

5-18-2007

Beneath the Surface

Susanna Dienes
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Dienes, Susanna, "Beneath the Surface" (2007). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*.
1058.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1058>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Beneath The Surface

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 Writing, Nonfiction

by

Susanna Dienes

B.A. The New School for Social Research, 1999

May, 2007

© 2007, Susanna Dienes

For Jonathan

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Randy Bates for directing my thesis.

Thanks to Adrian Péré for teaching me how to transform big, intimidating projects into smaller, manageable ones.

Thanks to my committee members, Doreen Piano and John Hazlett, who proved that a Masters thesis defense can be both challenging and fun.

Thanks to Caroline Skinner, an amazing friend and reader.

Thanks to my grandmother, Pauleen, who made me quit my waitressing job so that I could better focus on graduate school.

Thanks to my parents, Amy and Lou for reading all the drafts of my essays and always liking them and telling me so.

Thanks to David Fryxell, the author of *How to Write Fast (While Writing Well)* for putting his book out into the world so that I could find it at the Harahan public library.

Thanks to my fiancé Randi Ferrara, who did everything to help this project along but write the essays themselves.

Table of Contents

Abstract	vi
Preface.....	1
Beneath the Surface	7
Hello, Harry.....	19
My One-Summer Bike.....	26
Essays from UNO's Katrina Narrative Project	
Just Like Jazzfest	37
In Defense of Sodom.....	48
"Every Year it's Something"	55
Revising my Approach.....	64
Vita.....	85

Abstract

Beneath the Surface is a collection of seven individual literary nonfiction essays. Five of the essays are personal essays, and three come from the author's contribution to UNO's Katrina Narrative Project. The collection represents the author's cumulative body of work upon completion of her MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing at UNO. Titles include: "Beneath the Surface," "Hello, Harry," "My One-Summer Bike," "Just Like Jazzfest," "In Defense of Sodom," "Every Year It's Something," and "Revising my Approach. The essays explore themes such as sibling bereavement, Latin American travel, the incomprehensibility of death, experiencing new cultures, online teaching, and hurricane evacuation.

Key Words: Creative Nonfiction, New Orleans, Guatemala, Travel, Sibling Loss, Aging, Cancer, bicycles, D.I.Y., Hurricane Katrina, evacuation, online teaching, Freshman English

Preface

This is a collection of literary nonfiction. The essays explore family relationships, death, survival, grief, the inevitable fumbling for identity after life-changing crises, interior and exterior journeys, and personal growth in the face of challenging circumstances. Four of the essays are personal essays, some more personal than others. The other three come from my contribution to UNO's Katrina Narrative Project. Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of writing this thesis was that I wrote about a variety of subjects I care about. Although a hundred pages of writing barely scratches the surface of subjects I hope to cover in my life, this collection represents my beginning as an essayist.

When I began the MFA program, I wanted to write about my travels, and for my first few workshops I drafted essays about traveling in Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe. The most consistent feedback I received was that my readers couldn't understand what the point of the essays was supposed to be. Why had I traveled to Guatemala or Hungary? Why had I gone anywhere at all? My essays raised questions and left them unanswered, establishing situations but lacking the authorial commentary that would have grounded readers in the intended meanings. Now I can't imagine writing a scene without internal context and reflection, but in my first MFA nonfiction workshop in the summer of 2003, and for some time after, I did struggle to grasp the elements of creative nonfiction as outlined by Vivian Gornick in her book, *The Situation and the Story*: "Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (13).

In order to develop the insight that Gornick demands to transform my situational stories into literature, I had to ask myself, Why do I want to write about my travels? What preoccupies me about them? Why is this subject important enough to write about? When I asked myself why I had traveled to one place or another, my mind balked at the investigation. I couldn't justify the travel writing if I couldn't come up with a better answer than "because I felt like it" or "because it was fun." Even if my descriptions captured the feel of a place, writing accounts void of purpose weren't enough. I wasn't writing ad copy. I put my travelogues aside and moved on to other topics.

This thesis includes one travel essay: "Beneath the Surface." I used this work's title for the collection because it represented the accomplishment of my original goal. All of the essays that follow involve a journey, whether literal, emotional, or intellectual. The subjects are personal and universal. All of the essays touch on the harder stuff in life. As I pushed myself toward each situation's inner story, writing more openly and honestly about my subjects, I warmed up, developing confidence and trust in myself and my readers. As I wrote about the loss of my great-uncle, or the confusion of teaching freshman English for the first time during Katrina's aftermath, I came to a more fuller understanding of my experiences and began to see how they taught me universal lessons about subjects such as family relationships, love, grief, coming of age, and the development of confidence.

The writing of each personal essay began with a situation that puzzled me, or frustrated me, or taught me something. The writing process that followed and carried each one to closure involved careful analysis of each situation. During the planning stage, when I laid out all the elements of a situation, whether on index cards or in the form of a list, my perspective changed as I pushed myself, searching for the point-of-view, striking elements, beginning and ending, that

would most effectively serve to craft a piece of writing that would hook and hold onto a reader's attention.

The three Katrina Narrative Project essays included in this thesis are quite different from the four personal essays because I wrote them with the UNO book project in mind. I was instructed to interview New Orleanians affected by hurricane Katrina and to try to capture each telling as a narrative. The themes of the three essays included here touch on health care, homosexuality, and legal aid for the poor—issues that make them interesting; but to meet the goal of UNO's project, I refrained from turning the narratives into essays about those themes and kept each one's focus to the subject's telling of his or her Katrina story.

“Beneath the Surface” opens the collection. The essay is about traveling in Guatemala, part of my inner journey through grief, an adventure tale about almost drowning, and a coming of age story about a quasi-sophisticated New Yorker leaving the island and discovering the hugeness of the world outside. The process of writing this essay showed me how important it was, even more than I had realized, for me to travel far from home after my brother died. I can never entirely explain what it feels like to outlive my older brother; but I found a way to share my grief experience with the reader. When I remembered that three years after he had died I still dreamed about him and woke up disoriented, that seemed like the ideal beginning for the essay. People always told me time would heal my sadness, but no one said how long it would take. When I think about three years, it is both a long and a very short span of time. The travel and immersion in Guatemala gave me a new focus and helped me to move forward in the grieving process. I rationalized the trip with Spanish study, but I could have done that closer to home, or in a more familiar setting, such as a major city of a Spanish-speaking country. Even though I

hadn't consciously planned for it, immersion in a drastically different culture helped to counteract my sadness. When I came to this realization, it became the main insight to the essay because it found one answer to the question, Why is this travel important enough to write about?

The second essay, "Hello, Harry," focuses on death from a different angle: the geriatric. My great uncle Harry lived to be eighty-seven years old, and his last years were uglier than my brother's. I had seen self-destruction, but I'd never seen the effects of disease on the elderly. I wanted to capture the emotion and experience of watching Harry grow sick. He was the first old person I cared about who died. My experience with death up to that point involved only accidental death, so it was Harry who showed me that some people actually outlive themselves. At first I tried to empathize, imagining how I had felt laid up in bed during stints of asthmatic bronchitis, which I suffered from as a teenager. But my set of expectations involved getting better, and Harry grew less and less receptive to love and care. Harry's experience was incomprehensible to me, and that fact represents the essence of the essay. I wrote about something which, when I tried to consider why I couldn't understand it, I realized that no one in my position could have.

The essay, "My One-Summer Bike," marks the transition to a new backdrop: New Orleans. The essay tells of my tentative steps toward independence and maturity in an unfamiliar world. The worlds in the essay are the city of New Orleans, the D.I.Y. bike shop, Plan B, and the neighborhood population that frequented the shop. In this multi-dimensional travel essay, the narrator feels brave enough to enter the world of tools, but less so when she must decide whether to spend an afternoon alone with thirteen African-American boys. In writing this essay I enjoyed confronting my initial jolt of disorientation in New Orleans during the summer of 2004. I wanted to articulate my struggle to come to terms with the socio-

economic disparity between white and black people in my new socio-economic landscape. I wrote this essay to capture the human story within the situation.

The next three essays come from my contribution to UNO's Katrina Narrative Project. In real life, I have strong personal ties to many of my Katrina interview subjects, but I saw no appropriate place for myself as a persona within their stories. I had ten recorded, hour-long interviews to work from and less than three months to draft, revise and polish the ten essays. The goal of the project was to gather firsthand disaster-aftermath accounts and to document them as John Hersey did with his six atomic bomb survivors in *Hiroshima*. While I knew my narrative essays would not be able to delve so deeply into the lives of my subjects as Hersey's full-length book, I felt a great responsibility in having all those evacuation stories to tell, each one meaningful to the person who had experienced it.

I transcribed, shaped, re-organized and edited, deciding where to begin, how to proceed, and where to skip to the end. If I had let the interview subjects dictate the form and content of their essays, each narrative might have consisted of dozens of pages, full of digressions and personal asides that would have confused the reader. Instead, I orchestrated the retelling of each person's evacuation story, alternating between quotations and paraphrases of the subjects telling their own accounts and a neutral, journalistic narrator to frame the events and provide transitions where necessary. Although I couldn't include all of my Katrina Narrative Project essays in this collection, writing them benefited me so much as an exercise in focus and organization that I chose three as a representative sample.

The final essay of the collection, "Revising My Approach," is a trifecta in progress: my own Katrina narrative, an essay about teaching, and a personal essay about developing confidence. The essay deals with the complexities of my Katrina experience, and how the storm

actually pushed me to grow emotionally in ways I couldn't have predicted. I call it in-progress because during the revision process I struggled to control the focus of the subject matter, and I plan to continue working with the material in the future. The experience had so many layers, I had to make sacrifices. Some aspects, such as my relationship with Randi, who was then my boyfriend, and is now my fiancé, seemed irrelevant to the current draft's point. Other aspects, such as the particulars of online teaching, seemed important; but pages of description of what the online class looked like and how it technically worked sucked the life out of the narrative. I considered slanting the essay toward pedagogy and including much more material about the lesson plans, writing prompts, and interactions with students, but a limited time-period in which to finalize this thesis precluded that possibility for the current presentation. I settled for a medley of Katrina/teaching/personal growth.

As I revised and finalized the material for this thesis, I spent as much time meditating on why each story meant something to me as I did crafting the actual text. I've always worked through problems and questions in a journal. Sometimes I think if I couldn't write, I couldn't think logically at all, because I'd have no way to process anything. I used to hide my inner story in my private pages, and submit what I thought were "stories" to my fiction and nonfiction classes in school. I set up interesting or exciting situations, such as my experience at the beach in Champerico, or growing up in Manhattan; but I only wrote about the events and actions, ignoring how the situations changed me or affected my life and my way of thinking. Putting together a collection of nonfiction essays that combined veracity and personal presence posed a challenge, and in striving to meet it I took my first steps toward my contributing to the genre of literary nonfiction

Beneath the Surface

My travel alarm clock woke me at dawn. I'd been dreaming that my brother was calling from New York to say he was coming to visit me in Guatemala. I put my foot on the cold floor. It hurt to make the transition to reality. My brother had died three years before, but dreams often brought him back. It wasn't easy to push through the bad feelings. I had to get moving. I splashed water on my face and dressed for school.

Most of my days in July of 2000 began at the Mayan lady's juice stand. She wore *traje típico*, a soft white, embroidered blouse and a colorful wrap skirt. Her braided salt-and-pepper hair fell behind her ears. Like many local women, she wove a bright pink ribbon into her braids; the color blended with the embroidery on her *huipil* blouse and frilly apron. She cranked the manual juicer, crushing the orange so that its thick liquid poured into a glass. Then she transferred the juice into a sandwich-sized plastic bag and handed it to me with a straw. I pushed up the sleeves of my hooded sweatshirt and paid her a *quetzal*, the equivalent of about fifteen cents. I never appreciated pulpy orange juice so much in my life.

It took twenty minutes to walk to the one-story building where I attended *Centro Maya de Idiomas*. Like many schools in Quetzaltenango, or Xela, which is the city's Quiche language nickname, CMI offered intensive, private Spanish-language instruction. Some of the students who were more pro-active than I had organized a trip for that Friday. I had happily put in my money. I've always loved going to the beach.

The bus pulled up to the curb and almost everyone from CMI got on. Our group had about ten American and European students and almost as many Guatemalan teachers. I said *Buenos días* to the bus driver, hello to the students and *hola* to the teachers. Then I curled up in

an empty row and closed my eyes, wrapping my hood around my hair and ears. The purr of the motor reminded me of Xela's bus depot. My teacher, Carlos, and I had gone sightseeing there earlier that week. I thought about a Mayan lady I had photographed while she milked a goat crouched between two buses. I had never seen anything like that at the Port Authority bus station in my native New York City.

I never imagined I'd travel so far from home. I had wanted to run away when my brother died, but I stayed to complete my last two years of college. Then I wanted to leave after graduation, but I had no savings. I threw myself into waiting tables. I didn't sleep well, nor could I relax, so I picked up as many shifts as I could. While I worked as a waitress, I practiced my Spanish conversational skills with Mexican co-workers. The language I had studied in college thrived like a dandelion. Following some research and planning, I left for a summer in Guatemala.

My head leaned on the window as I slept. I awoke to the clammy feeling of tropical lowland air. It brought out the musty smell of the seat back. After stretching, I pushed my hair out of my eyes and removed my sweatshirt.

The driver pulled off the road just past Retalhuleu, a town with a covered bazaar. My teacher, Carlos, walked up the aisle to my seat. "*Buenos días, señorita,*" he said. "*¿Quieres un cafecito?*" Carlos knew I couldn't wake up without coffee. We usually spent the first hour of our lessons chatting over fresh percolated brew from the school's kitchen.

I nodded. "*Sí, porfa-*" I said, abbreviating the Spanish for "please." He took my hand and pulled me out of my seat. At five feet, four, I stood as tall as many Guatemalan men, but not Carlos. He could look down on the sunburned part in my hair.

Our group crossed the parking lot to the bazaar. I pushed aside the canvas flaps and stretched my legs by wandering the aisles. I loved the trinkets and household goods and toys and transistor radios and outdated *bolero* music on cassettes and the latest Caribbean dance hits on CDs and sunglasses and fabric. I came out and Carlos waved me over to the food. He had found the Nescafé booth. We each bought a coffee and walked back to the bus. In my New York life, I brewed Chock Full O’Nuts at home and enjoyed Italian espresso drinks at hip cafes. But that summer, I wanted immersion, even if that meant drinking instant coffee. Carlos and I reboarded the bus holding onto our styrofoam cups and sat next to each other. I asked him if we had passed the residential section of town while I was sleeping, if I had missed it. “Where are the houses?” I asked. I hoped it wasn’t too early to tap into his mental encyclopedia.

He adjusted his wire-rimmed eyeglasses. “Well, *niña*,” he said, as if to one of his daughters, “All we can see is *caña*.”

I had never seen *caña*, or sugar cane, before, but I knew it was hard to cut. One of my coworkers at the restaurant in New York had worked in a cane field in Ecuador from the age of nine. He said the knives were sharp and the pay was shit. Too many accidents happened.

“The workers live back in the fields. We can’t see their houses because the *finca* is so big.”

I remembered *finca* meant plantation. “Do they just grow sugar cane?”

Carlos paused and then listed: “Cocoa, rubber, *caña*, and *café*.” Each item conjured an image for me. A tin of Hershey’s cocoa. The bottoms of my sneakers. The white and brown sugar I measured to make chocolate chip cookies. And the black coffee my dad and I drank together in the morning while reading the paper.

“You know how much they charge for Guatemalan coffee beans in New York City?”

“I guess maybe twenty dollars a pound. Maybe fifty,” he said. “But everything is expensive in New York.”

“You just have to know where to go,” I said, as if we hadn’t had the conversation before. “You should visit sometime.”

“Ha,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.” He sipped his coffee. Carlos’ father had sent him to boarding school in the capital at age eleven and he lived there on and off until he finished his university degree in education. He had traveled plenty in his younger years. At thirty-six, he served as one of three members of CMI’s cooperative board and had a wife and three children at home in Xecam, a town near Xela.

I blew some steam onto the window pane. “What else do they grow here?”

“Palm oil,” he said.

“Palm oil?” I was surprised. “How do you grow oil?”

“It congeals off the backs of the peasants in the fields,” he said. “You wouldn’t know that because life in *Nueva York* is so easy and rich, even for you.”

“Ha,” I countered. I doodled in the cloudy patch on the scratched glass with my fingertip.

“Look, *hija*,” he said. “*Ya está el sol*.” The sun sparkled freshly on the fields for the rest of the trip.

Champerico surprised us with its emptiness. A few men drove pedi-cabs about the main square behind the boardwalk. It was almost nine o’clock; we didn’t know if people would begin to appear later in the day, or later in the season. A dozen restaurants stood on stilts over rocks facing the ocean. Carlos and the two other board members went to haggle for the privilege of

taking one over for a flat day rate. They bee-lined toward their choice. The rest of us waited in the shade. Champerico, a popular destination for Guatemalan nationals, didn't seem to have the same draw for people from other countries. It was no Cancún. It wasn't even Coney Island, although the warped wooden structures reminded me of the rickety Cyclone rollercoaster. A pedicab driver offered to carry a couple of us to see the local crocodile. We really just wanted to go swimming.

Negotiations finalized, our group filed onto the restaurant's open deck. The men set their bags down and undressed to speedos. I giggled with the other American girls and wondered if the Mayan women would suddenly strip off their conservative clothes and don bikinis. But our young female teachers changed in the privacy of dry shower stalls. They removed their colorfully-patterned *huipil* blouses and ankle-length, wrap-around skirts, and dressed in baggy shorts and tank tops. Clothes that I would wear myself, although not at the beach. Suddenly, they looked much closer to me in age. I was, in fact, a year older than the eldest of them. I followed their example, and wore shorts over my bathing suit.

Everyone gathered at the edge of the deck. Down the beach to our right stood a dilapidated fishing pier. Even from a distance we could see where planks had rotted from the walkway. The shelter at its working end was missing roof panels. In spite of this deterioration, men labored, retrieving crates of fish from small outboard motor boats. The framework of the pilings held strong over the turbulent, white water underneath. Choppy waves broke on the black sand, in contrast to the ones that rolled gently to the shore in front of us.

Three of the Guatemalan women climbed down the rocks with me and we splashed into the water up to our waists, a row of brown-skinned women, and me, olive-toned white, holding hands. I loved their camaraderie. They reminded me of old friends, pushing deeper together and

screaming with pleasure each time a wave crashed higher on our skin. “*¡Que frío!*” they called as cold water slapped us. “*¡Dios mío!*”

I screamed out in English, “Oh my God!” Finally we bobbed up to our chests and warmth came up from the soft seaweed brushing my toes. We played for a few hours that morning.

The noon sky reflected blue-green, and clouds mirrored the foam. Carlos and I went walking down the beach, past clusters of local families on blankets, away from the vicinity of the pier. The women rolled their long skirts up at the waist to wade. The men, like Carlos, wore Speedos. The children’s dress imitated their parents. Fully dressed little girls in tiny embroidered *huipils* and thick wrap skirts played in the surf with naked little boys. It was the same in Xela. Women dressed traditionally. Men wore modern apparel.

As we walked, Carlos told me that he had spent time in Panama. I asked how he got there; Mayan mountain villagers rarely traveled south. He had been in college. It was during the civil war and he participated in student action groups in Guatemala City. “I should have been careful,” he said, “but I was young. Young people aren’t careful.” Some of his classmates had hinted that he might want to step back. He hadn’t paid attention.

We reached the end of the populated beach and waded out into the water. One day, his story continued, he boarded a microbus in Guatemala city, a glorified communal taxi with a specific route. He settled into a seat. Once the bus lurched forward, he felt the pressure of a solid object pressing into his ribcage from behind. A voice whispered slowly in his ear, from the aisle seat behind him. It said, “Don’t get off the bus.”

“Carlos!” I breathed. “What did you do?”

“Well,” he said, “I didn’t want to die. I figured I had one chance.”

We had been standing still but as we talked, the gentle cross-current moved us slowly along the shoreline. Although we had walked away from our restaurant before entering the water, we found ourselves standing in front of it.

“As the driver pulled away from the curb,” he said, “I lunged to the front, and threw myself through the closing doors.” He demonstrated, throwing himself to the side and disappearing under the surface of the water for a moment. When his face reemerged, he said, “Then I ran low behind parked cars to get around the corner and away. The microbus didn’t stop.”

“Wow.” I leaned back for a moment and wet my hair. “Did you know where you were?”

“Yes, because I was only one stop away from where I had gotten on. I knew the way home, although it took a little while.” He summarized the rest without any more demonstrations: How he ran through the streets of Guatemala City back to his apartment to collect his things; then he went straight to the bus depot.

In the capital’s massive station, all the buses had a driver and an attendant, who chanted the name of the bus’s destination, and who loaded bags on top of the bus by crawling up and down the ladders next to the front and back doors. The buses for Xela, the country’s second largest city, filled quickly. The attendant would have called, “SHAYlaSHAYlaSHAYlaSHAYlaSHAYlaaaaaaaaaa!” The trip into the highland region took four and a half hours. Carlos said that as soon as he arrived home, his father sent him to Panama for a year. The story ended there.

I never asked why he had to go five countries away because the water had carried us too far. We were approaching the area around the pier. We heard the creak of the boom swinging out over the water. A skiff with an outboard motor idled, waiting for a metal hook to lower and

hoist up the wooden crate of catch on the rope and pulley system. Carlos and I marched through the current to the sand.

Back at the restaurant, a peddler stopped to sell fresh oysters. Our group had consumed plenty of cold beer, fried fish, and french fries; but the salt water swelled everyone's appetites. The peddler smiled, showing gold casings around many of his teeth. "Is it a good business?" I asked. He nodded, and opened a shell for me, offering lemon juice and Worcestershire for seasoning. I swallowed the oyster and asked for more. Carlos and I each ate five. We considered sitting down for a full meal, but decided to go walking and wading one last time, rejuvenated by our snack.

We went in and out and in again. The tide had risen. The waves still felt soft, but the cross-current moved us more aggressively. I couldn't figure out how the water had so much power. Again, we floated into the deepening shadow of the pier, now darker with the sun lower in the sky. We had to tread water where before there had been sandbanks under our feet. I was telling Carlos about my brother. "We looked so much alike, people asked if we were twins. But he was always trying to get away with things. I worried about getting into trouble. But he said if no one caught us, it didn't matter. He insisted our parents didn't know everything, that I should do what he said."

"Parents can't know everything, *niña*," he said.

"But they should," I said. I felt the same pain I had awoken with that morning. Waves rolled over my shoulders. "When I was little," I said, "I tattled on him; but our parents left us alone so much that as I got older I went to them less. I followed him everywhere he went. You know," I said, "I dreamed of him right before I woke this morning."

“¿Hoy?” he said. “Today? Really?”

“Yes—hey, look.” I noticed two guys swimming towards us.

“¡Hija!” he said. “Look where we are!”

I laughed, and said “Holy shit” in English. Two young men swam up to us and said they had arrived to help me, that we were much too close to the pilings. I told them I thought I could swim on my own.

“No really, we have to help you get back to shore. You can't get back now.”

I looked at Carlos. His eyes squinted, examining the distance between us and the beach. Then he launched into a crawl. The choppy waves pushed him sideways even as he attempted to propel himself forward. He stopped after just a few strokes. I didn't understand why. I'd never tried to swim outside beach lifeguard safety zones; it never occurred to me why they didn't include docks and piers. When Carlos steadied himself, he nodded assent for me to go with the young men. He was going to need all the energy he had. He might not have been able to carry both of us.

They flanked my body and held my hands. “When a wave comes, swim!” they instructed. “But when the water goes back out, don't try to move. Hold onto us.”

I tried to concentrate on the waves but worried about Carlos.

“¡Nade!” they ordered. I swam jerkily, still trying to look back to locate Carlos's head. He pumped his arms and kicked his legs. His body progressed sideways, moving him in the direction of barnacle-encrusted timber. I didn't know if I would make it out of the water before my own energy was spent. The young men let go of my arms. “¡Nade!” I swam with all my strength. We did this again and again. The closer we got, the more I could almost stand up in the sand. But each time I tried, the current under the foam dragged us back. Carlos lagged

behind. “*¡Tranquilo!*” the young men yelled for me to stop putting my feet down. “*¡Nade!*” they ordered again.

“Swim!” I thought. The swell came in from the sea and I moved as well as I could in time with their wiry figures. Finally, we made it. I sat and panted, my wet shorts darkening the sand around me. My helpers disappeared before Carlos made his last push out of the water.

He walked over, his arms hanging limply at his side. “*Hija. . .*”

As we walked back to the restaurant, I asked Carlos where he thought the young men had come from. From behind us, a fat man said, “I sent them after you when you stalled in the crosscurrent. The pier would have crushed you.” He had mistakenly thought that we were stuck, even though we were just treading water, but we didn’t bother him with the details.

“*Gracias,*” Carlos said. I nodded my thanks. Then Carlos looked up and thanked God. The man left us to ourselves.

I collapsed into a chair at the restaurant. My limbs felt tingly with leftover adrenaline. My brain replayed the minutes of our struggle. The faces of the boys, gone. I had trained my eyes alternately at the black sand beach, and then back at Carlos. We hadn’t realized we were in trouble until help arrived. His danger felt real; mine less-so. I knew that I could have drowned but I never felt it. Carlos had been the one thanking God, but it had been me the boys came out to save. Or maybe it was both of us, because two city dwellers wouldn’t have made it out of the water alone. I sat and felt the planks of briny wood under my heels and toes and kept my eyes on Carlos. He spoke in whispers with the other two board members while I stared. Then he brought drinks to our table and said, “Good thing I like to swim.”

“*Salud.*” We clinked our bottles and downed them in a few gulps. *Caldo de Mariscos*, seafood soup, came next with glasses of rum, lime and ancient glass bottles of Coca Cola.

Carlos mixed the cocktails. We drank to our lives and dug into the soup.

A few students still played cards. The rest were talking quietly or reading paperbacks. The tank tops and shorts of the female teachers had dried on their bodies; the students' bathing suits were dry too. I don't know what the other students might have thought about our disappearance, or if they even noticed. But the other two board members came over to the table and laughed uneasily as they asked if I had enjoyed my day at the beach.

Carlos and I took sips of rum between spoonfuls of soup. We ate quietly. The handful of students close to us raised their drinks, toasting something, and we held up our glasses too. After eating and drinking more, we walked down the beach, holding bottles of beer and leaning on each other, feeling awkwardly intimate from the shared, near-loss of our lives.

My brother and I had grown up in a small New York apartment; we went to the same public schools and hung out with many common friends. I had always been Jon Dienes' little sister. When he died, my biggest question was, "What am I now?" I could be, and do, whatever I wanted, but it was hard to get past just wanting him back. Ever since we were kids, he watched out for me and taught me how to survive. But when he got older, I ended up having to protect him from himself—and I couldn't. He died of a drug overdose at twenty-three, a few months after my twentieth birthday. My coming of age felt like punishment, the person closest in the world to me gone.

I could have died that day at Champerico, but I didn't. When I went to Guatemala, I wanted to do something I had never done before, to develop an aspect of myself that would reset the way I looked at things. All I wanted was to go somewhere I wouldn't be an abandoned younger sister. I was willing to speak a foreign language, eat exotic food, and ride the buses on

awful Central American roads—anything to get to a place where I felt like my life meant something on its own. That day in Champerico, I did.

Hello, Harry

When my great-uncle Harry had laryngeal cancer in 1998, the doctors could have removed his entire larynx. He would have been able to eat normally, but no longer talk. He chose speech and they carved out just the cancer. He sounded hoarse after that, but he seemed to know instinctively that he could use his new voice for comic effect while telling his old jokes and stories. He was eighty-two, still busy, still jotting to-do lists. He still accompanied his wife, Lynn, to the theater, and he continued to craft birthday cards with abstract drawings of planets and spheres.

I remember Harry sitting at the head of my grandparents' table. Lynn nagged him from the side. "Eat a piece of bread, Harry!" she said. "You can't take the liquids!" Because of Harry's operation choice, he had to learn a new way of eating. The larynx closes off the lungs so that food has a clear path to the stomach. Bread bulks up soft food, which helps it go straight down. Harry's incomplete larynx necessitated *extremely* careful chewing and swallowing. I watched him cut meat and vegetables, delivering bites to his mouth. He held his fork as I did. Nothing struck me as peculiar. He chewed with his mouth closed. I couldn't tell from my seat if he moved morsels differently about his mouth or if some other mysterious digestive revolution took place in the back of his throat.

Eventually, perhaps inevitably, food got lost. In 2002, at NYU Medical Center, an MRI test result showed infection in the lung area, which the doctors assumed was inside the lung. They administered intravenous antibiotics. Further testing showed that he had an empyema, a collection of pus between the lung and the sac it rested in. The infection didn't respond. They gave him a tracheostomy, a Chapstick-sized, plastic tube that jutted out of his neck. My mother said it was temporary, but he couldn't breathe without it.

I knew NYU's corridors from childhood, when my mother had worked there as a nurse. I remembered walking with her on her rounds, and standing in the doorways of rooms while she tended to her patients. When I accompanied her to visit Harry, I sat on a chair next to the bed. Lynn and my mother discussed the details of his condition. Harry and I held hands. We didn't speak because, with the trach, he couldn't use his vocal chords. He squeezed my thumbs in his fingers and opened his mouth in a big circle, exercising abandoned muscles. The doctors had him so hooked up to tubes and monitors he could barely move around.

I had always relied upon my mother to help me understand the body. After we left the hospital, I asked if he was going to die. I guess I had cinematic ideas about how quickly or cleanly a life would end. Up to that point, I had only experienced accidental deaths. When I saw Harry's gaunt frame in a hospital gown, and the trach, I wondered if he would die overnight. But she said that wasn't what death looked like. The doctors removed the empyema surgically and he began to get better.

When I was a teenager in the early nineties, and Harry and Lynn were younger, they used to invite me to their apartment in the East Village. They lived on St. Marks Place, across the street from the St. Mark's Playhouse, which they had given birth to, in lieu of children. By the time I came around, they merely admired it. My great aunt and uncle were retired. Harry had crammed his studio so full of books and art and materials that I can't recall the shape or size of the room—only that I could enter and stand by the stool in front of the drafting table.

Framed oil portraits littered the wall above. One, in particular, held my attention. A painting in sepia yellows, oranges and browns stood out. It showed a strange and brutal version of a man at its center. One arm appeared to be a rifle and the other an emaciated human arm.

Grey triangles jutted out of the top and side of the head like two tin-man hats. A geometric jaw grinned open and greedy. Harry had printed a poem at the bottom of the canvas:

*Once I built Towers to the Sun
3 Mile Island, Chernobyls' done
Polluted Oceans, Rivers, Atmosphere
Killed Mammals, Fish, Birds, Trees without Tears
No question, I'm Winner, unchallenged Top Gun
The only One, the One and only One*

On one of my visits, Harry moved papers around on the table until he produced a color photocopy of a Polaroid of the painting with the poem typed on the white area at the bottom. I was delighted by the gift. I placed it in a scrapbook. In 2002, I framed the copy and hung it on the wall of my apartment.

Harry left NYU Medical Center for the Jewish Home and Hospital, where he was supposed to recover from the big infection. But he developed another while he was there, so he was transported to St. Luke's Medical Center. From there, he moved to the Amsterdam Nursing Home. I visited him in all the beds, sometimes with my mother, sometimes alone. Wherever he went, Lynn visited daily. Even if she had to ride two connecting buses.

When I sat with him, we played charades in bed and doodled on his notepad. Lynn reported to my mother, who told me that old friends occasionally dropped in, and his sister, my grandmother, called on the phone. At that point, he could still enunciate hoarse words through the receiver. Our time together still smacked of lighthearted encouragement and hope.

Sometimes I interrupted Harry snoozing with *The New York Times* Metro section across his lap. I picked through the remainder of the paper until he awoke. He learned to ask questions without talking. To find out if I had ridden my bicycle to visit him, he put his hands over his head, and then held them out. I handed over my helmet, which he placed at an angle on his head.

“You have to buckle the strap,” I’d say. “Biking in New York is serious.” Harry would shake his head rebelliously, and the straps dangled about his chin. He reached his hands out, as if to grip handlebars. “Okay, Harry,” I’d say. “We’ll go for a bike ride when you go home.”

The doctors cured his infections, but life in bed weakened the old man. On the rehabilitation floor of the Amsterdam Nursing Home, a physical therapist helped him into a wheelchair and pushed him into the hall. Once she locked the wheels of his carriage, she helped him up and held his arm as he practiced taking steps. I remember him winking, and sometimes mouthing, “I think she likes me.” But his joking couldn’t hide the fact that he struggled. The therapist coaxed gently. He’d leave his attendant’s side and head straight for something to hold onto, stooped over in his dressing gown to catch his breath.

Comfortably in bed, he held court with friends in the sunny room he shared with another old man in recovery. They watched each other’s visits and butted into conversations. The only privacy they had was the curtain that pulled around the hospital beds. To my young eyes they seemed like regular guys in an old-people’s dormitory. Lynn wheeled Harry downstairs to sit in front of the building. Amsterdam Avenue could be sunny and bright with wild glinting reflections from the cars. Or it could be grey and bleak on overcast days. I watched him watch pedestrians with interest, pointing to a mother rolling a stroller or to a deviant bicycle messenger peddling by on the sidewalk. If he was tired, Harry would stare vacantly down the avenue at St. John the Divine Cathedral. Maybe he wished at those moments that someone would wheel him away.

Lynn insisted he exercise, and he would mouth, “I know, I know.” But Harry plateaued. My mother investigated how to apply for healthcare assistance to pay for a hospital bed rental in

their apartment and a home health aid. She and Lynn thought if he went home, he would feel happier. The doctors had added anti-depressants to his regimen.

Harry came down with two separate infections while at the Amsterdam Nursing Home. The doctors at St. Luke's cleaned out his lungs both times and returned him to the nursing home. At this point, my mother talked to Harry alone. She told him they might be able to get health insurance for home care. "Lynn can't take care of me," he said. Although they had been keeping it a secret from him, he seemed to know that she, too, was sick. The doctors had found the shadow of a tumor in her lungs. Maybe he guessed. For whatever reason, he stopped trying to get better.

Due to a new infection, the EMTs drove Harry back to St. Luke's, to the intensive care unit. The doctors and nurses poked him with needles to send fluids in or take blood out, maintaining his life. I began to focus my attention on his arms; his pale skin bruised easily. I traced my fingertips back and forth, from his elbow to his wrist. Around us, other patients lay quietly in their beds. We listened to heart monitors and respirators and the light hiss of oxygen. We winked and blinked instead of talking. His taxed lungs lacked the respiratory power to breathe enough, especially at night.

With the permanent opening above his adam's apple, He could only talk if he plugged it. With the plug in, oxygen was supposed to have followed the same path in takes in healthy people, passing over the larynx, expelling from the mouth. If Harry had regained his strength, he could have plugged that tube and used his mouth again for breathing and speaking. Eventually, if he had improved enough, the doctors would have removed the trach and allowed the hole to close. But when the nurses pressured him to use the plug, he only coughed.

Harry didn't sleep well, and he felt exhausted. On one evening at St. Luke's, he wanted to go to bed at eight o'clock. He waved to the nurses, but they didn't come. I walked to where they clustered over paperwork, and asked if one of them could help him settle in. They explained it was the change of shift. "Five minutes, Harry," one called from across the room. "Just hold on." I sat by my great uncle for almost forty-five minutes, making childish faces and writing notes on the yellow paper that matched my cotton jersey. He coughed, agitated, as we waited. We heard, again, "Just a minute, Harry!" Creamy spittle poured out of the tube onto his gown. When the nurse finally came to his bedside, she asked me to step away so she could pull the curtain. He had needed to go to the bathroom and hadn't been able to wait.

When Harry was ready to start kindergarten, my grandmother remembers him saying to his mother in Yiddish, "Ma, I can't go to school. I haven't learned English yet." Their mother laughed and sent him out the door to begin his life—and learn English. I asked my mother why he didn't learn how to walk again the way he learned a new language in kindergarten. He had survived the influenza scare, The Great Depression, and crawling around the trenches in World War II. Later, Harry survived the colon cancer that took his older brother. And finally, he dealt with the laryngeal cancer—and got permanent laryngitis. A mere tap on the wrist. Harry had his aches and pains, but he had pushed on.

My mother reminded me that Harry had that five-year-old-boy inside of him, but he had another eighty years worth of life, too. He must have been tired. If it was sad for me to watch him deteriorate, I needed to imagine how he must have felt. Sad and spent. I had seen the fear in his eyes when the physical therapist released his hand in the hall. He couldn't eat, drink, talk or

breath through his mouth. Couldn't walk on his legs. Probably had bedsores. He stopped reading, writing and having conversations.

I couldn't make sense of all the illness and deterioration Harry suffered before he finally died in 2004. I asked my mother what the good was in a long life that ended miserably. She always tried to answer my questions; but when I asked her that, she merely responded that watching a person die is no picnic.

During the final year, Harry had a private room at the Amsterdam House. Lynn hung pictures and kept vases for fresh flowers. Freestanding bookends supported his library on the night table. I remember one day when I went to visit. I said, "Hi, Harry! How are you?" He didn't even mouth a greeting in return. He shrugged and squinted his eyes and tightened his dry lips. Lynn had been straightening the collection of get-well cards on the window sill, but she had seen his response. She walked around me to the other side of the bed to face him.

"Speak, Harry! For God's sake, Susanna is here to see you. She asked you how you are!"

Harry took a deep breath. He moved his arm heavily to the bedside table where the trach plug rested in a plastic dish and inhaled with a wheeze. "Hello, Lynn," he said, and coughed.

"Remember to breathe, dear." She spoke like a choir director.

He paused to inhale, still gazing at Lynn. "Hello, Susanna," he said. I smiled and leaned forward, reaching for his hand. He breathed deeply once more. Then he looked at me. "Hello. Hello. Hello."

My One-Summer Bike

When I moved to New Orleans in June 2004, I discovered I needed to change my idea of a city bike. The narrow rims on my New York City ten-speed would never survive the unpredictable sidewalks and streets of my new home. I had looked forward to zipping back and forth between my apartment in the French Quarter and the University of New Orleans' lakefront campus where I was in graduate school. Whether from the accelerated growth of potholes due to extreme annual rainfall and municipal negligence, or uneven ruptures in the pavement from the roots of ancient trees, the city's paved roads needed a makeover. This surprised me because I knew that in New Orleans three times the national average of workers commuted daily on bicycle. I had mistakenly assumed that this would mean the city had well-paved streets and avenues. When, during my first days and weeks, the reality laid itself bare, I decided to adjust my own habits. I could still ride, just not on the bike I was used to.

Fixed in the mindset of a frugal graduate student, I had asked around for suggestions where to find good deals. I didn't know what to expect when I first took the ten minute walk over to Plan B. Above the entranceway, a rusty cruiser with tireless wheels stood welded onto the transom. I stepped around the milk crate propping open the door and glimpsed the workshop. Diffused sunrays illuminated the big room through the panes of mullioned windows. From the iron racks against the wall, a hundred metal wheels caught the light. A group of black boys clustered in the glow, handling wheels and then looking over their shoulders at the small frames they seemed to be outfitting. A pale man with broad cheekbones and a limp, blond Mohawk towered over them, his neck bent forward as he interacted with the boys. I could hear them, but not him. Their exuberant voices pitched slang about the room. "Yo, Marvin . . ." and then

something I couldn't figure out. They handled the bikes and parts, grabbing tools off the wall pegs and then leaving them on the table.

Everything in the room smelled like bikes. I knew the greasy odor from lurking around my favorite bike shop in New York, but I wasn't accustomed to getting my own hands dirty. Everyone's hands, that I could see, had black-gook-lined nails. I curled my clean, white fingers into my palms. Aside from the boys, the rest of the men and women worked quietly. Even though it was hot inside, everyone wore closed shoes and long pants. A man sorting through a pile of seat posts stood and stretched, audibly cracking his back. People picked up bicycles with a swift grasp of a crossbar and launched them onto mechanic stands. A woman stood by a truing stand and spun a wheel carefully, noting with chalk where the metal grazed the stand's frame. I pushed my limp hair away from my sweaty temples and looked down at my sandals, not sure if I should wait to be approached, or just walk up to someone.

For a few minutes I just stood inside the vast, rectangular space. April, a tiny woman with short, choppy blue hair, and an assortment of star and raindrop tattoos on her arms and shoulders, eventually greeted me and apologized for the delay. "It's all the kids today," she explained. "We go crazy when they come in."

I forgot myself and told her I wanted a cruiser bike. She asked what kind. I didn't know. Weren't they all the same? "The kind that won't get stolen?"

April giggled. "That's funny," she said, and then asked me if I could wait just a little bit longer. I stood around and stared, feeling okay about thinking how loud the kids were.

I knew that Plan B called itself a public bicycle workshop, but I didn't understand the rhetoric right away. In my native Manhattan, I had commuted on bicycle during the work week and kept riding for exercise during the evenings and weekends. But when my bike needed repair

and maintenance work, I got someone else to do it. Someone in particular, actually, who had been building bicycles since the age of fourteen, a good friend who gave my bike tune-ups and repairs. But Plan B was D.I.Y., a term I had never heard before. I liked the idea of Do It Yourself, because if I could fix my own flats and tighten loose parts, I could go farther on my own.

April returned to my side and pointed at the row of cruisers on a rack to my right. “These are pretty much ready to go,” she said. “You might have to do some work, but we’ve done enough to send them out.” I scanned the bikes, not sure how to pick. “This one looks like your size,” she said.

Ah, I thought. Probably the best way to choose. I wouldn’t have thought about frame size.

“Why don’t you take it for a spin around the block?” she offered. I looked over to the plasterboard wall across from the open windows. A large, hand-painted sign read, “Bikes: ‘We built’em \$45-\$100,’ ‘You built’em \$25-\$75.’” I fingered the fifty bucks in my back pocket, and pushed the blue cruiser out into the sunshine.

The bicycle felt all right, although, every time I pedaled, the crank groaned. I showed it to April, and she hopped on for a diagnostic try. She rode in a loop-de-loop up and down Decatur Street. She said it might be the pedals, but it was nothing serious. She stuck my money into a metal lockbox under some greasy rags and I left.

My new bike rode well enough for a few days, and then the noise grew to a groan, a click and sometimes a whine. I had two choices. I could either take it to a shop where I would have to pay, or take the next step in my relationship with bicycles. I decided to get intimate.

When I went back and found April, and the tall, mohawked man who I had learned called himself Moose, they accepted my near-total lack of knowledge and offered to help me diagnose the problem. Really, Moose did the diagnosing, but once he had, he stopped and asked me if I knew about the bottom bracket. I knew it existed, I told him, but couldn't have put my finger on it. Moose and I kneeled together. Suddenly I understood why everyone wore long pants in the heat. The floor smudged my knees. He guided my hand to the piece between the pedal cranks and then pointed at a diagram stuck to the wall. Under Moose's tutelage, I took the bottom bracket apart; cleaned, lubricated and reassembled it; we made adjustments and tightened it back into place. The work took two hours. My hands had blackened, I felt exhilarated with accomplishment, and I asked Moose if he would help me take my whole bike apart and put it back together. He said we had done enough for one day.

For all of July and part of August, I haunted the shop, reading repair manuals and learning over people's shoulders. My cruiser became my passion. I learned to adjust all of its moving parts, swapped out the pedals, added reflector lights and a rear basket for groceries. I also learned to perform many tasks for the shop, evolving from a customer into a volunteer. Once I had skeletal knowledge of bicycle repair, I gave information and performed triage when the shop got crowded. When no one came in, I stripped old tires and tubes from donated rims. I grew to relish the odor of the yellowish degreasing solution. I loved getting my fingers sticky placing the tiny parts of a rear hub into a soak. My basic tool knowledge expanded from the crescent wrench, the Allen wrenches, and the cable cutters to include the chain whip, channel lock and cone wrench, among many others.

I got hooked on Plan B. Not only did the mechanical work thrill me like a puzzle, but the volunteer work situated me in a room with New Orleanians I might never have gotten to meet,

or, who otherwise might have intimidated me. I became well-acquainted with the rest of the eclectic collective, the older black men, throngs of black boys ages five and older, and white men and women in their twenties. The clientele ranged from bartenders to yoga instructors to public school teachers to secretaries.

Many people came for the same reason I had—the low prices. The collective shared its tools with the public and recycled parts to sell at a minimal cost. People involved with the inner workings of the organization cared so much about transportation alternatives and recycling bikes and materials that they spent their free time sharing skills and pooling resources with the community. Many of the core people lived together in a Mid-city communal warehouse and had weekly pot luck dinners. The idealism of the group fascinated me. Although I considered the bike shop an incredible project, an asset to the community, I wasn't sure how realistic it would be to dedicate my life to D.I.Y. transportation alternatives. I wanted to live a car-free lifestyle, but once graduate school started, that would probably be the end of my volunteering days. I embraced the experience wholeheartedly, perhaps because I knew my time was limited. I had to find a paying job by the end of the summer, and once classes began, I doubted I'd be able to continue hanging around at Plan B.

By late July, I volunteered regularly with Moose two days a week. Every Thursday we opened the workshop at two. That was the only day of the week that Plan B opened so early and the biggest day for neighborhood kids. They showed up in raucous groups, carrying second boys on the rear wheel foot pegs of their bikes. Moose wrote daily entries in our log book about how hard they were to supervise. The teenagers could work independently, but the younger boys needed guidance. Some had working bikes that they yearned to “trick out” and others had bikes

with no brakes or gears or even seats. Moose didn't mess around, and his presence kept the kids in line.

On one Thursday afternoon, I arrived at Plan B's door a little before two. Thirteen boys waited outside in the sun. The street was quiet except for an occasional car. Their faces and arms glistened with sweat as they sat on their bikes, leaning on one foot and then the other. They all stood up when they saw me approach. April opened the door. They wilted back down on the sidewalk and the grass as it shut behind me.

The shop was swept and the work tables almost ready, with just a random assortment of nuts and bolts still in mixed clusters. Shafts of afternoon light came in through the windows; the hanging florescent lights were off. Moose was late and April didn't know when he would return. He had gone to an appointment with a doctor that morning. She said she thought he would be there as soon as he could, but then shrugged her shoulders. She asked me if I felt comfortable enough to open the shop alone. She wasn't going to be able to stay with me. I had to decide. Did I feel okay by myself?

I felt only newly confident about my status as a responsible adult, and even less-so about my mechanical abilities, but there was more to my apprehension. I had grown up in one of the most diverse cities in the world. I felt like I shouldn't have even considered that the thirteen eager boys outside were all black. But that, in fact, was what I was worried about. New Orleans was not a multicultural hub like New York City, and I wasn't sure how I would fit in, alone, with a room of young black males.

I said I thought I'd be fine. April left me alone with the keys. I stood still for a moment, thinking. The industrial fan droned. I felt hot. I hoped I had made the right decision. What if the kids tried to take advantage of me? What if they ran around screaming and banging tools

against the walls? I rolled my bike out into the hall behind the workshop, where other bikes leaned unlocked against the wall. They would be good, I decided. These were the same kids I had worked with every Thursday for a month. Why would they be any more unruly than usual? I decided I would threaten to sic Moose on anyone who got out of line and grabbed a small spiral notebook and pen.

The daylight shocked my dilated eyes. I covered my face with one hand and pointed the boys into the shade across the street. All thirteen seemed to call out at once,

“Miss, I need brakes!”

“Miss, I need a seat!”

“Miss, where Mister Moose at?”

I opened the notebook to a clean page and put it in one boy’s hand. “Write your name down,” I said, “and then write down what’s wrong with your bike.” The boy wrote his name. “What’s wrong with your bike?” I asked him.

“Brakes. I need some brakes,” he said, not writing anything down. I took the pad and wrote the word: “brakes.” The boys wrote their names but I had to fill in the rest. I didn’t know how old each one was, but most appeared to me to be between ten and thirteen. The question, “Why don’t they want to write a simple word like “brakes”?” passed through my mind but I dismissed it. This wasn’t school.

Even so, I used the list like an attendance roster, and moved on to ask the second one what he needed.

“Everything, I think,” he said. He held a bike frame in hand, with some parts installed and dangling. I asked him how he had gotten to the shop from home. He had ridden on the back of another boy’s bike, hugging the frame under his arm.

Four of the boys had no brakes. They had to wait for Moose. Alone, I only could fix flats, tighten chains, adjust seats and work on bottom brackets. I picked the first two boys to enter, and the rest grumbled. One of the older boys informed me that he could work independently, so I should let him in, too. I stood firm. "Two at a time. I'm alone here, and I can't help more than two of you at once. Just, please, stay in the shade."

Inside, I stood with the first two while they glued orange patches onto deflated inner tubes and hung them to dry on nails. It took a few minutes. Then we squatted on our haunches by the bright orange compressor. The boys filled the tubes half full with air and knelt in front of a metal mixing bowl to submerge their experiments in water. If no bubbles rose to the surface, the patch was a success.

Moose arrived an hour and a half late. By that time, adult regulars had begun to come in after work and even more neighborhood kids materialized. I handed the youths over to him and he began by walking a half-dozen boys through brake issues. Moose explained simply, pointing at the hand-drawn diagrams on the wall to illustrate. He assigned partnerships so that kids with similar repairs to make could work together. If one boy had to take apart the hub of a wheel, his partner soaked and scrubbed the parts. People at the door kept me busy and soon the shift was almost over.

At ten to six, Moose and I called out for everyone's attention. We needed to close and we expected everyone to cooperate in the cleaning and straightening of the shop. The adults responded immediately, but I had to pester a few of the kids to stop what they were doing and help put tools and parts away.

“Yes, Miss,” they said, while continuing to work. They always tested me, as I imagine most kids test adults. I stood at the table with them, helping them see a stopping point. “Plan B will be open on Saturday,” I said. They knew that, but it helped to remind them.

From across the room, a woman easing her bicycle out of a table brace called, “Miss! Hey! Do you have a blue bike with a basket?” She told me later that a flash of blue had caught her eye.

I looked up, thinking of my bicycle in the hall. I had left the door unwatched.

“I just saw one of those kids run out the door with it!”

I hurried outside and asked a group of waiting boys if they had seen anyone ride out on my bike.

“We seen a bike,” they offered.

“Was it a blue bike, with double baskets on the back?” I felt helpless. The kids leaned against the side of the building, seemingly unaffected by the urgency in my voice.

“Yeah. We seen that bike. It went that way.”

Moose barreled out and flew around the corner. Two other men from the shop, regular volunteers, followed him. I didn’t move from the front of the building. The boys wouldn’t say who took my bike. They just acknowledged they saw it ride away. Moose and the other men combed the quiet neighborhood streets, but in his minute of lead time the thief disappeared. And that was it. My bike was gone.

I looked up at the rusty cruiser above the doorway. I hoped the boy would come back. I couldn’t imagine he was one of “mine.” I felt like I really knew some of those kids. Moose took the situation into his own hands while I walked around, feeling useless. He called the remaining boys to stand around him in a circle. Their heads came no higher than his chest. His filthy,

white tee shirt with ripped off sleeves contrasted their clean faces. He took a deep breath and looked down, making eye contact with each one. “Do you know what just happened?” he asked carefully. I heard no judgment in his tone, just seriousness. I remembered Moose had been in the army earlier in his twenties. I pictured him in a pressed uniform and officer’s cap.

The boys met his eyes. Two or three pointed at me and said, “Yeah. Someone took her bike.” No one would say who. But they were sure it was no friend of theirs. Why would one of them take my bicycle? I felt warm in my face the way I do when I need to cry. But I wasn’t certain what to cry for—my bike or the boy.

Moose declared without hesitation that they all needed to leave, and that no person under the age of eighteen would be allowed back inside without an adult for the rest of the summer. The air compressor hose jabbed the back of my leg. Or maybe it was a mosquito biting. I don’t know. I just remember reaching down to scratch, and scratching too hard. I felt stupid. I hadn’t locked up my bike. Never mind that I hadn’t imagined anyone inside the shop would steal from me. It was a collective. We were volunteers. And the kids . . . they were already getting so much stuff for free, I just never would’ve thought. . . .

The boys shuffled out. The rest of us cleaned up. When April came back to get the keys, she told me to pick out a loaner bike and pointed to the rack under the window. I felt a mix of emotions, but not anger. Already, I had another bike, and these kids were riding around with no brakes.

I picked out a purple cruiser and took it for a diagnostic ride in the street. It sounded awful. The rear hub groaned. Even Chartres’ smooth pavement didn’t make it sound better. It was really a mess. I pedaled along, listening, oddly excited. It was something I could fix.

*

That summer at Plan B, I didn't always know what I was doing; but I did my best, and enjoyed the mixed community, so different from my predominantly white, middle class neighbors in the French Quarter. Many in New Orleans lost bikes to thieves. The truth was, as a New Yorker, I understood there was no excuse for leaving my bike unlocked. I felt stupid that I had let it happen, but in a larger way, I just felt frustrated that it had happened at all.

I had moved to New Orleans partially because I thought it was a bicycle-friendly town. The 2000 census had reported that twenty-six percent of families in New Orleans did not even have access to a car, compared to ten percent nationally. Now, I know my research could have been deeper; then I would have learned how poor much of the city's population was. But on the brink of my life as a graduate student, I merely saw what I wanted to, a malleable fact that suited my lifestyle.

When I bought the blue cruiser, I had never worked on bikes before; but, in a month, I had learned enough to raise my bike's status in the world. Maybe I restored it too well. Maybe if I had left the creaky pedals on and all the rest, it wouldn't have caught anyone's eye in a row of unlocked bikes. But if that had happened it would have taken me longer to understand the complexities of my new city.

Just Like Jazzfest

“The sun set and I have never seen so many stars in my life. It was awesome. The power was out in New Orleans and all along the Gulf Coast region. . . . The lights were probably out one or two hundred miles north of here. To the south was just gulf. It was the most gorgeous, incredible sky I’ve seen in my life. We laid out on the front steps landing. I laid out there a long time Monday night and just stared at the sky, just thinking, I’m so glad I stayed to witness this sky.” Lora Crayon, thirty-four, grew up in the house in which she passed Hurricane Katrina with her best friend and tenant, Sabrina Avalos, thirty-five and Sabrina’s four-year-old daughter, Marigny. Lora and Sabrina, friends for twenty years, both grew up in Gentilly. Before the storm, they lived at 5210 and 5212 Demontluzin Street, a shotgun double that Lora had bought in February 2004. Lora and her children, aged eleven and fourteen, occupied one side and Sabrina and Marigny, the other. The weekend hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans, Lora’s ex-husband, a New Orleans firefighter, had her kids. He took them to the Hilton where they passed the storm safely with their stepmother and the rescue squad. Sabrina’s mother, also a Gentilly resident, booked a room for Sabrina and Marigny at the Hilton hotel, and even dropped off the key, but her daughter hesitated to use it.

Lora and Sabrina decided to stay on Demontluzin Street, but not in the house they shared. They saw no reason to put themselves in a tedious hotel room. Instead, they drove down to the 4800 block, where Lora grew up, and where her sister still lived, to the four thousand square foot, cypress house on pilings twelve feet above street level. It also happened to stand on Gentilly Ridge, a “B” flood zone, which meant it hadn’t flooded in over a hundred years. And it came well stocked for any disaster, equipped with a generator, gasoline, the medicine chest of a

nurse (Lora's sister's profession) and ample food and water. Sabrina felt that Marigny would be safe and comfortable there, especially because Lora's sister had young kids with a bedroom full of toys and videos. They looked forward to the adventure of the storm. They prepared for loss of utilities and water by filling up the washing machine, bathtub, sinks, pots, pans and numerous Tupperware containers that would serve as makeshift vessels.

"We love storms," explained Sabrina. "The wind and the rain. I love the roar of the wind, how it howls."

Lora jumped in with the first indication of just how fun-loving she and her friend really were: "Sunday night when the wind started picking up, around one-thirty, Sabrina and I ran down the street naked, streaking and twirling our hands in the air. Just feeling total freedom. . . . When the wind started getting a little worse and we heard a couple of cracks of the tree branches, we went back to the porch, which had an overhang. We were safe there. We sat there for a while and watched."

They laughed and Sabrina added, "We had towels on." Marigny slept peacefully in a bedroom in the center of the house, as far away from the only window in the room as her mother could situate her. Sabrina and Lora stayed up watching the storm until three or four, and then woke up again to watch a few hours later. They sat in an alcove outside again in the morning.

Lora remembered, "The wind was blowing from the north and the alcove was on the north side. We just sat there for a while and watched the wind blow by. The ceiling fan on the front porch started tearing apart. We were scared a piece would hit us so we went inside." Hovering a safe distance from the window glass, they still watched, fascinated as the wind pulled the aluminum roof off in strips.

By noon Monday, the wind died down and the water came. A foot of water turned into four feet by four-thirty. For Sabrina, “That was unsettling, especially because the water rushed north toward the lake and if anything, we would’ve thought it would’ve spilled over the levee at the lakefront and flow south. So that was very bizarre.” Gentilly residents know minor flood water pretty well, but neither Sabrina or Lora ever remembered the streets flooding more than a foot. That night, while Lora lay admiring the startling night sky, Sabrina left her friend for a little while to lie in bed next to her daughter, soothing her to sleep. When they finally went to bed themselves, Lora and Sabrina set their cell phone alarms to go off at intervals so that they could keep an eye on the water in case it rose even higher.

For a few days, they used the generator to power the refrigerator, some lights at night, and the TV and video for Marigny to watch Disney movies. They kept their cell phone batteries charged but neither phone functioned to make calls or to send text messages. “It was hot. We were stressed out. We’d been in the house and on the porch. There was no air conditioning. We were on a little island. We were worried because the water wasn’t going down. I knew my kids were worried about me,” said Lora. They tried to stay cool sitting in front of the house. Voices from around the city came through the small, battery-powered radio; people were calling in from their attics in Mid-City, the ninth ward, all over. They heard people begging for help, trapped with their kids and no way out, calling the radio for help because there was no 911 service.

On Monday Lora waded into “Lake Katrina.” She moved through chest-deep water to her brother’s house four blocks away. He had animals she wanted to check on, and a boat she hoped to free so they could use it. Unfortunately, she couldn’t get it free by herself, and Sabrina could not leave Marigny alone to be the needed second set of hands.

On Tuesday morning, the water level rose to five and a half feet, and stopped. Neighbors passed by in boats, in pirogues, on surfboards, or whatever they had that would float. Lora hoped to hitch a ride back to her brother's, but she started to see grease and oil in the water and did not want to risk immersing herself in it again. Instead, they hung around the house, which had six feet of dry grass below it on the slope down to the water-filled street. Dark fish that looked like Flounder swam by. Sabrina gave Marigny a net and the child entertained herself by fishing.

Marigny wanted to go home but she also wanted to play in the water. Sabrina remembered that Marigny "thought we could go home but I don't think she thought how we would go or the repercussions of trying to get home or what we were going home to. She was just more annoyed that she couldn't play in the water than anything else. For the most part we had that generator on during the day. We'd keep her occupied watching TV or playing with toys or we'd play with her." They kept washcloths in the freezer and placed them on Marigny's head at night to help her feel cool and fall asleep easier.

The freezer did more than help Marigny sleep at night. It also may have saved the life of Mrs. Burke, an elderly woman in the house next door. Lorraine and Louis Burke, both in their seventies, actually lived in New Orleans East, but their son, a firefighter, insisted they leave their house the Sunday night before Katrina. He brought them to his aunt's house on Demontluzin, next door to Lora's family house. Mrs. Burke, a diabetic, brought a limited supply of her insulin, her needles, or her other medications. She came to Gentilly Terrace in her night robe. Shortly before the evacuation, she had had a surgery on her legs that prevented her from bending her knees at all. The two-hundred-pound elderly woman sat confined in a wheelchair. She needed help.

On Tuesday, Lora went to check on the Burkes whom she remembered from childhood. She took them devilled eggs. By Wednesday, Mrs. Burke ran out of needles. Sabrina pillaged Lora's sister's medicine chest, full of supplies, and sent Lora across the short stretch of watery driveway. On Wednesday, Mr. Burke asked Lora if he could buy two gallons of water.

"We have tons of water," she said. "Don't pay me. Anyway, it's my brother-in-law's water." The proud man insisted that he planned to reimburse Lora's brother-in-law as soon as he next saw him. He did not want help, although his wife needed it badly. On Thursday Mrs. Burke seemed sick and out of touch with reality. She had no insulin left and her body overheated. That's when Lora went over and packed her in frozen sausage.

Lora had been staying close to home, not wanting to spend too much time in the oily water. She waded back and forth across the driveway up to her waist to go between her family's house and the Burkes'. But Thursday, when Mrs. Burke needed rescuing, she went down the street, as best she could, to a few other neighbors' houses. She walked along some of the terraced land using it like a sidewalk, but in between each house, the driveway dipped down below the murky water level. She wanted to get a helicopter's attention. The neighbors waved white sheets and Sabrina stood on the balcony of their house in her bikini, also waving a sheet. They hadn't seen helicopters in their neighborhood since Monday, but whether it was the sheets or the bathing suit, the cry for help was heeded inside of fifteen minutes.

The helicopter made its way toward their house just as a neighbor on a surfboard paddled by on his stomach. The winds were so strong, Sabrina ran inside and the surfing neighbor had to grab the nearest crepe myrtle branch so that he wouldn't be tossed in the artificial tidal wave down the street. Lora was on the Burkes' porch. A guardsman rappelled down from the helicopter and she ran across the yard to talk to him. She explained the situation of Mrs. Burke's

immobility. The man told her to get everyone ready and that the helicopter would come back in an hour after refueling.

A neighbor with a boat assisted with the move of Mr. and Mrs. Burke to the schoolyard of Saint James Major, a block away, where Lora had attended grammar school. A couple of other neighbors helped Mrs. Burke into and out of the boat. Then, they all left the Burkes to wait for the helicopter where it could land for them to board. No one else from their block of about six populated homes wanted to leave Gentilly.

Lora and Sabrina had a big decision to make. They had heard reports of the chaos at the Superdome and the Convention Center. Lora asked the guardsman, when he came initially, if either place was their destination; the guardsman insisted that the helicopter would carry them to a safe place. It took over two hours for it to return, and in that time, they decided to go along and help the Burkes. When the helicopter came back, they were ready to be airlifted from the house.

They each packed a duffle bag with some food, water and change of clothes. Sabrina raided the medical stash and packed liquid band aids, alcohol wipes, sunscreen, a heating ointment for joint and muscle pain, children's fever medication, and a pack of antibiotics. She also packed her bikini and Marigny's raincoat. The helicopter returned to the house and a man dropped down from the sky with an anchor on another rope to lift the women and child. He sat Sabrina down first and then Lora on the other side, with their legs in a scissors pattern. Marigny sat in her mother's lap. Sabrina thought her legs would bruise, since they were underneath those of her friend and her daughter's, but the view distracted her from the awkward position as the anchor rose above New Orleans. She recalled, "We saw parts of the interstate underwater, just water everywhere. We knew from the radio that they had water downtown, uptown, Mid-City,

and all different places, but to see parts of the interstate that looked like boat landings was incredible.”

Once inside the helicopter, Lora explained where the Burkes were waiting. They found the couple waiting with other stranded Gentilly residents. The helicopter ride lasted about fifteen to twenty minutes, and Lora and Sabrina found themselves comforting a crying family of a mother and two teenage daughters. When they reached the alleged safe place, they were not so sure it would be okay anymore. The helicopter had carried them to Causeway and I-10, where something like 3,000 people appeared stuck. The masses loitered, waiting for direction, waiting for some authority to take charge and get them out of there.

Many law officials were present—Jefferson Parish police, state troopers, National Guard, maybe some military police—but nobody was able to produce a bullhorn. Nobody knew exactly what was going on. No one separated the elderly from the strong, the babies and children from the sick. Trash littered every inch of ground. People had no place to go to get away from their own refuse. For the 3,000 bodies, Lora and Sabrina saw four Port-o-let toilets. The basic necessities of food and water came in the form of MREs and bottled water, but no one distributed garbage bags to collect the packaging and remove it from the area.

The EMTs assessed the Burkes and told Sabrina and Lora to make sure the elderly couple got on the first bus out of there. Lora explained how difficult this was—“The interstate has bumps and guard rails and all of that; it was a maze...” They were on the westbound side of the interstate. They were instructed to go over to the eastbound side, right across from the Galleria, to wait for busses. “It was hot, the sun was beating down us.” After that afternoon’s rain, the atmosphere turned into a sauna. Strangers helped them carry the Burkes in their wheelchairs over the obstructions to the other side.

Lora recounted, “I got the kindness of strangers to help with Lorraine.” Fellow refugees in the crowd helped get the elderly to the waiting area for the busses. “We were all forced to stand out in the sun by gunpoint.

“‘Back up!’” they kept yelling. “‘Back up! Back up! Y’all line here. Y’all line there’ They moved the line three or four times. . . . At one point they were pushing the crowd back. Marigny was standing in front of me and I lifted her over my head to keep her from getting crushed and Sabrina was screaming, ‘I’m getting crushed! I’m getting crushed!’”

In between these arbitrary moments of pressure, people stood helpless. A woman from St. Bernard parish fainted next to Lora. When she approached a state trooper to ask for help, he informed her that he wasn’t there to help, he was there for security, and he couldn’t do anything. During this limbo, standing with the Burkes in front of them in their wheelchairs and wall-to-wall people everywhere around them, Lora got a call through to a sister who lived in Slidell, who had evacuated to Florida. She let her know that they were at Causeway and I-10. After they talked, she couldn’t get through to any of her family members or back in touch with that sister. People in the crowd around her asked if they could borrow the phone, and she willingly shared it.

They weren’t happy to be there, but somehow Lora and Sabrina maintained their sense of adventure. According to Sabrina, “We had a sense of humor and laughed a lot. We were hot and miserable but we do that at Jazzfest every year.” The pushing of the crowd stopped. They could see three busses pull up in the distance, and they saw them drive away full of people. But that was it. When the EMTs started packing up to leave and trucks arrived with floodlights and a shipment of folding cots, they knew nothing else would happen.

Lora grabbed a box of five cots and carried it over her head about a hundred yards to set up near the floodlights. Marigny played with a six-month-old baby belonging to a large family

set up nearby. She entertained herself by cooing at it and saying over and over how cute it was. Mrs. Burke finally admitted she needed to use the restroom. The cops came in and made a tent around her. Nurses from Memorial Medical Center, evacuated earlier that day, helped lift her off the cot so she could pee into what might have been a refrigerator vegetable bin.

The EMTs had pulled off a mile down the Causeway. Lora could see their lights from where she had wandered in pursuit of a cell phone signal. The police kept the refugees penned into a small area. At nine-twenty, she started to get text messages from her sister in Florida who knew somebody who was coming across the Causeway.

“Her husband had some mutual friends that he knew were coming back to the area that had evacuated to Florida. They were crossing Causeway and I-10, so they had messages to them to pick us up. I got messages from her, ‘We have people coming to pick you up. Can you meet them at such and such place?’ It was very confusing . . . I would get them in groups of five. I didn’t know which one was first and which last. One would say, ‘Can you walk to West Metairie?’ which was south. Or ‘Can you walk towards Causeway?’ which was north.

She was standing fifty feet away from Sabrina, Marigny, and the Burkes when the last messages came in: “‘No time. One black truck. One white truck. Harahan policemen. Nick Nuccio.’ And ‘He’s waiting on Airline side of overpass now. Can’t wait. Hurry now.’ Lora took off. She ran up the overpass, around, around, around the loop-de-loop, screaming Nick Nuccio’s name. She found him and he said, “‘There’s supposed to be two women and a girl. Where are you?’” Lora said she had to run to get them, and asked if he could take the Burkes too. He said no. She ran back for Sabrina and Marigny without arguing.

Lora arrived back at their cot area with muck up to her knees. While she had been struggling to understand the text messages, Marigny had asked Sabrina to go the bathroom.

Sabrina said she would take her, but not until Lora came back, because she didn't want to leave the Burkes alone. But when Lora ran up and said, "They're here! We gotta go!" That was all Sabrina needed to hear in order to pack up. Lora hugged Mrs. Burke goodbye and said goodbye to Mr. Burke. She asked the nurses from Memorial to look after the couple, and wished them the best. Then, they ran back in the direction of Nick Nuccio.

Sabrina carried Marigny initially, but Lora, taller and stronger, grabbed the child and ran ahead. They stepped over cots, people lying on cardboard, people lying plainly in mud. They jumped over people. When she had to climb a four-foot high guard rail, Lora handed Marigny to an older black man on the other side, so that she could climb over. Shortly after he handed Marigny back, she let go of a stuffed frog she had been carrying in her hand. Marigny cried for her frog, but Sabrina and Lora kept moving.

A flood light shone out of nowhere into their faces. Sabrina laid her eyes for the first time on their rescuers, a group of Italian men who reminded her of "The Sopranos." They drove a white and a black pickup truck and they had a police escort sent from Harahan to meet them there and ensure their safe return. Sabrina and Lora stood outside for a moment, surveying the big, fat Italian guys inside the vehicles with assault rifles, generators and plenty of water and food.

A man tapped Sabrina's shoulder from behind. It was the same man from the guard rail. He handed her the frog doll. Sabrina thought, "If he only knew that these guys were trigger happy and ready to shoot looters. That guy took his life in his hands over a stuffed animal for my baby. I just looked at him and thanked him. I couldn't believe what he had done. So we got into that truck and we held hands the whole ride from Causeway and I-10 to Harahan.

“They told us when we got in the truck, ‘If you hear fire or we tell you to get down, just get down.’ They were very worried they were gonna get looted.” The media coverage on national news had scared them so bad, they barely felt comfortable waiting, even with their artillery and a police escort.

The drive to Harahan was quiet. No other vehicles shared the road. The police escort lit the path at the front of their caravan. When they arrived at their destination, what looked like a “million dollar home,” they told the women to wait in the truck while they “secured the perimeter.” Then they went inside and cranked up the generator and turned on the lights in the house. Built into the house, they had a generator that seemed to Lora powerful enough to juice up a hotel.

Apparently, the owner of the house was the owner of an electrical company, and he and his wife and children and other family evacuated to Florida. The men were coming back with generators and water and batteries when they picked up Lora, Sabrina and Marigny. They had two truckloads of supplies to bring to their neighbors in Harahan.

Sabrina set Marigny up with a video of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” and she and Lora went out to the Jacuzzi to bathe, since the house had no water pressure. They knew they were under surveillance, but after being rescued by The Sopranos, this seemed completely fitting. They were off the Causeway and I-10. They had a gorgeous, air conditioned room with king-sized bed decorated in a safari motif. It was paradise. They passed out immediately.

In Defense of Sodom

James Welch, staff attorney for New Orleans Legal Assistance (NOLAC), initiated interviews with each Katrina evacuee at the FEMA center in Shreveport with these questions: “Are you having trouble sleeping at night? Are you having headaches? Are you fighting with people for no reason? Are you crying for no reason? Do you feel depressed for no apparent reason?” During that month of September 2005, he rarely received a “no” answer. Then he would say, “Well I’m not a doctor, but I’m having some of these same problems.” Welch, an evacuee himself, suffered from recurrent nightmares. “I was in a room and it was a bright, sunny day and then suddenly the room would begin filling up with water and everybody would become panicky.” Welch felt chronically tired and had no appetite. He knew a lot of what the evacuees were feeling. “So I told them, first of all, you’re probably having post traumatic stress disorder and at some point you’re going to have to deal with that with a doctor. Now let’s talk about your legal problems.”

NOLAC is part of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, which provides free legal aid for low-income people with civil legal problems. Welch, who has lived in New Orleans since 1976, has worked for the agency since 1985. Welch and his boyfriend, Linton, who is also a lawyer and “an old, old friend from high school,” own a house at 1911 Burgundy Street in the Faubourg Marigny. They evacuated for hurricane Katrina at five o’clock in the morning on Sunday, August 28th. They took their two cats in the car. Linton drove the whole way because Welch has chronic back pain. They began their journey to Shreveport, where they both grew up, on I-10, but got off the interstate before they even got out of Orleans Parish when they saw how crowded it was. They exited at Carrollton Avenue and took Airline Drive to Causeway and then took that

all the way to Covington. At Hammond, they got off of I-12 and took all the back roads to Shreveport, going up through Clinton. No one else was on their highway. It took them eight hours to drive four hundred miles including stops to eat, stretch and clean up after a disgruntled cat.

In Shreveport, Welch, Linton and their cats stayed with Welch's mother and his stepfather in the house in which he grew up. On the first working day after the hurricane, Welch called Legal Services of North Louisiana in Shreveport to discover that Alma Jones, the head of the local agency had already spoken to people from NOLAC and that she had space for him in her office. She told him to come in after Labor Day. In the meantime, a neighborhood friend of theirs in New Orleans who had not evacuated called them in Shreveport from a working payphone on the corner of Royal and Barracks in the French Quarter. He informed them that their house had no damage at all, except in the back yard; a thirty foot avocado tree had fallen over. The friend gave Welch the number of the payphone and they made plans to keep in touch by calling at appointed times to check in.

Welch looked forward to getting to work. He wanted to go out into the shelters. A large number of New Orleans residents had evacuated to Shreveport and many of them were at the Hersch Auditorium. At the office of Legal Services of North Louisiana, he sat down with his colleagues to talk about what they should do. Welch knew what he thought they should be doing: "What we need to do is go to the shelters and talk to the people now." His colleagues balked at this aggressive tactic. Welch explains that most lawyers are an impaired species: "The problem with lawyers is that they have tunnel vision and all they can think of is, "Is there a case out of it?" or 'Where's my computer?' or 'How do I research this?'" While Welch felt that a

certain amount of that line of thought was necessary, he also felt that in the moment of crisis, all of that was “sort of unimportant.”

“I kept saying, ‘We’ve got to go to the shelters, we really need to go to the shelters. The people need help now. It doesn’t matter if we don’t know what to tell them, we can just write their problem down and tell them we will try and get back to them.’ I felt like what they really needed was some kind of psychological help more than really a legal thing.” What seemed like the most practical idea in the world to Welch became an overly complicated mission for lawyers who, for whatever reason, hesitated to throw themselves into the center of chaos. It took a couple of weeks for Welch to convince his colleagues in North Louisiana that he was right. Until then, he busied himself at the office, starting by getting a new Notary seal so that he would be able to prepare affidavits for clients and by changing his contact information in the Louisiana State Bar Association’s (LSBA) website.

Within two days lawyers and reporters began calling him at the office in Shreveport from around the United States. He has no idea why his phone rang so much because he did nothing to advertise himself as a spokesman. In the office he helped clients with simple affidavits, some of them written by hand. “Mostly they were for power-of-attorney for people, or to state, ‘I am so-and-so, this is my social security number,’ so that they could get their FEMA money, their Red Cross money and basic stuff like that. ‘I want so-and-so to have custody of my child while I’m up here’ because for some reason they were separated from family and that kind of thing.” Welch filed a lawsuit for one woman whose husband had visitation with their children, but he took them to Atlanta and refused to bring them to her in Shreveport where she was staying. She had left her documentation of the custody agreement at home when she evacuated. Welch had her sign a notarized statement and they drafted a petition saying that she needed to have her

children brought back. Welch took it to the court in Shreveport. The clerk accepted the paperwork but the judge would not sign an order that would require the father to come to Shreveport so that the mother could prove her case.

The judge, in fact, would not have signed anything because of an executive order by Governor Blanco suspending trial dates and things like that. “The judge interpreted that order to mean that he was to sign nothing of any sort by anybody about anything even if they were dead.” Welch felt understandably frustrated, but fortunately he had the support of three of his NOLAC colleagues in the Shreveport office. They did not give up.

The NOLAC lawyers in Shreveport worked up fliers to take to the various centers where evacuees were staying or where they received services on a regular basis, to publicize the availability of free legal advice. About two weeks after Katrina, Welch carried some of the fliers over to an evacuee center at LSU Shreveport. He asked a Red Cross representative for permission to post the fliers. The representative seemed taken aback. “Where have you been? Where have you been? All of our people are gone. You’re welcome to put up signs but it’s too late. You waited too long! People have been asking where to get help for their legal problems. Why haven’t you done something?” The next day Welch talked to Alma Jones again about working in the field.

Welch took Andy, a volunteer fledgling law student to the Hersch Auditorium. When they arrived, they encountered a private attorney who had set up a table with pamphlets, forms to fill out and laminated business cards. “I came in and I told him who I was with and he said, ‘Well, you’re not with the LSBA, are you?’ and I said ‘No.’ ‘Well good,’ he said, ‘because Red Cross has already said they don’t want anything to do with the LSBA because they’ve been so unhelpful!’” In addition to this attorney, a volunteer lawyer from the Shreveport Bar Association

was there, and she confirmed the Red Cross's denunciation of the LSBA. Welch and his apprentice stayed for five hours and talked to about ten different people.

On the ride back to the North Louisiana Legal office, Andy told Welch that he had emailed the LSBA three times to find out if he could, as a beginning law student, volunteer in Shreveport, but he had not received a response. Welch had been willing to give the LSBA some leeway because the organization had to evacuate to Lafayette, and Welch could see where it would be challenging to keep things going. But after spending five hours at the Hersch Auditorium, this detail about the Association ignoring the request of a law student to be put to work sent him over the edge. Welch picked up the phone.

"I get a little excited," he explains, "I admit that. I got really excited and by the time I was back I was quite livid and I called up the Bar Association and screamed so loud that everyone in the building heard me and I said 'How many more people have to die before you do something to help them?'" Welch got transferred up the chain of command on that phone call until he finally had the attention of Mr. Frank Neuner, the Association President. "I said, 'You're not doing anything to help these people. They are desperate. There's a private attorney. He's got his laminated cards in a basket and he's running the show down there and Red Cross told him to tell you that they don't even want you there now. They wouldn't take you if you came with a million dollars!'" Shortly after that point in the phone call, Mr. Neuner hung up on Welch.

Then next day, Welch called the LSBA to apologize to the people he had yelled at along the way to Mr. Neuner and then apologized to the president himself. This was really hard for him to do. "My problem was, here we had failure from the president of the U.S., his man in charge, who we've now found out has blatantly lied. Governor Blanco does not realize she has

the authority to call out the national guard. The mayor said he didn't know what to do with all those school and RTA busses and they never opened up this shelter at the convention center. Every day we see this on TV. I'm looking at it, and actually, I saw some of my old clients at one of those centers and heard the complaints they were making... I told Mr. Neuner that I was upset that it seemed like this was just another example of the authorities not doing what they were supposed to do. And the LSBA certainly represents one of the most elite groups in the state and you have an obligation. We take an oath! We will help in times of need, and that we will do it for free and we're required to do all this pro bono work... And they weren't doing it!"

Welch did not return to the Hersch Auditorium. In mid-September, a FEMA center opened in a church and Welch went there almost every day for about two weeks. He spoke to over a hundred people. He initiated each interview with that question, "Are you having trouble sleeping at night?" When he got around to talking about their legal problems, he explains that "most of the time it was just me giving them a simple answer." If he didn't know the answer, or needed to follow up with someone, he'd call the person back over the weekend from his mother's house. Although he couldn't get back to everybody, he believed it was a pretty effective way of helping people, and they often told him they felt better after speaking with him. "The main thing is, I'm in an agency that's supposed to help people. It's what I thought we needed to do. So I did this for a real long time and then we started working out a schedule." Local lawyers began to come in and someone set up a computer. Little by little, a system came together. Welch, Linton and their two cats returned home on October 7th because NOLAC called and said they needed him.

Welch loves New Orleans, and he cares deeply for its people. "I live in New Orleans because I want to live in New Orleans. . . . This is the only place in the United States I feel like

is home to me. Maybe it is because of my weirdo personality or because I'm gay. Because I like black people. Because I love good food." His clients told him the worst thing about being in Shreveport was that the food tasted so bad. But Welch says this: "The people in Shreveport, certainly at the legal services office there, were more than kind to us and very concerned, about not just the situation but how we were doing, and that kind of thing. I did not personally hear a lot of this talk about Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed. I *heard* people say that and heard that people *did* say that. . . . 'Now the blacks are gone!'

"To tell you the truth, I told every black person, '*Please come back. We need you. It is not New Orleans without you.*'

"People ask me, what's so great about New Orleans, and I told them this in Shreveport: 'It's got the greatest soul in America.' And I think that's true. When you think about it, without the black culture, a huge part of that soul is going to have a hole in it. And that's what distresses me a great deal."

“Every Year It’s Something”

On Sunday, November 6th, 2005, Delores Ferrara thought she had a stroke. She was in her home at 8917 Inez Drive, River Ridge, LA, where she’s lived for forty-three years. Her porcelain cheeks looked crooked in the mirror; her bright smile and shiny brown eyes seemed wrong. They appeared “messed up,” but only on one side. At the hospital, doctors administered tests to assess her brain waves and an MRI. Delores, known to her loved ones as “De,” had Bell’s Palsy, a condition that comes from tension and nerves. The muscles on the right side of her face were temporarily paralyzed. After all that she experienced during hurricane Katrina, as well as in the summer preceding the storm, it was no wonder. Because this condition develops from stress, the doctors prescribed rest and relaxation. De’s body waited long enough for the condition to emerge. For her, the big stress in her life did not originate with hurricane Katrina as it did for many other edgy New Orleanians. It revolved around the health of her husband of forty-nine years, John Ferrara.

On July 6th 2005, John had open heart surgery. Afterward, he fell into a coma for two weeks, during which time the doctors informed De that her husband would likely die; they instructed her to gather the family around him for goodbyes. The room filled with his wife and her children, his sister and her children. They filled his allotted space in the intensive care unit, discovering that although he was in a coma, he seemed to respond to their presence in small ways. John moved his hands and feet a little and responded to voices. If De said something from one side of the bed, his head would roll in whatever direction she stood. De and John’s children, DeAnne, Johnny and David visited almost daily. John’s sister, and her children visited daily too.

At first, the doctor insisted John couldn't have been as aware as his family claimed. He cautioned them not to get too hopeful. But they disregarded his negative outlook and stayed by his side until his eyes opened. Finally, the doctor saw that he would make it. When he had improved enough to be discharged, his breathing wasn't perfect, but the doctor provided nitroglycerin patches. When applied, the medication would seep into his body and open up constricted blood vessels that went along with congestive heart condition. John spent thirty-five days in the hospital, and De spent every single one of those days at his side.

Two weeks after De took John home, they packed those patches when they evacuated for hurricane Katrina. They drove with their daughter and her husband Raoul to Lafayette, where they passed the storm safely. The day after the storm, De got hold of her sons on one of their cell phones and found out they were all right, although Johnny had ankle-deep water in his house in the Little Farms neighborhood of River Ridge. David had stayed in Harahan with his wife and twin teenage children in their house, and they were fine, except for a missing carport roof. Then De couldn't get a call through to her sons for ten days. The family was separated by damaged technology, as well as the need to keep on working, for those who could. DeAnne's boss temporarily reassigned her to Houston. Her husband, a post office employee, stayed in Lafayette where he was put to work. DeAnne drove her parents to Texas where her boss booked them a room at the Four Star Sheraton.

The Four Star hotel did not live up to its name. It was overcrowded and the air conditioning did not work. New Orleans evacuees filled its rooms with listless displaced energy. Some people milled around in the lobby during the day. The family in the next room rarely stepped out, as evidenced by the room service trays left on the hall floor three times a day. De drove her daughter to work daily and then returned to take care of John during the day; he still

felt relatively weak. They stayed close to the hotel, eating all their meals at the same restaurant. When the lobby wasn't too crowded, they went down and sat, drinking a glass of juice or coffee, and talking with some of the other evacuees. At that point, people who had lost everything knew it from the TV news reports. "One man was sitting next to us and he showed us on television, he said, 'this is where my house is' and it was under water. And then he'd say, 'and this is where my business is.' Underwater. He lost everything. Oh, yeah. Plenty of them like that... We were bad off but we knew at least we could come home."

De and John knew that their little pocket of New Orleans had fared the storm without flooding, but they worried their house might have taken some wind damage. During that first week after Katrina, that didn't help the fact that John started to feel bad and was having a hard time breathing. Towards the end of the first week in Texas, De wanted to get him medical attention. His respiration seemed particularly bad for someone who had open heart surgery eight weeks earlier. The doctor had warned her that he would continue to have symptoms of congestive heart disease, but he seemed to be struggling a lot. She stuck nitroglycerin patches on his chest nightly in hopes that he would improve in a couple of days. DeAnne left for the weekend to visit Raoul in Lafayette. She was gone from Friday after work until Monday. De wanted to take John to a doctor or a hospital during the weekend, but felt wary of navigating far into Houston for the first time. She normally does not drive in "fast traffic" or on "interstates" at home in New Orleans. The only resource close by was the Red Cross, so she took him there.

The large and brightly lit Red Cross building had many official-looking offices and signs pointing out the various services available. De knew she needed to get John to a doctor, and that if someone could just drive them, that would solve her problem. "We went there and we told them we needed a driver, you know, or a hospital, if they could help us. A driver. I mainly

needed a driver to get me somewhere because I didn't know where I was. They didn't even take our name or anything. They just ushered us out the door and said, 'All right.'" De and John never received more than a few bottles of water from the Red Cross, although she visited the building three days in a row. When she returned to inquire further, she was told that a driver had been sent to the hotel for them; they had instructed him to ask the desk clerk, who, of course, didn't know her, of all the thousand Katrina refugees milling around. John had to stay in the room at that point, because it was cooler there than downstairs in the crowded public areas. The hotel had not fixed the air conditioning. They waited. De brought food and drinks up to her husband and continued applying the nitroglycerin patches.

On Monday, with DeAnne back, her boss called her to let her know that the company rented an apartment for them closer to the office than the hotel. "[Sugarland] was a lot of rolling green hills.... Everything was perfect all the time. It was manicured, a nice place to live." The apartment lacked furniture, but the kitchen had been stocked with breakfast foods and cold cuts for sandwiches. The company supplied air mattresses for its seven temporary residents. DeAnne and her parents slept in one bedroom. They purchased a small TV for John because they wanted him to be able to relax in the relative comfort of their shared living quarters. The first night he had to sleep in a chair sitting up because he could barely breathe. De took him in the car when she drove DeAnne to work the next morning. She had decided that as soon as she dropped her daughter off, she was going to find some help. De feared John was dying.

De found the courage to risk navigating Houston's unfamiliar highways. Her shoulders leaned tensely toward the steering wheel. She had to maintain the fast pace of the traffic while scanning passing buildings for signs of a hospital. Alone in the car with his wife, John perked up. "De, you're going too slow."

She ignored him.

"You need to stop looking off to the side. Pay attention. Quit looking around so much."

"I'm trying to find you a doctor, John!"

"Well you're driving real slow. There's cars backing up behind us."

"Hush, John," she said. She needed him to relent so she could get them to a hospital without having an accident.

"Aw, honey," he said. "Why don't we get De Anne to take us?"

De turned to face her husband. "John," she said, "my baby, you know I love you. But if you don't stop talking now, I will drive this car into an oncoming truck."

He leaned back, an invalid again.

Sugarland seemed to have a shopping plaza every mile. Shortly after John gave De the peace she needed, Houston Medical Plaza practically found them. She turned into a shopping place with a medical sign on its marquee. The first office she encountered was that of Dr. George Miller, Cardiologist. She entered and explained that she was from New Orleans and that her husband was very sick, that he had had open heart surgery eight weeks prior, and that he couldn't breathe at all.

John was put through triage and after some tests and an exam, they brought him to West Houston Medical Center for an angiogram and two more bypasses. Two of his arteries were blocked 100%. They placed a stent in one and a balloon in the other. He stayed in intensive care for three days and then recovered in the hospital for four more days. During that week, DeAnne drove the thirty minutes to the hospital from the apartment before driving herself to work. She returned around five o'clock each evening and they all stayed together until eight-thirty at night.

Every day, De tried calling her sons in New Orleans. Ten days after the first phone call, which was almost two weeks after the hurricane, she got through. “One night I’m sitting there and I’m so nervous because I don’t know how anybody was and I told John, I said, I’m going to try calling our house and see if our answer-phone works, and I’ll know if we have a phone. When I called my house, David answered.”

He told her that her house was all right and that David and his kids were sleeping there because she had A.C. and they still had no electricity. The storm had knocked down the left-hand carport post, but Johnny and David had arrived there in time to jack the carport up so they could put the post back in place before the roof cracked. Other than that, the only damage was minor: the wind knocked the wooden fences down and shingles blew off the roof. They warned her to stay in Texas. “. . . they said, ‘You can’t get to the hospitals here. There’s no 911. You have no phone service here. No electricity. No air.’ So they said, ‘Keep Daddy in Houston, where he’ll be all right. Don’t come home right now.’ So every time I talked to them, they’d tell me, ‘Ma, don’t come home right now. You can’t get anywhere. If you need a doctor, you can’t get one.’ So that’s why we ended up staying here for so long.”

De felt lucky. The knowledge that not only was her house undamaged, but that her son and grandchildren could use it to be comfortable in difficult times relieved some of her worries. And she felt cared-about, as a New Orleans evacuee, in Houston. Restaurants gave discounts of ten to twenty percent. CVS drugstores provided free medications. Dr. Miller was at the hospital every single day of John’s stay. They enjoyed the time that he, and so many others, took to talk to them and spend time with them during his recovery.

The night the hospital discharged John, he hadn’t had a haircut in two months. “His hair was long, and poor darling, he had lost twenty-five pounds.” His six-foot frame looked gaunt.

“So he looked real bad. We had to stop at a grocery to pick up some orange juice and bread and milk, and right next door was a hair stylist. We knocked on their door. They were getting ready to close. We asked if they could just take him and trim him a little bit because he had just got out of the hospital. His hair had to be six or seven inches long. Sixty-nine years old with long hair! They were real nice to us. They said, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and took him right in.”

The haircut elevated John’s mood, but his body still felt weak. De and DeAnne purchased a bed for him, thinking they would probably have to live there for a while. That was, until hurricane Rita came about two weeks later. The day before Rita hit, De called her daughter at work to say, “‘We better leave right now.’ And she [DeAnne] kept saying, ‘Oh, no. It’s not going to be that bad, the traffic.’ I said, “There’s four million people in Houston, and in a few hours, four million people will be on that highway.’ ‘Oh, no. Oh, no.’ Finally, I told her, I said, ‘I packed the car and I’m taking Daddy out of here. I’ll just have to take my chances and see if I can get out, if I know where I’m going and drive on the interstate,’ I said, ‘But I’m not going to stay here and go in bumper-to-bumper traffic with him.’” DeAnne finally agreed to leave, and they left Houston at three o’clock. They “sailed right through” all the way to Lafayette where they spent the night. (DeAnne’s boss and co-workers, who waited until five o’clock to leave, languished in bumper to bumper traffic for thirteen hours.) They went home to New Orleans the next day for the first time in four weeks.

De had already felt drained by the time John left the hospital back in August. One might think that dealing with the chaos after Katrina in Houston’s unfamiliar environment compiled with the even greater and potentially fatal surprise of the two missed, blocked arteries in John’s heart, would have sent her over some kind of edge. But it didn’t. She maintained calm throughout, from early July to late September. “I had to. Because I knew how bad off John was

and I knew that I had to take care of him first. And once I knew that my house was all right and my kids were all right, well then I said God will just have to take care of everything else. . . . I've learned to deal with it, him being sick these last three or four months. I've learned to deal with it and be calm." When they first returned, they visited John's cardiologist in New Orleans, who stated authoritatively that John's heart seemed "great." At that point, De handed him the paperwork from the doctor and the hospital in Houston and asked, "You operated on him eight weeks ago. Could he have possibly had these two 100% arteries blocked within eight weeks?" The doctor realized he had made a mistake. At first De wanted to sue him "and take their jobs for putting us through what they did because he could have died. But now as time goes on you know, forgive and forget, he's doing better, thank God."

De Ferrara has lived her whole life in Harahan and River Ridge. She remembers Hurricane Camille in 1969. Her mother was a nurse at the time at Hotel Dieu hospital in Orleans Parish, and had to stay the night at work. The children passed the storm with their family in Harahan. They didn't have phones or lights for a few days, but she says "We just stayed in here and our neighborhood didn't really get hit by it. You know, bad or anything." Her mother had a challenge trying to get home the next day with all the telephone poles and light poles down, with electrical wires everywhere on the streets. De also remembers when Betsy came and a tornado ripped the roof off of her sister-in-law's house across the street. Fortunately, the family wasn't in the house when it happened. In fact, a tornado ripped the roof off of the same house again during Katrina. Now De's nephew lives there, and he and his family lost everything. It's a miracle De's house took so little damage, although she and John had a new roof put on their house in April of 2005, so she thinks that might have saved it. She looks at hurricane season this way: "Every year it's something."

So the 2005 hurricane season took De and John on an adventure. She made decisions throughout that kept her husband alive, which she takes as a matter of course. Now that the couple feels like their life is mostly back to normal, evidenced by their ability mostly to be calm and enjoy day-to-day things like watching TV, cooking meals, taking showers, and going to church on Sunday—now De has Bell’s Palsy. Her doctor’s orders, to rest and relax, would have been impossible before this point. But her life has finally calmed down. De is grateful because she knows that “For a lot of people it’s not like that yet.”

Revising my Approach

On the first day of school, one of the other Teaching Assistants, wearing a jean skirt and tank top, told me I looked like a temp secretary. “At least I look old enough to have a job,” I said. I can be snotty sometimes—usually when I’m feeling insecure.

She laughed. “What? Get dressed up for these kids? This is UNO!”

True, I thought, as I walked out of the office with my stack of syllabi and departmental handouts. At the urban, commuter University of New Orleans, I probably could have taught Freshman English in my rolled-up, loose pants with elastic bike shorts peeking over the waistband. I could have worn a sports bra and tank top and then thrown on a tee shirt for modesty. Those were the clothes I wore to my creative writing classes in the university’s MFA program. But I worried my students would stare, and maybe think disdainful thoughts. Or just write me off as a weirdo. I didn’t want them to look at me and see a bicycle-commuting, creative-writing grad student. I wanted them to see a teacher.

In the elevator up to my classroom, I rolled my shoulders a few times. Then stretched my quads standing on one leg. I wished I felt relaxed enough to teach in jeans. Others did, but I just felt like I looked too young for the job. I stepped out of the elevator and walked to the ladies room. I wanted to check my appearance.

At twenty-eight, I looked eighteen. The women in my family age slowly. Normally I enjoyed this fact. But not on my first day of teaching college. I inspected my oval face in the mirror. No makeup. Long brown hair in a low ponytail. I lifted up my arms. Still dry. I looked down. Black, wedge sandals. Tan, summer-weight pants. A blue-and-white striped, linen blouse. (Long sleeves, because I hate air conditioning.) I felt itchy in my teaching outfit. I

knew I'd be nervous when they all sat facing me, waiting for wisdom to pour from my mouth. I practiced a welcoming smile and went to find the classroom.

At ten minutes to ten, a boy and two girls walked through the door. I could see the boy's eyes directed toward the back of the large room. "Are you here for English 1157-007?" I asked. The boy nodded and kept walking. The two girls each glanced at their class schedules. "I'm going to ask you to fill in the front," I said, "since you're here early."

"Do we have to sit in the front?" the boy asked.

I pointed toward a seat in the first row by the wall. "That chair looks comfortable." The girls didn't ask where to sit. They dropped their bags in second row chairs and walked back out to use the ladies' room before class. I spent the last few minutes before the rest of my students filed in arranging piles of handouts to pass out once the first day got started.

The class was to meet Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for fifty minutes each morning. The first day served mainly to introduce myself and to get a feel for the students. My mentor warned my T.A. group not to memorize students' names too hastily, because they dropped and added courses until the end of the first week. By the second week, I might have a whole new group.

By Friday, most of the students took the same seats as they had Monday and Wednesday. They laid their textbooks and notebooks on the desks. They looked entirely too angelic. A hand rose. "Miss, did you grade our writing from Wednesday yet?" I was seated at the desk facing the room. I told them that I had not. They had spent Wednesday's class writing quietly and handed in their pages. The exercise was a diagnostic tool for me, but I hadn't mentioned whether the writing would be graded. Their anticipation provided my first clue to the power of

the grading pen. My classroom teaching experience had begun only a few months earlier, the previous June. As a temporary instructor for The Institute of Reading Development, I followed prescribed lesson plans and when I assigned homework, I merely checked for completion. The classes were for enrichment purposes, so I hadn't had to grade anything. I should have known how much weight grades carried because I was a college freshman once. But ten years buffered me from their experience; I forgot that, like mice, they were more afraid of me than I of them.

Instead of commenting on the writing samples, I had dissected a stack of old *New Yorker* magazines. Tiny slices of magazine grade paper littered the maroon rug in my kitchen. In my pre-coffee fog I'd prepared a folder of full-page ads, one for each student. I passed them out and wrote on the board, "Is advertising good or evil?"

One hand shot up. "Ads are good because they show us what to buy, right?"

"Maybe," I said. The student's face fell. "Can't you figure out what to buy without seeing the product in an ad?"

The blissful pack of consumers sat quietly, save one. I crossed my arms in front of my chest. A longhaired boy spoke without raising his hand. "I don't watch TV or read magazines because I don't want to be, like, brainwashed," he said.

"Nuh-uh," another student across the room said.

While long-haired-guy called out, "It's true—pop culture is totally evil!" other students began talking over each other about their favorite commercials on TV.

I had wanted them to look at the magazine ads and assess whether the ad would work on them in particular. The activity was intended to prime them for the first paper in which they would analyze an ad of their choice. One of the girls in the front row caught my attention. While her classmates talked over each other's heads, she sat quietly, studying her ad. I held my

hands in the shape of a T (for time-out) until the talking ceased. Then I asked the quiet girl to describe her ad. She held it up in the air and began speaking slowly. “It’s an ad for red wine. It’s got two ladies sitting on a sofa holding wine glasses in their hands. They’re toasting something. They look happy.”

I took the ad from her and walked around the room with it for other students to see. It was as she described. The white women on the page both had dark, shoulder-length hair; they wore slacks and pretty, short-sleeved sweater tops. Their lipstick smiles glistened. I thought they looked to be in their mid-thirties or early-forties. “Does this ad make you want to buy this red wine?” I asked her.

“No.”

“What about me? Do you think this ad would make me buy this red wine?”

She cocked her head and moved her glance from the page in my hands to my face. “Probably. You look like those ladies in the picture. It wouldn’t work on me because I’m not old enough to drink red wine—and if I did—I wouldn’t sit around drinking it at home.”

When the laughter died down, I moved around the room, asking other students to present the pages I’d given them. Fifty minutes flew by. Although I doubt she knew it, that girl gave me a great sendoff for the weekend. I loved drinking red wine on the couch with my girlfriends. Happily pigeonholed into adulthood, I rushed home to my apartment in the French Quarter, where I packed hurriedly for a weekend visit to Northern Virginia to see my boyfriend Randi.

I boarded the plane to Washington Dulles Airport with a bag just the size to hold a change of clothes, my laptop and the freshman textbook, *Reading Life*. If I had known that I would not be able to return to my apartment for a month, I probably would have packed two

suitcases. Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana three days after I left, which led to levees failing, and the abrupt end of my first semester teaching college.

But it took me more than a week to comprehend that the semester wouldn't resume. I sat on the couch in the living room, worrying. "How am I going to catch up?" I asked Randi. "What if I can't get back soon enough and I miss days of class?" My skin prickled with goose bumps from the air conditioning. I missed hot, sticky New Orleans.

"Don't worry about UNO," Randi said. "No one's getting back to classes." He walked to the front of the house every so often to smoke a cigarette in the driveway. Although I would have enjoyed the warmth outdoors, I wrapped myself in a blanket and stayed by the TV to watch CNN's and Fox News' constant coverage of New Orleans. My weekend away turned into exile. We struggled to reach friends and family members. Randi's family had evacuated to Alabama, parts of Louisiana and Texas. I had no family in New Orleans, but I worried for many friends. My cell phone had stopped receiving calls on Monday, although I was still able to dial out. When I called my parents on Monday night they said they had been trying to reach me all day. I felt disoriented and scared. Randi talked to me, but I don't remember anything he said.

He took a few days off from the AT&T data center in Ashburn, Virginia, where he worked as a server technician. We thought I'd be able to fly home by Tuesday. By Wednesday, he returned to work for his three to eleven o'clock shift. I kept company with his housemates. Holly, a seventh grade English teacher, took me walking around the tree lined subdivision streets. Her boyfriend Andrew, who owned the house, encouraged me to sit with them at dinner, although I don't remember having an appetite, except for dessert. They solved this problem by driving me to the Dairy Queen afterward, where I filled up on therapeutic, peanut buttery, chocolate shakes.

*

Back in New Orleans, UNO's administrators and faculty improvised a plan for an abbreviated semester that would take place partly at the Jeff Center, the satellite campus in the New Orleans suburbs, and partly online. The university could not afford to risk state funding by closing down until January. It aimed to deliver education to its students beginning on October 10th. The English Department Chair emailed a comforting memo to assure T.A.s that we still had our positions and stipends. He mentioned that he might even use some of us to teach freshman English online. I wondered if I might be asked to teach. Other faculty still in the Gulf South might have had less stable Internet connections or places to live for the duration of the semester. Moored in the relative comfort of Herndon, Virginia, taking two online MFA courses and teaching one online Freshman English course seemed manageable. I had experienced online learning before, and thought that even though I didn't know exactly how to *teach* online, I'd have very little else to do besides figure it out.

Randi arranged with the household for me to stay indefinitely. Then we drove over two thousand miles round-trip to fill the bed of his pickup truck with my things—clothes, books, computer supplies, photo albums, picture frames and my bicycle, all boxed up underneath a tarp. During our brief stay in New Orleans we stayed with Randi's relatives, who had all returned home by the time we arrived. The suburbs of Jefferson Parish appeared to be intact, but when we crossed into Orleans, the impact of the hurricane and the floods left its mark almost everywhere we went *but* the French Quarter. On our trips back and forth between my apartment and our sanctuary in the suburbs, we drove Randi's truck through standing water and over the blackened fabric of lost living room furniture. He let the truck idle in front of houses that had no front walls left, or that had kitchen appliances on the roof. We spent enough days to collect my

things and visit with friends and family in the outlying suburbs. Although I knew I would miss it, I didn't wish to stay. Everyone I knew had left. My closest neighbors in the French Quarter would have been the armed soldiers manning the checkpoint half a block away from my building. After spending an emotionally charged month with Randi in Herndon, I felt that he was the most stable thing I had. Although I didn't expect my adjustment to the Northern Virginia suburbs to be easy, I couldn't think of a better place to work through the semester. Randi and I wanted to take the time together, and I hoped that borrowing his everyday life in an unblemished part of the country would help me focus on my schoolwork.

On the first day of "class," I awoke shortly before noon. Natural light came into the kitchen through the sliding glass door to the back yard. I ate cereal and sipped black coffee in front of my open laptop. The Blackboard pages for my online classes displayed a greeting from one professor and nothing from another. I clicked around the Blackboard control panel for my freshman English class. Instead of composing some kind of a first-day welcome announcement, I pulled on sweat pants and walked off under the shade of English Oaks.

"How do I begin?" I whispered to the trees. Deer lived in the woods. I wanted to see one. An arbitrary sign that I could teach and learn inside the Internet. *Sans* place. Under normal circumstances, a teacher should have her syllabus and curriculum prepared in advance. She should have the course readings mapped out. The prompts for student writing, drafted, at the very least. All of that was supposed to have been provided by my mentor. Birds grazed on tree branches. They chirped and twittered and fluttered, brushing leaves with their slight wings. I promised myself I wasn't procrastinating. Thoughts churned and words spilled out under my breath. I felt afraid.

Groundhogs snuffled about thick blankets of clover along the road. I passed and they chewed. Online classes meant teaching without seeing, hearing, touching, making any noise or physical impact at all. I wouldn't be able to stamp my foot for comic effect. Or express warmth with a calm teacher's voice, when students needed a push to ask, and sometimes answer, their own questions. A rabbit darted along the road's shoulder, but not near the groundhogs. I slowed my pace. Then a voice jarred my reverie. "Passing on your left!" A cyclist whizzed around me. I had to get back to the computer. Too late in the day for me to be feeling helpless, when that really was not the case.

It occurs to me now, eighteen months afterward, that Katrina offered the perfect window into teaching the essay. Essay, in French, means "to try" or "to attempt." UNO's post-Katrina administration, faculty, and students accepted the challenge of standing up in the face of catastrophe and pushing our academic careers forward. Under the most unusual, stressful and disorienting circumstances, we, as a university, tried to pull together. Most of the classes offered took place online; not many instructors or students had online educational experience. We tried. I had pursued graduate studies in creative writing because I dreamed of teaching at the college level. I was going to have to use the resources available to me, and try to do my best.

The previous semester, I had taken a composition studies pedagogy course. My professor, Kim McDonald, who was also the director of the Freshman English Program, prompted me and my classmates to draft our teaching philosophies at the semester's end. I had imagined enthusiastic discussions about assigned readings and the flurry of pens during in-class freewriting sessions. I would delight in the students' honing of individual styles and voices and I

would learn all of their individual writing and learning habits in the classroom and during office conferences.

Sitting at my desk in Herndon, I considered how my previous ideas on teaching freshman composition contrasted with what I had learned at the T.A. orientation. The curriculum had to encompass what my mentor referred to loosely as “the nuts and bolts of composition writing”: those basic parts such as thesis statements, topic sentences, development and transitional phrases that form and shape an essay. Nuances of style, for UNO freshmen, was a long way off. The freshman English course prioritized the deconstruction of writing into blunt compositional elements. And I couldn’t assume my students had learned any of them in high school. My mentor seemed to think that because of my graduate studies in creative nonfiction writing—essentially, essay writing—and my previous classroom experience, Freshman English would be “cake” for me. I was less sure.

My workspace developed in the front room of the house, behind an unused pool table. The felt surface, perhaps too soft for the balls to roll fluidly to the pockets, remained under a brown cover for the duration of my stay. At first I perceived it as a much-needed moat between my study corner and the distractions of the rest of the house. Soon, though, I saw it as a useful surface on which I could lay out categorical piles: August’s T.A. orientation notes, a couple of weeks’ worth of pre-Katrina lesson plans, printouts of emailed post-Katrina memos from the English Department, printouts of web sites and emailed documents that might be useful to the class, and my copy of *Reading Life*. I stood at the end of the table, leaning in position to shoot with an invisible cue. My hand darted towards a page. Would this one have the answers? I wondered. This one? Or this one?

I recalled my own experiences with Blackboard, a web-based, interactive classroom. After two semesters of “e-school” at the beginning of my graduate studies, I had hoped to avoid it for the rest of my life. Even though Blackboard had Discussion Boards and a real-time Chat function, I struggled to feel connected to my classmates and teachers. Virtual classroom interaction was no substitute for the real thing. And if tackling a semester’s worth of knowledge alone had challenged me as a graduate student, I worried for the future of my post-Katrina freshmen. Without a campus, physical classroom, and office hours, the students would definitely feel alone.

I thought of eighteen-year-olds synthesizing reading material as comparable to plants photosynthesizing food. The mind was the chlorophyll, which could make food (or bright ideas) from carbon dioxide, water, nutrients, and energy from sunlight. The carbon dioxide sated their emotional need for support in the classroom. The water flowed between their fingers as they turned the pages of the text. The sunlight, without which many plants couldn’t survive, came in the form of the teacher at the front of the room.

When I started to think about them and this process, I sank into a wooden chair. Freshman English at UNO was about writing academic essays. The instructor assigned readings from *Reading Life* and corresponding writing prompts for each of the semester’s five units. I knew this from my T.A. orientation. *Reading Life*’s 854 pages included instructional chapters on analytical and argumentative paper writing as well as a diverse anthology of readings and questions designed to promote comprehension and critical thinking. My online class was expected to cover the essentials of a usual semester.

I had seen high school juniors and seniors in action all summer. Many felt comfortable asking questions in the classroom, out loud. Some felt comfortable never asking questions,

counting on others to ask for them. But either way, by the time they got to UNO, students had developed classroom personas. I wasn't going to be able to gauge their investment in the course by considering their tone of voice, posture or attendance. They would become acquainted with my writer's voice, but they'd never hear me read a particularly interesting passage from the text.

I typed instructions for introductions onto Blackboard's Announcements page. Sixteen students responded, two from outside of the United States. The international element took me by surprise. Practically speaking, it meant I couldn't rely on all of them having English language spell check built into their word processing programs. But that seemed inconsequential when I saw that, in the Gulf South, some students were using library computers or home computers that dialed up to the Internet on the family phone line. Most were fresh out of high school, except for a twenty-year-old and a woman with a husband and four young children.

Some daunting circumstances worried me from the beginning. First, a few of the students emailed to say that they could not get *Reading Life* right away. It would have been easy for me to begin the catch-up semester by assigning instructional chapters such as, "Getting Started," which outlined the importance of critical reading skills and how to outline ideas for a paper. The second chapter, "Writing Analytically," would have also replaced a classroom lecture with its synopsis of analytical elements such as block-by-block and point-by-point comparison, comparison-contrast analysis, definition, and cause-and-effect analysis. Instead, I studied these chapters and summarized their main points into a "lecture" document posted for all to download.

Even more potentially disastrous—students complained of less-than-consistent Internet access. How could the course succeed without consistent access? Only two of my students logged on from outside the Gulf Coast and they were in Belize and Mexico. Everyone had

connectivity limitations. I realized immediately that my use of technology could only be sparing, largely just the basics of logging into Blackboard and posting assignments. *Reading Life* would serve as the cornerstone of the course. I posted an announcement that no one could stay enrolled without this text.

Mainly, I worried about my own lack of experience. I reviewed my T.A. orientation notes until the paper physically softened. I didn't know if the English Department's expectations would be different because of Katrina—but even if they were, it wasn't for me to decide. Kim emailed me a Microsoft Word document that outlined some possibilities for teaching online; it provided a variety of links to other universities' online writing materials. I sat up late watching one site's collection of twenty-six short documentaries about different aspects of the writing process. Watching those video lectures gave me a crash course in the basics of teaching freshman English. Just when I thought I might have to come clean to my students, and tell them I *never* outlined papers before diving in, I discovered Purdue University's Online Writing Lab's library of digital handouts that I could post in the Blackboard class site. I found the jigsaw pieces to my puzzle and started releasing my insecurities.

Although I'd made *Reading Life* mandatory for enrollment, I had to allow time for a few of the students to have it sent to them. The unit-one writing prompt had to be one that all the students could work with, with or without the text. I required my digital charges to research online news articles about the post-Katrina FEMA response, and to write a point-by-point analysis of the agency's action during New Orleans' time of need. I felt I was providing a common context for their varied experiences. Even if they couldn't benefit from direct interaction with their classmates, it would be interesting for them to research something that had

affected all of us. I posted the prompt by the end of the first week. They had the second and third week to research, read, think, prepare and draft the essay.

I could tell, to some degree, how prepared for college my online students were by the types of questions they posted on the general Discussion Board during the first weeks. The biggest red flags came from students who asked about information already posted in the various pages of the online classroom. Information readily available in the syllabus was either being ignored or misunderstood, misread or forgotten. They posted questions such as “How many papers will I have to write this semester? How do I order a new textbook? When do I have to log on? Is this class all online, or can we also see you at the Jeff Center?”

They used Internet slang—quick, unedited sentences with barely any punctuation. I wondered if because they couldn’t see me, it didn’t occur to them to use a, “this is how I talk to a teacher” tone. I emailed one student who wrote “lol” in every email because I didn’t understand what it meant. The acronym meant “laugh out loud.” When she explained it, I realized that she had been laughing-out-loud at her own “stupid” questions. As in, “I know this is stupid, but, I don’t understand X, Y or Z part of the reading...” Another student typed her postings all in capital letters. I emailed her to let her know she was virtually shouting. Pacing around the pool table, I’d imagine my students reading in crowded living rooms, family members chatting or watching TV in the shared space, or some of them going to work during the day and leaving online coursework for later. I tried to picture them drinking coffee in front of their computers, and spilling tiny droplets onto the keyboard as I did.

I read the rough drafts of paper one and emailed each student feedback. I looked forward to great improvement. The “final drafts” floored me. I had to read them in the kitchen, sitting across the table from Holly, as she graded her seventh graders’ quizzes. “They must know that a thesis statement can’t be a question,” I said.

Holly looked up and smiled. “No, they don’t,” she said. She made a few more check marks and Xs.

“But I told them. Look at this.” I passed her the paper.

“Uh huh,” she said. “That’s a question.” Her pen hovered above the table.

As I read the next essay, I underlined sentences with my pointer finger, to slow down my reading speed. “Unless I’m missing something, this one doesn’t even have a thesis. I told this kid his rough draft would have been great if only it had a thesis.” I turned to the second page of the paper. “It’s exactly the same.” I rested my chin on my hand. Holly kept grading, but I could see she was smiling. I started another one. “No argument.” Another one. “Should this student be ESL?” Suddenly, I understood why UNO required the yearlong sequence of English. After reading through all sixteen papers, I decided not to grade them right away.

Those first papers also had issues with incomplete or faulty MLA formatting, but that concerned me little when I recognized “final drafts” identical to first drafts I’d read and commented on the week before. Some of the papers had been revised, but not enough; they read like thick outlines. And then, one paper had no name anywhere; it made no sense to me that a college-aged student wouldn’t remember to put his name on schoolwork to hand in.

Holly pushed her quizzes and grading rubric into a folder. “Ice cream?” she asked. We took breaks with bowls of chocolate and vanilla swirl. Then I read through the papers again.

*

English 1157, the first semester of a required, two-course sequence of freshman English, was designed to function as composition boot camp. Back in late August, the mentors had walked all the new T.A.s through grading some sample papers. They instructed us to write marginal comments about individual aspects of the papers, end comments beneath the paper's conclusion, and to assign letter grades. I succeeded at highlighting each paper's strength; but my constructive feedback barely scratched surface issues. The main obstacle I learned I would have to face came in grading. Basically good students needed to suffer possibly their first ever C's, D's and F's in order to feel the pressure to take steps to improve their writing. Any pattern of errors in a paper resulted in an F or a "rewrite." My grading was too generous.

"Do not reward or encourage through grades," the mentors had commanded. "A grade is not a representation of any students' potential or your support of the students." I had given each paper a B, but each could have been so much better. Paragraphs with only one example of support could have offered two. A thesis could have made a stronger assertion. End comments should have included suggestions for reorganization or how to achieve a stronger focus. In Herndon, reading my first set of real student papers, I felt lost. As the words, "I wish I had my mentor," rolled off my tongue, I thought of Kim. Although such individualized guidance wasn't technically her job, I felt sure she would be able to help. I needed a nod from someone experienced.

When I emailed her for advice, she invited me to send her a few papers with comments and grades. She would let me know if I was grading appropriately. After a few days she replied that I had assessed students' strengths well, done an okay job on identifying specific areas to improve, but that I had graded too high. I felt a sense of betraying my students in grading them

on things that they clearly didn't know, and that I hadn't taught them; yet I did exactly that. This did not console any of the twelve students who had earned F's. Grading, in a word, sucked. For them and for me.

For papers two, three and four, I pulled the prompts straight out of *Reading Life*. I'd post the reading assignments and prompt for each paper on Sunday. Students read, answered questions, and posted their answers on the discussion board by Wednesday. Then they posted thesis statements and outlines by Friday. Once I approved or offered suggestions to revise the outlines, they posted drafts by Sunday. One by one, students' names appeared on my screen as they uploaded their work. I checked them off for "handing in" their work and noted the date and time. I'd read them and post feedback on the Discussion Board by the following Wednesday. Then they had to email me a revision by the next Sunday. Every assignment had to be "handed in" by six in the evening. I chose this hour because I didn't want to read work that had been scrambled together in the middle of the night. I thought that they could give even last-minute papers better attention in the afternoon than at dawn.

Some of my students responded well to the online format. They paid attention to the assignments folder, read what they were supposed to by the assigned time, and answered Discussion Board questions thoughtfully. I had invited all students to comment freely on each other's work; I hoped they might begin to reply to each other's remarks, and hoped that might make up for the lack of physical classroom time. Under normal physical classroom conditions, students learn from each other through discussion, even if only as listeners. Discussion gives a student who may not have understood his reading assignment fully the opportunity to catch up. But what happens to the struggling online student? When students struggled with correct comma usage, I prescribed reading. When they needed to develop a sense of tone to learn how to

compose academic-paper appropriate sentences, I prescribed reading. When their weekly short-answer question responses to *Reading Life* fell short, I did my best to enlighten them through email—but they still had to read that. The students who did not thrive in the text-based learning environment disappeared.

When I look back on those ten weeks, I struggle to distinguish separate days and events. Everyone else in the house went out to work each day. Holly left for school first at seven. Andrew drove to his office around nine-thirty. Randi left for the data center by two-thirty. The fourth roommate, R.C., worked as a sound tech in nightclubs. Sometimes he left at dusk. Sometimes eight or nine o'clock at night. I, alone, spent complete days inside. Outings became less and less frequent as the air frosted and snow fell. I wondered if by the time spring came, I'd have any range of motion left in my body to bike to school again. New Orleans didn't seem to be recovering quickly. I hoped I'd be able to return for the spring semester in January, and that UNO would return to its lakefront location, six miles from my apartment.

My office in Virginia opened to the foyer, so I heard everyone's comings and goings. When Randi opened the door at night, I'd call out his name. Once he settled in, he'd try to cajole me into some couch-time. I usually said no; I had always avoided TV in my pre-Katrina life. "Just one show!" he'd say. "Thirty minutes." He'd walk around the pool table to massage my crunchy shoulders.

"Working," I'd say. "But the massage is great."

"It's freshman English during the Katrina semester. Just give them all A's."

"Did you get an A in 1157?"

"Ancient history."

“The English department would hang me.”

“They won’t notice. Watch *The Daily Show*.”

I did enjoy political satire. I usually gave in to watch at least the first couple of minutes.

At the beginning of the semester, I had tried to encourage students to improve their papers by emphasizing their already-successful aspects. But when I congratulated a student’s thesis, structure and organization, and then gave the paper a C or a D because it needed more support and development, usually the student felt confused. Eventually I developed a direct commenting style that would make it easiest for each student to know how to revise and earn a higher grade. Students could revise each paper several times, as long as they emailed me to set a new due date. Instead of beginning end comments by typing, “There are a lot of good things about this paper,” and leading the student on to think he was doing fine until the end, I revised my approach. “Although this paper has some good qualities, I want to make sure you understand that without adequate support and development, no paper can earn a passing grade.” The students that stuck around got the message, and asked for more help.

By Thanksgiving, week seven, my roster had dwindled from sixteen to thirteen students. The following Monday, I announced that the last day to drop the class would be that Friday, December 2nd. Three more students’ names disappeared from Blackboard. Many of the other ten students emailed, asking me if they were passing. They had only just submitted the third paper and I hadn’t graded it yet. They had two more papers to write before the semester’s end. I wanted to say, “How do I know? I can’t read the future!” But I decided to take a break instead.

Randi arrived home in time to take me out for dessert. I wore one of his jackets and bundled a scarf about my head. We drove the truck to Amphora, an all-night diner. Even though

we were taking a break from work, I continued to mull over my students. “Jennifer is finally back home,” I said. My boots crunched in the gravel parking lot. “She went for tutoring with Inge yesterday.” Inge Fink, who directed UNO’s Writing Center, had struggled to launch online tutoring for the better part of the post-Katrina semester. My student had found her at the Jeff Center.

Randi held the door open for me. “What about Kristen?” he asked.

“I don’t think she’s going to make it.” We slouched into a roomy booth. “She didn’t drop by the drop date, but I’ve been emailing with Kim about what to do about it.”

We ordered two coffees and a piece of chocolate peanut butter pie. “What’s her problem?” Randi asked.

“She doesn’t want to lose the tuition.” I leaned back in the booth.

“Too bad for her,” he said.

“I wouldn’t want to either . . . but she just didn’t learn. It was as if I responded to her papers in Greek. Just no progress. And now she’s upset.”

Randi simplified things in a way that comforted me. We had discussed this before. He thought I was doing my students a favor by teaching. Although I knew it wasn’t my fault if a student couldn’t, or didn’t, follow instructions, I often blamed myself, thinking a more experienced teacher would have provided more effective explanations. Randi reminded me of the big picture: New Orleans had drowned. Chaos had ensued. People had suffered. We were lucky UNO had reopened. If students dropped my course, it wasn’t because of my teaching performance.

Although I didn’t have the experience necessary to respond to students’ emails with precision, I knew who had progressed and who lagged behind. During the same week that I

announced the impending drop date, the online tutoring service overcame its technical difficulties and became available for my students. The help came at the perfect moment. The writing tutors, other T.A.s, approached struggling student work with new eyes, and had their own ways of explaining how to revise and improve words and ideas. I loved knowing that they hovered out there, somewhere in the country, and wanted nothing more than to help me help my students make it to the finish line of the post-Katrina semester.

My fifth and final essay assignment was to write an analysis of online education. This was my sneaky strategy to solicit feedback. I wanted my students to look carefully at all of the elements of their experience. That meant looking at their own attitudes and behaviors in regard to their online course load, including my class. I was stunned when I read the drafts; the students had all thought that online courses would be easy, and many of them had wasted half of the semester slacking off or prioritizing other activities over their online work. They had also struggled with Katrina-related stress and the unfamiliar, elevated accountability in the online learning environment. They knew they could have managed time better, asked more questions, and simply put more energy into their work.

I had wondered why I didn't see real progress until the final few weeks. I thought I wasn't doing enough. When I read their papers in which many asserted that the semester had forced them to develop stronger study habits and become more independent students, I laughed. They reminded me about the most important aspect of the freshman year of college: It's the year during which they think they know everything because they've just finished being seniors; but they have to start at the beginning again. I had been so overwhelmed by my lack of experience, and the fact that I was teaching in a vacuum, that I assumed all their shortcomings were my fault.

If the levee walls had not ruptured after hurricane Katrina, New Orleans probably would have shut down for a few days to a week. By noon on Monday, August 29th, the winds had already died down. Louis Armstrong Airport would have been closed on Sunday, and maybe reopened by Monday evening or Tuesday. I might have had to sit at Washington Dulles Airport for half a day, waiting for a seat on a crowded flight home. Or maybe I would have spent a few extra days with Randi, since UNO probably wouldn't have been able to resume classes until the following week with all the evacuated students still making their way home.

The first day back, I would have awoken refreshed from the unexpected time off. If the morning was cool, I might have sipped my coffee from the fire escape landing, admiring the townhouses on Dauphine Street below. Then I would have fussed over my teacher-look for the day. Instead, I spent half a year with almost no need to dress at all. When I submitted final grades for my students in December 2005, I felt like a different person. I doubted that I would worry so much about teaching clothes in the spring.

Vita

Susanna Dienes was born in New York City and received her B.A. from The New School for Social Research. During the five years between college and graduate school, she toured the Americas and select countries in Europe and Asia, learning about culture and geography through practical experience. Following this period of sojourn she completed her Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction Writing at the University of New Orleans. She now resides in the Washington D.C. metro area with her husband Randi and goes by the name Susanna Ferrara.