Hurricane Katrina and the Lessons of Disaster Relief

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Edited by

Michael Powelson

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This book is dedicated to the late Michael Mizell-Nelson,
New Orleans' greatest historian

A native of New Orleans, Michael attend public schools in the city and received his bachelor's degree, master's degree, and PhD from Tulane University. Michael taught at Delgado Community College before accepting a tenure track position at the University of New Orleans. An activist and scholar, Michael is interested in every aspect of his beloved city, and discovered how the famous New Orleans sandwich, the "Po-boy," got its name. In 1995 Michael produced and directed the excellent documentary *Streetcar Stories*, which chronicled the history of New Orleans' iconic streetcar system. After Hurricane Katrina hit, Michael worked to create the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, which collects stories, images, and items related to hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Before his untimely death, Michael was working on a book about the history of working-class people in New Orleans. More than anything, Michael was a great, genuine, and kind person. Michael is survived by his wife Cathe, also a great, genuine, and kind person, and their two children, Keely and Arlo. Michael Mizell-Nelson is sorely missed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The river rose all day, the river rose all night
Some people got lost in the flood, some people got away alright
The river have busted through, clear down to Plaquemines
Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline
"Louisiana 1927" by Randy Newman

Despite the numerous hurricanes and floods that have ravaged the Gulf Coast region over the centuries, in 2005 the area was, once again, entirely unprepared to respond to Hurricane Katrina. In December of that year, four months after Katrina had hit, I visited New Orleans and, as I drove the streets inspecting the damaged homes and still-broken levee system, it was clear to me that this disaster, which cost the lives of over 1,800 people and destroyed thousands of homes, hundreds of apartment buildings, and dozens of businesses, parks, schools, and libraries, was entirely human-made. The flooding of the city came not from Katrina but from the broken levee system that was poorly constructed and even more poorly maintained. The loss of life was also avoidable, and had the government drawn up a basic evacuation plan and provided the equipment to carry it out, not a single person need have died. Also unnecessary was the dislocation of thousands of housing unit residents and the eventual destruction of all of New Orleans' public housing units. As a former carpenter, I have a good idea whether or not a structure should be demolished, and after visiting the Saint Bernard housing project I concluded that the buildings did not need to be torn down. In fact, it would have been much cheaper to do the minor repairs needed to make the housing project habitable once again. Since that visit in 2005, I have visited New Orleans a number of times and nothing that I have read, heard, or seen has altered my first impression that the death and destruction of Hurricane Katrina *did not have to happen.*

In 2015, on the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, myself and other academics, students, and community activists organized a conference both to study the hurricane and the flooding that followed and understand how such a disaster could have taken place at all. The conference was not called to celebrate New Orleans' "resiliency" or the city's supposed determination to "bounce back," but rather to understand, critically and

scientifically, how and why such a disaster could have taken place in this uniquely American city, located in the wealthiest nation on the planet. Thus, myself and Dr. Sean Anderson—both faculty members at California State University, Channel Islands, in Camarillo, California—placed a call for papers to be presented at the conference "Disaster on the Delta: Ten Years Since Hurricane Katrina" on October 16, 2015. It is this conference that forms the basis of the current volume.

This book is divided into three sections. Section One, "First Hand Accounts," tells the stories of three New Orleanians who stayed in the city during the hurricane and flooding that followed. Mary Gehman, who is white, tells of her decision to remain in the city and, hopefully, her home. Eventually, Mary was forced to evacuate and so spent a number of days on a freeway overpass with fellow survivors, many of them inmates of the Orleans Parish prison. Mike Howells, also white, describes the ordeal of living in a city without electricity, running water, or even food, while, at the same time recording how human beings in times of crisis are able to band together and help each other out. Finally, Eloise Williams, who is black, recounts the lack of a plan by city, state, or federal officials to provide water, food, shelter, or a plan for evacuation. At the same time, Eloise records some wonderful moments when average New Orleanians—white and black—extended help and protection to other, more vulnerable people. Their stories speak for themselves and contain a range of emotions, from fear, uncertainty, and pain to relief, compassion, and outright joy.

Section Two, "Saving Lives and Wetlands," looks at how, with better organization and planning, the tragedy of Katrina could have been prevented. Zin Htway and Cassandra Casteel argue that poor management and leadership and an inability to adjust actions based on the actual conditions played a big role in turning a major weather event into a full-on disaster. Thomas Huggins, Sean Anderson, John Lambrinos, and Katie Brasted focus on the role that wetland erosion played in making Katrina such a devastating storm. These scholars note that a robust wetland surrounding New Orleans would have slowed down the great surge of water that topped—and in places even toppled—New Orleans' levee system. Finally, Sean Anderson analyses how years of human engineering and intervention in the ecosystem, flood control, and levee and canal construction conspired to make Katrina an event much more destructive than it would have otherwise been.

Section Three, "Lessons Learned: Looking Forward," considers how the mistakes made in response to Hurricane Katrina can help to avoid them in the future, if only we recognize what those mistakes are. Vanessa van

Heerden shows how an informed, government-directed disaster policy that combines human expansion and growth with government polices to protect and revive the ecosystem would benefit most everyone. Richard Hallett and Judith Kaplan-Weiner show how the tourist industry has adjusted to the post-Katrina reality by emphasizing different elements of New Orleans' famous culture of food, music, and festivals. David Klein predicts that, with global warming, disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are more likely to happen. Dr. Klein argues that, by transitioning out of capitalism and into an economic system known as "ecosocialism," humanity can maintain a sustainable planet in the near future. In my paper, I argue that relying on market forces during a crisis is the wrong approach, and, in fact, it is during a crisis that the "magic of the market" should be abandoned in favor of a well-planned, government-directed relief effort. John Arena challenges the celebratory nature of both politicians and business people who claim that New Orleans is "coming back" because New Orleanians are "resilient." In showing how lacking the relief effort was, and continues to be, at every level, Arena offers a very different picture than the boosters that celebrated the tenth anniversary of Katrina. Arena notes that if the response to Katrina was carried out with the intention of benefitting the people, the relief effort was a failure. Only if it was geared to enrich corporations and real estate speculators, argues Arena, can it be declared a success. Finally, actor, comedian, and radio talk show host Harry Shearer, who spends part of his year in New Orleans, provides examples of the mistakes committed by government officials. Shearer also offers alternative solutions in the event that another Katrina hits New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

While this book focuses on an event that occurred over a decade ago in one region of the United States, we hope it will serve to inform peoples all over the US and the world who also live near levees, dams, power plants, sewage treatment plants, oil drilling platforms, high pressure fracking installations, nuclear generators, and a host of other public/private endeavors that could malfunction, as did the levees of New Orleans, and result in an unknown amount of death and destruction.

Many people were involved in this project, and I can only name a few of them here. First, thanks go to my sons Eli and Noah, who are a constant source of inspiration to me and whose ideas often become my own. Thanks to Victoria Carruthers, commissioning editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and Graham Carter, who copy edited this book. Also thanks to Alison Potter of the California State University-Channel Islands (CSUCI) Department of History, who played such an important role helping to organize the conference that was the origin of this book. Thanks

also to David Daniels, coordinator of CSUCIs Instructionally Related Activities program (IRA) that provided funding for the conference. Thanks also to Dr. Sean Anderson of CSUCI's Department of Environmental Science and Resource Management, who jointly sponsored the conference. Also thanks to Dr. James Merriweather, Dr. Frank Barajas, Dr. Rainer Buschmann, and Dr. Scott Corbett, all in the CSUCI Department of History, all of whom provided much needed advice and help—and patiently suffered through my rants. Thanks to CSUCI's Communication Specialist Kim Gregory who helped publicize the conference and, through her contacts, allowed me to talk about the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina on radio station KVTA in Ventura, California. Both Hai Le, Information Technology Consultant and all around good guy, and Kristi O'Neil-Gonzalez of the CSUCI's FIT Studio were instrumental both in setting up presentations for out-of-state participants and transferring those oral presentations into a printed format. Drs. Nan Yamane, David Klein, and Markar Melkonian, all professors at California State University-Northridge, deserve special thanks for helping to organize and proofread some of the conference papers as well as providing overall good counsel when needed. I also owe much gratitude to my CSU Channel Islands students Bernice Murias-Aispuro and Mikhail Kadyrov, who helped in the sometimes overwhelming job of editing. A special thanks to Farrel Broslawsky, my mentor at Los Angeles Valley College, and a great cheer for my comrade and long-time *consigliere* Dr. Mike Howells, who so cherishes New Orleans and the Gulf Coast and thus has devoted his life to making the region a better place to live.

Finally, a special thanks to Elna Green, for both the good times and the bad, as well as all those times in-between.

PART 1:

FIRST HAND ACCOUNTS

SURVIVING HURRICANE KATRINA

MARY GEHMAN[1]

Thousands of people remained in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, which began on August 29, 2005. Those who stayed had their own reasons for choosing not to evacuate before the storm. None of them, of course, could have imagined the flooding of eighty percent of the city, nor that, once evacuated, they would not be able to return for at least a month to homes soaked in floodwaters for two weeks.

I stayed through the storm, and was evacuated by boat to an overpass the following day where I spent three days and nights stranded with hundreds of others, with minimal water and food. Finally, on the evening of Friday, September 2, after eight hours in a crushing mob at the Superdome, I boarded a bus for Dallas. This is my story; one I hope will never be repeated in my beloved New Orleans.

August 22–26, 2005: Final Days Before the Storm

Hurricane Katrina first appeared on weather tracking maps early in the week of August 22, which was also the first week of classes at Delgado Community College. I mentioned to students that we'd have a Fall break and a Thanksgiving break, unless, of course, a hurricane or two intervened. Little did I know then that we were enjoying our final days before a cataclysmic event that would send us to the far corners of the country and forever alter our lives.

Friday, August 26

At the end of the day there was talk that a hurricane was brewing in the Gulf and building strength, and classes might be cancelled if the storm continued its course towards New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina was predicted to land sometime on Monday and some people were packing their cars and leaving town. Events planned for the weekend were being cancelled, and we felt that we were in for a boring weekend glued to the TV with little to do since everything would be closed. On the way home from school I saw people boarding up their windows and doors and

decided to stop at the supermarket to load up on canned goods like tuna fish and red beans—things easily eaten cold out of the can. I had plenty of bottled water, batteries, candles, and flashlights. Friends called to ask if I was going to evacuate and I said "definitively not." We had weathered Hurricane Cindy, a tropical storm with very heavy winds, less than a month before and with no problems.[2] I felt my sturdy, century-old house could withstand this storm as it had many before, plus I wanted to be there to carry things upstairs if need be. Also, my two aging outdoor dogs would be difficult to transport.

Saturday, August 27

The day dawned warm and clear with a soft breeze. Coverage of Katrina approaching New Orleans was broadcast on all the TV stations, whipping viewers into a numbing frenzy. I refused to listen because I can never figure out what is hype and what is fact in such cases. This was the big one, they said—the one we had always feared, bearing down straight toward us. A mandatory evacuation was announced by New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin that evening.

We all had a stoic view of the situation—better to be at home and able to care for our things and ourselves than off in an evacuation into the unknown. Most people in my neighborhood were poor and had spent whatever government checks or help they received by the last week of the month. Miss Jane, a heavy smoker, was even out of cigarettes. We had all heard about the fiasco of people crowding the Superdome two years earlier during Hurricane George and we were not about to leave our homes for that.

Sunday, August 28

Despite dire news reports of Hurricane Katrina moving quickly and ferociously in our direction, the city was calm and clear as Sunday dawned. The breezes that picked up through the day were welcome in the humid heat. I stayed close to home, checking on my readiness supplies, making sure everything outside my house was secure from high winds. I also spoke with friends over the phone, and a few, like me, had dug in their heels, while others had left the city or were in the process of doing so. Radio news reminded us all day that it was too late to leave—contraflow, where all major roads in and out of the city were directed to flow in the same outbound direction, had ended. We were in it for the long haul.

Feeling conflicted about my decision to stay, I watched the 5:30 pm national news that evening and became concerned. It also didn't help that several friends who had insisted they would stick it out did not answer their phones. I began to wonder if, given the chance and ability to drive off to Jackson, or at least to Hammond 50 miles north, where I had an invitation to stay, leaving might not be the better part of valor. A friend nearby agreed to keep the dogs for me for a day or two, so I packed a bag and loaded up my Jeep, heading out at dusk on Airline Highway. My gas gauge indicated slightly less than a half tank, and I was sure I could fill up somewhere along the highway before heading out on Interstate 10.

Everything along Airline Highway was locked up tight—I couldn't believe it! No one was out on the streets, only a few police cars passing. It hit me then that it really *was* too late, that I couldn't be sure I'd make it to Hammond or even across the miles and miles of low bridges over the wetlands. Getting stuck there in the middle of nowhere when the hurricane hit was not an attractive idea. Somewhat relieved that the decision had been made for me, I turned around and headed home.

Because the upstairs floor of my house tends to shake and shudder in heavy winds, I decided to sleep downstairs on the living room couch. I watched TV until 10 pm when the electricity snapped off and everything went dark. There was nothing to do but try to get some sleep while the winds picked up and the rain began to pound the east side of the house.

Monday, August 29: Hurricane Katrina Hits

All through the night heavy winds battered the house. Eventually, I was awakened by the noise, snug on my living room couch. I could only hope the upstairs rooms were going to hold tight. Even downstairs, the framework of the two-story shotgun house (a long, narrow, wooden structure) shuddered with each advancing gust, then, as if breathing a sigh of relief, settled into silence while waiting for the next pounding. It was pitch black outside except for some dim lights in the office building across the alley. The loud whir of the office building generator would become part of the background noise for the next 24 hours. Later, I learned it had stopped after the first day because of lack of fuel.

A watery mist started to hit me on the couch from the window behind me and I realized that the window frames were not tight enough to stave off the rain being driven in horizontal sheets against the house. From then until the storm ended on Monday afternoon, I ran around up and down the stairs with towels and rags, placing them in strategic places to catch water

that was being forced in, then wringing out the sopping towels and starting all over again.

In the early morning, the winds shifted from east to west and started battering the opposite side of the house. My floor-to-ceiling cypress shutters began clattering upstairs—their hook-and-eye closures were laughable, and the wind opened one and lashed it against the house. I rushed to get some telephone cord from my toolbox, and, using all my strength to hold the shutters closed against that merciless wind, I managed to tie each of the five pairs of shutters tight enough to withstand the battering. It felt good to be there and able to curse the darkness in some small way.

The dogs, having managed to spend the night out back in the shed, were ready to come into the house, but I didn't know how to get them because it was impossible to walk the few yards to the outside shed—I'd be instantly lifted and tossed by the powerful winds. In addition, the backyard was filling with water and I didn't relish walking through the gooey fluid. I opened the back door and called their names over and over: "Here Judge! Come on Larkey!" Larkey was the first to creep toward the house, his ears back in fright. Serious-looking Judge followed shortly, trembling from the cool air and eying me with newfound relief. I spread out newspapers in the kitchen for them to sit, but they paced the floor, moaning. They didn't know what it was like to be enclosed in a house, and they were terrified of the clattering sounds all around them. I tried to comfort them, to little avail.

By noon the winds diminished. There were another few hours of rain and some gusts but the storm's fury had been spent. Less water was coming through the window frames, though there was a lot of dripping from the ceilings below the upstairs balcony. I scurried for buckets and pans to catch it. My concern was to protect my hardwood floors, something I later found was futile when the water entered the house without respect for floors, furniture, or anything else.

For two hours on Monday afternoon, after the storm had quieted and the rain stopped, I enjoyed a sense of relief and self-righteous victory. I had been right to follow my gut feeling about being able to weather the hurricane. The water outside in the street had risen higher than I had ever seen in my 27 years in New Orleans. The water flowed fast, like a roiling creek, lapping the second step of my porch. But I was confident that, as is usual in such cases, the city's renowned water pumps would kick in and we'd soon be back to normal. I worried a bit about my Jeep parked in the driveway next door. Water had probably gotten into the floor of it, but not enough to affect the engine.

With no electricity, phone, computer, or TV, there wasn't much to do. I eyed the stacks of papers on my desk that needed attention but couldn't concentrate. My wind-up radio kept reporting that the water was rising in New Orleans. First, they said that the water pumps were under water and not working. Essential personnel to get the pumps working had evacuated and would have to be brought back in by helicopter. It wasn't clear if there was additional water from a levee break. Experts were on hand, trying to figure it out, but none of this sounded good. My heart began to drop. Maybe we weren't out of the woods after all.

Monday, August 29: Water Oozes Under the Door

By 5 pm Monday evening the creek outside my front steps had turned from a greenish grey to black, and the water was inching up. The flow had slowed somewhat, but there was no sign of it stopping or receding. With a sickening feeling, I watched as it came up to the threshold and began to seep in under the front door. A few minutes later water pressed in through the baseboards: I knew we were in for a fight. The radio reported there had been a massive break in the 17th Street Canal levee and the water would rise even more before it stopped.

I sprang into action. Anything on the floor downstairs was put up as high as possible and papers and valuables, like the family Bible and some paintings, had to be hauled upstairs. I set the dining room chairs on the table and piled whatever I could on them. It dawned on me that I might lose my antique French buffet, my winter wardrobe packed into a cedar chest, and the area rug, to name but a few things. The loss of these items played on my mind like an obituary, tears stinging my eyes as I comprehended the scope of this new menace.

The dogs had to be moved upstairs. I spread more newspapers in the hall up there for them, coaxing them up the unfamiliar and slick hardwood steps. They were uncomfortable because they refused to relieve themselves in the house, but there was nowhere for them to go outside. Fortunately, the rising water was very slow so I had time to collect my thoughts to organize how to arrange for us to live for what could be days upstairs. Remembering a common tip, I ran the bathtub half full of clean water. By the time darkness fell about an inch or two of water covered the floors. I was so exhausted from putting things downstairs and hauling other things upstairs that I fell instantly asleep. Hopefully, I thought, the water would stop in an hour or two.

Tuesday, August 30

I awoke at 3 am and was catapulted into one of the worst days of my life. Had I known what was to come, I would very probably not have gotten out of bed. The dogs greeted me with canine expectation, seeming a bit less nervous than before. I remembered the rising water downstairs and grabbed the flashlight, shining it down the winding stairwell. Water had risen to cover the second step—I knew I would be doomed if I didn't immediately go down to the first floor and collect all the fresh water, food, and other items that I could.

As I eased down the hardwood stairs, the water came up above my knees to mid-thigh, well over two feet deep. The flashlight flickered in the thick, humid darkness. Why hadn't I bothered to load new batteries? I scolded myself and went back upstairs to get a lit candle and set it on the stairs as a reference point. This was not the time for panic. The floor boards were slippery, coated by a film of oil and filth. I was barefoot in order to feel my way better and maintain a grip. Already, the floorboards were beginning to warp and the linoleum on the kitchen floor was soggy under my feet.

What to grab from the mess downstairs? Systematically, I reached for essential items: five one-gallon jugs of fresh water, packaged snacks, canned goods, and several apples left on the kitchen table. The refrigerator would be hard to open due to the water so I could only speculate what was left to rot inside it. Ice cubes from the top freezer unit were dumped into a cooler floating near the stove. Who knew how many days I'd be stranded with eating as my only diversion? The dog food came next with a box of dog biscuits and more newspaper.

Twice in my haste I took a nasty spill on the slippery steps, once nearly dropping my keyring into the murky water. I hit my tailbone and elbow and already felt bruises forming. I couldn't afford to break a limb! The flashlight kept flickering and threatened to quit on me. Somehow, I hadn't figured it would take this much time, planning, and energy to complete such a simple task.

It was nearly 5 am as I finished bringing up as many items as I could from downstairs. The shelves of books would have to stay downstairs, as would my grandson's toys. The water was now over three feet, just even with the top of the dining room table. After washing my feet and legs in the clean water in the bathtub, I remembered that I had left my camera in the cabinet downstairs and so I waded back down to retrieve it. Back up the stairs I took a few shots of the side entrance foyer of my furniture standing stoically in the dark, sparkling water. My eyes were blurred by

obstinate tears—I could not believe I had lived to see such a scene. Already I was beginning to disassociate myself from the comfortable house and life I held so dear and worked relentlessly to maintain, and I told myself that it was still all salvageable if the water went down in a day or two.

Upstairs, I untied the tall cypress shutters and walked out on to the balcony. A silent watery sunrise greeted me. All around, the buildings swam in a lake of dark, foreboding water. It had not yet begun to reek of raw sewage, but that was obviously coming. Voices wafted across the water from around street corners in eerie displacement. Someone yelled for Dana and someone else, presumably Dana, called back from a distance. A motorboat churned down Tulane Avenue. The dogs wanted to come out on the balcony, and it occurred to me that if they went to the far corner at the end of the house they'd relieve themselves. I was right—they were immediately calmer. Too bad I hadn't thought of that the night before.

Tuesday, August 30: Saving Miss Jane from Drowning

Helicopters crisscrossed the skies overhead. Between their noisy flights a woman's voice was audible on the balcony from several houses down the alley. It startled me to realize that Ms. Jane was still in her house, barely visible as she stood in the front doorway in water up to her midriff. Why hadn't she left when the water started coming in? There was no access to the attic of her one-story house, and even if there had been she was not strong enough to axe her way through the roof.

"I've been standing here for hours, calling for help," she sniffled. "My legs are tired. I have to sit down." Immediately, I called to a man who stood on a covered parking garage across the alley to help rescue my neighbor. A mini-police center had been set up in the garage. The man said he had heard her and was trying to get a boat for her. Thank goodness the generator of that ten-story building had run out of fuel and shut off, otherwise we wouldn't have heard a thing.

For the next two hours I was out on the balcony assuring Ms. Jane that help was on the way if she could just hold on a little longer. She could swim, she said, but we couldn't figure out where she should swim to and whether, given her age and heavy smoking, she'd make it. Several boats filled with passengers passed by the avenue and promised to return, but we waited without much hope. I tied a white t-shirt to a long stick and waved it from the balcony, hoping to catch the eye of a helicopter, but to no avail. The water must have stopped rising because Ms. Jane was not sinking deeper into the water. I wracked my brains thinking of a way to save her.

She could stay with me upstairs if only I could get her over the balcony railing, because there was no way she could get in downstairs.

Just as I was starting to feel hysterical, like a mirage an inflatable dinghy from the sheriff's office rounded the corner of Tulane and headed down the alley. Many more people in the office building were yelling for a boat and they steered the rescuers to Ms. Jane, who nearly collapsed as she was pulled like a sack of potatoes over the side of the dinghy. We all clapped and hooted as the boat took off. I have no idea what happened next for Ms. Jane, nor if I will ever see her again. I realize now that the immense panic and sadness one feels in the face of helplessness, topped for me by equally immense relief to see my neighbor rescued, were emotions tumbling around inside me much like clothes inside an electric dryer. Like those clothes at last dry, I felt warm and cleansed in spite of the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

For hours that Tuesday afternoon I listened to the wind-up radio to decide what to do next. I wanted to stay with the dogs and stick it out until the water receded. We had enough food and water, and if pushed to do so I could always go downstairs for more. There was no more running water, and the prospect of being the only person on the block, a lone woman at that, bothered me, especially given the reports of looting, pot shots at police, and general sense of lawlessness. Night-time was pitch black, and even the dogs would be useless in facing down a determined intruder, especially if he or they had guns.

The commentators on WWL radio kept saying that the water was still rising in some parts of the city and that the levee break could not be repaired for days or maybe weeks, and that anyone who was still in New Orleans should get out. How we should *do* this, however, was not clear. The Superdome[4] was full and there were people standing on overpasses in various places. As I lay on the bed in the quiet heat with no fan to cool me, I thought that my family must be wondering about me and I realized that there was no way to let them know I was okay. I also heard another wood-cracking sound like I had heard during the storm, then another coming from a new line opening up in the plaster on the far wall of my bedroom. It dawned on me that the water downstairs could be putting extra stress on the structure of the house, and I had visions of the upper floor collapsing in the middle of the night. This was not at all what I had imagined toughing it out would be like!

Tuesday, August 30: Deciding to Evacuate

By the afternoon of August 30 I had made up my mind to get out, but what to do about the dogs was the one remaining block. I knew the boats and helicopters that were picking people up were not taking large dogs, and, given the uncertainty of where I would go and the conditions of evacuation, it didn't seem wise to add two old dogs to the mix. Their lives for the past six or seven years had been dictated by me, and I had the responsibility of protecting them now—but how? Abandoning them on the balcony to an agonizing death of starvation and dehydration was unthinkable. I thought I should maybe kill them. But how? I had no weapon, not even a knife, and anyway I could not have brought myself to such an act.

A strange thing happened in the fifteen minutes that I concentrated on the dogs. The concept of losing them, unthinkable a quarter hour before, became thinkable and even acceptable. I was in survival mode. These were not ordinary times, I kept telling myself. I had to protect my own life. I glanced at the photos of my sons, with their wives and my grandchildren, on my nightstand and thought how useless I'd be to them were I to be found dead, my two old dogs keeping guard over me. No. I had to prioritize things in a rational manner.

With that decision made I went into high gear, packed my laptop computer in my schoolbag, grabbed a few important papers (will, copy of passport, key to bank deposit box), and made sure I had some cash in my purse. A change of clothing was stuffed into the schoolbag and I was ready to go. News reports mentioned buses taking evacuees out of town to Baton Rouge, Houston, or Atlanta. I was sure wherever I landed there would be the Red Cross with minimal aid until I could get in touch with family and re-join them in Jackson, Mississippi. Almost as an afterthought, I stuck a small bottle of water into the schoolbag. How naïve I was! Had I known what was about to transpire, I might have paused and reconsidered. That too could have been fatal. Fortunately for me I acted out of ignorance, which probably saved my life.

Out on the balcony I could not look at the dogs, not even as I set out a bucket of water and a dish of food for each. Judge's deep-set eyes haunted me even on normal days, as if he knew too much. How would I ever be free of those eyes and their sensitive gaze? I blocked this out by thinking about how to catch the attention of a boat or helicopter. Using the white t-shirt tied to a long stick, I climbed over the railing of the balcony and scrambled on to the peak of the house roof beside mine—the houses were only three feet apart, their gutters along the side touching. It was very hot

and uncomfortable, but at least I could wave and shout from that vantage point. One of the men in the parking garage across the alley chatted with me. He wondered if my family knew where I was. I told him no, and that I had no way to call them, and he offered to try to get through with one of the very few cell phones that were working. A half hour later he called to me from the tenth-floor roof and said he had called and there was no answer, so he left a message. I wasn't convinced he had actually left a message and that perhaps he sensed my anxiety and was telling me what I wanted to hear to comfort me. People are like that.

Another man across the way asked if I was taking my dogs with me and I told him no, asking if he would please shoot them after I left. He looked surprised. "Ah no, you don't want me to do that," he said. "Dogs know how to survive. They'll make it. We'll toss them some food. Don't worry." I dropped the subject, my voice cracking so hard I couldn't respond.

Tuesday, August 30: Rescue Boat Arrives

It was dusk by the time a flat-bottomed boat manned by Bossier City, Louisiana firefighters pulled up to the alley by the house where I was perched on the roof peak. I scrambled down, grabbed the schoolbag and my purse, pulled the tall window shut behind me, and handed my things down to the man in the boat. The Red Cross would provide food and water, I thought, so no need to take more than the absolute minimum. The dogs pressed against me and I petted them for the last time, my eyes welling with tears while the men in the boat reached out for me. One had climbed up on the porch roof of the house beside mine and helped me down the ten or so feet to another man in the boat. At last I was seated in the boat and we were moving.

"Your dogs!" someone yelled from across the alley, thinking I had forgotten them. I told the firefighters that I couldn't take them with me, sobbing now as we rode away on the dark lake. One man put his arm around me, not knowing what to say. Through my sobs I told him I had asked a policeman to shoot them but he refused. "They're old. They can't make it without me. I don't want them to suffer." The words tumbled out of me like water from my tears. The uniformed man with his arm around my shoulder asked if he should come back and do it the next day. I nodded yes and, looking me straight in the eyes, he promised me he would. Whether he did or not, I will never know. I want to believe he did. I wanted to believe that when I finally got back to my house there would be no trace of dogs. It would be an immensely humanitarian act on his part. I

dare not contemplate the possibility that he did not complete his promise. All I know is that on my return to the house, five weeks later, there was no trace of them.

The boat made its way down the alley and through the parking area behind the corner house where it stopped to pick up five more people—neighbors who lived in D. Primm's Christian mission, a drug rehabilitation facility. Earl, a man who lived with Ms. Ruth in the house next to the mission, got into the boat beside me. He had trimmed the yards of my rental houses for years and I knew him well. These people had been on the roof of Primm's house earlier that day, waving t-shirts and trying to catch the attention of the helicopters. They were more than happy to be moving out before night fell.

Tuesday, August 30: Landing on the Broad Street Overpass

We moved slowly up Broad Street past the Tulane intersection, moving around submerged trees and cars in the lake around us. The boat continued up Broad toward the I-10 overpass and stopped once it hit concrete. We got out of the boat and walked a few feet up to high ground. Clothed in orange outfits, about one hundred prisoners from the Orleans Parish Prison were seated cross-legged on the overpass roadbed, watched over by armed sheriff's deputies.[5] We filed past them to the crest of the hill. I sat down on the curb along with some other newly evacuated people. Buses would be coming to take us out of New Orleans, one evacuee said. The Superdome was full, so buses were picking up evacuees wherever they could find higher ground. It made sense to me, but little could I have known that it would be the first of many lies and broken promises we were to be told in the days ahead. Indeed, there was a string of white buses with heavy wire over the windows lined up on the overpass, and their sides read "Angola State Prison." I assumed the busses were there to take the prisoners to Angola or other prison facilities out of harm's way.

It took us all a while to figure out the situation atop the overpass. We were about three hundred or so civilians, with more arriving constantly, along with the ever-changing group of prisoners who were fairly orderly and sitting cross-legged on the concrete roadway. Guarding and herding the prisoners were armed men and women in dark uniforms with prison insignia; they were sheriff's deputies assigned to oversee the evacuation of inmates. There was a fourth group made up of, it only became clear to me the following day, the deputies' families who were camped out in their vehicles on the overpass along with the other evacuees. The evacuees

included babies and the elderly who were prepared for at least a few days, having brought water, food, and bedsheets with them. In total, we were probably at least six hundred people at any given time, spread out over close to a quarter-mile of on and off ramps and the overpass itself. Except for the inmates, we moved around throughout the day, chatting, exchanging stories, scrounging for food and water, and in general just hanging out.

It was nearly dark. We sat along the curb, watching the prisoners march by, handcuffed by pairs, and being loaded onto the buses. I looked around at the odd collection of humanity—not just the prisoners but the evacuees who included many elderly, a few babies, and people with dogs. One old woman was not allowed to bring her wheelchair on the boat, but someone had somehow moved a red upholstered arm chair on to the overpass, and the woman sat in it, unmoving. Two hours passed. We looked around for food or water, but there was nothing. I walked around and came across several people I knew from walking my dogs in the neighborhood. One young woman, Linda, called to me. Linda was the sister of one of my new tenants in the building I had just bought on Gravier Street, and she told me that the ceiling had collapsed during the hurricane. "You don't worry about nothin' out here, Ms. Mary," she told me. "I'm a take care of you." I was a bit surprised that, in the face of total uncertainty, most people seemed resigned to whatever happened, and they also primarily focused on family or neighborhood groups for support and morale. A man in his 60s sat beside me and told me that he had just gotten out of Angola State Prison after serving a 30-year sentence. He recognized some of the prisoners filing by and called out greetings to several of them. What was my name, he wanted to know? I made up a first name and started planning to move away from him just as Earl came up to me and said I should come sit over with Primm's little enclave. They had brought some food with them, along with some water, pillows, and sheets.

"I thought we're supposed to be getting on buses," I said and Earl laughed. "You wait on them buses, Miss Mary, you be awake all night!" Earl handed me a dirty pillow so I could lay on the concrete nearby to catch some sleep. I went off to see about toilet facilities before turning in for the night and soon realized there were none but that there had been an ad hoc agreement for people to keep their movements as far down the off ramp as possible, near the water. There was no privacy except for the darkness, and already the area smelled bad. It began to sink in that we were in for what could be a long haul, though I still hoped we would be bused out the next morning.

Tuesday, August 30: Trouble in the Prison Complex

There seemed to be trouble brewing in the prison complex to our right. At about nine o'clock that evening the generator that lit the tall detention building in the distance apparently quit. The prison and the entire area became completely dark and we heard a loud roar that went on for several minutes, and the sounds of clanging and banging. When we asked a nearby deputy what was going on, he said the inmates were afraid they would be left behind. Already the air inside was really bad, he told us, due to lack of air conditioning, and some windows had been punched out by the inmates desperate for air.

"They trashin' the place. People been killed in 'ere," the deputy said, refusing to give more details.[6] Shortly we saw smoke coming from the building and saw what appeared to be a mattress on fire hanging out a window. Inside the prisoners were chanting "Help! Help!" Their voices floated across the water in eerie cacophony. Civilian onlookers beside me on the overpass began muttering that "a lot of prisoners gonna die," and someone mentioned having a son "up in 'ere." We all felt ill at ease. As tenuous as our fate was, the prisoners' fate was even worse. Our only solace was that the prisoners were wards of the state, and one thing we knew was that the city would not allow a slew of lawsuits for cruelty and neglect. The buses marked "Angola State Penitentiary" had been filled and so drove off. A large contingent of female prisoners was led out on to the roadway, stirring some interest from the men among us. I was tired from the events of the day and joined Earl and the Primm group along the curb, grabbing the dirty pillow that had been offered me, which was a good bit better than nothing at all.

Wednesday, August 31

It was a fitful sleep that night on the very uncomfortable concrete curb of the overpass. I kept my wallet, which contained several hundred dollars, under my neck as a brace, and the schoolbag that held my laptop was beside me. I woke several times to the sounds and lights around me. My tailbone had been bruised from my falling down the stairs at home, and it made it impossible to find a good position on the unforgiving surface. Helicopters circled overhead throwing long, bright streams of light over the motley group gathered around us. We assumed they were watching the hundreds of prisoners who continued to sit cross-legged on the roadway. At one point, I awoke to the sound of cascading water nearby. I raised myself up to peer over the low rail and saw farther down the overpass a

long line of male prisoners lined up along their piece of railing all relieving themselves over the edge at the same time!

It was not with joy that we watched the dawn yield to hot daylight. We felt thirsty, dirty, and cramped, and there was not a bus in sight for anyone. One of the women in Primm's group brushed her teeth, using the gallon of drinking water carefully—I looked at my own small water bottle, now empty, and thought for the first time about the scarcity of water in light of the hot day ahead of us. Once up and circulating among the civilians who had shared the same restless night, I was able to collect information—some of it helpful, most of it depressing. We were not supposed to be there, and the boats had dropped us off there because it was the only high ground nearby. The deputies and their families had limited food supplies, and there was some water and food for the evacuating prisoners, but nothing for us. The deputies had nothing to do with us; their mandate was to supervise the prisoners. There was no one in charge of us and no one able to make calls and get someone to pay attention to us. Once the prisoners were all gone we'd be evacuated, the deputies declared.

The deputies were overworked, exhausted, and demoralized. Sheriff Marlin Gusman, only a few months in office, ordered his deputies to work for the duration and told them to bring their families with them rather than have them evacuate.[7] Sheriff Gusman was, of course, nowhere to be seen. The families had been in the prison during the storm in quarters near the prisoners, and had been escorted out with them through the waist-deep water on Tuesday morning. The small children were fussing while grandparents were happy to leave the cramped jail quarters in favor of leaving cars and trucks parked along the overpass. Some were sick and needed medical attention. Word spread that until the last prisoner was removed from the overpass, the deputies' families would not be taken anywhere. With tempers flaring it was difficult to tell who was with whom. There were still shouts coming from the detention building. Towels were dangled from the windows by anonymous hands and arms, waving from several floors. There were also stories about prisoners drowning on the bottom floor of the prison where solitary confinement was located, and of prisoners trying to escape only to be shot and their bodies tossed into the water. Inmates were rioting out of panic, breaking windows so they could get some air, burning mattresses to get attention, afraid they would be left behind. What little food there was for the inmates was bad and insufficient. A deputy reported that one baloney sandwich and a small bottle of water per day were all they received in rations. Buses intended to remove the prisoners could not get to the overpass because of deep water at either end. They were parked in long lines on the I-10 Interstate below.

We could see them from where we stood, waiting for the water to recede so the prisoners could be evacuated.

Wednesday, August 31: Wrong Place at the Wrong Time

Two hours passed and finally some motorboats and airboats arrived to ferry the inmates in groups of four or five from the foot of the overpass, down Broad Avenue for a U-turn, and then down along the overpass to the I-10 where, hand-cuffed in pairs, many of them middle aged, they had to somehow get over a three-foot-high lane separator and finally on to the waiting buses. It took forever! Meanwhile, those of us displaced by the rising water and stranded on the overpass began to take a long and serious look at our own plight. We were sure the powers that be were aware of our presence. Someone on the overpass reported that the television news reported thousands of people stranded on various overpasses in the city. But no help was available for any of us. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Until the prisoners were evacuated, there was no aid for any of us, although the deputies heard that buses were taking evacuees out of New Orleans. Where such buses were located, however, they could not say.

By 10 am the sun was beating down on us and there was no shade anywhere. I used a cardboard box over my head to protect my face and neck from the brutal rays, but still I developed a nasty sunburn, especially on my feet, ankles, and legs. We had nothing to eat since the evening before and were starting to feel real hunger. Thirst was even more important since we knew we could manage without food but not water, especially given the heat and exposure to direct sunlight. I scrounged around among the refuse that was fast accumulating along the curb sides of the overpass and found a few remnants of MREs (meals ready to eat) in their signature taupe-colored heavy plastic pouches—a serving of strawberry jelly here, a half-eaten pasta meal there. It added up to enough sustenance to keep me going for a while. Someone explained that the MREs were left over from prisoner supplies by the deputies. Not knowing when or where the next food or water was coming from at first bothered me, but soon began to consume me. Stranded on the overpass I saw the above-mentioned Linda standing in a family group and greeted her. Linda offered me a bottle of water and I didn't bother to ask where she had gotten it as I was only too grateful to have the water to soothe my overwhelming thirst. Linda smiled and asked how I was doing. There was a sick child in her group; everyone's attention was focused on how to get help for the little one. Behind the ramp a man in his 60s was moaning. I

went to him as he sat alone, a life vest only partially fastened to his torso. He was diabetic, he explained, and needed insulin or at least some water. I poured half of my new bottle into his empty one and watched him chug it down. He could not thank me enough. I asked about the life vest. Earlier, I had noticed him with the vest on and leaning heavily on an aluminum cane, barely able to walk, dragging a small plastic bag with him.

"My sister lives just down the way a bit, on Washington Avenue," he said with effort, straightening himself on the hard curb. "She doesn't know I'm here. If I can get to her, I'll be all right."

"But how can you get through the high water to get there?" I asked. He looked at me with amusement.

"Why do you think I got this life vest?"

That made sense for a man in good health but not for someone barely able to walk. Anticipating my comment, he added, "In the water my legs work fine. I can make it, I'm sure."

I left him, unable to think of anything else to say. We each had our own troubles.

The old woman in the bright red upholstered armchair sat there as if in nature's living room, observing the passing scene. Next I came across a group of Guatemalans, two women and three men in their early twenties. I had noticed them before, quiet and keeping to themselves. When I spoke to them in Spanish, they brightened up and started asking questions. How long before we got help? Where was food, water? They had nothing to eat or drink. I told them I wished I knew the answers, explaining that all of us were in the dark about why we had been abandoned. The Guatemalans shared with me that they were undocumented aliens and wondered if they would be denied help because of that. I replied that immigration status would appear to be a low priority, given the circumstances. But what did I know? In any case, I'd keep them posted as to news and when food was available. It was hard to imagine being in this predicament and not able to understand the language.

Wednesday, August 31: A Desperate Search for Food and Water

The sun was brutal. My thirst was so severe that I was reduced to rummaging through empty water bottles tossed to the side. Now and then, one had a discernible amount left in it. By tipping that little bit into my own empty bottle, I could collect a swallow or two, enough to assuage the worst thirst. An hour or so later a shipment of supplies arrived via two strong young men who had waded through the water up to their necks and

acquired bottled water, packaged snacks, and canned goods from a superette on Washington Avenue.[8] They divided out the much-in-demand items to immediate family and friends and then offered to sell what was left. I was near the front of the fast-gathering crowd, money in hand. Water was going for $1 a bottle, but canned goods were higher. One man held up a can of Dole fruit salad and I asked "How much?"

"Five dollars," he barked back at me. Finding that too high, I told him I didn't have that much on me. He eyed me suspiciously, then in some act of meagre mercy lowered the price to three dollars. It would be all I'd have for the rest of the day, so I grudgingly paid it and snapped off the top to let the sweet juice in the can trickle down my parched throat. The same salesman was barking "five dollars" to a Hispanic woman with two small children for a can of the same fruit salad, and it angered me to see her fork out the money. For a moment, I thought that it was only fair for the men to be compensated, since they had gotten soaked in the grimy water by steering two large Igloo coolers for their families. I didn't mind being gouged a little. But then it occurred to me that the items had been "liberated" from the superette and that the so-called salesmen were common thieves. Of course, "looting" seemed a wrong word in this context, and anyway, the morsels of grape, pineapple, and apple that slid down my throat tasted far too good for me to complain.

I noticed a thin white woman with a green shirt draped over her head for protection from the sun. Her name was Laura, and she lived only a few blocks from me, though I had never seen her before our meeting on the concrete overpass. At first I took her for a nun or at least a missionary of sorts, but she explained that she was an artist and had purchased her modest shotgun house in the area because it was affordable, much for the same reasons that had brought me into this diverse neighborhood. Predictably, we had both found many fine people among our neighbors and learned to fit in, and even to belong in some sense of the word. She had acquaintances among the overpass crowd but, like me, was on her own. I was especially interested in hearing the local news on her portable radio, though she played it sparingly, afraid to run down the batteries. More than once I kicked myself for not having brought along my trusty transistor radio.

Laura and I struck up a friendship that would take us to the end of this ordeal together. We were even mistaken for each other several times. It was nice to have a reliable friend in such a difficult place, and Laura seemed to be a cross between one of my best friends, Mary, and a teacher at Delgado Community College, also named Laura, who shared an office with me. I took it as a consoling sign from my guardian angel to have