

Chapter 2

Toilet Bowl

(Monday, 29 August, 2005)

There was a high-pitched noise. A baby maybe and it was laughing - no crying. It was definitely a baby and it was crying. But why was there a baby crying? No one had a baby in any of the apartments. Why was his neck so stiff? And what was that whistling sound? Blaire must be up boiling water for coffee.

Stop that damn baby from crying! his mind screamed as he pulled a pillow over his head. The whining didn't stop though, and the boiling water continued to whistle.

"Blaire. Your damn water is ready," he groaned as he sat up in a strange bed. The room felt like it had been shaken up like a snow globe. But even as things started to settle back down, nothing was familiar. An old cathode ray tube television sat atop a sturdy dresser beyond the toes of his feet. Cheaply framed posters of the Jazz Festival hung on either side and both were tilted. He looked at the bedside table beside him noticing that the time was no longer being displayed on the small alarm clock. He tried turning on the lamp but it didn't work either. Blaire was nowhere to be seen and he could now tell that the whistling was coming from the gap below the rusted metal door next to a window covered in condensation.

He shook his head then noticed his backpack leaning against the wall next to the bathroom. There was trail of water creeping toward it so he lifted it onto the bed. As he looked around, he could see the water was coming from a half-inch gap below the door and was being forcefully blown further inside by the same wind that was rustling the nearby heavily stained cream curtain. Immediately he recalled where he was and what he was doing. Well, maybe not what he was doing. He looked at his watch. *Wholly crap. It was nearly 9:00 a.m.*¹

¹ 2:00 a.m. Monday, 29 August, 2005: "The eye of the hurricane is passing 130 miles south-southeast of New Orleans. Winds are blowing steadily at almost 155 mph. Katrina is a Category 4 storm, moving slowly at a rate of 12 mph. A slow-moving hurricane is much more destructive than one that passes quickly over inhabited areas." Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge, Timeline*.

3:00 a.m.: "The 17th Street Canal begins to suffer a breach, according to National Guard reports."

4:00 a.m.: "The storm surge begins to arrive at the central part of the Mississippi Coast."

6:10 a.m.: "The eye of Katrina makes landfall near Buras, Louisiana as a Category 4 hurricane."

6:30 a.m.: "Buras has been destroyed. Nearly every building in lower Plaquemines Parish, which escorts the Mississippi River into the Gulf, is obliterated."

7:11 a.m.: "Telephone services fail in southeastern Louisiana, as landlines and most cell phone towers are affected by the storm."

7:50 a.m.: "A massive storm surge sends water over the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MRGO) and the Industrial Canal, causing immediate flooding in St. Bernard Parish and eastern neighborhoods of New Orleans. Water levels in most areas are 10 to 15 feet...Ninety-five percent of the parish is underwater."

8:30 a.m.: "Hurricane Katrina pushes a 25-foot storm surge into the flat, unprotected Mississippi Coast."

9:00 a.m.: "Two holes open up in the Superdome roof.

He hopped from the bed and felt the wetness on his bare feet. After smearing away some of the condensation on the window with his palm, he could see that it was still gloomy outside. Then he splashed through a thin layer of water toward the front door. After turning the doorknob and just as the latch bolt withdrew from the faceplate, the door flung open and a strong rush of wind and sharp raindrops were instantly pelting him. The closest poster was lifted from the wall, bounced off the television and shattered on the floor. With a lot of effort, he forced the door shut allowing him to hear the crying baby again along with the mother's voice trying to calm it. It wasn't working. And the baby and the mother were getting increasingly frantic.

Foolishly, he picked up the phone receiver. The signal was dead. His cell phone was lying on the bed still attached to the charger. He flipped open the top and heard what sounded like a fast busy signal even before it was up to his ear. The whistling sound would momentarily stop then return bringing with it sheets of rain peppering the window. Surely, he was imagining things. But it almost looked as though the window was actually bulging inside. Suddenly the motel room seemed very small.

As he passed the second poster, he lifted it from a nail then set it inside a closet across from the bathroom. Then he continued to the toilet and relieved himself. The mirror was also fogged over so he splashed some water on his face then left. Beside the foot of the bed, he felt a sharp piece of glass cut into the bottom of his foot. By the time he sat back on the mattress, blood was already dripping onto the wet floor. He removed the shard then wiped the blood away with one of his dirty socks from yesterday. Then he located the first aid kit from his backpack and placed a bandage over the cut. Finally, he slid on a fresh pair of socks then his new hiking boots carefully over them. When they were snuggly tied, he looked around the room and sighed. He hadn't even started his grand adventure yet and he was already wounded.

The crying was getting increasingly louder and he was certain now that it was coming from the room right below him. The mother's voice was beginning to sound less annoyed and more panicked.

Preston lightly tapped the heel of his boot on the floor. When that wasn't noticed, he drove his heel more forcefully. All the sounds from below stopped. "Are you alright?" Preston called out as he leaned down with his ear against the slick laminate surface.

"Somebody up der? No, we ain't alright," the woman shrieked. "Wawta's up ova da bed. My baby diapers dun got soaked and he shit hisself."

Once she paused, the baby started crying again. "Weez scayed. Somebody gotta hep us quick," she yelled over the cries.

"Okay. It's alright. It's dry up here. Maybe you could come to the second floor," Preston suggested.

"I'm scayed. I cain't swim and da wawta's evrywhere," she pitifully whined. The baby unleashed a piercing scream that seemed to penetrate right through the floor.

"Maybe I could come down and get you?" he offered.

"Please come now. Else we gonna drown down here."

"Okay. I'm coming."

"Please hurry," she yelled then kept repeating.

Preston leaned back up and felt dizzy as he did. His mind was a jumbled mess. What had she meant by the water was over the bed? Maybe she was just panicked. It was probably just water from beneath the door being blown into the room just like here.

Whether exaggerated or not, he couldn't just leave them down there in that state. He removed his expensive parka out of his fancy backpack, pulled it over his shoulders and zipped it up. At least he had prepared. He paused at the door and took a deep breath. "Okay Katrina. Time to see what all the fuss is about."

He leaned his body into the door then waited for the whistling to momentarily stop. The moment it did, he opened the door to another pelting of raindrops. He pulled it shut behind him just as a gust curved around the side of the building and blew him over to the iron railing around which his fingers tightly wrapped. The wind filled his hood and tugged on it like a parachute. It was pinching his neck so he pulled it tight over his head and synched the strings until they were snug. Then he tied it off. As he looked down, he saw the roll bars of his Jeep below. The soft top had been stripped clean and both of the flimsy doors were blown open allowing water to creep up the sides of his cloth seats. Suddenly, the passenger door was lifted off its hinges, blown several feet then floated away. He blinked then blinked again. "You've got to be kidding me," he said but the wind rushed his words away before they even made a sound.

He started down the balcony toward the stairs passing the reporters' rooms. He knocked on both their doors but neither answered. *They must already be out there getting the scoop*, he decided. He looked back over the railing which he'd kept a firm hold of. The street was a rushing river and the water was up to the window sill in the houses across the street. Through the sheets of rain, he saw a curtain part and a pair of big wide eyes staring at him. For some reason, he waved then continued down the balcony. As he got to the steps, he could see that they were entirely immersed below the first landing. *Oh my God!* he realized. *The mother in the room below him wasn't exaggerating. Water was actually in the building. The bowl was being filled.*

Despite being wrapped up tight in his parka, he was already soaked. With every step down the stairs, the cold water rose further up his leg. He could now hear the mother whaling in the room again. "Oh Lord. Somebody got to hep us. Weez drownin. My baby gonna drown." The baby had gone silent, however. Then chills rain throughout his entire body when he thought about why that might be.

He finally felt the steps end and his boot heels on the sidewalk. The water was up to his waist as he waded toward the room below his. His toe clipped something below the bare limbs of a baby pear tree and before he could catch himself, he'd stumbled face first into the water. His hand grabbed hold of a fully submerged planter which he used to lift himself back upright just as an empty carton of milk bumped into his hip before being rushed away by the water.

The mother was now anxiously chanting over and over again, "Oh Lord hep me. Lord oh Lord hep me and my baby,"

"I'm coming," Preston called out as he continued slogging against the flowing water. As he got closer, her chanting suddenly stopped.

"What room are you in?" he yelled. There was no answer. His heart was beating furiously from excitement and exertion. He came to a door and pounded his fist into it. "You in here?" No reply.

He forced himself to the next one over and placed his ear against the window. Between gusts of wind, he could hear the baby whimpering. *Thank God*, he thought.

He splashed by the window only to find that the door was locked. "I'm right outside but your door is locked." When she did not respond, he beat on it. The baby immediately started to cry again. "I'm right outside. Let me in," he screamed so loud his voice cracked.

The baby was now screaming too. "Let me in. Let me in," he yelled as he allowed the current to carry him back to the window. He pulled the parka sleeve over his fist then punched

the window. When it did not break his drew his arm back further then slammed into it again with all his might. The window shattered and the wind rushed inside immediately ripping the curtains and their rod from the wall. Then he continued to knock out window pieces until there was enough room to pull himself through the opening. Once inside he first saw the mother with eyes as big as saucers rocking back and forth on a chair that she'd perched atop a chest-of-drawers in the far corner of the room. The water had submerged the dresser and was rising steadily up the legs of the chair. Her completely naked baby was in her arms and was staring at Preston with big beautiful dark eyes.

"It's alright. I'm going to get you both out of here. It's alright," he repeated as he waded toward them. He felt the box spring bump against his shin and as he pushed on the mattress, it floated toward the broken window.

"My name's Preston," he said while working his way around the bed. The contents of her grocery bags were floating all about. He tossed a soggy pillow out of his way toward the bathroom. Several diapers were caught in the back corner of the open closet. And all the while, the mother just continued to stare at the locked door as though she was in a trance. With his hands out front leading him, he felt a drawer then the legs of the chair which he latched onto.

"Mam. Mam," he said more firmly. He slid his hand up until he felt her leg. She immediately flinched and tears started streaming down her face as she looked down upon Preston completely panic-stricken.

"Is you an angel?" she muttered.

"My name is Preston," he told her again.

"Yuze an angel. Thank ya Lord. Thank ya Lord."

Preston shook his head. He was now standing upright in front of the dresser and the water was above his navel. "I'm not an angel. Which means that you are going to have to help me out here."

"God bless you. Thank ya Lord," she chanted.

"Mam. Mam," Preston interrupted her. "Listen to me. I can get you out of here. But you're going to have to help me."

Then she started to panic again. "I cain't swim. Please don't let me drown." He could see that she was gripping the seat of her chair so tight that her index finger was bleeding around the nail.

"Stop it," Preston yelled at her. She immediately fell silent as she helplessly stared at him. "Now we're going to wade out of here then up the stairs to my room on the second floor."

Just then an eerie calm overcame her entire face and body. Then she extended her arms with her baby held out toward him. "Take him. Take my baby. Save him," she calmly pleaded.

"There's no need for that," he assured her in the most comforting voice he could manage. "We're all getting out of here."

"Take my baby," she repeated and the dark little child instinctively reached out his arms toward Preston. He grabbed hold of the tiny fellow and as the mom released him, she smiled. "Protec my baby," she said.

"I will protect him. But you're coming with us. Now what is your name?"

"Bernita," she serenely replied as the boy wrapped his arms playfully around Preston's neck.

"Great. Bernita. Now listen. You're going to have to come down from there so we can walk out of here."

"He such a sweet baby. You gonna love on him like he loves on you."

With his free hand, he grabbed onto Bernita's forearm. "Listen to me," he said as he fixed her eyes. "You're going to put your hands on my shoulders," he said as he tugged her thick arm free from the chair. "Now you're going to ease yourself down into the water," he directed her after feeling her second hand tightly gripping his other shoulder.

"I cain't do it. I cain't swim."

"You don't need to swim. I'm standing just like you will," he said firmly.

Bernita stared at the water.

"What's your baby's name?"

"Chauncey. His name is Chauncey Jackson," she repeated.

"Here's the thing Bernita. I can get you out of here. But I can't take care of Chauncey afterwards. So if you want your son to live, then you're going to have to come with us. Now ease yourself down so we can walk out of here."

He felt her fingers dig into his flesh then her weight shift from the chair. He reached around her large waist with his free hand and used his legs to pin her against the dresser. "That's great," he grunted as she slowly slid into the water.

"Iss so cold," she moaned as her large breast mashed into his nose.

He turned his head to the side so that he could breathe. "You're almost there. Benita, look at me," he commanded her. She did. Her frightened eyes stared into his. He only hoped his appeared more certain than he felt. "Just a little further."

"Der da floe," she finally felt.

"Great. See. No swimming required. Now hang on to my jacket and let's get out of here."

She released the dresser and immediately wrapped her arms tightly around his chest.

"Here comes the first step forward," he warned. "You're going to need to step with me," he added when he felt that she hadn't moved.

Her face was mashed into his back and she had begun praying again. But at least she was moving her feet. He unlocked the door and allowed the wind to push it open. Chauncey quivered as the wind blew across his bare body.

"You're doing great Bernita," he encouraged her as they took small steady steps toward the stairs. The bare limbs of the pear tree in the planter that he'd tripped over marked the turn in the sidewalk which they followed to the stairway rail.

"Here's the steps," he said as he peeled her fingers loose from his chest then placed them on the handrail. "Now ease your foot forward until you can feel the bottom step."

She complied.

Then he guided her around him then steadied her up step-by-step. He noticed that the water had risen beyond the level of the first landing. That was several inches in however much time this had taken - less than thirty minutes he guessed. He glanced over at his Jeep and saw that the driver's side door was gone too and the bottom third of his steering wheel was now underwater. Chauncey was tugging playfully on his ear as he pushed on his mother's derriere.

"Vous vouliez une aventure (You wanted an adventure)," he reminded himself.

Once they made it to his room, Bernita went straight into the bathroom. He carefully laid little Chauncey on the bed. The boy then made a funny face and peed straight up into the air. After he was done, he started giggling. Moments later his mother reappeared. It was apparent that she had tried to straighten herself up. Hopefully that meant she had regained her wits as well.

He was repacking things in his backpack as she stepped by her son on the bed then continued until he saw her bare feet standing directly in front of him. He looked up and her

expression looked similar to the one her son made before relieving himself. God he hoped she wasn't about to relieve herself too!

"Thanks for hep in us mista," she said. She looked much younger now than she had before. He realized now that she was only a kid herself.

"No problem. Listen. You two are welcome to stay here until Katrina passes," he offered.

"Who beez Katrina?" she said with a puzzled look on her face.

"You know. The hurricane. They name them."

She smirked. "Why would dey name a hurricane?"

"I don't know why? It's just what they do. Didn't you know it was coming?"

"I heard yestaday aftanoon. Dey told us at da shelta to git cawze dey was closin up. I tried goin to my granmomma's place but dey wouldn't let me in cawze I hook," she said and frowned. "She live jes up da street. You think she alright?"

"The houses are a little higher on that side of the street," Preston lied while recalling the frightened eyes in the window earlier. *How many others were still down there watching the water slowly rise?* he wondered.

"She got kidney problems. She on dialysis."

Preston reflexively glanced at the alarm clock which was still off. He was pretty sure a dialysis machine required power to operate. From his research, he recalled that power could be out for weeks. But surely the authorities wouldn't allow someone that fragile to stay at home during a severe hurricane. Surely there would be someone out to her home just as soon as the winds died down - in a boat.

"Do you think the power went out on dat side of da street too?" she noticed.

"I'm not sure," he replied and she immediately grimaced. It was clear that she was hanging on every word he said in a way that made him uncomfortable. "Listen. I'm sure your grandmother has a back-up generator. And as soon as the weather calms down a bit, medical personnel will be out to help her," he overstated and it worked. "Is she with anyone in her house?"

"Dontrelle live der sometimes. He my half-brotha. But we had a fallin out. He a crackhead and ain't no tellin where he at. Frank stay der too. But he an ole man dat got da shakes hisself. Dey just stay right down da street," she repeated.

"You want me to go check on them?" Preston realized.

"I could let you git up in me and we could call it even," she said then started unbuttoning her wet blouse.

"No. Please stop that," he said grabbing her hands.

Then she went down on her knees in front of him. "You wont I should blow you instead? I'm real good at it. Best you eva had," she said as she reached toward his crouch.

"Please don't do that," he said as he caught her hand again."

"Please mista. Dey ole. Dey cain't swim neitha."

He sighed as he looked out the window. The rain was really coming down hard and the wind was still howling beneath the door. "There are some reporters staying down the hall. Maybe they'll know when this thing is supposed to pass," he suggested mostly as an opportunity to get away for a moment.

He removed his transistor radio from a pocket in his backpack and placed it in his parka. Then he buttoned and zipped up the other pouches that were filled with his food, water and other gear. "I'll only be a minute and just a few doors down."

She frowned again.

"I'll only be a minute, maybe two. In the meantime, you and Chauncey will be safe here," he said as he looked over at the baby nodding off on the bed. Then he glanced over to the window which continued to flex with the gusts of wind. "Just don't stand too close to the window."

Before leaving, he decided to take the backpack with him. *Certainly she wouldn't steal anything*, he thought to himself. But then the extra weight would help him remain grounded.

Once outside, he more level-headedly surveyed the immediate surroundings. The winds seemed to be shifting directions which meant that some of it was now being blocked by the building. The heavy rains were now traveling near horizontally toward the other side of the street where the water was now halfway up the windows. No eyes were looking back up at him now.

He hadn't expected either of the freelance reporters to be in their rooms. He was just hoping to find a concealed area to listen to an update on his transistor radio without the risk of further alarming Bernita.

Rusty's door was open and banging against the wall. "Hello," Preston called out before entering. As he peeked into the doorway, Rusty's lanky frame was straightening from behind his bed.

"Georgetown," he noticed. "Well, this is 'The Big One' alright," he added as he dusted off his knees. "I warned you to move your Jeep."

Preston entered the room and forced the door closed behind him. He didn't want to think about his Jeep right now beyond reminding himself that at least he had insurance. He wasn't sure how he was going to explain it being here, however. Hopefully that detail would get lost in the post-Katrina bedlam.

"I thought you guys would be out there getting the scoop," he replied.

"Are you kidding? Nobody in their right mind goes out in this yet," he said as he rummaged through his dresser drawers.

Preston removed his backpack and set it on the floor. "Did you lose something?"

"A satellite cable. We set up our equipment in the conference room down the hall. We can see out both sides of the building from there," Rusty explained.

"And?"

"Water's everywhere. There was a breach at the Industrial Canal and now the Ninth Ward is part of Lake Pontchartrain."

Preston recalled the profile diagram of New Orleans he'd seen during his research. Parts of New Orleans were as much as ten feet below sea level. And the water levels of the surrounding river and lakes could be expected to swell even higher especially during the surge. That meant that the worst was far from over. While it was hard to imagine it reaching the second floor of this building, it wasn't hard to imagine it completely immersing those low-lying homes across the street.

"What's the latest on Katrina?" he asked.

"The eye just passed over the Louisiana Mississippi border. It's been downgraded to a Category 3 but it's such a massive storm that peak winds are being felt 25 to 30 miles from the eye. And it's dropping nearly three inches of rain an hour. There are reports of a 25-foot surge along the coast."

"All that water has to go somewhere," Preston reflected out loud as he looked toward the window. "There was a mother and her child downstairs," he revealed.

"In this building?" Rusty immediately realized. "I guess that explains why you're soaking wet. How high was the water down there?"

“Up to the dresser,” Preston replied as Rusty closed the top drawer.

“Like this one?” Rusty asked.

“Probably. But like I said, it was underwater.”

“That’s means it’s three to three-and-a-half feet deep. So down at the street it must be nearly five feet,” Rusty speculated.

“And rising,” Preston added.

“We need to go tell Matias. This will be our first exclusive.”

“They’re in my room.”

“Who?”

“The mother. And the child from downstairs.”

Rusty’s eyes lit up further. “Are they alright?”

“The boy’s asleep. The mother’s a little shaken.”

“Do you think she would do an interview?”

“I don’t know. You don’t happen to have any diapers, in your van maybe?”

“Jackson Barracks² was one of the first places to flood,” Rusty disclosed.

“The National Guard Headquarters flooded? I thought you said it was at a higher elevation?”

“I assumed,” Rusty admitted. “Incorrectly, so it seems.”

“What about all their people, trucks, boats?”

“I’m guessing it’s all flooded.”

“But then who’s going to help all the people who are stranded?”

“Have you seen others?”

“I saw someone in the window across the street. And Bernita said her grandmother lives in the area.”

“Is Bernita the mom you saved?”

“I helped,” Preston modified and it wasn’t clear to him why he felt the need to do so. “Her grandmother is on dialysis.”

Rusty shook his head. “And she didn’t leave? Power has been out for four hours,” he unnecessarily reflected.

“She wants me to go check on them.”

“No way. Not in that,” he said pointing toward the window. “The winds are still over a hundred miles per hour out there and like you said, the water’s rising. Maybe once things settle a bit we can find a boat.”

“A boat?”

“You just can’t go swimming around in that mess looking for people. Besides, I’m sure most of those trapped can’t swim. So why don’t we get Bernice...”

“Bernita,” Preston corrected him.

“Bernita and her son to the conference room. Maybe get them some food.”

“And interview her?”

“Sure. This is huge news. New Orleans has nearly 500,000 residents.”

“Projections were that a quarter of the population wouldn’t leave,” Preston recalled.

² The Jackson Barracks are the Louisiana National Guard Headquarters located in the Lower Ninth Ward. Following the breech of the Industrial Canal, portions were submerged in more than 20 feet of water. “Residents and troops were caught in the floodwater and evacuated via boats to the Mississippi River levee, where National Guard helicopter pilots evacuated them to the Louisiana Superdome.” Source www.wikipedia.org.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“It was in the summary of a simulated hurricane exercise done a few months ago that I read.”

“If that’s true that means...” Rusty paused as he did the calculations in his head. “...one-hundred and twenty-five thousand people could be trapped.”

“But surely all of the city isn’t under water?”

“Depends on if there are any other breaches. There are approximately 14,000 residents in the Lower Ninth Ward alone. That’s why we set up here. High concentration of the elderly, poor and sick with little means of communication or transportation. Plus, the floodwalls to the west have always been suspect. It’s the perfect recipe for the worse kind of calamity.”

That seemed really exploitive until Preston realized he’d done the same thing. He was nothing but a soaking wet ambulance chaser himself. “I should be getting back to check on them,” he regretfully muttered.

“So, are you going to ask if they want some water or food? I’m sure we could crush something up for the kid,” Rusty followed up.

“Chauncey,” Preston reminded him. “I’ll ask her.”

“I’ll be here waiting.”

Preston lifted his backpack.

“You can leave that if you’d like,” Rusty offered and smiled. “Since you’re coming right back.”

Preston threaded his arms through the straps and turned for the door. *Rusty was just doing his job*, he reminded himself.

The winds were still very strong and quite oddly, he felt his ears pop³. There were several palm trees in front of the Super 6 Motel that were being bent over so far that their palms would touch the water then snap back up only to be bent over again seconds later. Earlier, they were being blown toward the building, then parallel with the street, and now toward the low-lying houses across the street. That meant the eye had passed them he realized. Maybe that was a good sign that the worst was behind them. Maybe now the winds and rain would die down and the water would start to recede. Except that now it was up to the dashboard in his Jeep.

He knocked on the door before entering. When he did, he saw Bernita curled on the bed around her son. Her eyes reluctantly cracked open and she smiled when she saw that it was him. She carefully sat up as he set the backpack just inside the door.

“Is he alright?” Preston whispered.

“He good. Gonna be hongry when he wake up,” she whispered back.

Preston looked at the pair lying there so innocent and vulnerable. It was unsettling to consider how quickly a person might become helpless without our modern conveniences. And not just Bernita and Chauncey. The truth was that he was just a few bottles of water and some granola bars away from being helpless too. He decided to take Rusty up on his offer.

“I found one of the reporters,” he told her.

“Do dey got some food?” she hopefully asked.

“They do. And water.”

³ 12:15 p.m. Monday, 29 August, 2005: “Barometric pressure rises so quickly that people report that their ears popped. The wind changes direction as the storm passes to the north. The same force that had been pushing water from the sea onto the land, causing the storm surge, begins to send it back in the other direction. The storm surge slowly drains from the coast.” Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*, Timeline.

Her eyes immediately lit up. "I could..."

"They have plenty to share, no strings attached," he interrupted her.

Just then Chauncey rolled over and opened his eyes so that he was looking right at Preston. He stared for a second. Then his little face wrinkled up and he began to softly cry.

Bernita picked up her son who continued to whimper as she patted him on the back. "He hungry."

"Why don't we go see my friend down the hallway?" Preston suggested.

Rusty opened the door before Preston could knock. Matias was standing right beside him and it was clear they had been waiting for him to return with some company. Both men stepped aside from the doorway at the same time.

"You must be Bernita," Matias greeted as the young mother stepped into the room with her son held protectively to her chest. "Oh, and this little guy must be Chauncey. What a handsome young man you are," he continued as he rubbed the back of his fingers on the boy's cheek. "May I?" he asked with his arms extended.

Bernita hesitated for a brief second then handed him over. Chauncey looked back and forth between his mother and this stranger making silly faces at him. Then he made a funny face that Preston immediately recognized.

"You might want to get him to the toilet because he's about to go potty," he warned as he set his backpack down.

Matias immediately trotted him into the bathroom and seconds later they could hear the pee splashing in the toilet bowl. When they came back out, both were smiling.

It was clear that Rusty was getting anxious. "Shall we go to the conference room?"

"I'm sure Preston told you that we have some food and water," Matias smoothed over to Bernita.

"We is hongry. I had some formala and milk but it got all wet."

"No problem," Matias said as he removed one of his pillow covers, set the boy inside it then wrapped the extra material around him. The reporter obviously had young kids of his own.

Rusty held the door open against the wind and Matias was the first to step out onto the balcony with the boy shielded from the weather. Bernita followed right behind him.

The large open conference room was in the center of the building at the top of the stairwell. There was a video camera set up in front of a chair surrounded by several open suitcases with wires coming out of them on the floor nearby. There was also a table with some leftover barbecue chicken, a can of fruit cocktail and two little 8-ounce cartons of milk on top. Matias escorted Bernita to the chair as Rusty opened a carton and poured it into a small cup.

Preston had remained just inside the door across the room from where he watched the two freelancers cater to Bernita who was busy making quick work of a piece of left-over chicken. He had no interest in being a part of whatever they had planned. After all, he was a writer not a reporter - a would-be writer. "I just remembered I forgot my backpack," he announced to justify his leaving.

"Take your time. We've got this covered," Rusty reassured him.

Preston paused as he noticed a phone-like device in a suitcase beside a notebook, computer-sized terminal and a directional antenna. "You wouldn't happen to have a cell phone that works?"

"All the local cell towers are down. That thing is a sat-phone," Rusty explained. "Would you like to use it?"

"Could I?"

“Sure. Don’t be surprised though if you drop the call since maintaining a connection in this weather is spotty. Here. I’ll get you set up.” Rusty knelt beside the case, handed Preston the phone, opened the notebook and started pressing buttons. Then he turned the antenna while watching a screen until he got the position he wanted. “Okay it’s ready. Just dial the number. And remember to pause after you say something to give it time to travel to the satellite and back.”

Preston punched in Blaire’s number then waited as he walked toward the furthest window.

“Hello?”

“Blaire. It’s me.”

“Preston. Is that you?” she said over him.

“Listen. I’m borrowing a sat phone so you have to give it a second for the messages to transmit.”

There was a pause. Then, “Where are you? Are you alright? The pictures from down there are horrible.”

“Slow down. I’m fine,” he assured her.

“Thank goodness. I’ve been so worried.”

Just then they lost the connection just as Rusty had warned.

“Should I git freshen up a bit first?” Bernita asked as Matias pulled up a chair beside her.

“No,” Matias blurted then smiled. “We want you to look just like you did after you were rescued. In fact, would you mind if we took the pillow case off of Chauncey?”

“My baby butt gonna be on TV,” she giggled.

“You’re going to be holding him of course.”

“If you wont, we can go outside and git wet agin?” she offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” Matias decided after giving her offer brief consideration.

Preston redialed Blaire’s number and she immediately picked up again.

“Oh my God Preston. What’s going on there?”

“The sat phone connection is spotty with all the wind and rain. Unfortunately, all the cell towers are down.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, what’s it like?”

“Pretty crazy I must admit. The winds are snapping over trees and blowing over road signs. The rain is hard and constant. Power went out early this morning. There are reports that one of the floodwalls was breached.”

“The news is reporting possible breaches along the Industrial, 17th Street and London Canals,” she informed him.

I can confirm at least one of those, he thought but didn’t say because he didn’t want to alarm her further. “What about the Mississippi?”

“The water is very high. But the levees are holding. Are you sure you’re alright?” she repeated no doubt because of something she heard in his voice.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“How’s the loft?”

“It’s fine. The yard’s a mess. But nothing that can’t be cleaned up. There’s plenty of food and water and the generators are working as advertised,” he lied.

“Most people are saying that New Orleans dodged another one. That it could have been much worse,” she continued to probe.

He looked out the window and could see water above his steering wheel. Across the street the houses were submerged nearly up to their roofs. He suspected there were a lot of people that felt like they hadn’t dodged anything.

“So maybe you’re not going to have any stories to tell after all except for picking up limbs,” she half-heartedly joked when he did not respond.

He thought about stumbling out on the balcony and down the stairs into the cold water. Tripping over the planter. Busting in the window of the room below him and swimming inside and finding a frightened girl with a naked baby perched on a chair on top of a dresser. Then he wondered how many more people were trapped in the steadily rising water. He glanced back across the room where the camera was now rolling and it suddenly occurred to him that his “unbelievable story” was happening right now.

“I want to help people,” he blurted.

“Who?”

“There’s going to be people who need help,” he ambiguously followed because he wasn’t certain what he meant either

“After this all settles down you mean?” she sought to clarify.

“Of course. You don’t think I’d go out in this mess, do you?” he laughed off.

“I should think not. There’s people whose job it is to respond in these kind of situations,” she punctuated.

“Like the National Guard,” he replied recalling Rusty saying that their headquarters, along with many of their vehicles, were underwater. They likely had their hands full just saving themselves.

“Exactly,” she replied.

“Well, I need to go babe. There’s some reporters using the parlor that let me borrow their phone. I told them I’d keep it short.”

“When will I hear from you again?”

“I’m not sure. Hopefully they’ll get some cell service going again soon.”

There was an awkward pause much like the one at the airport the day she’d left.

“You take care of yourself,” she said and it sounded sincere.

“I will. Goodbye Blaire.”

“I...” she began then the connection was lost.

I love you. I don’t ever want to see you again. He wasn’t ready to hear either.

For some time, he stared out the fogged-up window at the violent winds and steady sheets of rain. Three of the four palm trees out front had been toppled over and the one that remained was stripped of its palms. As he looked at the bare metal frame that once secured the Super 6 sign, he noticed something adrift ricochet off the sign post. After careening off a nearby streetlight, it got lodged between two mostly submerged vehicles in the parking lot below. He wiped away some of the condensation from the glass enabling him to see that the object was a shallow-draft bateau (ba-tō).

“Thanks for the phone,” he called out to Rusty who was operating the camera.

He nodded.

Back outside, the water had risen up several more steps which meant that it would have been nearly six feet in Bernita’s room by now. He couldn’t imagine how terrifying that would have been especially for someone who couldn’t swim. Thank God he had gotten to them. But

what about her grandmother, Frank and the hundreds of other “invisible” people now trapped in the Lower Ninth Ward? For them, riding out the storm was anything but a romanticized adventure. If he could get to that boat and secure it until things calmed down a little more then maybe he could follow through on his declaration to Blaire and help some of them too. *Follow through. Hmmff.*

After struggling against the wind back to his room and removing his parka, boots and socks, he allowed the gusts to blow him back to the stairs. As he side-stroked toward the boat, he noticed the water was salty. He also detected, more faintly, the taste of gasoline. A major hurricane had just swept over “Cancer Alley” and who knew what it had brought with it. He reminded himself to keep his mouth shut.

There was a rope tied to the front end of the bateau which was convenient. Unfortunately, it had become entangled in something below. He ran his hand down the taught line without reaching whatever it was caught on. After a count to three, he dove down following the rope to the front tire of the truck that the boat kept banging into above. He unraveled the line from around the tire and immediately felt the tug of the boat from above as it tried to resume its windblown drift down the street. After he popped back up to the surface, he looped the rope around his waist then began paddling feverously toward the top roll bar of his Jeep which he planned to tie it off on. After several minutes of exhaustively slow progress, he was able to wedge his legs around what felt like a bike rack below. From here he could reach the stair rail which he decided would be good enough.

He tied the boat off with enough slack to allow for a few more feet of rising water and on both ends so that it wouldn’t be knocked around as much. After he hopped over the rail and caught his breath, he noticed that there were two wood paddles lodged between bench seats which would come in handy.

Once back in room 227, he removed his remaining clothes down to his underwear then wrung his shirt and pants out in the bathtub and hung them over the back of the chair. He then propped his boots upside down against the wall to allow the water from earlier to drain out. After removing a bottle of water and an MRE from his backpack, he opened the plastic packaging and laid the contents across the bed. Then he turned on his transistor radio which he set on the bedside table. He immediately recognized the raspy voice of Garland Robinette of WWL who was recounting the latest position of Katrina just southwest of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It had been downgraded to a Category 1 storm which sounded promising⁴.

While he listened further, he tore into something that was labeled tuna casserole. He was so hungry that it likely tasted far better than it would have in any other circumstances. Callers were reporting harrowing stories of hundred-year-old oak trees crashing through their roofs,

⁴ 2:00 p.m. Monday, 29 August, 2005: “The eye of the hurricane is 20 miles west-southwest of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Winds are blowing steadily at almost 95 mph. Katrina is a Category 1 storm. U.S. Route 90 in Mississippi is covered by 7 feet of water in Harrison County, as the storm surge has yet to recede completely. People have been floating in the water or clinging to treetops since midmorning.” Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*, Timeline.

3:00 p.m.: “Four feet of water is reported in the Lakeview section of New Orleans. With the storm proceeding north, the water trapped with the storm surge in Lake Pontchartrain shifts south, pressing against the levees and floodwalls protecting the city of New Orleans. The extra pressure widens the breached levees.”

4:00 p.m.: “...The London Avenue Canal levees are breached in two places. Water is gushing into New Orleans.”

rising water forcing them into their attics, high-rise buildings swaying several feet in the winds, shattered windows, lost pets. Someone reported several feet of water in their elevated home in Lakeview which was an upper middle-class neighborhood between the 17th Street and Orleans Canals along the banks of Lake Pontchartrain. Apparently, the storm had ignored the many Neighborhood Watch signs along its streets that warned against outside intrusion.

There were no calls from the Lower Ninth Ward though and it wasn't hard to imagine why. Water naturally sought the path of least resistance down to the lowest area it could find. And there was probably no area offering less resistance and any lower than right here.

After finishing the MRE, Preston retrieved his computer and made a second entry into his journal. He knew his battery power would be limited so he kept it brief reasoning he could add the details later. He suddenly wondered whether anything this memorable would ever happen to him again.

12:00 p.m. Monday, 29 August, 2005: Awakened by a whistling sound on the second floor of the Super 6 Motel early this morning. The heavy rains were being propelled near horizontally by wind gusts of over a hundred miles per hour eventually streaming into room 227 through the crack beneath the door. Even above nature's fury, I heard what sounded like a baby crying in the room below. When I called down, a young lady answered. Water was rising up over her bed and she was afraid that she and her baby were going to drown. When I opened my door, the wind slapped it against the wall knocking over a pair of dime-store Jazz Festival posters. Outside, Katrina's wrath was being unleashed on the Lower Ninth Ward. Several feet of water rushed down St. Claude Avenue, thick trees were being bent over like twizzle sticks, and millions of raindrops became projectiles that stung as they struck exposed skin. Each step down the motel stairs allowed the cool water to rise another eight inches up my leg. By the time my foot reached the sidewalk, I was wading in water that was up to my navel. Once I got closer, I could hear a baby whimpering in room 127. I had to break a window since the door was locked. The mother had gone silent which made getting inside all the more urgent. I swam through the opening to a sight I won't soon forget; the mother, a young, heavy set black woman who was maybe eighteen years old herself, cradling her naked baby on a chair perched on the top of a dresser. I tried coaxing her down but she was scared of the water - she couldn't swim. Eventually, she handed over her baby and told me to protect him presumably because she planned to die there. Finally, I talked her down and we waded out together and back up to my room where she offered to thank me by letting me screw her. When I refused, she offered me a blowjob instead which I also refused.

He reread the last two sentences then decided to delete them. Then he began a third entry as though they had been written sequentially because he reasoned it would flow better.

3:00 p.m. Monday, 29 August, 2005: Found Matias and Rusty in a conference room down the hallway where they'd set up their fancy reporting equipment. They were very interested in getting Bernita and Chauncey's story - the mother and baby from room 127 - out to the public. It'll be interesting to find out one day whether they were successful and whether it made a difference. I noticed a boat being swept down the roadway which has become a rushing river. It got lodged between two flooded vehicles so I swam out to free it. The water was cold and salty with a hint of gasoline in it. Getting it back the thirty or so feet to the motel was difficult against the wind.

But eventually I was able to secure it to the stairwell. Once the wind and rain dies down a bit, I plan on using it to help rescue people.

Once that one was done, he turned off the computer to save his battery life then stowed it in the top of the closet next to his camera. As he cleaned his trash off the bed, he tried to recall if he'd ever given the reporters his name. Rusty had called him "Georgetown" which made him think maybe he had not. That meant the person who had saved a terrified Bernita and her helpless baby boy would be anonymous. He imagined the intrigue of being the mystery hero that the whole world would be clamoring to identify.

His feet were still bare as he stepped back out on the balcony. The rain continued to fall but the winds were dying down. Still the water continued to rise. There was no sign of helicopters or boats just yet. Daylight would be shortened by the clouds but there were still hours left to do something. If he was really going to check on Bernita's grandmother and Frank with time to get back, then the time was now.

*

Putting on a new pair of socks as he'd done was pointless since his boots were still wet, it was still raining and there were several inches of water in the bottom of the boat. The water was also finding a way underneath the buttoned-up parka. He wished he'd asked Rusty or Matias to come with him since the moment he'd untied from the stair-railing the wind whisked him toward the submerged street. There was no turning back now. Good thing he'd decided at the last minute to bring his backpack with him.

Preston's wind-blown path quickly carried him right over one of the cars that the boat had gotten hung up between then conveniently right toward the house across the street. Despite his best efforts to avoid it, he got caught up in the branches of a tree in the front yard. As he pulled himself around limb-by-limb he noticed a sopping wet and shivering Collie was precariously perched just above the water's surface near the trunk. But the closer he maneuvered the boat, the more the frightened and disorientated dog began to growl at him. He opened one of his ready-to-eat meals then set the package of beef stew on the front bench seat to hopefully coax the pathetic creature onboard. With its body stretched and its neck fully extended toward the food, Preston momentarily debated whether to try to grab its collar and pull it in. But before he could act, the dog lunged at the package catching the corner between its teeth. The abrupt movement, however, caused it to lose its balance. It attempted a final desperate leap into the boat but instead bounced off the aluminum side and into the water. Preston could only watch as the animal frantically paddled against the swift current while nipping at bites of the stew nearby mostly getting a mouth full of water each time instead. Eventually exhausted, he helplessly watched as the dog disappeared below the surface.

After it was gone, he paused to reconsider this plan. What if he did find someone in one of these houses? They would be scared too. They would likely be helpless, panic-stricken. How in the world could he expect to get a fully-grown person safely into the boat when he couldn't even handle a dog? "*Qu'avez-vous vous-même en obtenu* [What have you gotten yourself into?]" he scolded himself. *This wasn't a game. The wind, the rain, the rising water, desperate people trying to survive - this was all real.*

Hand-over-hand, he pulled his way back out to the periphery of the tree. The submerged porch of the house was five boat lengths away and there was a less than two-foot gap between

the water and the roof. *If there was anyone alive in that house, they'd have to be in the attic*, he surmised.

The front of the boat smacked into the roof fascia then bounced away. He aggressively paddled to swing the back end around enough to grab hold of the shingles. Then as he pulled himself along the roof, he began to shout, “Is anyone inside? Does anyone need help?”

He continued around the corner of the house then paddled himself to an attic vent centered in the gable. “Is anyone in here?” he repeated as he carefully crouched high enough to get his fingers between the louvers so that he wouldn’t drift away. When no one answered, he gave it a shake and one of the rotted corners immediately came loose. He shook it more firmly and the entire metal piece peeled away in his hand. An immediate rush of warm, foul smelling air rushed by his face causing him to drop the vent in the water. The boat rocked beneath him as he recoiled backwards with his eyes closed and hand over his mouth to hold back the vomit that was in his throat. Once the world stopped spinning around him, he opened his eyes a second before the front of the boat slammed into the side of the house next door. He leaned over just far enough to project his puke away from his backpack and into the water. The boat then bounced off the wood siding twice more as he continued to try to expel the smell from his mouth and nose overboard.

By the time his head began to clear, the bateau was around the front of the house and drifting toward the top of the St. Claude Avenue street sign that was only a few inches above the water. He looked back and recognized the house was the same one he’d seen someone peering out of earlier. *Maybe it was Bernita’s grandmother’s place.*

He quickly collected his wits then aggressively paddled toward the grey shingled shotgun shack with a shallow porch across the front. The fact that he could see the top panes of two front windows likely meant the home was elevated on blocks. As he struggled to get the boat toward a corner iron-work porch column, he could see that the top had separated from the beam supporting the roof causing both to sag. While cautiously approaching the damaged structure, he noticed the curtain in the far window beyond the porch was moving. He felt his heartrate accelerate just as it had done approaching room 127 at the Super 6 Motel. *Somebody was in there*, he realized.

“Hello,” he yelled as he pulled himself along from the loose corner column to the one next to it which was the only thing keeping the roof from collapsing. There wasn’t enough room to fit the boat beneath the covered porch so that he could access the front door. So instead, he headed toward the closest window. “Hello. My name is Preston. Bernita sent me to check on you,” he hopefully called out as branches to a submerged tree scratched along the bottom of the hull.

He grabbed onto a metal conduit pole careful to avoid some exposed wires that dangled out the top then onto the white frame of the window. Inside was dark. But he could definitely see something moving.

“Frank? Is that you?” He couldn’t recall the brother’s name and truthfully, an old man with the shakes would be far easier to manage than a young crackhead. “Listen. Frank. I’m going to have to break the window so you might want to back away a bit.”

Preston could make out what appeared to be a white T-shirt in the darkness. He wondered how long the person in it had been wading around in water up to his chin. After he reared back with the paddle, he gave one more warning. “Okay. Here I go.”

He paused long enough to pull his soaked shirt collar over his mouth and nose and held his breath. Then he braced his feet on the boat deck, turned his head away and slammed the

paddle into the glass which immediately broke into pieces. After allowing the closed room time to vent for a few seconds, he noticed that the curtains were being sucked out the opening.

“Frank?” he repeated as he chipped away more of the broken glass so that someone could fit through the opening without cutting themselves up.

“You don’t know how good it is to see someone. I was beginning to think that everyone might have...” he babbled then stopped when he saw something advancing toward him. He leaned over to the side of the boat and recognized a black baseball cap with a white and gold **fleur-de-lis**⁵ on the front which was the logo for the New Orleans Saints. Behind that was the white T-shirt from before.

“Hey slow down a bit,” Preston warned just as the cap bill passed into the dim light revealing a pair of wide, milky eyes staring right up at him. Frank’s mouth was also open and filled with water. Preston was shocked stiff as the baseball cap smacked into the side of the boat. He stumbled back as far as the aluminum sides would allow and into the puddle of water that had continued to get deeper from the rain which had not let up. Several more times the body thumped against the opposite side of the boat as they both drifted back toward St. Claude Avenue. Eventually, the two floating objects mercifully separated.

Time suddenly seemed as though it was progressing in slow motion. Preston laid back with his head on the back-bench seat and stared at the fat rain drops as they fell from the gloomy sky above. He wondered what all this must look like from up there as he deliriously drifted along. But mostly, he couldn’t shake the look on Frank’s face, like he was frozen in the act of a horrific scream. He wondered if that was the look of someone who knew that they were going to die.



⁵ A fleur-de-lis is a “stylized lily that is used as a decorative design or symbol.” It was prevalent in European coats of arms and especially with French royalty. Early French settlers brought the symbol with them to the New World where it became a symbol of cultural heritage (appears in the city flag or seal of St. Louis, Louisville, Detroit, Mobile, New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Lafayette). “On 9 July 2008, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal signed a bill into law making the fleur-de-lis an official symbol of the state. Following Hurricane Katrina, the fleur-de-lis has been widely used in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana, as a symbol of grassroots support for New Orleans’ recovery. It has also become the symbol for the identity of the Cajuns and Louisiana Creole people, and their French heritage.” Source www.wikipedia.org.