunch on the tray.

I napped for a while, and, when I woke, my father looked at my mother and said, "She's better now. It's time."

"George, are you sure?" my mother said anxiously.

"I want her to see the cockpit." My father no longer had flying papers because of his health, yet his love of flying had not diminished since his youth. He knew the pilot and had arranged for all of us to visit the cockpit. My sisters had taken the tour while I slept. My mother, terrified of flying, white-knuckled the entire trip from her seat and refused her invitation.

My father looked down at me and said, "Barbara, do you want to see the cockpit?"

"Okay," I replied.

"Alright," my father said. He stood up and continued his instructions as he reached for my hand, "Behave yourself in there, and *don't touch anything*. You've been invited to see something special."

It took only a minute to take the wobbly walk up the aisle to the cockpit of the plane. The small, semi-circular enclosure held three men - a pilot, co-pilot, and another man whose purpose I did not know - along with the most instrument panels I had seen in my young life. I knew the name of some of those instruments. I knew what an altimeter was because my father had explained to me that the altimeter told the pilot how high up in the air the plane was. The third man sat in the left rear of the cockpit by something that resembled a telescope. I had not yet looked out of the cockpit window because my attention was focused on the third man in the corner. I wanted to know what he was doing.

The pilot turned back towards me and said, "Hello." I smiled back, but I was still focused on the man with the telescope-like machine.

"We're almost to the Hawaiian Islands. You're going to like living there." I nodded in agreement without looking at him. "As a matter of fact, the islands just came into view. There they are," he said.

The pilot got my full attention when he mentioned the Islands. I was eager to see where we were going to live. I turned my gaze forward, and as I did, I saw not only the distant, brown specks in the ocean that were to be my new home, but something else, something unexpected and beautiful. The sun had begun to set over the Islands and gigantic swatches of rainbow colors filled the sky over the place where we were going to live. Mile-wide patches of azure blue, bright yellow, and orange, bold green, and vibrant red shone as far as I could see. After two years of living with the dark, blood-red clay of Georgia, the brownness of our travels across the country, and confinement in our Plymouth and a series of miniscule hotel rooms, the expansive, multicolored light show I saw captivated me. I stood transfixed, too young to know the words to describe what I was feeling.

I eventually learned the physics of what happened that day. Every drop of moisture in clouds acts as a tiny prism that, when the circumstances are right, can reflect and refract the colors of the setting sun. That's what I saw – millions of tiny prisms painting the sky with patches of rainbow colors in every direction.

When I told my father in our Georgia home that I wanted to live in Paradise, I was parroting what my sister told me to say. When I stood beside him in the plane's cockpit looking at something that was, to me, more beautiful than the Aurora Borealis, I began to understand what paradise was.

The color-filled horizon I saw from the cock pit of the plane was only a harbinger of good things to come. Exotic, jewel-colored flowers grew wild in Hawaii's rich volcanic soil, and my sisters and I made many leis from those flowers. I can still feel the stickiness that remained on my fingers when my petal-ring was finished and I placed it around my neck.

In spite of the fact that Hawaii was an island - which I believed meant that we were going to live in a small place - everything appeared expansive, especially the deep blue sky that reflected in the ocean water. I loved the ocean the most. My father, in search of a cheap way to entertain me, would take me to the beach. We'd find a place to sit and watch the surfers as they rushed toward land on their sleek boards, ducking and swaying to stay on their feet as they rode the monstrous waves. Pop swore that he could predict who would make it to shore and get to step off his board in the sand and who would wipe out.

"That one," he lean down to me and say, "He's going to make it. That's the one." I'd shake my head in his disbelief, demonstrating my distrust in his prognosticating skills. But he was always confident that he'd made the correct choice. Then we'd watch. Amazingly, he often made the right choice. When I accused him of cheating, he'd feign pain. "You don't trust me," he'd say.

I remember those hours at the ocean - watching surfers, listening to the roar of the Pacific, feeling its spray on my body as it rushed toward the shore -

and I still long for the island. The ocean is a jealous lover; it will come back to you, in your dreams and your imagination, whenever it can.

My father's jealous lover was flying. His home, the place where he found sanctuary was in a plane. I never think of my father – long gone from this life – without remembering his love of flight.

I wanted to remain in Honolulu, but that was not to be. When we left paradise, I entered a new phase of life. No more would I live in my father's home, the ever-changing home. Now I would live in one city, cupped between two bodies of water much smaller than the ocean. I would live in my mother's home.

My Mother's Home

St. Tommy

St. Thomas was the disciple who had to touch Christ's wounds because his mind could not grasp the idea that faith involved belief even when the world and his senses offered no reason to believe. In some religious traditions, St. Thomas became the patron saint of doubters. For twentieth century New Orleanians, the name St. Thomas not only evoked Christ's skeptical disciple, but also one of the city's largest public housing projects. From 1941 until its destruction in the early part of the twenty-first century, the St. Thomas Housing Development occupied acres of land in the Irish Channel, a low-income neighborhood in uptown New Orleans. Only blocks away from the mansions of millionaires and Mardi Gras kings in the Garden District and on St. Charles Avenue, the St. Thomas Housing Development was home to people who required public assistance in order to meet basic expenses.

The residents sometimes referred to the St. Thomas Housing Development's over-sized, red brick apartment buildings as the St. Tommy. If St. Thomas was the patron saint of doubters, then St. Tommy was the patron saint of people who usually believed in God, but often doubted themselves. Public housing was intended to be a temporary shelter for the poor until they became economically solvent, and many residents of the St. Tommy passed through those brick buildings on to a better life. But other people, those who could not

overcome their disappointments, fears, or failures lived in the St. Tommy until they died.

New Orleans's warehouse-style public housing developments like the St. Tommy grew out of an effort in the late 1930's to build housing for the poor who, during the throes of the Depression, needed assistance. The city's Housing Authority razed sections of older neighborhoods whose architecturally beautiful structures had fallen into disrepair. The last, colorful vestiges of Storyville were taken down for the Iberville Housing Project that abutted the French Quarter, and the St. Thomas Housing Project replaced a large portion of the Irish Channel's wooden, camel back houses and creole cottages. My mother and my grandmother lived in both of those projects, and my grandmother died in the St. Tommy. I visited my maternal grandmother, who everyone called Annie, in her apartment in the St. Tommy in the early 1960's, shortly before she died. I knew Annie briefly, yet both she and her home made a lasting impression on me.

In the summer of 1961, my father became ill, and the Air Force decided to retire him. My mother, two older, teen-age sisters, and I left Hickham Air Force base outside Honolulu and came to live in New Orleans, my mother's home. We moved in with my mother's aunt in a shot-gun double on Jackson Avenue and Annunciation Street, one of the borders of the Irish Channel. Our job was to find a home where my father would join us when he separated from the Air Force.

Two blocks west and one block south of our home was the St. Tommy. Even though my grandmother lived only blocks away in the project, we didn't

visit Annie for a few months after we moved to New Orleans. My mother said that Annie was tired and needed rest. My mom's sister, Florence, and two of her children, Armande and Diane, lived with grandma. Mom thought two more teenagers and a seven year-old would be too much for Annie.

The woman we didn't visit occupied much of my imagination. A grandmother was a luxury for a military child. Usually, we lived hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away from grandparents. Plane tickets and long distance phone calls were expensive, so a grandmother was a signature on a Christmas card or, occasionally, a voice on the other end of the phone during the holidays. I had met Annie before, when we visited for Mardi Gras. Mom had dressed me in a clown costume, and I was perched upon my father's shoulders in the crowd watching the parade. My mother waved to an older woman who walked over to us. I was very young, perhaps four years old, so my mother's family was the background to the event that held my attention – the costumes, floats, and beads. All I recalled was that my maternal grandmother and I were acquainted. She faded out of my life when we left the mainland United States.

Even though I was not yet allowed to visit my grandmother, I imagined her house as a spacious, welcoming home with a fire place and a large, friendly dog, another treat unknown to a military child who moved every other year. I pictured myself in my grandmother's comfortable kitchen, baking cookies. Only when we had spent a long, happy day together would my mother appear and take me home. Driven by these fantasies, I asked repeatedly to visit Annie, but

my mother was firm. Her mother, like my father, had a weak heart, and too many children were not good for her.

One day mom came to pick me up from St. Alphonsus School, the catholic grammar school across the street from the St. Tommy, and she told me that were going to see her mother. I was both excited and scared. I wanted to know my grandmother; I wanted to see her, to sit in her lap, and talk with her. Yet, the surprise unsettled me. I suddenly wondered if the woman I had met a few years ago would like me. With mixed feelings, I held on to my mother's hand as we walked further into the housing development than I had ever been before.

Because of my father's Air Force career, we had lived in a variety of places, but I had never seen public housing's warehouse-style buildings. As we traveled, we sometimes slept in strip motels along state highways when we were too tired to keep going. When we settled in at my father's new assignments, we had to wait for base housing, and we lived for months in tiny apartments. None of the places we'd passed through looked like the St. Tommy.

All of the structures in the housing development were situated around green quadrangles, but none of the open spaces took away from the closed-up nature of the place. The three-story apartment buildings blocked out light, so the grass was a yellow-brown color that indicated it had been alternately starved for water and then for sunlight. Although the excitement about meeting my

grandmother was fast overcoming my childlike timidity, the surroundings kept me uneasy.

When my mother and I walked into the hallway of Annie's building, I saw a series of doors, stairways, and dimly lit corridors. The building had no air conditioning and the air was hot and stagnant. We climbed up the creaky stairs to Annie's split level apartment on the second and third floor of her building. I don't recall how many entrances Annie's apartment had, but we knocked at a door that led to the kitchen. A short, sunken-chested woman with gray hair, my maternal grandmother, opened the door. Although Annie and my mother had not seen each other in years, Mom kissed her lightly on the cheek as if they had parted only a few days ago.

"Mom, you remember Barbie, don't you," my mother said.

Annie said hello as we entered her apartment, and, like my mother, treated the reunion lightly. No hugs, no kisses. Instead, she asked me if I wanted something to drink. I took a small, bottled Coke from her and sat down on her worn couch while my mom explained to her mom that dad was sick and would soon retire from the Air Force.

I don't remember much about Annie from our first meeting except that she was kind. I did, however, remember her apartment. All of her counters were covered. Laundry detergent, odd pieces of clothing, and mismatched dishes were piled up in no particular order, and her furniture was in disarray. It looked as if it had just been moved and left -- anywhere. As Mom and I walked back to

her aunt's shot-gun double, I made a comment -- what exactly I can't recall -- about Annie's furniture.

"It was just moved, Barbara," my mother said. "Your grandmother is scared. She moves furniture against the door every night so people can't break in, and then moves it away from the door in the morning." Mom looked straight ahead as she spoke. "We don't have the money to bring them all to live with us. When your father gets out of the hospital and back on his feet, maybe your grandmother can come live with us. But he can't support two families now that he's sick." Mom's face was almost expressionless, except for the downward curve of her mouth. I knew she would have liked to have brought Annie home with us.

The fall of 1961 turned to winter. My father had been hospitalized shortly after we left Honolulu, and he was transferred from the facility in Hawaii to the hospital at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi. Mom was distracted by his absence and his illness, but, as Christmas approached, my sisters and I forced her into the spirit of the season. We had moved into an apartment, and we decorated it for the holidays. While we were shopping, Mom purchased a gift for Annie. She told me that we would go see Annie soon to deliver the gift. Mom had never announced a visit days in advance.

We arrived at Annie's apartment shortly before Christmas, and she and Mom sat at the crowded kitchen table and talked. When Diane and Armande

came home from school, they said hello and went upstairs to their rooms. Bored, I eyed Annie's hard wood stairs. I walked up a few stairs to get something that lay upon one of the stairs, - a glossy magazine with pictures on its cover, perhaps a copy of *Life*. Instead of picking up the magazine, I began to climb the stairs, and, as I did, my black and white saddle oxfords made a loud thumping sound on each stair. Once I reached the second floor, I turned around and thumped my way downstairs. I loved the sound the soles of my oxfords made when they came in contact with the stairs. I went up and down, and, as I did, I began to create a percussive symphony. Thump, thump, thump, pause. Then a faster thump, thump, pause. With the kind of repetitive, noisy action that children love, I climbed up and down the stairs, and Annie's apartment reverberated with the sound of my hard-soled school shoes on her wooden stairs.

"Barbara, stop that," my mother said tersely.

I froze. No one in my family liked noise. I had been taught by my parents and my older sisters that making noise was a grave offense.

"Leave her alone," Annie said authoritatively. "She's not doing anything." My mother was silent.

I had never seen anyone, not even my father, silence my mother with a single phrase. At that moment, I realized I loved Annie. For the rest of the visit, my mother said nothing to me, and, on the way home, she did not admonish me for all of the noise I had made.

Before we left, Annie handed me a wrapped package that I took anxiously from her hands. When I removed the green and red wrapping paper I was rewarded with a child's tea set made of plastic. In the center of each white piece were large, ripe-looking grapes. Although the gift was not fancy, I was surprised and flattered to receive it. Annie had very little money, and I had been told not to expect anything.

"Thank you," I said shyly. Annie said nothing.

A few months later I woke one Sunday morning to find my sisters somber faced. They stood around my mother who was crying. No one spoke to me. I looked questioningly at all of them, until someone, it might have been my middle sister, told me Annie had been found dead in her apartment. Death was a new experience for me. I walked towards Mom, but my oldest sister took me back to my bedroom and played cards with me. She told me that Mom needed to be alone for a while.

"Don't bother Mom with a lot of questions for the next few days, ok, Barbie?" my oldest sister, Lizzie, said. I nodded.

The next day, Mom took me with her to the funeral home. My aunts were there, and I sat quietly while they made arrangements. When it was over, we went to catch a bus home. Mom was upset.

"She never got over my father's death or Frank's," Mom said while we waited for the bus, although I had asked her no questions. "Your grandmother died of a broken heart."

Whenever I thought of Annie, I remembered my mother's words. I saw her small apartment with its furniture in disarray, and I pictured her dead from a broken heart in the St. Tommy.

Perhaps twenty years later, I found a picture of Annie when she was a young woman neatly tucked into the pages of my grandfather's prayer book. It was a sepia-toned photograph printed on thick, cardboard-like paper. Annie appeared to be in her early twenties. She was tall and thin, and she stood beside a hepplewhite-style chest, its beautifully inlaid ivory decorations highlighting the white pattern in her dark dress. The dress might have been made out of silk, and it was cinched tightly around her waist to accent her figure. On her head was a large, woven-straw hat, and, in the center of the hat, was a big, cheery flower that hung over its brim and shaded her face so that the camera did not quite catch all of her. Plainly visible, though, was a slight, playful smile on her lips, and to me she looked happy. From my mother's childhood stories, I believed Annie and Henry Fisher lived a good life on Tchoupitoulas Street. Their house was demolished years ago to make way for a marine goods warehouse, but I imagined it as wooden shotgun or even a modest creole cottage that might have contained that lovely ivory-inlaid chest.

How could that young woman in the picture have imagined that twenty years later she would be twice widowed? And what did Annie know but to marry? She had only the education necessary to be a good wife and mother, and so Annie married. First to my grandfather, who died from a heart attack at the age of thirty-eight, and almost two years later she married his best friend, Frank Thomas. Frank, a light-hearted Irishman, died from a stroke perhaps five years into the marriage. What a shock it must have been to leave the house on Tchoupitoulas Street after my grandfather died and, when Frank became ill, to move into public housing and stay there for the rest of her life. I don't know much about Annie's life with Frank. I do know that when she was married to my grandfather their house was comfortable, and Annie had a maid to help her raise her three young daughters.

When I met Annie, she was in her sixties. I never saw anything but the faintest of smiles on her lips, and I never heard her laugh. Annie had neither the education nor the belief in herself necessary to push through her losses. She lived her widowhood under the protection of the New Orleans Housing Authority and St. Tommy until, after twenty years, she sat down in her rocking chair one night and died, not from the broken heart my mother reported, but from a heart attack.

I looked forward to the public housing hearings in the fall of 2007 and winter of 2008 because I hoped that rebuilding public housing in post-Katrina

New Orleans would help rebuild the city. I also wanted to know where and how people like Annie would live.

One plan called for razing several of the older New Orleans Public housing projects, but would retain a small segment of the original buildings. Tearing down the projects, even the dilapidated ones, was going to be painful for many people, and a plan that left a few apartment buildings intact to become community centers or museums might help people adjust to the necessary changes. Generations had grown up in those projects, and, after losing their homes, their belongings, and in some cases family members, those buildings represented their roots in the community. Certainly, change was inevitable and necessary, but I wanted to know that people who lived in public housing would be treated fairly and compassionately. I wanted people like Annie, who didn't believe they had options and a future, to have decent homes in post-Katrina New Orleans.

I was prepared for protests. I was prepared for heated, ugly debates. I was not prepared for the intervention of people who knew little or nothing about New Orleans, for near-riots, for a lockdown of city buildings on hearing days, for police who Tasered former housing residents, and for what appeared at time to be anarchy. I watched as a Tasered protester in the throes of a seizure was passed through the crowd. In the end, the City Council decided to raze most of the hurricane-damaged housing projects and forego the plan that would retain a

small portion of the original structures. Only two projects, the Lafitte and the St. Bernard housing developments, would carry out this plan.

What will happen to the Annies of New Orleans? No one knows. I do know what happened to the St. Tommy. Early in the twenty-first century, it was razed. Over the years, little effort had been made to keep it repaired. In the 1970s, drugs moved into the projects, and the St. Tommy became one of the most dangerous places in the city. Almost immediately after the old project's destruction, the Housing Authority began the construction of Project HOPE on the site of the St. Thomas Housing Development. Project HOPE consists of single and double structure mixed-income housing. Some of the new houses mimic the architectural style of the homes that were razed to build the St. Tommy, and in the center of Project HOPE is a small group of the red-brick buildings that were retained as a reminder of what had once been home to tens of thousands of people.

Occasionally, I drive past Project HOPE. I wish I could see Annie on the porch of one of those brightly-colored homes, smiling. She, of course, is not there. But I do see people tending gardens and others in their yards, talking. Some are laughing. All of this goes on in the shadow of a remnant of the warehouse-style buildings that were the St. Tommy, and it makes me wonder if doubt is perhaps the first step toward hope.

My first impression of New Orleans was not a good one. I had left a place of wide open spaces, full of exotic flowers and colors and arrived in a crowded corner of the world. When I lived in Honolulu, I often stood in the surf of the Pacific Ocean, watching mountainous waves heading toward shore from the deep blue sea that extended as far into the horizon as I could see. Like the sirens who called Odysseus's sailors, the symphony of tides beckoned me. From the moment its spray first touched my body, the ocean hypnotized me.

In New Orleans, homes were crowded so closely together, some of them barely had yards. One of the mightiest rivers in the world moved swiftly through the city only blocks from where we lived, but I could not see it. And there was Annie. My dreams for a life seated at my grandmother's knee were not dashed so much as they slowly faded away. I sensed from the day that my mother first took me to her apartment that Annie's life was hard. She did not smile; she was not dressed smartly like the grandmothers I watched on television who came to visit with presents and sage advice. Annie lived hand- to-mouth because, the men whom her mother had taught her would take care of her had died.

Annie's home appeared sad to me because I don't ever remember seeing her happy. She was kind to me in the way I longed for a grandmother to act towards me, and suddenly she died. Life in New Orleans seemed hard.

Yet, my young life was soon to change. When Annie died, we had already left the Irish Channel and rented an apartment in Lakeview. My father, who had been in the hospital for months, was discharged from both the hospital and the

Air Force. And he came home. Reunited, my parents were calmer, and we began to fall into the rhythm of life in New Orleans, a city full of rituals.

The New Orleans traditions that I learned from my mother taught me that the city's present is intricately mixed with its past. While I recall our traveling life in a linear fashion, my life in New Orleans is a jumble of past, present, and future. Time in New Orleans is fluid like the Mississippi River that cuts through the city. The past and present have always seemed to hold hands in New Orleans. Many times the city of New Orleans has almost been destroyed. Fires, floods, yellow fever, and hurricanes have all taken their turn, yet the city survives. Post-Katrina, many of the homes where I lived are gone, and that loss binds the memories of the rituals my family participated in with the places where we lived.

Indian Princesses

My mother had lived on the road for twenty-two years while my father was in the Air Force. As soon we settled into an apartment in New Orleans, she shed the itinerant lifestyle she had adopted to accommodate Dad's career and settled back into the rhythm of her home town. She took my sisters and I shopping on Canal Street, and then we ate spaghetti and meatballs at Toney's on Bourbon Street, one of the places where she ate lunch when my father was courting her. She took us to the Irish Channel for St. Patrick's Day parades where I met her stepfather's family. Those members of her extended family who were not in the parade, surrounded us in the street. Two days later on St. Joseph's Day, we visited her Italian friends and admired their food-laden altars in honor of the saint. Then we feasted on pasta and fig cookies.

Mom also taught us how to enjoy her favorite holiday, Mardi Gras. She instructed us that while the observance of the arrival of three wise kings at the Christ child's cradle ended Christmastide, it also signaled the beginning of the Carnival season, the great feast before the forty-day Lenten fast. In New Orleans, the Epiphany heralded the appearance of King Cakes, Mardi Gras decorations, and parades. As a child, the floats and their masked riders with their promises of beads and other trinkets excited me, but it was my Mom's passion for Carnival that engaged my imagination so that Mardi Gras was, like Christmas, abundant pleasure with the addition of parades and costumes.

When the season began every year, Mom reminisced about her parents and their lives in New Orleans in the late 1920's and early '30's. She told us about the Mardi Gras organizations her father belonged to, and, as she related these stories, she became animated and carefree. As my mother planned for my father, sisters, and me to spend the day with aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends watching parades and eating all of the delicacies that would be forbidden to us during Lent, she temporarily forgot that my father was sick, or that her mother, whom she missed while we traveled with Dad from military base to military base, had died only months after we moved to New Orleans. She also forgot the pain of her adolescence growing up without a father because hers died before her ninth birthday. My mother loved introducing my older sisters and me, a last child still young enough to remind her of her days as a girl, to the favorite celebration of her childhood.

When the festivities began in early 2008, they called to mind the many Carnival days I spent out on the street with my family, costumed and awed by the pageant at which I was both spectator and participant. I remembered how my mother, proclaiming with absolute certainty that she knew what I wanted to be, chose my costumes when I was a young girl. Although she was never successful at guessing what I wished to wear for the big celebration, her conviction that she had chanced upon the right outfit somehow communicated itself to me like the ripple effect of a pebble thrown into a pond -- sooner or later I was caught up in her rings of excitement. By the time Mardi Gras day arrived,

the unrestrained joy she demonstrated for her wrong selection always seduced me, and I discovered, to my surprise, that I wanted to be something I had not even imagined.

As I read the upcoming schedules of parades and balls, I began to think about visiting the New Orleans neighborhood where Mom took me to shop for costumes, but I knew that it had become a dangerous place in a crime-ridden city. Yet the idea that I should return persisted. In post-Katrina New Orleans where landmarks and the memories attached to them disappeared every day, I was determined to find an opportunity to look for what traces of my mother might still exist.

The occasion presented itself one Sunday morning when I had to retrieve some papers I'd left on my desk at the office. Trapped in the wrong lane by unexpected traffic headed towards a Saints football game, I moved slowly away from my office in the business district. The quickest way out of the gridlock was to travel into Central City New Orleans, just opposite the business district, and make a U-turn back towards my office. I turned onto what had been once been the commercial section of Dryades Street before it was renamed for a local civil rights activist.

During my childhood, my mother and I shopped frequently on Dryades Street. Mom was old New Orleans, not in the sense that her family's name appeared in the city's social register, but in the way she did many things as her mother, Annie, did them, and the way her grandmother, Louise, did them when

Annie was a child. Mom, like Grandma Annie, shopped close to home. Only for a special occasion did they, or we, travel to Canal Street, once New Orleans's finest commercial district, to make a purchase. Dryades Street was the area where my parents and I came every August to purchase the blue, pleated skirts and white blouses I wore to Catholic school, and I imagined that this was the same place where Grandma Annie brought my mother for her uniforms when she was a girl. We also came to this street to purchase another necessary item for that day once a year when New Orleanians fulfilled fantasies. We came here to shop for Mardi Gras costumes.

I was going to drive two, perhaps three, blocks into the now-blighted neighborhood and turn around. The striking difference between post-Katrina Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard and the Dryades Street of my youth kept me going. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this area housed the Orthodox Jewish community, and behind the Jewish-owned stores that lined the street, lived many of the city's poorest African-Americans. Sometime during the Forties, the neighborhood became predominately African-American, but the stores the Gershons and the Meyers owned remained. Dryades Street turned into a true New Orleans gumbo where ethnicities and races mixed like ingredients in my great-aunt's soup pot. Last names, religious affiliations, and races were not the symbols of acceptance or omission on Dryades Street that they were blocks away on St. Charles Avenue, a wide boulevard lined by oak trees where antique trolley cars carried residents from the doors of their mansions to town and then

home again. In contrast to the luxury of St. Charles Avenue, Dryades Street was a hodgepodge of shops for working class families.

In mid-January 2008, the remnants of what had once been Dryades Street had become a narrow avenue of abandoned properties, missions, and store-front churches. On each block, fire had gutted at least one building, and grayed, weather-beaten boards covered the few windows that weren't broken. I saw no people. I wondered what my mother would think of this decayed neighborhood if she were still alive.

I remembered, when I was eight, seeing Mom busy at the kitchen table, making lists of what we needed for Mardi Gras day. Her shoulder-length, black hair was pinned up in a French knot to keep it out of her way while she worked, although the freckles she hated were more obvious when her hair was up. She was wearing the dark red lipstick that she loved, and, when she spoke, her mouth was a ring of fiery excitement.

She looked up from her work and said to my father, "I think it's time to get Barbara's costume. We shouldn't wait longer."

My father stopped reading his newspaper long enough to nod in agreement.

"This Saturday. We'll go to the place on Dryades Street," she said.

"Alright." My father returned to reading his paper. In all matters concerning fashion for me and my two older sisters, my father acquiesced to my mother's wishes.

Mom pinned some errant strands of hair back into her French knot before she continued talking to Dad. "The older girls are making plans with their friends, but we need to take care of Barbara."

My oldest sister, Liz, who was a grown-up nineteen, was to be married in a few months, and, while she and her husband-to-be would watch the parades with us, they did not intend to dress for Carnival day. My middle sister, Patsy, almost seventeen, had designed a theme costume with a group of her friends and would leave us in the afternoon to end the day's festivities with her boyfriend's family. My mother was not going to interfere with their arrangements. But she eyed me curiously as she examined her list of things to do.

Mom marked a few more things down before she said, "What do you think you want to be this year?" She reached over to me and, just as she had fixed her own hair a moment ago, smoothed some loose strands of my waist-length blonde hair back into my pony tail. She did not wait for me to answer her question before she began to speak.

"When I was your age, I loved my costumes," she said.

When my mother was a child, a woman who worked for her parents hand sewed her Mardi Gras costumes. Every Carnival season, Lucinda Conway and my mother waited for her father, a member of one of the marching clubs, at the end of his route while her mother stayed home with children too young to go out for the day. When her father arrived, his entire cane of brightly-colored paper

flowers was intact. "All for my girl," he said to my mother. "I saved them all for you."

The parades, the canes of flowers, and the hand-sewn costumes disappeared from my mother's life before her ninth birthday when her father died from a heart attack. His death brought other changes to the way my mother's family lived. Her mother could not then afford a maid, and Mrs. Conway no longer came to the house on Tchoupitoulas Street where Mom was born. Although they stayed in touch until Lucinda Conway died, never again did Mom and her childhood guardian and companion spend Mardi Gras day together. After her father's death, Mom dressed in odds and ends she could find around the house and went out on Mardi Gras day with her friends and their families. But I knew Mom missed Lucinda Conway and their Carnivals spent together because she talked about them until she passed away.

When I was young, I, too, looked forward to Mardi Gras, but for less sentimental reasons than my mother's. For me, the gaudy purple, green and goldness of Mardi Gras signified the arrival of two weeks of parades and their attendant pleasures. While we waited for parades, my parents, older sisters, and I had impromptu curbside picnics. I shelled peanuts until I'd had my fill of salty foods, and then came the sticky, sweet blue of cotton candy. It seemed that just as I was sated of both sugar and salt, the main event arrived. Painted canvas floats slowly traveled down the street, and thin pieces of gold leaf

accents wafted to the ground in their wake. In between the floats marched high schools bands, and people danced in the street to the beat of the bass drums, with or without a partner. The pungent smell of burning kerosene stung my nostrils as the flambeau carriers walked alongside the floats, providing both light and entertainment. They, too, danced for the tips that people threw into the street, and, in spite of the cold, their skin glistened with sweat. As every float passed, I waved my arms and screamed, "Hey, Mister," with the hopes that riders would shower me with beads. And some times they did. The trip to Dryades Street to select a costume precipitated these joys. My mother couldn't sew, and so my costumes had to be store bought. But I loved my purchased attire as much as Mom treasured her hand-sewn garments because they allowed me to live the life of another – a clown, a Raggedy-Ann doll, a Dale Evans cowgirl – for one day.

When Saturday came, my mother, father and I prepared for the trip across town from our apartment in Lakeview, a quiet, residential neighborhood near Lake Pontchartrain. We lived in a small cul-de-sac of two-story apartment buildings, all new. As I was tying my shoes, I sat upon Mom's new couch.

"You know you shouldn't do that. Go sit at the kitchen table," my mother said sternly. No one, not even my father, was allowed to sit on her new couch. The fabric was pretty – green flowers embossed upon a green brocade background - but it was not soft and comfortable as our old sofa had been,

something I discovered one day while Mom was retrieving the mail. To protect the sofa from children's dirty, moist hands, Mom had covered it in bubbled plastic that left a mark on the skin of anyone who dared to sit on it.

As we left our apartment to catch the bus Mom eyed me with disappointment. I tucked myself behind my father so that she could not see the small, pink impressions on my hands.

The three of us crossed the city by bus to a neighborhood that could not have been more different from where we lived. The buildings on Dryades Street were old and gray, but life filled the street. The hum of automobiles and buses carrying people up and down the small boulevard, the hustle of family-owned businesses, bakeries, shoe stores, fabric shops, uniforms stores with dummies in the windows dressed as nurses, janitors and guards, and everywhere people on their way - to work, to shop, home with their purchases – all made a busy music on Dryades Street.

I had a vision of myself dressed as a ballerina on Mardi Gras day. I was a clumsy child, and I envied the graceful ballerinas I watched on television. As much as I wanted my awkward, young body to mimic their elegant movements, I coveted their pink and white dance clothes even more. I imagined myself clad in a white leotard with a cloud-like, pink tutu wrapped around my waist. I longed for delicate, pink toe shoes with silk ribbons criss-crossing their way toward my knees. The thought of dancing clothes made me want to pirouette my way down the street.

The costume store was the same place where we shopped in the fall for school uniforms. While children had scarcely finished unwrapping their Christmas presents, the shop owners busily stocked their establishments with the garments of imaginary lives in preparation for the Mardi Gras season. I entered the doors of the transformed uniform stores and saw stacks of boxes, and in one of them I hoped to find what I needed to be a ballerina for one day.

Other families had come to shop for costumes. A young boy of no more than five pulled a plastic saber from a stand-up carton in the corner. He swash buckled his way down the crowded aisle until one of the older clerks gently dislodged the play sword from his small hand.

I walked around the stacks of cardboard-boxed identities, each rectangle topped with a large cellophane window that made a crinkling sound when I touched it. I peeked inside those windows and saw promises of a day as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, a black-and-white French Pierrot mime, and the red-nosed, frizzy-wigged clowns I saw in circuses. I scrutinized the boxes of pretend lives, fingering the noisy windows for what I needed - pink and white, the colors of ballerinas.

My parents stood on the other side of a glass island case full of tiaras, sparkling scepters, satin gloves, fake beards, and king's crowns. While I looked tentatively for what I desired, my mother's actions on the other side of the store were confident. She moved with such decisiveness that she might have been looking for a costume for herself.

From across the glass island filled with items for would-be kings and queens, I heard my mother say to my father, "Barbara wants to be an Indian princess." He nodded in agreement and spoke a few words to a salesperson.

My heart pounded with disappointment as I watched an older woman search for a box that contained an Indian princess dress and feathered head band. She tipped it slightly so that my parents could view its contents through the window. My mother said something I could not hear, but it was clear from her actions that the clerk had found what she wanted. My father pulled his wallet from his pocket and placed a few green bills on the counter.

My parents called me over to them and showed me the costume.

"What do you think, Barbara?" they said.

I peered through the crinkly window, and, instead of the pink and white ballerina outfit of my dreams, I saw a beige colored dress with fake bead trim. My eyes were wide not with excitement, but with dismay. The clerk placed some coins in my father's hand, and the transaction was completed before I could say a word.

We left the store, boxed Indian garb tucked under my father's arm, and the illusion of me, dressed as a pink and white ballerina on Mardi Gras day remained in the uniform shop.

I looked around and realized I had gone much farther on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard than I planned. As I scanned the deserted buildings and empty

street, I saw nothing that reminded me of the Dryades Street where my mother enjoyed taking me when I was a child. I made my U-turn and headed back towards the business district.

As I drove away, a picture of the Mardi Gras day I dressed as an Indian princess flashed through my mind. I was eight years old again, the same age my mother had been the last time she waited for her father with Mrs. Conway. I was standing on St. Charles Avenue by my parents as the last of the marching clubs passed. The members sauntered gaily on their way with their decorated walking canes. I looked anxiously down the street because the first parade of many for that day was only a few blocks away. I remembered the excitement that coursed through my body and erased any trace of disappointment over the costume I wanted and the costume I wore. I even felt proud of my feather headdress because no other girl I saw that day was wearing such an exotic accessory.

As she stood beside me, my mother asked me several times if I liked my costume, and I told her I did.

"I'm glad, Barbara," she said. "I knew you wanted to be an Indian princess."

I asked her about the oncoming parade -- I wanted to know if it was the Rex parade -- but she didn't answer. She was looking the other way, towards the marching club that was moving away from us. When I repeated my question, louder, she looked at me and smiled.

She reached down and smoothed wrinkles out of the Indian princess outfit. "When I was your age," my mother said, "Mrs. Lucinda made a costume for me every year. We waited for my father at the end of his route, and, when he came, he gave me his whole cane of flowers."

When someone in New Orleans asks, "Where did you go to school?" that person wants to know where you went to high school. I went to St. Joseph Academy in Lakeview. It was an all-girl Catholic school populated mostly by teenagers from middle class families. The school was about five miles from the lakefront, and, during my freshman and sophomore years, my mother drove me to school along Lakeshore Drive. It was her way of acknowledging how much I missed Honolulu. She also used the time to grill me about the day's activities. Since she had not had the opportunity to attend high school, she was interested in everything we did – what we'd had for lunch, what books we read, what classes I took. I thought she enjoyed school much more than I did.

For most of the four years I matriculated at St. Joe, I longed to be in the French Quarter. Ripe with teenage rebelliousness, I wanted to shed my virginal, Catholic-girl school uniform for worn jeans and a tank top and join the hippies in the Quarter. The Quarter was no Haight Ashbury, but it was the antithesis of an all-girl Catholic high school. Leftover from the sixties, the hippies inhabited dilapidated buildings throughout the district. They busked in Jackson Square during the day, and went home with the money they had earned from tourists.

My parents would never have rested if I had snuck down to the Quarter and tried my hand at Hippiedom. I had to settle for weekend trips to the Quarter accompanied by my married sister.

I studied the humanities in college – mostly music and English. When I ran out of my money one year, I went to work in a law firm. Although I had

several jobs over the years, I relied on legal work to support me. I was working at a law firm near the federal district when my father, the man who loved traveling, died. He developed a brain tumor, and the treatments strained his body's weak resources. His heart, so fragile and tired, finally stopped one day when I was in my mid-twenties. I grieved for two years.

When I recovered from the loss of my father, I shifted my attention to myself. I returned to college. I finished the bachelor's degree that I ran out of money for, and I went to graduate school. As I write, I am finishing a third degree. I took a part-time job teaching basic composition in the evening division of the local community college. I loved working as an adjunct, but it did not pay the bills, so I continued to work in law firms to support myself.

Although I had been living with friends off and on during my twenties, I had returned to my parents' apartment on Pontchartrain Boulevard in Lakeview when my father was dying. Slowly, it became my apartment as I spent more time there and my mother began to visit her friends. I lived in the apartment near Lake Pontchartrain where my father died for twenty-years. During the time I lived less than a mile from what would be a major breach in the city's levee system, Pontchartrain Boulevard never flooded. The 17th Street Canal quietly channeled flood water way from the neighborhood and into the lake.

In my forties, I moved to Mid-City, across from the winding Bayou St. John. Not only did the move allow me to return to my favorite neighborhood, but it also put my mother, whose caregiver I had become, in a secure

environment. The large apartment building had a concierge at the front desk, and locked doors. I was assured that my mother could not wander into the street if she eluded my supervision.

By the time I moved to Mid-City, I knew my mother would not live much longer. I also knew that the apartment beside the bayou that I loved so much would feel strange without her. Probably because I hadn't married and didn't have children, for a while homes were not important to me. As my mother's life faded away, I began thinking about a home of my own. Not an apartment, but a house with a yard and tree swing.

When Mom died in 2004, I was faced with the problem of reinventing myself. For seven years, I had been her caregiver. I washed her, sorted her meds, sat with her, and sometimes fed her. I was reluctant to let go of the woman who had given me life and, in many ways, shared my childhood. As my grief slowly faded, I was faced with the opportunity to fulfill dreams I had set aside. I was still single. My future belonged only to me. My thoughts again turned to finding a home of my own.

I no longer had a close, living relative in New Orleans, and the city felt empty. I found myself thinking about moving on. I had come to live in New Orleans because it was my mother's home. I thought perhaps that was why it felt empty without her. Was it time for me to find a home of my own choosing? But what city or town could possibly feel as comfortable to me as New Orleans?

A Place Apart

Olde Town, New Home

I found my way to Bay St. Louis, a quiet, water front community that adjoins the Gulf of Mexico, by accident. One Sunday when the city's heat and humidity were unbearably dense, I headed out on Highway 90 in the direction of Mississippi. I had the vague idea that I wanted to do something different. An hour later I turned right in the direction of the Gulf. I'd always bypassed the small towns of Waveland and Bay St. Louis and gone on to Gulfport or Biloxi. The Bay was a small place, too small for a woman who had been raised crossing the country, but it was also a haven for artists and crafters. That hot summer day, I decided to see what the town had to offer.

As I headed toward the Mississippi Sound, I passed through street after street of friendly-looking wooden houses where the branches of tall oak trees supported swings and a rainbow of impatiens and azalea bushes punctuated verdant lawns. Then I reached the beach. The sun reflected upon the expanse of water so that the Bay appeared to be a broad sheet of mirror textured by gentle waves of motion. The tourist literature called the Bay "A Place Apart," and while I seldom agreed with marketing hype, I thought someone had gotten it right.

Highway 90 was lined with gas stations, Burger Kings, and other mass-marketed chains, but the Bay residents had not allowed neon signs or golden arches to intrude upon the old town proper. The small strip that was devoted to commerce along the waterfront was reserved for locally-owned boutiques. Wind

chimes hung over the doorways of stores that sold pottery made along the Gulf Coast, and colorful kites and flags decorated the porches and windows of garden shops.

When I walked into the pottery store, the shopkeeper was saying good-bye to someone on the phone. She turned towards me and said, "I love it when my husband calls me with what's for dinner. He caught some trout today. We're gonna have a good supper. Let me know if you need any help, alright?"

"Sure."

Across the street was Olde Town's only mall, a rectangular building perhaps no more than three thousand square feet that had been converted to fit more boutiques. I walked into a store that sold beach memorabilia. The sales clerk had lit candles decorated with seashells and anchors and the room smelled of eucalyptus and mint.

I spent only a few hours in Bay St. Louis that afternoon, but my thoughts returned to the small town frequently. Whenever business quieted down at the law firm, my mind transferred me to the little beach town. Driving to the junior college where I taught composition, I imagined myself on the way to Bay St. Louis instead of the campus.

Soon, I was driving over to the Bay whenever I found the opportunity. I shopped in the local stores, and when I was tired, I settled in the Dock of the

Bay to eat seafood on the balcony overlooking the water. The woman in the pottery store had been right; the trout was especially good - and plentiful.

Across the street from the Dock of the Bay was a two-story, post-Victorian structure that had been built as a multi-generational home. The Mississippi Coast had once boasted many structures like these, but hurricane Camille had downed most of them. Seated high on a bluff, this one survived. The cypress structure was painted white, and green shutters bracketed all of its lace-curtained windows. The long veranda that faced the bay was lined with rocking chairs. A tree swing – they were everywhere in this town - hung from a limb of the massive oak tree that shaded the front lawn.

The house had been turned into a bed and breakfast decades ago, and from the day I saw The Bay Town Inn, I began to fantasize what it would be like to stay there or to have a home like that. At first, I imagined myself watching the sun set from one of its rockers in the evening. Then, I began to wonder what it would be like to live in one of the small cottages that lined the streets near the Inn. I pictured myself in my yard chatting with my neighbors as the golden-red sun set over the Bay.

In the summer of 2003, I had been caring for my mother for four years without a vacation. Her dementia was far along, and keeping her at home was difficult. I washed her in the morning, I fed her, I cleaned her colostomy appliance, I drove her to day care, I went to work, I picked her up, I fed her, I cleaned her, I gave her medicine, and after she'd watched television for an hour

or two, I put her to bed. Although I never regretted caring for mom, after four years I needed some time away. I managed to secure care for her so that I could have a three-day weekend alone. There was only one place that I wanted to go. Lauren, The Bay Town Inn's housekeeper, assured me I'd have a room.

When I arrived, I was greeted by the proprietor, Nikki Nicholson. "You said over the phone that you needed a place to rest, right? Well, while you're here, we want you to sleep late, walk on the beach, and take long baths. I put some wonderful bath salts in your bathroom this morning. Pamper yourself, and let me know if you need anything."

Nikki had worked in the hospitality industry in New Orleans, and she had about her that just-right balance of I'm-in-charge and congeniality. Only three years older than I, she had my ideal life.

I had arranged to stay in the front master bedroom, the room I had looked into from the Dock of the Bay for the last two years. I pushed aside the lace curtains and looked out onto the porch where I dreamed of sitting in the afternoon - where I would sit this afternoon. The day was clear and the sun was high in the sky. The water was peaceful and blue. I knew I would enjoy myself there, but I didn't know how good it would feel.

Before dinner, I went to the beach. Strolling in the surf, I had sudden flashbacks to my young life in Honolulu. The quiet, gently rolling waters of the Mississippi Sound were nothing like the giant waves that rode surfers toward

Weikiki Beach, but still the place evoked the memories of a small girl gazing into the endless horizon that hovered over the Pacific.

I explored the fishing pier that extended almost a quarter of a mile into the Bay. I walked over water on its hard, thick planks. I'd been told that this pier was hurricane proof, and, as I reached the shaded kiosk at the end, it felt sturdy beneath my feet. I took out my book and sat down among the people who were fishing. They eyed me as I began to read, and I watched them as they reached into their worn tackle boxes.

"I wish I'd thought to do that," one woman said. "I wish I'd brought a book."

"It's a great place to read." I was surprised to find someone to talk to in this closed, everybody-knows-everybody community, and I put my book down. "Where are you from?"

"Picayune." She pronounced the name of the town about twenty-five miles north of the Bay with a heavy accent on the initial syllable so that the name, as it rolled off her tongue, sounded like PICK-e-une. I had little doubt that she'd been born and raised around here. "It's about thirty minutes from here."

"So you get to come fishing a lot?"

"Pretty much. The kids like it," and she nodded in the direction of two boys under the age of ten and a grown man who sat between them who must have been her husband. Then she returned to her fishing.

The Bay was busy even here at the end of the fishing pier. Pelicans glided by on the currents and swooped down into the water for the afternoon catch. The giant birds gave the people fishing more competition than they cared for. The plaintive caws of the seagulls together with the quieter calls of the terns chorused a raucous noise. The wind rocked the fishing pier gently and, for a moment, I felt as if I was being laid to sleep.

In the morning, I sat at Nikki's kitchen table drinking coffee while she prepared breakfast for me and the other guests. Some of the locals who dropped in all day to visit with Nikki and her guests were already there. I met Dick, a retired NASA worker who lived with his wife in a small house a block or so away; he began all of his mornings at the Bay Town Inn. After Dick had breakfast with his wife, he walked over to the Inn and had his second cup of coffee with Nikki.

Dick had worked as an engineer at the NASA facility in New Orleans East, and in his retirement he built planes. As he explained what he did in his spare time, it became apparent that Dick did not, as I assumed, build seven or eight inch models with peel-off stickers attached to their sides. Dick built planes with wing spans of eight and nine feet. He fitted each plane with an engine so that it could be flown remotely. When he was finished, he gave the plane away and started on a new one.

Dick always waited for Fred to bicycle over from Waveland, the small town adjacent to the Bay. Fred, probably twenty-five years younger than Dick, was a

sonar engineer and pilot. He was jovial and inquisitive, and it was rumored that he was one of the smartest men on the Coast.

When I asked Nikki about them, she shrugged her shoulders and said "I inherited them from the previous owner. They're supposed to be here in case something needs to be fixed, but I can't recall that they've ever fixed anything. Dick comes over for his second cup of coffee because his wife cuts him off after one cup. She says coffee's not good for his heart. Fred stops by on his morning bike rides to talk with Dick. They're fixtures here, like the furniture. I wouldn't know how to start the morning without them."

Fred and Dick became my friends, too, as they did with many guests. They had many questions. "*Where do you live?*" [*"In New Orleans."*] "*What do you do for a living?*" [*"I have two jobs. I teach English at the local Community College and I work near the Federal Complex in town."*] "*You like to read?*" [*What are you reading?*] [*"Well, I usually read several books at time. Right now, one of them is a biography of Faulkner."*] "*You take care of your mother? Well, I hope she feels better soon."*

While their wishes for my mother's health were genuine, I made no response to their remark. I knew she would never recover. The disease that was robbing her of the person she had once been would certainly claim her life, and she died in the fall of 2004. For seven years, I watched as she became less of the person she had been until nothing was left of the mother I had known other than a frail, pain-filled body shrunken to half its adult size. After I buried

Mom and the friends and relatives who dropped by to say they were sorry drifted away, I returned to Bay St. Louis and the Inn. I had only found my way to the Bay because of Mom. We took that Sunday drive in any direction after she complained of being shut-in by the heat all week.

I arrived in the Bay about six weeks after Mom's funeral, just in time for the annual Christmas celebration. Wreaths hung from street lanterns and lights twinkled in shop windows beside the kites and flags. The town's mini-bus was decorated and ready to transport people during the evening house tour to benefit the local SPCA. The boutiques were full of locally-made pottery and art ready to be wrapped and placed under the Christmas tree.

I was warmly greeted when I arrived at the Inn. Although Fred and Dick would not be there until the morning, Nikki and Maddie, her Scottish terrier, greeted me.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother, but I'm glad you're with us this weekend," Nikki said.

When I called to make my reservation the Inn had been full, except for a small upstairs room. As I headed for the stairs, Nikki opened to the door to the master bedroom, my favorite room.

"But I'm to stay upstairs. My room was booked."

"Not tonight. The couple who booked this room cancelled. Think of this as an early Christmas present."

I protested, but Nikki wouldn't listen. I put down my bags and, as I always did, I went to look out on the Bay from the front window. I wondered what it would be like to have a home like this – smaller, of course – but close to the Bay. I'd always heard that it was hard to leave New Orleans. We all knew the words to the song, "Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans?" Whenever I went on vacation – to Mexico City, San Francisco, London, Prince Edward Island – a little part of me knew I belonged in New Orleans. But I had just watched my mother die for seven long years. I needed to make a change. Could the Bay, country-like, small, and much simpler than New Orleans, become my new home?

I wanted to think about moving, but I had no time. The annual Christmas party was about to begin. Nikki and the housekeeper prodded me on my way.

I had only two days at the Inn before I returned to New Orleans. I spent my first Christmas alone in many years in my Bayou St. John apartment. I rose early, not to open Christmas presents, but to bake my paternal grandmother's kolache bread. The smell of warm yeast and pecans filled my home. As I moved around my little apartment – my home, laden with books and plants - I wondered if this should be my last Christmas in New Orleans. If I wanted to move to Mississippi, nothing prevented me. But would I be happy there? Only sixty-five miles separated the two places, yet they might as well have been on two continents. New Orleans was a party town. I had been in bars on Bourbon Street, accompanied by an older sister, when I was only fifteen. By the time I

was twenty-five, I was tired of the Quarter party life. The Bay, on the other hand, was part beach and part country. I had never lived anywhere like it.

I would need a new job. I had been teaching part-time at a junior college at night for years now, and I wanted to teach full time. The Coast had a large, five-campus community college where I might find a job. I was in my forties and still single. I had faced the fact that I was terrible at relationships years ago and pushed the question of marriage out of my mind. Yet, sometimes when I was in the Bay, I thought there might be a man in my future. That was an unfamiliar feeling for a woman who'd broken up with so many men. The Bay residents were, for the most part, couples. Terrible at relationships or not, I might try again.

The only reservation I had about moving was whether I would enjoy small town life. Having been a city girl all my life, I didn't know how I would react to the quiet nature of the Bay once I was there for good.

I was sprawled on my couch with my thoughts when Cynthia, a friendly woman who lived down the hall, banged on my door.

"It's snowing," she said.

Cynthia was playful, and she was not above a practical joke.

"No," I said in disbelief and laughed out loud. It does not snow in New Orleans.

"Yeah, girl, it's snowing."

"You're crazy," I said.

"Come see for yourself."

We went down to the Bayou together. A small group of neighbors had already gathered and were watching in amazement as white flakes landed on their clothing. The ground around us was already blanketed with a thin cover of white. The more adventuresome were trying to make snowballs. A white Christmas in New Orleans? I hadn't thought it possible.

I looked at Cynthia and said, "You don't think this is a sign of the Apocalypse?"

We looked at each other for the briefest moment and laughed until we ached.

I needed to choose where I wanted to live, and I took the occasion of my fiftieth birthday to make the decision. I booked a long weekend at Nikki's bed and breakfast. I had two things to do: turn fifty and decide if a small town girl lived inside of me.

On my first morning Fred and Dick were already at Nikki's table before any guests were up. Things were much as they had been at Christmas, and the year before. Dick was building a new plane, and Fred, who had been away on contract work in California, was back home and riding his bike along the beach in the mornings.

"So, what's new with you?" Fred said.

"Well, I'm fifty tomorrow..."

"Well," Dick stopped me mid-sentence, "happy birthday. You're just a youngster."

"Thanks." I smiled at him, grateful for the compliment. "And I've come to think about moving to the Bay. I think about the place all the time. I drive over whenever I can. Now I need to figure out whether or not to move here."

"What's stops you, Bobbie?" Nikki said. She was at the sink cleaning up now that she had placed breakfast in the dining room for the rest of her guests.

"Yeah," Fred said. "You're here all the time. What's the barrier?" Fred had a no-nonsense approach to life. If I loved the Bay, then I should live here.

"I think I could get a job, and I would love to own one of the cottages around here. My problem is that I can't decide if I'm a small town girl. And I wonder if I'll be happy here. If I'm not, I won't be able to run right back to the city."

Fred and Dick were friends, but I didn't want to tell them that Mom's illness had taken a heavy toll on my bank account. If I wasn't cut out for small-town life, I couldn't afford to spend money I didn't have to move back and forth.

"Leaving my friends is a big deal to me. I wonder if I'll make new friends here?"

"You already know half the town," Fred said.

"Yes, I do," I said and laughed.

“You know,” Nikki turned around from the sink to face us, “I bought this bed and breakfast for my fiftieth birthday three years ago and moved here. I’ve never regretted it.”

I felt a slight twinge of envy. I was going shopping tomorrow in Ocean Springs, but would get nothing as wonderful as this bed and breakfast for my birthday.

I woke on my fiftieth birthday beside the Mississippi Sound in a beautiful house. About a century ago, the deMontlutzin family resided there. Even though it had been a bed and breakfast for long time now, it still had a lived-in feel. I looked out the window and saw the bay waters lapping gently against the sand, and thought the mornings must have been much like this a hundred years ago when the deMontlutzins woke.

Outside my room, I could already hear Fred and Dick. As I sat down at the table, Fred said, “I wonder what’s in that package?”

“What package?” I said.

“The one over there by your door,” Fred said as he pointed toward a small, thin package standing next to the door to my room.

I retrieved it and read the tag – Happy Birthday from Nikki and Maddie. Beneath the brightly colored paper was a small, framed poster I’d seen in the gift shops many times. It depicted Olde Town along the water front. Printed

underneath the houses that looked out on the Gulf was the legend: "I Wasn't Born In Mississippi, But I Got Here As Soon As I Could."

"Nice gift," said Fred.

"Yes, it is," I said.

I was inspecting the prize Nikki had left for me before she went to New Orleans when Lauren placed my breakfast in front of me. Fruit, eggs, and a biscuit with a birthday candle in it. I knew that Nikki and Lauren were telling me it was all right to make the move.

"What are you doing, today?" Fred said.

"I'm headed over to Ocean Springs, and I'm going to the Walter Anderson Museum and Shearwater Pottery."

"Sounds like a pretty good day to me."

I drove over to Ocean Springs on Beach Boulevard, that part of Highway 90 that paralleled the Mississippi Sound. I knew that patch of road well from the times I had been driven there to visit my father in the Keesler Air Force Base Hospital. In Biloxi, Highway 90 had been built around an old lighthouse. It stood in the neutral ground between east and west. Even though it no longer functioned as a lighthouse, it served as a beacon for all of the water-loving coastal people.

I spent the day shopping, driving, and enjoying the Gulf. In the evening, my sister Patsy drove over from Mobile and we had dinner at the Long Beach Lookout. From our privileged seats - the restaurant sat on stilts in the Gulf

waters - we watched the sun set. New Orleans had been a wonderful place to grow up, to live, but now felt that I belonged on the Mississippi Sound. As my sister congratulated me on my landmark birthday, I realized that I was on my way to a new life.

I returned to the Bay the first weekend in August 2005 to do some reconnaissance for my move, hopefully next summer. I needed to think about a job and a place to live.

When I arrived, Maddie greeted me when I opened the door. In response to my inquiries about Fred and Dick, Nikki assured me that I would see them tomorrow for coffee. As reliable as the rain in southeastern Mississippi, they were both at the table when I got there. I gave Dick a belated kiss for his eightieth birthday, which I had missed, and asked Fred what he had been doing.

After breakfast, I moved onto Nikki's front porch with my coffee and laughed at Maddie. She was angry that she had not gotten a prize from the guests' breakfast table and barked her disappointment.

I would need to get newspapers from all of the towns along the Sound and see what jobs could be had. I doubted that I would be able to buy a house next summer, but there was a nice apartment complex only two blocks from Nikki's Inn. I wondered if, on the weekends, she might let me drop by for coffee.

As I looked out over the Sound, the clear sky reflected vibrant blue on the bay waters, and I watched the surf calmly wash up against the shoreline as the sun poured gold light on the Mississippi Sound coast line. I had a new home.

I grieved for my mother long before her physical body died. We had reversed roles during her illness, and, when she passed away, I lost both my mother and the closest thing I had to a child. When I stopped crying, I was determined to find a new life for myself.

I took a smaller apartment in the same building where she had lived with me, facing Esplanade Avenue, the street where Degas had stayed when he visited family in the 19th century. I framed a picture of his dancers and placed it next to the window that looked onto the street where he once lived.

I decorated my home so that it reflected my personality – books and plants covered every surface. African violets lined the window sills and ferns found a home in the shadier corners. Anything that resembled hospice supplies was thrown out or donated to charity.

Despite the changes, I was restless in that apartment. It was the persistent feeling of no longer being where I belonged that led me to decide to move to the Mississippi Gulf coast.

As I drove away from the Inn in early August 2005, I thought that my life was set. I hoped to become a home owner in the next few years, and I believed I would be living within walking distance of a quiet patch of beach in a year's time. I had spent the preceding nine months – the same amount of time it took me to form in my recently deceased mother's womb and come into the world – to figure out my future. For nine months, I planned carefully. What I didn't know was that for nine months, I was working on becoming homeless.

Homeless

Anyone who has seen houses collapse knows all too well how fragile vases of flowers, paintings, and white walls really are. He knows all too well what a house is made of. A house is made of bricks and mortar and it can crumble. Behind the serene vases of flowers, behind the teapots, the rugs, and the waxed floors, is the other, the true face of the house, the horrible face of the crumbled house.

Natalia Ginzburg – "The Son of Man"

I was neither asleep nor yet awake, when the phone rang. The sound reminded me that I had to do something - check something - but I couldn't yet remember what. I answered the phone with a groggy "Hello." The voice on the other end belonged to my friend, Cherish, who was calling me from her family home in Amite, Louisiana. In my still-not-awake state, I could hear panic in her voice.

"You're still at home? Get out of town," she said.

"What?" My friend's voice made me remember that what I wanted to do. I needed to check the status of hurricane Katrina in the Gulf of Mexico. The night before, Saturday, August 27th, I'd decided to tough out the storm in my apartment. I hoped it would jiggle a little bit to the west, as some of the forecasters indicated it might: "If Katrina steers only slightly to the east, she will be a Category 2 when she hits New Orleans."

A Category 4 would have forced me to evacuate. A Category 2 would give me, high on the fourth floor of a sturdy building, no worries. I went to bed last night afraid for my car, but not for my life.

"It's a five, dude. Get out of town," Cherish said.

The word "five" provoked a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, much like the feeling I had as a child when I was called to the school office, but much, much worse. I reached for the remote and turned on the news. Local officials were calling for an emergency evacuation of the city. One newscaster said, "If you have a way out of town, leave. Don't pack. Just leave."

"Cherish, it was not headed dead on for New Orleans last night." I said.

"It is now. Get out of town."

I hung up and gathered what I thought I could not leave behind. In less than an hour I left with my pets, three pairs of jeans, some underwear, and a few books. My store of hurricane supplies – water, juice, non-perishable food, and batteries – remained in my apartment. I had seen an elderly lady who lived just a few doors down carrying a single gallon of water bought at a convenience store to her apartment.

"Did you get anything else?" I asked her.

"No, I don't go out much anymore. I'm sure I won't need more."

As I left I gave my spare keys to my friend Carolyn and told her to use whatever she needed from my pantry, either for her family or some of the other people in the building. It was August 28, 2005. I didn't return to New Orleans for two months, and, although I didn't know it at the time, I would never live in my quiet, book-filled apartment on the Bayou again.

In Michigan

One week after Hurricane Katrina submerged the streets of my home town of New Orleans with water, I began to reside temporarily in Canton, Michigan, fifteen miles east of Ann Arbor and a thousand miles north of the Gulf of Mexico I love. Loosed from my home, my jobs, and the quotidian responsibilities of life, I felt – and here I want to pause and emphasize how difficult it is to say how I felt, yet I have to put some name to my feelings so that I can begin to understand them – I felt like a boat loosed from its anchor. Like a boat adrift in the harbor, I was neither separated completely from my existence anchored in the South, nor did I have any tangible connection to it. Dislodged from the place that had been my home for years, that was my mother's home, and her mother's home, the place where I went to school and to proms, and where I buried people I loved made me feel as if I had fallen off the edge of the known world.

My niece, Chris, was my host in Michigan. Only thirteen years younger than I, she lived in a suburb of Ann Arbor while she completed her Ph.D. in engineering. Together we watched the horrifying news reports of the destruction along the Gulf Coast and the anarchy in New Orleans. When Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, it was a category four hurricane. It weakened to a category two by the time it passed over New Orleans, but the storm surge that broke the levees had been a four. I told Chris I wanted to go home – to help, to save people, to do something.

My niece opposed the idea. She didn't want me to return to a city locked down under martial law. Chris insisted that the only people who could possibly be needed in New Orleans were either construction engineers or rescue workers. So I remained in Michigan, tucked safely away from the biohazard and mayhem that thrived in my home town.

I stayed at my niece's house, a large, two-story structure, built to take the cold Michigan winters. However comfortable this structure was, it was not my home. While I was grateful to have survived and have a warm, secure place to stay, I felt guilty – as if the relative comfort of my situation rendered my existence less than legitimate.

My nights were mostly sleepless. When I did sleep, nightmarish images filled my dreams. I saw people floating face down in flooded streets or screaming from their rooftops for help from rescuers who didn't arrive. I dreamed of people who had descended into chaos and forced the Governor to put SWAT and combat troops on the streets and of houses muddied and ruined by flood waters. I woke from these dreams and curled up into fetal position. I whispered over and over the words I said every night since I drove away from New Orleans – *"Please, God, I want to go home."*

I would not be going home soon. In New Orleans, electricity and potable water would be unavailable for months. The worst news was, of course, that the National Guard was still finding bodies. Thousands of homes had been destroyed. No one knew how my apartment had fared through the wind storm.

Situated on the fourth floor, I had little to fear from the waters of Bayou St. John, one of the thoroughfares that drained into Lake Pontchartrain. But aerial photographs revealed that the building suffered severe roof damage. Water traveled down channels in large apartment complexes like the one I lived in – down closets and plumbing wells for bathrooms and kitchens. It all falls down. My pictures, mementos of my family’s travels across the country, had been left on a top shelf in a closet. I worried that they had been destroyed. Then the guilt returned when I realized I was worrying about things when so many people had died.

Every day I waited for news that it was time to go home and that I could go back to work. That news did not come. I fell in and out of self-pity all day long. Yet I knew that self-pity wouldn’t help me, my neighbors, or my city. So, like an automaton, I got up every day and put on make-up. When I looked in the mirror, I didn’t recognize the homeless person who looked back at me. I kept on going, though, simply because there was nothing else to do. I looked for something that would occupy my time. I was at the book store when I passed a table of writing journals. I purchased one, and decided that I would record what I was learning as I lived away from my home.

I had never lived in the Mid West. My niece explained to me that the state was nicknamed “The Mitten” because on the map it resembled a gloved hand. When I was a child, people used to call Louisiana “The Boot” for a similar

reason, and it occurred to me that no matter where I went I seemed to wind up in the country's extremities. At the bottom of the thumb, where my niece lived, Michigan was flat country, not unlike southern Louisiana. But instead of the large areas of swampy bog that, along with the humid climate, defined southern Louisiana for me, southeastern Michigan was solid land populated by hundreds of thousands of trees – maple, beech, and ash. Michigan may have been the Great Lakes State, but in the southeast area the lakes were mostly small reservoirs of water that could never compete with Lake Pontchartrain, the volume of water that is the northern boundary of New Orleans. As I drove around the bottom of the thumb, I felt strangely land locked. Only the beauty of my surroundings solaced me.

Because my niece's Michigan-born friends talked repetitively about open spaces and woodlands, I took my journal and went to Gallup Park, a small nature retreat at the eastern edge of Ann Arbor that intersects the Huron River. The Huron was no Mississippi. It was, by my calculation, perhaps only a fourth of the width and far more shallow. But it was a respectable body of water in its own right, and the people there loved it as much as New Orleanians loved the Mississippi.

In Gallup Park, walking paths traversed dense patches of foliage along the banks of the river, and, in mid-September, the trees and shrubs remained stubbornly verdant even as the weather turned chilly. As I made my way along some of the park's nature walks, I was struck by the idea that in Louisiana I

might find an alligator along paths like the ones in Gallup Park. But I was as far away from alligators in Gallup Park as I was from hurricanes. My niece told me that my biggest worry was the "slow bee," who was not slow and whose sting could make a person quite sick. If I saw a bee, I was going to duck. I couldn't afford any more problems.

By contrast with the Mississippi, which moved through New Orleans with hurricane-like strength every day, the Huron possessed a subtle beauty that was reflected in the abundance of foliage and trees that lined its banks. Joggers, mothers with baby carriages, and picnickers milled peacefully through the grounds beside the quiet river.

My intention in coming here was to try to get to know some of the locals. I smiled at the Michiganians in Gallup Park and mouthed the word "Hi" to them. I got an occasional and quick "Hi" back from a few, but the majority averted their eyes and continued on. In the South talking to strangers was a way of life. Midwesterners responded negatively to attempts to strike up conversations. The Michiganians I met used the word "reserved" to describe themselves, and that summing up seemed accurate of all the people in Gallup Park.

As I began to gather up my belongings to leave, I was interrupted by three noisy geese as they flew overhead and banked down into the Huron. Their loud, horn-like calls caught my attention and I watched them as they were answered by three geese floating along the edge of the river who I thought were ganders. It appeared that these new arrivals had flown here with the hopes of

finding dates and the bank-floating ganders replied beckoningly. Suddenly, a large goose glided rapidly from under some cover toward the newcomers. His bill opened wide and clipped at the bodies of the newcomers. The lately arrived young geese moved hurriedly down the river. I might be a thousand miles away from New Orleans, but I was comforted to know that as far away as I was from my own culture, some things were the same all over – if you tried to steal someone’s date, you might get your wings clipped.

Later in the week, my niece urged me to go to the fall markets which had opened when the chilly weather arrived. I grew up running in and out of the New Orleans Marketplace at the foot of the French Quarter, and a Fall Market sounded like a place where I could meet some Michigianians. On a bright, chilly fall morning in the early days of October, I set out to find one. I drove into the country until paved street turned to gravel road, and, when I reached my destination, the first thing I noticed was that the midwest Fall Market was an inventory in contrasts with the French Market. Nowhere in sight were the vegetable hawkers, the African and Caribbean merchants, the snake skin and alligator head peddlers, the artists, the t-shirt sellers, large trays filled with silver from the Orient, and the smell of yesterday’s garbage mixed with the scents of patchouli and sandalwood. Here, pumpkins were for sale - large and small, plain and fancy – along with apples by the bushel or the basket and decorative squash. The only smell was the clean aroma of chilly air scented with a hint of the mulling spices used to make cider. The shadow of the levee that held the

depth and girth of the Mississippi at bay only a few thousand feet away from the French Market was replaced by open fields, gently rolling hills, and trees beginning to put on their autumn colors. The bars and restaurants of the French Quarter were nowhere to be found because at the Fall Market all of the eating and drinking was done in a single, auditorium-style building equipped with picnic tables and chairs where the goodies for sale were donuts for dunking into the freshly made apple cider. And, damn, the cider was good and tart, but it was non-alcoholic.

Settled in at one of the picnic tables, I surveyed the knots of pre-schoolers, kindergartners, and a few babes in arms who had been brought here so that their mothers could vicariously relive the Fall Market experience through their children's eyes. I watched as chaperones and parents instructed small, eager hands in the proper art of dunking donuts into petite cups of apple cider. Children wiggled and turned on their benches while the adults chattered in a manner that said they enjoyed the outing almost as much as their wide-eyed young charges. Alone in this crowd, I was the odd person out, and the only people who talked to me were the ladies behind the counter who sold me my donut and cider.

In the yard adjoining the traditional red barn was a small zoo where the children observed cows, sheep, goats, chickens, and the surprise couple in this barn yard, a colorful pair of peacocks. To the right was a small fall tableau stage - open wagon with bales of hay, scarecrows, and larger-than-life figures of

pumpkins with cut-out holes for faces. The children climbed up the stairs in the back of these figures and stuck their heads in the holes while their parents and chaperones memorialized the trip with a picture.

Walking around in this rural perfection with my traditional, round-shaped donut in one hand and my cup of cider in my other hand, I wondered what these people would make of a beignet. I missed the airy, fried dough -- sweet, but not too sweet. Mountains of powdered sugar piled on top of the square shape that caused that just-right combination of hot pastry and sugar to explode in my mouth when I bit into it. It was at moments like this that I was struck by the fact that a thousand miles south my home existed in disorderly contrast to the simple beauty of this scene. Homesickness washed over me.

On the second weekend in October, my niece and her friends were readying themselves for one of the most important events of the Fall – the Michigan/Michigan State football game. They explained to me that, for Michiganians, this game was more important than the Superbowl. From the bevy of activity that surrounded the game, that seemed a good summing up. I accompanied Chris and her friends to the grocery for supplies and found the stores crowded with people who needed to buy football-shaped platters of hors d'ouerves, carts full of chips, and, judging from people's baskets, more beer than I could imagine being served on Bourbon Street in a week. Every child I saw

wore a cheerleading outfit - from newborns in their mother's arms to high school girls. For a change, everyone was talking.

Caught out in the traffic crunch on the way home, my niece pulled out in front of a car hurriedly and received the sound that I had come to know well while I drove around Michigan – the honk. They didn't have road rage there, at least no road rage as I understood it. If you turned too slowly or pulled into someone's lane without signaling, the people gave you a firm, strong toot that said "Hey, you just annoyed me. Stop it." After the honk, it was over. They usually pulled around you and moved on. No hand gestures, no single finger salutes, no f*** you, mouthed or shouted. In its own way, this honk was a symbol for the mind set I'd observed here: reserved, practical, mostly G-rated for the family, and, succinct.

Settled into one of the sofas, our recently purchased sustenance laid out around us, I got ready to cheer for Michigan along with my niece and her friends, all Michigan alumni. This year, for the first time in many years, Michigan was the underdog and there was a lot of tension in the room. In spite of the excitement in the room and the pre-game shopping, I was not interested in the football game. I cheered when everyone else did, but I didn't care, not the way the people around me did. Michigan scored another touchdown, and everyone, except me, jumped up and yelled, "Ohhhhh, sweet."

As my niece and her friends watched the game, I had to wonder over the events of the past few weeks. From the day I pulled out of town until now, almost mid October, my life had been a jumble of worries, uncertainties, and road trips. But sandwiched in with the disheartening challenges of being homeless and jobless, the traveling, and the observing, I had learned a few things. I learned that while midwesterners may be reserved, they are also wonderful people, even though they sometimes presented a confusing mass of character traits to a Southerner. Substituted in place of the eccentricity of the Deep South and New Orleans, I sensed a quiet practicality in Michigianians. Here reserve was exercised in all things, including relationships. Yet, as I met people, I found them warm and generous. In my own way, I was fond of these Michigianians even though they were not the people I grew up with. Just that simple remembrance of New Orleanians made me homesick again. I was a Southerner and I belonged, if not in New Orleans, at least on the Gulf Coast. That was my home.

It had been over a month since Katrina ripped through New Orleans, and I still had no idea when I would be able to return to my home or to my jobs. My niece, her wonderful friends, all of the people in Canton, Michigan couldn't make me forget that. The pain remained although I learned not to talk about it. When I tried to express what I felt beneath the smile I put on every day, the heartache intensified. I didn't know if I should try to return home, where SWAT teams patrolled the streets at night, or if I should try to build a new life here, in

Michigan, or somewhere else in the South. Only six weeks ago, my life was settled. I lived in a small, beautiful apartment and I was soon to have a new home along a quiet beach. I didn't know anything about how my apartment had fared the storm, and Bay St. Louis had been hit by a twenty-five foot tidal surge. I wanted my old life back, but I was painfully aware that it no longer existed. I needed to anchor myself somewhere, because I could find neither rest nor peace.

Whether or not I knew where I was going to live, I was at my niece's home, a thousand miles north of the place where I'd lived for more than forty years, adrift in a sea of uncertainty. And because I was a thousand miles away from my home and because it was not possible for me to live along the Gulf Coast, I had to push the thoughts of pain and doubt to the back of my mind and concentrate on where I was. At that moment, I was in Michigan. I wasn't sure, but Michigan might have scored another touchdown.

Coming Home

After the windstorm passed, after the Corps of Engineers pumped the city dry, after the National Guard completed evacuations, and after the biohazard abated, Mayor Ray Nagin called New Orleanians home from their Hurricane Katrina and Rita dispersals in a manner somewhat differently from the way Yahweh called his chosen people back to the land of milk and honey. The Mayor asked us to have faith in the water which he called drinkable, he told us that the streets were dry, which was true, and that the city was safe, as would any city be that housed a complement of military police with orders to shoot to kill. Armed with this information, employers began to open their doors and I, along with some of my fellow New Orleanians, turned my car homeward.

I arrived in New Orleans on October 24, 2005, to find that my Mid-City apartment would not be habitable for several more months – perhaps longer. I had spent a disproportionate amount of my income to live in the quiet beauty of Bayou St. John. Parallel to the winding bayou was City Park and its population of centuries-old oak trees among whose company I walked in my pre-Katrina evenings. Although the bulk of the trees survived, their limbs now posed starkly against the sky in embarrassing nakedness. Their amputated stumps were evidence that they had done battle with a mighty wind storm.

As I toured the city to assess the damage, I found New Orleans, always a colorful town literally as well as metaphorically, painted in shades of grey. Lawns, streets, and buildings were colored the same shade of dull as the dirty

water that spilled into the city - a leftover gift from the combined forces of receded flood waters and the lack of electricity. Dirty mattresses, damp carpets, ruined furniture, and trimmed branches composed a kaleidoscope of garbage along curbs and neutral grounds. The recurring theme of this collage of discarded possessions was the presence everywhere of abandoned refrigerators taped shut. They sculpted monolithic metal reminders of all that could go wrong. Ugly clusters of signs crowded street corners advertising for workers or informing the public which businesses had managed to open their doors. They added to the general ugliness of my once-beautiful home town. While the French Quarter and Garden District thrived because of their relative altitude, Lakeview, the Ninth Ward, most of Mid-City, the long stretch of Claiborne Avenue, and all of Chalmette remained wastelands.

A large portion of the New Orleanians, the people I lived with since I was a child, were gone. I grieved for the residents of my home town. They had been my extended neighbors, and I missed them. As a child, I demanded rides on the trolley car for amusement, and I remembered well the plank steps that dropped down to scoop people into the vehicle's metal belly. Wooden seats jostled passengers as the street car swayed back and forth in its tracks, and bodies pressed against each other as they moved forward with the trolley. I remembered the face of the conductor, never referred to as a driver, who greeted passengers as they came aboard and who made the trolley car ride an event. Today, neither the trolley cars nor their conductors could be found.

I remembered the ladies, most of them elderly, who worked from New Years until March 19th to produce their annual St. Joseph's Altars. These Italian-American descendants filled dozens of tables surrounding a large statute of the saint with artisan-crafted breads shaped to resemble St. Joseph's staff and an army of cookies in every shape, color, and flavor. Lamb and cross-shaped cakes decorated tables where a meatless dinner, necessitated by the Lenten fast, was served on the saint's feast day. I remembered the small bag of treats from the altar placed in my hand by these ladies, their humble symbol of the hospitality of St. Joseph. Concentrated as they were in Lakeview and Chalmette, many of these ladies lost everything to the flood waters.

Although the news reported tentative plans for Mardi Gras, judging from the city's population I wondered how the krewes would manage to parade without the bulk of their membership that had yet to return to the city. In 2006, it was likely that only handfuls of masked riders will be in the city to stand at the edge of floats taunting the crowd with a pair of beads until they pointed to that special person with a gesture that New Orleanians understood to mean, "This pair of beads is for you. Catch it." With their neighborhoods in ruins, the men who belonged to the Mardi Gras Indians, African Americans with roots also in Native American culture, might not be able to march on Mardi Gras Day. Their ornately plumaged and beaded costumes required an entire year and thousands of dollars to produce, and, as they danced to the beat of drums, feathered costumes keeping time with them, they defined a side of Mardi Gras that

displayed not only their handiwork but also their culture. The crowds that stood in the street yelling “Throw me something, Mista” were gone, evacuated to Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, Tennessee, Arkansas, and some even as far as Colorado Springs and Los Angeles. Residents once of a distinctive Southern town, today they were members of a diaspora brought about not by war or by God’s wrath, but by a system of improperly constructed levees.

Filled with grief for the home I used to know, I wandered the town where I had lived since I was seven – my mother’s home and my grandmother’s home, both of whom were born, raised, and are buried here – in search of familiarity and hope. Most days after work, I walked along Carrollton Avenue where I was staying with a friend. A stroll in post-Katrina New Orleans involved dodging felled electrical wires and downed tree limbs, and, as I walked and dodged, I read the large, spray painted Xs on the front of the beautiful homes, a grim reminder of the death law enforcement was looking for when they searched residences. It was hard for me to imagine that this New Orleans was the same place where I grew up and where my parents took me to Café du Monde or where I walked along the banks of the Mississippi and watched boat pilots, specialized in the navigation of these waters, maneuver ships through the winding twists and turns of the New Orleans corridor of one of the world’s mightiest rivers.

I was pulled out of my reverie of memories by a white panel truck that stopped short and barely pulled over to the side of the road before the driver

emerged with a large smile on his face as he began to talk. I did not know him so I assumed – correctly – that he was addressing the woman walking some ten feet behind me. This is what I heard:

“Hey, girl,” the driver said as his smile became wider.

“Oh, Gawwwd,” was the woman’s surprised response.

“Watcha doin’, babe?” he asked.

“Lor....”

The conversation continued as they exchanged evacuation stories, and, grudgingly, I moved along not wanting to appear to eavesdrop. But in the familiar, New Orleans conversion of the word God into Gawwwd I’d heard a comforting sound.

Homes are more than just buildings and their contents, no matter how precious they may be. Homes are made by people. New Orleans was no land of milk and honey, but its people – its wonderful, colorful, sometimes crazy people – were coming home.

In late October 2006, the office where I worked during the day managed to re-open. They offered me a job, but I had to work reduced hours. My teaching job was gone. No university could afford its adjunct faculty; what full time faculty they retained would have to carry classes adjuncts once taught. While I had a job, of sorts, I had no place to live, and wound up in my friend Cherish's spare bedroom in her shotgun house off of Carrollton Avenue near the bend of the Mississippi River. I worked, I walked, and I returned home to a deserted neighborhood because most of the houses had flooded. I lasted a month. I left New Orleans again the day before Thanksgiving and went back out on the road. I occupied one relative's spare bedroom and then another's until I considered living in my car just to have my own space.

I've taken a turn at many careers in life – salesperson, music teacher, tutor, office worker, governor's personal assistant, university faculty – but I was terrible at being homeless. I began to sink into the funk that dogged everyone who had returned. I could no longer concentrate; whatever I didn't write down on a list did not get done. I'd been crying since I'd heard the city flooded, but now my tears came frequently and they were brought on by the smallest upset – misplaced keys, a dropped glass, anything at all.

In February of 2006, I returned to a suburb of New Orleans and a friend and I took a house where we tried to rebuild our lives.

Every day, on the way to work, I drove through deserted neighborhoods. Only a portion of the city's population had returned, and many of my friends had

moved on. All around me I saw darkness and destruction, and, for some reason, I suffered most because of the loss of homes, thousands and thousands of homes. I felt guilty about how much I missed the physical structures I was used to seeing. I wanted to mourn the dead – and I did – yet I grieved for the places where they lived and the lives they had in those buildings more.

By May of 2006, I was pulling my car over to the side of the road on the way home to cry where no one could see the tears. One afternoon when I stopped crying, I looked up and saw in large, spray-painted print: "TWO DEAD GERMAN SHEPHERDS." It was a message left by rescue workers, probably in late September. I began to think about those two dogs, how scared they must have been, how lonely, how hungry and thirsty. Their home, their place of safety, had become their tomb. I cried harder.

A few days later, I heard these words and very little else that was said: "Depression is a disease. Don't expect it go away right away. It will take time." That's what the psychologist I consulted said. He was right; it took time. For almost two years, I mourned for the life I had and the life I expected to have. A trained psychologist told me that my feelings were normal, although they didn't feel normal.

"It's all part of the process," he said.

"I hate the process."

"That's part of the process, too."

Creating Home

The Eye of the Beholder

I stood at the intersection of Main and Beach Boulevard in Bay St. Louis -- a place once so familiar to me and still familiar in some ways – and tried to understand what I saw. All of Beach Boulevard and the first block of Main Street had been swept back into the Mississippi Sound. I wanted to cry, as I had done so frequently in the last few months. But as I accustomed myself to seeing destruction, the tears stopped.

I was assaying the damage when I spotted a man slowly walking his dog along the gentle mid-day surf. I'd seen people walking their dogs along the beach here before, but today, less than a year after Katrina passed through this small town with one hundred and fifty mile per hour winds and a twenty-five foot tidal surge, I was shocked by the image of normalcy amid utter chaos. The two pictures before my eyes – one placid and the other confused and disorderly – seemed widely incongruent.

A few hours ago I'd told a friend I was going back to the Bay for the first time since the storm. He said, "Think Poland before the peace. About 1944." He, too, loved the Bay and had worked there until last year.

I had come prepared to see post-apocalyptic life, but I wrestled with the juxtaposition of the man and his dog serenely walking down the beach despite what had happened in this community.

For the last eleven months I'd been living with the results of failed levees in New Orleans. But I'd avoided seeing the devastation in the Bay. My friends

who loved the town told me not to go. "You don't want to see it," they said, and I had stayed away.

I talked about the Bay often with Robin, a friend at work who had lived there for years before moving further inland. We reminisced about the quiet waterfront, the pristine beach, the monthly art walks in the shopping district, and the bull's eye hit the town took from Katrina.

"It's bad," she said, "really bad. I cried when I saw my old home." Robin paused and made that shrugging gesture people made that signified a combination of sadness and resignation. "If you want, I'll go with you," she said. "We can meet up and we'll see it together."

I resisted for months. I didn't want to know what damage a twenty-five foot tidal wave had done. Yet as the words, "No, I can't," came out of my mouth, I knew that would have to return. I could never stay away from the place I loved.

I made plans with Robin to meet her Saturday afternoon in the Bay. I could look for a few friends who I believed may have returned to town, and I'd see the town. Robin wanted to visit her old house if the roads were open that far down Beach Boulevard. We weren't sure what we were going to drive into, but we'd have each other.

Saturday morning I left New Orleans, and when I reached Bay St. Louis, I turned off Highway 90 onto Main Street just as I had for many years. As I drove toward the waterfront, instead of neat rows of cottages where children played on

the lawns, I passed blocks of darkened structures, many of them “blue-roofs,” with blue tarps nailed in place over damage caused by the hurricane. Most of the houses were vacant, but some had trailers parked on their once manicured lawns. I saw few people. Bay St. Louis had always impressed me as a sleepy town, but the dark emptiness of these once homey dwellings struck me as eerie and sad.

I arrived downtown an hour early. I’m not sure if it was because of the mid-July heat or, more likely, because of the strangeness of being in a familiar place that was almost unrecognizable, but I decided to explore on my own. I parked my car on Main Street three blocks from the waterfront, where the road stopped. Without knowing what to expect, I took a walk that pre-Katrina I’d taken many times.

The waterfront establishments were gone – literally swept away by the tidal surge – and all that remained was brown sand and chunks of broken cement. Nikki’s beautiful Victorian-style bed and breakfast was only a memory. While it had withstood Camille, one of the few category five hurricanes to strike the United States, Katrina’s tidal surge flattened the Inn, and the people who stayed there for safety clung desperately to trees until the waters subsided. The oak that lent a sturdy arm to the white tree swing still remained, but it was bent and naked - stripped by the wind storm of its foliage. I had spoken to Nikki a couple of times, and learned that both Fred and Dick had survived. Dick and his

wife now lived in Baton Rouge with their oldest son, and Fred and Sharon were living in California. I wondered if I would ever see them again.

Standing at the bluff by the water's edge, it appeared to me as if a giant hand of Gulf waters, churned deadly by category four hurricane winds, reached onto this road ten months ago and grabbed the life out of this once-cheerful street.

I had been right not to want to come here and see the tidal destruction. Why hadn't I waited for Robin? Then I spotted the man walking his dog on the beach as the first evidence of what would become evening tide rippled in from the Gulf to the Bay.

I looked past the man and his dog out on to the waters of the Bay and the Gulf of Mexico I loved so much, the source of the powerful wind storm that blew onshore. The water, so calm and beautiful today, reminded me of the paradoxical ability of nature to be creatively destructive - when she takes or destroys, she always leaves something new in her wake. In spite of all that happened - hurricanes, tidal waves, death, and destruction - I began to realize that in this tiny, battered, and weatherbeaten spot on the map, life continued.

A half hour later, I stood at the same spot on Main and Beach Boulevard with Robin again looking out onto the bay. Although she'd been to this area before, she started to cry.

“It’s all gone,” she said. “And it was so beautiful here. How can it be all gone?”

“It’s alright, Robin. It will come back.” I wanted to reassure her, but the words that came out of my mouth felt stiff and overused.

“But it was so beautiful....”

I wanted to comfort Robin, but I didn’t know how. When Robin looked out on this once-familiar scene, all she saw was destruction, and she was right.

“Yes, it was beautiful here,” I said. “But, Robin, in its own way, it’s still beautiful here.” As those words came out of my mouth, I wasn’t sure that I, the woman who cried for almost a year, had said them. Yet I knew that as I looked around the devastation, I still saw beauty. I didn’t cry with Robin because, as I watched the man walking his dog on the beach, I realized that life can go on. That man might have lost his home, but he could rebuild it.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and when the flood waters hit the streets of my home town, as far as I was concerned then, my life and the lives of the residents of New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast changed forever. But here, looking out over the familiar bay waters on this hot, sunny, humid day, in the midst of utter destruction, the man and his dog had shown me that beauty still existed.

Light Dawns on Dreamland

It was dark and cold when my alarm buzzed me awake at five a.m. My arm reached quickly from beneath the quilt to silence the clock monster and then back into the warm spot beneath the covers. I should have gotten up. I should have made coffee and gotten dressed, but I didn't. I disliked getting up in the dark. When it was cold, my dislike intensified. So, instead of doing the things I should have done, I rolled over on my side and waited for signs of light.

Even in the mid-January darkness, I easily made out the contents of my small room with the inner radar that familiarity bred. The red flowered quilt and pillows that kept me warm were both functional and cheery. Two small book cases jammed with books and topped with plants lined the wall across from the bed and a small chest stood next to the door. The orchid that sat on top of the chest was flanked on one side by a picture of my mother and on the other side by a picture of my paternal grandmother. The pictures of important men in my life, my father and an old boyfriend whose picture still conjured up pleasant memories, were to the left of my bed.

As I looked at the redness of this room I couldn't help but remember how different it was from the blue and green apartment I had on the banks of Bayou St. John just eighteen months ago. I had decorated that apartment so that it reminded of the colors of the ocean and sky, and a sense of calm settled in whenever I stretched out on my blue and green sofa to read. This vibrant, red

room, pleasant as it was, always reminded me that a very short time ago I lived somewhere else.

Although the darkness concealed it from me, I knew that a small film of dust covered all of these surfaces. I had dusted for Christmas a mere three weeks ago – cleaning at Christmas time was a holiday tradition of mine - but already the white cover returned as if to remind me that onerous things could not be whisked away as easily as I wished. I had always been a bad housekeeper, and my practiced attitude towards dust was that when I couldn't see it, I didn't have to think about it.

Many other thoughts occupied my mind these days, and they were not as easily dismissed. During these winter mornings when my body lacked the energy to propel me out of my bed and on my way to work in the dark I found my mind focused on one question repeatedly: should I stay in post-Katrina New Orleans or should I move again? Eighteen months had passed since the levees broke, and while the pain was beginning to lift, disappointment was not. Now that I no longer had to provide receipts for insurance companies or stand in long lines to talk with FEMA or SBA representatives, other concerns took their place. I had lived in New Orleans since I was seven, but the combined forces of increased rents, utilities, and insurance rates made me realize that in the future I would have to live in the suburbs. If the fact that I had to substitute the southern uniqueness of New Orleans housing for the generic sameness of

suburban living was not enough, crime was rampant in New Orleans - not just in the city but in pockets all over the metropolitan area.

I asked myself if I thought I could be happy here? My friends were still in New Orleans, but more and more of them planned to move in the near future. In the next year or two, they said, they would start looking for somewhere else to live – in a place where levees didn't break and crime was not an issue. And what about work? I'd worked at a large, downtown law firm for many years, but I had also taught English in the local colleges at night. I had taught only one semester since the hurricane struck New Orleans. Then my class fell to the budget cuts. How long would I teach one semester on and three semesters off?

When the city's evacuation in 2005 forced me to live on the road for months, I longed to return. Now, a year after I returned to New Orleans, I lived in a small room, and its contents were all of my possessions that were not stored two states away from me. My furniture remained in storage because I couldn't afford an apartment in post-Katrina New Orleans large enough for my things. But I didn't waste sorrow over furniture. I was aware that people lost their lives and many more lost all of their possessions. I lost a sofa, bed, and bookcases to roof damage and felt lucky. But in order to make a new home for myself, I would need my belongings and an apartment where I might be able to place them. When would I be able to afford one?

These thoughts played out in my mind over and over again in my half-awake state. Life in post-Katrina New Orleans meant living with forced changes

and confusion and frustration. Nothing summed up the irony of how I lived more than the recent headlines of two of the city's newspapers. The January 14, 2007, headline of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* declared the Saints' victory over the Philadelphia Eagles with one large, bold print headline: DREAMLAND. The newspaper's sports writers proudly announced that the Saints had finally come into their own.

I knew nothing about football, had never been a fan of football, yet I found myself excited. I had ambivalent feelings about the money that had gone into the city's NFL franchise while schools remain closed and services to the elderly and handicapped operated at depleted levels. In spite of my misgivings, when the Saints played Chicago for the NFC Championship I planned to be with my friends in front of the television set watching the game. I purchased my first NFL t-shirt to wear for this occasion and I was looking forward to eating football food and screaming and yelling and hoping that a cause that seemed impossible for years would come together.

But DREAMLAND was not the only news to hit the headlines two days ago. The city's weekly newspaper, *Gambit*, also released on Sunday, featured a front-page article about crime in the city. New Orleans's police chief said that tough times were ahead. Chief Riley referred to the city's crime rate, specifically the homicide rate that no one could quell. In one week more than a dozen people had been murdered in New Orleans while eight Americans died during the same week in Iraq. If crime continued at this pace, New Orleans was heading

back toward the terrifying per capita homicide rate of the 1980s. As a single woman with no relatives left living in New Orleans, did I want to continue to live here or did I want to go someplace where I might feel safer?

Mercedes, the co-worker and friend I shared my small, but safe and clean haven in Harahan, reminded me that New Orleans was almost destroyed by a hurricane at the beginning of the twentieth century and that another hurricane in the nineteen forties seriously damaged the city as well.

“Bobbie, both times, the city regenerated. And it will again.” Her blue eyes, empathetic and sincere, opened wide as we spoke. Merce was only six years older than I, and she had many of the same concerns I had. Usually Merce was the optimist, but some days I had to take on that role if Merce was having a bad day. Her family home in Chalmette stood condemned but not yet demolished because of a bureaucratic glitch.

Merce was right. The city had regenerated before, but how long would it take for a city to come back from the devastation of the levee failure caused by Katrina? And did I have the stamina for the years rebuilding will take? Start a new life somewhere else or stay here with those of my friends who intended to ride it out – that’s the decision I had to make.

Almost forty minutes had passed since the alarm went off, and just enough light had come through the blinds to reveal the thin layer of dust that covered all of the surfaces in my room. As a practiced bad housekeeper I knew how to deal with the light layer of particles that settled on my things:- pretend it

wasn't there. The time would come when I would have to deal with the dust, but I could ignore it for a while longer. I applied the same logic to living in New Orleans. I was confused by how I lived and by what I read in the paper and heard on the news. Regardless, I put a smile on my face and pretended that everything was alright. I could keep that up for a while. One day I was going to have to deal with all of the questions that roiled around in my mind on these dark mornings, or in the afternoon when I stopped to have coffee and read the paper.

Go, stay. Stay, go. What did I want to do?

Beside the Mississippi

I did not leave Harahan in 2007. As time passed, so did the stress that came with living in a post-disaster environment. The feeling that I had to fix something, do something, go somewhere became less compelling.

At first, I hated suburban life. I longed for the unique nature of New Orleans or the every-day-was-a-surprise life I'd lived on the road as a child. In suburbia, I felt as I might have been living anywhere. Time healed that problem, too. As I adjusted to my new home, I learned to see that it, too, had character.

The part of suburbia where I lived offered me the opportunity, for the first time in decades, to live beside the Mississippi again. It was the river I had been shown as a child when we visited my mother's family on holiday. It was the river I'd lived next to when we first moved back to the mainland from Hawaii. When I returned to New Orleans from my hurricane Katrina evacuation, I went first to my parents' graves. They were buried in a mausoleum not far from the breach in the 17th Street Canal. Even though they had not been buried in the ground – no one buries their dead in New Orleans's wet soil – their graves were not high enough to escape the water that gushed from the opened canal. After the grim task of surveying flooded crypts was over, it was the river I had to see. As a person returned home who did not have a home, I felt drawn to the Mississippi.

I'd been perhaps four years old when my parents first took me and my older sisters to eat beignets at Café' du Monde in the French Quarter. As drops

of greasy powdered sugar fell from the square, fried doughnut onto my clothes, my father explained to us what was behind the massive levee of mud and grass we saw only a few hundred feet from us. He told me that the water traveled the length of the country - to the South, to New Orleans, to me. His hyperbolic speech painted a picture in my young imagination of all of the water in the world speeding its way towards me, yet I was unafraid. The water respected its levee as I ate my beignets and drank chocolate milk, and I, in turn, respected the river.

More than forty-five years later, I found myself living only blocks away from the same river. I was still in temporary housing - the beautiful yellow stucco house with the bright red door where I slept at night belonged to my friend. That knowledge made me conscious that, yet again in my life, I was on my way somewhere else. But I was learning to enjoy my transitions. I stopped trying so hard to control my future. I no longer had a plan to move to a particular place. Instead of making elaborate plans, I waited to see where life would lead me. For the time being, it took me to the Mississippi.

Now that I lived beside the river again, I was determined to see it. I walked the five blocks from my house to the massive levee of steel-reinforced earth. Once at the top, I hoped to see the Mississippi moving swiftly on its course toward the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, I saw a second levee. The real estate between the two levees had been commercially developed, and a gate kept me from going farther.

I couldn't help making a comparison between the disappointed child who had left behind her island existence - walking shoeless or in flip flops near the Pacific with the sun on my face and the vastness of the ocean in front of my eyes - only to arrive at a place where one of the world's largest rivers was hidden from my view. But I was no longer a child. I got in my car and drove several miles up the highway to River Town, a small commercial development next to the River. I climbed the steep stairs to the top of the viewing stand and finally I was rewarded with the sight of a strong-willed body of muddy water. Massive tankers full of grain were tacking down the river, through the treacherous, multiple turns in and around New Orleans. Small shafts of sunlight shone through dark, gray clouds. I could feel the river's power, both beautiful and frightening.

I'd taken to reading Mark Twain's *Life Along the Mississippi*, and I allowed his love of the river to deepen mine. For Twain, the Mississippi was a channel of life -- it brought boats, people, goods, food, as well as water to his childhood home in Hannibal. Standing beside the river, with only a hundred or so feet of concrete slabs to protect me from being washed out to the Gulf along with everything else, I understood Twain's awe.

When Twain was young, the one permanent ambition among boys in his village was to be a "steamboatman." Twain described the excitement that accompanied the arrival of a boat:

...the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun; the dense forest away on the other side; the "point" above the town, and the "point" below; bounding the river-glimpse and turning it into a sort of sea, and withal a very still and brilliant and lonely one.

Presently, a film of dark smoke appears above one of those remote "points"; instantly a negro drayman famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'!" and the scene changes! The town drunkard stirs, the clerks wake up, a furious clatter of drays follows, every house and store pours out a human contribution, and all in a twinkling the dead town is alive and moving (28).

While Twain's experience of the river was joyous, others had less pleasant encounters with the Mississippi. Tens of thousands of slaves, some of them children taken from their parents, were moved from plantation to plantation by boat on the Mississippi. Many of them came to New Orleans and were sold at auction in the French Quarter. Today, tourists eat po-boys and gumbo in renovated slave auction houses. In Twain's time, shackled slaves were led from boats docked on the Mississippi to the near-by auction houses. Just as the river brought excitement to towns along its banks, it also visited sorrow.

The river has always been present in this part of the country, always moving, although I was not always aware of the river unless something brought it to my attention – a walk along one of its levees, the playful sing-song tunes that come from the river boat calliopes in the French Quarter, or the plaintive sound of a ship's horn as it maneuvered laboriously through the twisted corridors of the lower Mississippi toward the river's discharge into the vastness of the Gulf of Mexico.

For people who were born or raised along the river, like Twain, viewing the Mississippi is like taking a trip to your mother's house. The river created this part of the world. Without the Mississippi, my mother and my mother's mother would have been born somewhere else.

I'd heard news reports that as Katrina swept through the city, for a while, the river ran backwards as hurricane winds pushed the water against its natural flow. The water was returned to its normal course - south towards the Gulf of Mexico, and waves lapped against the massive levee. Regardless of how much lake water flowed into the streets of the city as hurricane Katrina left town, the river remained in its deep channel.

Two million years ago, the Gulf Coast ran a smooth line from the Florida pan-handle through what became Mobile, Alabama, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles, Louisiana, Houston, Texas, and into Mexico. Five hundred miles north of this coastline, lay the Mississippi Embayment, a dry and well sedimented valley with a downwarped configuration. Runoff from the surrounding land

drained into this valley and formed a primordial Mississippi River. The Mississippi would have developed over time into a river of only regional significance had it not been for the last Ice Age. Glaciers redirected waters running off of large parts of North America into what was a relatively unimportant river winding over a large meander belt, and turned the Mississippi into a channel that drained an area stretching across almost two-thirds of the continent. As the Mississippi began its long flow toward the Gulf of Mexico, its sediment deposit extended the continental shelf. Most of south Louisiana below Baton Rouge formed over the past seven thousand years as the lowest portion of the Mississippi River jumped deltas several times. As it rechanneled itself, the Mississippi formed new outlets to the Gulf that stretch from south of modern-day Lafayette to a few degrees west of the present site of St. Bernard.

The Mississippi's tripartite discharge into the Gulf existed by the time the first European credited with exploring the Mississippi, Hernando de Soto (ca. 1496-1542), came to North America. Twain explained the importance of the discovery in the nineteenth century:

The date 1542, standing by itself, means little or nothing to us; but when one groups a few neighboring historical dates and facts around it, he adds perspective and color...

For instance, when the Mississippi was first seen by a white man, less than a quarter of a century had elapsed since Francis I's defeat at Pavia; the death of Raphael, the death of Bayard, *sans*

peur et sans reproche; the driving out of the *Knights-Hospitallers* from Rhodes by the Turks; and the placarding of the Ninety-Five Propositions - the act which began the Reformation. When De Soto took his glimpse of the river, Ignatius Loyola was an obscure name; the order of the Jesuits was not yet a year old; Michael Angelo's paint was not yet dry on the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel; Mary Queen of Scots was not yet born, but would be before the year closed (6).

Four hundred and fifty years later, advances in technology and travel have dulled excitement for the river. But here, in the lowest part of the Mississippi, the river still asserts its power. In and around New Orleans, the river reaches its greatest depths. In these deepest turns of the river, the water in the center moves swiftly, hurrying barges as long as football fields and mammoth tankers down the river. While the swift waters travel down the center of the river, the water at the bottom, at depths of around two hundred feet, is barely moving. The water that moves ships downriver glides over water that is almost stagnant. The weight of the water above it and its contact with the river bed cause the deepest waters to move slowly. So, too, the friction created by the interaction of the land and water that touches its banks moves the water slowly along the shore where I stand. While I see one river, three different river dynamics drive the water toward the Gulf of Mexico.

A crevasse in any of the river's levees would cause tens of thousands of deaths and destroy property for hundreds of miles. Yet, just as when I was child and my father explained to me in his exaggerated way that all of the water in the country moved silently and swiftly towards me, I was unafraid. The river comforted me.

A storm was approaching and the few, finger-like rays of the sun that were able to penetrate the rain-heavy clouds were fast disappearing. I climbed down the levee to my car to return home.

I had no idea how long I would live beside the river. The mustard-colored stucco home with the red door where I lived was yet one more on my list of homes. But it was dear to me because it brought me back to the Mississippi River.*

*For Further Reading concerning the geology and geography of the lower Mississippi River Delta consult:

Campanella, Richard. Geographies of New Orleans – Urban Fabrics Before the Storm. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006.

"Geological New Orleans," pages 33-39, contains a brief, yet detailed description of the genesis of the Mississippi River Valley and how the Mississippi River created New Orleans as well as most of present day southern Louisiana.

The Historic New Orleans Collection. *Surrounded by Water, New Orleans, The Mississippi River, and Lake Pontchartrain. A Guide to the Exhibition*. New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2008.

A guide to the museum's exhibition concerning New Orleans and the two large bodies of water surrounding it, pages 2-9 contain a reliable thumbnail sketch of the history of the discovery of the Mississippi by Europeans and early Americans and the uses they found for the river.

Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. New York: Random House, 2007.
The author's account of his years as a Mississippi river boat pilot.

In his essay, "The Longing for Home," Frederick Buechner, described permanence as one of the most important attributes of a home. Buechner felt so strongly about the permanence of homes that, some time after he moved out of the house where he'd lived for thirty-four years, he returned and apologized – out loud – to the building. I felt it ironic that the one place where I lived for twenty-five years in Lakeview, the half of a townhouse double on Pontchartrain Boulevard less than a mile from the lake, did not figure prominently in my memories. It was my safe haven while I attended college and worked in town, yet the only strong memory I had of the apartment was walking in the afternoon around Lakeview and to the lakefront. I sat on the seawall next to the New Canal Lighthouse, a squat, three-story red and white building that was no longer in use, but served as a landmark for Lakefront people. After I moved, I missed the lighthouse more than the apartment where I lived. I had never liked the actual structure. I thought the building had too few windows.

I did, however, visit my Lakeview apartment after the flood. Located only a mile from the 17th Street Canal and one of the major levee breeches that was responsible for devastating flooding, the building had taken on almost nine feet of water. While I was not able to go inside, I did feel, like Buechner, that I should go by and say I was sorry. After all I had lived in that building for almost a quarter of a century.

A place I only visited, Bay St. Louis, occupied a disproportionate share of my memories. Perhaps because my feelings about the Bay were not about any

particular structure where I lived, but about the longing for a home, an emotion that Buechner referred to as universal. A move to the Bay was supposed to relieve my grief over the loss of my mother. I believed that it would have worked, had I been able to get there. As it was, I grieved for my mother and the home I thought I would have at the same time.

Aside from permanence, or my lack of it, and a longing for home, I found that I had also experienced another phenomenon that defined home – community. It was my sense of having shared a common culture with the many peoples of New Orleans – Uptowners, Downtowners, Channelites, Chalmatians- that made me feel at home when I heard New Orleans dialect in late September, 2005. I had that sense of community while my Dad was in the Air Force and when we lived in the Hawaii. I was beginning to become a part of the Gulf Coast community, and, who knows, that may still happen. Community may not be located within the actual structure of a house, but shared celebrations and traditions with family and neighbors can transform mere houses into homes.

Ultimately, people make homes. No amount of furniture, memorabilia, or decorative content can make a structure – large or small, grandiose or simple – a home unless the people who live there make it one. My family and I often transformed our apartments and our temporary housing into homes. We followed no formula. We simply lived in such a way that a bond formed between us, our house, and the community.

The longing for home and the desire for a sense of something shared with family and neighbors were the reasons the woman's casual comment that home could be anywhere, anyplace confused me. That remark, if true, invalidated my experience of over fifty years. Heaped upon the pain caused by the destruction hurricane Katrina left behind, the idea caused me more pain. As I recorded my memories of what made certain houses and apartments into homes, I learned this: any structure can be a house or apartment. A home is an experience.

I set out to write a new list of homes, one that recited more than a series of addresses. This is what I remember of all of the apartments, houses, and even the '56 Plymouth where I've lived so far:

My New List of Homes

Baltimore, Maryland – My family moved to Baltimore so that I could be born in Mt. Sinai Hospital. My parents had lost their only son six years before I was born, and they hoped that the research done there would allow me to live. It did. I was almost two months old when my parents brought me from the hospital to an apartment they had rented. Four months later, we moved to a new two-story, red brick home in Edmondson Village. My father said that I cost almost as much as the house.

Macon, Georgia - We lived in a two-story, wooden home with stairs covered by a flower-patterned carpet. I was very fond of the carpeted stairs.

Warner Robbins Air Force Base (located outside of Macon, Georgia) - My father was the Sergeant Major at 14th Air Force headquarters. When we received base housing, we moved into the newly constructed Capehart Homes that adjoined the golf course. My mother, who was incensed by golfers climbing her fence to retrieve stray balls, acquired a large collection little, white golf balls.

The '56 Plymouth - The best home with a view that I ever had.

In Hawaii:

Weikiki Beach – It was a too-small apartment for too many people, but it was only two blocks from the beach. The address made up for all of the apartment's shortcomings.

Hickham Air Force Base - I can still remember volcanic-enriched grass, wild hibiscus bushes, and banana trees in the back yard.

In New Orleans:

Jackson Avenue near Annunciation Street - While I did not like the closed-up nature of my great aunt's neighborhood, her early twentieth century shotgun contained a hallway that ran the length of the house.

Caton Court: We moved to this cul-de-sac of new apartments a few months before my father retired from the Air Force. My mother, two sisters, and I were always locking ourselves out of our apartment. We acquired the habit of running across the street and getting someone from the firehouse to bring a ladder and climb in one of our unlocked, second-story windows to let us in. When my father retired and joined us on Caton Court, the first thing he did was train us to remember our keys.

Aviators Street - Aside from the name, which reminded me of flying, this apartment was memorable because this was where we lived when my oldest sister got married. The morning of her wedding, Liz locked herself in the bathroom and declared her ambivalent feelings about the wedding. My parents, the photographer, and Liz's husband-to-be spent about an hour coaxing her out of the tub and into her wedding dress.

St. Bernard Avenue – We moved to this apartment when I was perhaps nine. I remember that this was the apartment where I first got my own room. My oldest sister had been married for about a year, and, shortly after I turned ten, my middle sister enrolled in nursing school and went to live in the dormitory. My elation over having my own room was short lived. Once my sisters left home, I felt like an only child.

London Avenue - We lived there only six weeks. When the air conditioner broke, in the middle of the summer, the landlord told my parents that if we wanted it fixed, we would have to pay for it. We moved.

Elysian Fields: A comfortable house on a wonderfully-named street. From this house, I rode the bus down the entirety of Elysian Fields, through the French

Quarter, and into town every summer for sewing lessons just as I was becoming a teenager.

Keats Street - We lived, for a few years, on the poet streets. Keats, near where it intersected Shelley, was the house we lived in when I attended my first prom in a formal dress.

Morrison Avenue - The only house my parents owned in New Orleans. We didn't live there long because of a defect in the slab, but I enjoyed the idea that I could hang as many pictures as I wanted on the walls.

Carrollton Street (Metairie, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans)– My junior and senior year in high school, I carpoled to school with a few of my girlfriends. They picked me up from this apartment, and we headed on our way with the radio on full blast and the windows rolled down.

Bellaire Drive - I began college, for the first time, while we lived in this house. We had a small back yard on Bellaire Drive because the yard adjoined the 17th Street Canal, the waterway that flooded all of Lakeview decades later.

Moss Street: We moved to Moss Street, alongside Bayou St. John and across from City Park, for the first time in the mid-1970s. It was, and remains, my favorite neighborhood in New Orleans.

Pontchartrain Boulevard: Technically, this was my first apartment, although I did not choose it. Shortly before my father died, I moved back there to be by my parents, and the apartment devolved from my mother to me. I remained there for twenty-five years, probably because I was tired of moving. It was a comfortable apartment, and the streets never flooded. But I always thought the house needed more windows.

Moss Street: I returned to a large, high-rise apartment building facing Bayou St. John and City Park in 2001. Although my apartment was small, and somewhat expensive, I felt at home there. I walked in City Park in the evenings and I fed ducks in the Bayou. Of all the apartments where I lived in New Orleans, this was my favorite.

Gordon Street, Harahan - No matter where I go from here, I will always be grateful to this house for sheltering me. After living through a disaster and being homeless, this house helped me begin a new life.

VITA

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