

Surviving Hurricane Katrina

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by Mary Gehman

Thousands of people stayed in New Orleans through Hurricane Katrina on that unforgettable day August 29, 2005. They all 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 they would be unable to return for at least a month to homes that had sat in flood waters for two weeks.

I stayed through the storm, 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 Friday night, after eight hours in a crushing mob at the Superdome, I boarded a bus for Dallas. This is my story, one I fervently hope will never be repeated in my beloved New Orleans.



Final days before the storm

Aug. 22-26

Hurricane Katrina first surfaced early in the week of August 22. It was our first week of classes in the fall semester at Delgado Community College, and I recall mentioning to students that we'd have fall break and Thanksgiving break and that would be it, unless of course, a hurricane or two intervened. How little did I think at that point that we were enjoying our final days before a cataclysmic event that would send us to the far corners of the country and leave our lives forever altered. I had just moved into a new office, was getting adjusted to the luxury of not having to share a cramped space with two other instructors.

Friday Aug. 26

As we left classes on Friday, there was talk about a hurricane brewing in the Gulf and building strength. Classes might have to be cancelled for Monday if the storm continued its course toward us. Hurricane Katrina was predicted to land sometime on Monday and already some schools were giving rumbles about closing for a day or two the following week. Some people were packing their cars and getting out of town. Events planned for the weekend were canceling left and right on the TV evening news. We began to feel that we might be in for one of those boring weekends 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 myself to stop at the supermarket to load up on a few canned goods like tuna fish and Blue Runner red beans—things easily eaten cold out of the can. I had plenty of bottled water, batteries, that sort of thing. Friends began calling to ask if I was going to evacuate; I said definitively no. I felt my sturdy, century-old house could withstand the 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 for days in my Jeep. It all seemed too much, considering we had weathered Cindy, a tropical storm but with very heavy winds, less than a month before and with no problems.

My daughter-in-law left late afternoon with my 16 month old grandson for her parents' house in Jackson, MS while my son stayed behind with their dog to spend the weekend painting the rooms of the house they had just bought two weeks before. The long wait for the storm to pass would give him lots of time to get the job done. My older son and his family were safe in California. When he called I assured him I was fine and had prepared to tough it out—he knew better than to argue with me.

Saturday Aug. 27

The day dawned warm and clear with a soft breeze. Coverage of impending Katrina spanned almost all stations on TV all day, 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. There is no doubt that the news stations milk the drama for all it's worth, painting always a worst case scenario. This was the big one, they said, the one we had always feared, bearing down straight toward us (maybe). A mandatory evacuation was announced by the mayor sometime in the evening, mandatory meaning simply that whoever stayed should not expect any help from city or state agencies. We were on our own and could not later hold anyone else responsible for our misfortune.

My tenants next door announced they were going to hole up at the Fairmont Hotel, where he worked, for the duration of the hurricane. The tenant in the back worried me all day about wood and tools to board up his windows and door. I spent some time in the morning checking on things with my tenants in the two other buildings I had purchased just two weeks before. They were all planning to stay on. There is a second story to both buildings, so tenants could retreat there in case of flooding. Ms. Jane down the block from me declared she was sticking it out too. I turned my attention to climbing up on the roof of the lean-to backroom of my rental house next door and clipping low lying branches of an oak tree. They would damage the roof if thrashed about by hurricane force winds.

We all had a stoic view of the situation—better to be at home able to care for our things and ourselves than off in an evacuation into the unknown. Most people in my neighborhood were poor or close to it and had spent whatever government checks or help they receive by the last week of the month. Ms. Jane, a heavy smoker, was even plum out of cigarettes. She and others had heard about the fiasco of people crowding the Superdome two years earlier during Hurricane Georges and were not about to be part of anything like that. In short, they had nowhere to evacuate to and no means of getting there.

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 in front of and behind the house was secure from high winds, and speaking with friends on the phone. A few, like me, had dug in their heels, while others had ducked out or were in the process of doing so. Radio news reminded us all day that it was too late to leave—contra flow, the

opening of all major arteries in and out of the city to flow in the same outbound direction, had ended. We were in it for the long haul.

At noon my son called to report he was leaving with friends for Jackson to join his wife and son-- mostly at her insistence -- and wondered if I would keep his dog. In what would prove to be a fateful decision, I declined because my two large, old dogs would be enough for me to handle during a bad storm. I just didn't want the added responsibility. His dog, as it turned out, went to stay with his best friend Stan and his dog who were also staying put in Mid-City. We all figured the hurricane would hit Sunday night into Monday morning and we'd be back in business a day or two later.

Feeling terribly conflicted to go or stay

I watched the 5:30 national news that evening and became a bit concerned. It also didn't help that several friends who had insisted they would stick it out did not answer their phones. Feeling terribly conflicted, 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 Airline Highway before heading out on the I-10.

Everything along Airline 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. My friend was glad to see me and hand back my dogs that had howled and wanted out of her house. It just felt right to go home, unpack my bag and settle in for a long night. I let Ms. Jane three doors down know she and I were alone on the block.

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. The dogs retired eventually into their lair in the back shed once the rain hit. I was watching TV until about 10 p.m. 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 in velocity and the rain began to pound the east side of the house.

The hurricane hits

Monday August 29

All through the night gusts of incredibly heavy wind battered the house from the east side. It started out mild but 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 (narrow, long 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 generator over there 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.

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 Monday afternoon about 3 p.m., I ran around upstairs and down with towels and rags placed in strategic places to catch water that was being forced in, then to wring out the sopping towels and start all over again.

At some point early morning the winds shifted from east to west and started battering us from the opposite side of the house. My floor-to-ceiling cypress shutters upstairs began clattering; their hook-and-eye closures were laughable. 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 in some small way to curse the darkness.

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 to come in. It was impossible to walk the few yards out there to get them—I'd be instantly lifted and tossed by the powerful winds, not to mention the backyard was filling with water and I didn't relish walking through that murky stuff. So, I opened the back door and called their names over and over: "Here Judge, come on Malarkey!" Larkey was the first to creep toward the house, his ears back in fright. Serious faced Judge followed shortly, trembling from the cool air and eying me with grudging relief. I spread out newspapers in the kitchen for them to stay there, 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.

Finally, about noon, the winds started to diminish. 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 downstairs below the upstairs balcony. I scurried for buckets and pans to catch much of it. Mostly my concern was to protect my beautiful hardwood floors, something I later found was futile when the water entered the house without respect to floors, furniture or anything else.

For about an hour or two late 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 it before in my 27 years living in the alley. It flowed fast, like a roiling creek, lapping the second step of my porch. But I was confident that as usual in such cases, the city's renowned water pumps would kick in and we'd soon be back in business. 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.

There was nothing much to do. No electricity meant no phone, no computer, no TV. 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 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 might not be additional water coming in through a levee break. Experts were on task, trying to figure it out. None of this sounded good. My heart began to drop. Maybe we weren't out of the woods after all.

Water oozes under the door

By 5 p.m. Monday evening the creek outside my front steps had turned from a greenish grey to black, and the water was imperceptibly 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 ooze 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 farther before it stopped.

There was nothing to do but get into action. Anything on the floor downstairs had to be put up as high as possible and papers and valuable things 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 was beginning to dawn on me that I might lose the beautiful French antique buffet I had worked so hard to get, my winter wardrobe packed into the cedar chest that served as a sideboard, the new area rug, and on and on. It played through 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 and try to organize how to arrange for us to live for what could be days upstairs. Remembering a common tip, I ran the bathtub halfway 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 up downstairs and hauling others upstairs that I fell instantly asleep into a deep, uncompromised rest. Hopefully, the water would stop in an hour or two.

Tuesday August 30

A restroom call woke me at 3 a.m.: I was catapulted into one of the worst days of my life. Had I known what was to come, I very probably would 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 if I didn't go down there immediately and collect everything I could of fresh water, food, and other items, we would be doomed.

The water, as I eased into it from the slick hardwood stairs, 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 put new batteries into it? 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 I assumed by a film of oil and filth. I was barefoot in order to feel my way better and maintain a grip. Already the floor boards 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 the most practical first: five one-gallon jugs of fresh water I had set aside, packaged snacks, some canned goods, 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. I

added a half eaten carton of ice cream and a plastic bag of frozen blueberries on top of the ice. Who knew how many days I'd be holed up with eating as my only diversion? The dog food came next with a box of dog biscuits and more newspaper.

It soon became obvious that I'd tire too fast making the trip each time into the upstairs rooms, so I began setting things on the steps, beginning with the top one first. Later I could fetch items from there as needed or as the water kept rising. Twice in my haste I took a nasty spill on the slippery steps, once nearly dropping my key ring into the murky water. I hit my tailbone and elbow and already felt bruises forming. I couldn't afford to break a leg or arm! Some things would have to stay downstairs for lack of space to store them upstairs or lack of time and energy to carry them up. The flashlight kept flickering with its mean threat 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 a.m. as I finished bringing up as many items as I could from downstairs. The shelves of books would have to stay put as would my grandson's toys. The water had come up over three feet, just even with the top of the dining room table. After washing my feet and legs from the clean water in the bathtub, I remembered that my camera had been forgotten in the top drawer of the French antique hutch and waded back down into the water to retrieve it, taking a few shots from various angles 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 had held so dear and worked relentlessly to maintain. It was still all salvageable if the water went down in a day or two, but I had no assurance it would.

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 and flotsam but that was obviously coming as the day heated up. Voices wafted across the water from around street corners in eerie displacement. Someone was yelling for Dana and someone presumably Dana was calling back from a distance. A motor boat churned past out on Tulane Avenue. The dogs wanted to come out on the balcony and it occurred to me that if I led them to the far corner where the railing went along the side to 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.

Saving Ms. Jane from drowning

Helicopters criss-crossed the skies directly overhead. Between their noisy flights a woman's voice was audible to me on the balcony from several houses down in 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 mid-riff. Why hadn't she left when the water started coming in? There was no access to the attic of her one story house, and had there been, she was not strong enough to ax 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 standing eye level to me on the second story of a covered parking garage of the office building across the alley to help rescue my neighbor (also my tenant). A mini-police center had been set up there. He said he had heard her there and was already trying to get a boat to stop for her. Thank

goodness the generator of that ten floor tall building had run out of fuel and shut off; otherwise we couldn'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 to what she should swim and whether or not, given her age and heavy smoking, she'd make it. Then what? Several times boats filled with passengers passed by out on the avenue and promised to come back 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 pilot but to no avail. The water must have stopped rising because Ms. Jane was not sinking farther. I wracked my brains thinking of a way to get to her. She could stay with me upstairs if only I could get her over the balcony railing. 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. A lot more people in the office building had gotten in on the 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 as I write this what happened next for Ms. Jane nor if I will ever see her again. I do know 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 an hour or two Tuesday afternoon I listened to the wind-up radio and tried to figure out what to do next. I wanted to stay on with the dogs, to 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 but we'd make do with what we had. The prospect of being the only person on the block, and a lone woman at that, bothered me a bit, given the reports of looting, pot shots at police, a general sense of lawlessness. At night it 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 the water was still rising in some parts of town, the levee break could not be repaired for days maybe weeks, and that anyone who had remained in N.O. should get out. How was not quite clear. The Superdome 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 as usual and listened to repeated pleas by city officials to evacuate, I thought about how there was no way to let my family know I was O.K. They must be wondering about me by now. 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 onto the first on top of me in the middle of the night. This was not at all what I had imagined toughing it out to be!

Deciding to evacuate

By about 3 p.m., I had pretty much made up my mind to get out. 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 try to add two old dogs to the mix. Their lives for the past 6 or 7 years had been dictated by me – I had the

responsibility now of protecting them, but how? Abandoning them on the balcony to a slow agonizing death of starvation and dehydration was simply unthinkable. No matter my fate, they did not deserve such callous behavior from me. Maybe I should kill them? But how? I had no weapon, not even a knife —and anyway, I could not have brought myself to do them in.

A strange thing happened in that 15 minutes or so 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 spare my own life. I glanced at the photos of my sons, their wives and my grandchildren on my night stand 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. The dogs would have to be shot after I left. There were policemen in the building across the alley with guns. I'd beg one of them to do it for me. Officers train to shoot humans; how much easier it must be for them to shoot dogs and spare them misery.

With that decision made, I went into high gear, packed my laptop computer in my school bag, 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 school bag and I was ready. 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 rejoin them in Jackson, MS. Almost as an afterthought I stuck a small bottle of water into the school bag. How naïve I was! Had I known Tuesday afternoon what was about to transpire, I might have paused and reconsidered. That too could have been fatal. Fortunate for me, I acted out of ignorance and 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 to be a dog. How would I ever be free of those eyes, that sensitive gaze? I was too busy thinking about how to catch the attention of a boat or helicopter. Using again 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 out there 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, that I had no way to call them, and he offered to try to get through though very few cell phones were working. I went down and got the numbers for him. A half hour later he called to me from the top of the tenth floor roof and said he had called. I asked if he had spoken to anyone; he said no but he had left a message. I wasn't quite convinced he had, thinking 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 then, my voice cracking so hard I couldn't respond.

Rescue boat arrives

It was dusk by the time a flat bottomed boat manned by Bossier City, Louisiana firefighters finally pulled up in the alley by the house where I was sitting on the roof

peak. I scrambled down, grabbed the school bag and my purse, pulled the tall window shut behind me and handed my things down to a man in the boat. The Red Cross would be providing food and water, so no need to take more than the absolute minimum, the man in the boat assured me. The dogs pressed against me and I petted them for the last time, my eyes welling over with tears. The men in the boat were reaching up for me. One had climbed up on the porch roof of the house beside mine and he helped hand me down the ten feet or so 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. 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 wouldn’t. “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, 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 may 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 5 more people, neighbors who lived in D. Primm’s Christian mission (drug rehab) program. 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 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.

Landing on the Broad Street overpass

We moved slowly up Broad Street past the Tulane intersection, moving around submerged bushes and cars in the lake around us. Then the boat continued up Broad toward the I-10 overpass and stopped once it hit concrete. We got out into the water and walked a few feet up to high ground. A good hundred prisoners in orange outfits were seated cross-legged on the overpass roadbed, watched over by armed sheriff’s deputies. We filed past them to the crest of the hill. I sat down on the curb along with some other people newly evacuated. Buses would be coming to take us out of New Orleans, other evacuees said. The Superdome was full, so buses were picking up evacuees wherever they could find high ground. It made sense to me – little could I have known 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, but their sides read “Angola State Prison” and I for one figured they were there to take the prisoners to Angola or other prison facilities out of harm’s way.

It took us all a little while to figure out the scene atop the overpass. We were about 300 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. Then there was a fourth group that became clear to me only the

following day, the deputies' families camped out in their vehicles on the overpass along with us evacuees. They included babies and elderly but they had prepared for at least a few days, having brought with them water, food, bed sheets, etc. In total we were probably at least 600 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 were moving around throughout the days ahead, 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 get into 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, people with dogs. One old woman was not allowed to bring her wheel chair on the boat, but someone had somehow moved a red upholstered arm chair on to the overpass, and the woman sat in it, unmoving. An hour or two passed. We looked around for food or water; there was nothing. I walked around and came across several people I knew from walking my dogs every evening in the neighborhood. One young woman named Linda called to me—she was the sister of one of my new tenants in the building I had just bought on Gravier Street and told me how 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. They also were primarily associated with family or neighborhood groups for support and morale. A man in his 60s sat beside me and started to tell me how he had just gotten out of Angola after serving a 30 year sentence. He recognized some of the prisoners filing by and called out greetings to several. 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 them (meaning Primm's little enclave). They had brought some food with them, some water and pillows and sheets.

"I thought we're supposed to be getting on buses," I said and Earl laughed. "You wait on them buses, Miz Mary, you be awake all night!" He handed me a dirty pillow and lay down nearby on the concrete to catch some sleep. I went off to see about toilet facilities before turning in for the night and soon realized there were none, 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 zero privacy except for the darkness, and already the area smelled bad. It began to sink in for me that we were in for what could be a long haul, though I still believed we'd be bused out the next morning.

Trouble in the prison complex

There seemed to be trouble brewing in the prison complex to our right. About 9 o'clock the generator used to light the tall detention building in the distance apparently quit, because the place became completely dark, and we heard a loud roar that went on for several minutes, sounds of clanging and banging. When we inquired of a nearby deputy what was going on, he said something about the inmates being afraid they'd 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," he said, refusing to give more details. Shortly we saw smoke coming from the building and noticed what appeared to be a mattress half way out a window on fire. 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 about “lots a prisoners gonna die”, and someone mentioned having a son “up in ‘ere”. We all felt ill at ease. As tenuous as our fate was, theirs was even worse, except they were wards of the state, and one thing we knew the city would not afford was a slew of lawsuits for cruelty and neglect. The buses that were marked Angola State Penitentiary had been filled and rolled 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—it was a good bit better than none at all.

Wednesday August 31

It was a fitful sleep that night on the extremely uncomfortable concrete curb of the overpass. My wallet, which contained several hundred dollars in cash, was kept under my neck as a brace, and the school case that held my laptop computer 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. Mainly, we assumed, they were watching the hundreds and hundreds of prisoners who continued to be 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 totally depressing. We were not supposed to be there—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 that post, had ordered them to work for the duration and told them to bring their families with them rather than have them evacuate. He 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 Tuesday morning. The small children were fussing, the aging grandparents ready to leave cramped quarters in the cars and trucks parked along the overpass rails. Some were sick and needed medical attention. Word was that until the last prisoner left the overpass, no one in the deputies’ families would be taken anywhere. Tempers flared and made it difficult to tell who was with whom.

There were still shouted sounds coming from the tall detention building. Towels dangled from the windows by anonymous hands and arms, waving in a dotted pattern

from several floors. There were also all sorts of stories about prisoners drowning in the bottom floor of the prison (in solitary confinement) or some trying to escape, only to be shot and their bodies tossed into the water. Inmates were rioting out of panic, breaking windows any way they could to get air, burning mattresses to get attention out of panic they would be left behind. Food, what little there was of it for the inmates, was bad and insufficient (one baloney sandwich and a small bottle of water per day, a deputy reported). The prisoners out on the concrete had been there all night because more buses could not find their way up on to the overpass through deep water on either end. The buses were parked in long lines on the I-10 roadway below—we could see them from where we stood—waiting for a way to be found to get the prisoners down there to them.

In the wrong place at the wrong time

An hour or two passed and finally some motorboats and airboats arrived to ferry the inmates in groups of four or five a circuitous route from the foot of the overpass, down Broad for a U-turn and then down alongside the overpass to the I-10 where the prisoners, hand-cuffed in pairs, many of them middle aged or older, had to somehow get over a 3 foot high lane separator and finally on to the waiting buses. It took forever! Meanwhile, those of us displaced by the rising water and placed on the overpass by mistake 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 reported mention on the news of thousands of people on various overpasses in the city over the same interstate highway. But no help was available for any of us. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time, simple as that. And until the prisoners, in our case, were evacuated entirely, there was no aid for any of us, although the deputies when grilled admitted they had heard buses were taking evacuees out of New Orleans. Where such buses were stationed, they could not say.

By 10 a.m. the sun was beating down on us. There was no shade anywhere. I used a cardboard box over my head to protect my face and neck from the brutal sun rays but still incurred a nasty sunburn, especially on my feet, ankles and legs. We had had nothing to eat since from the evening before and were starting to feel hungry. Thirst was fast preoccupying our foremost thoughts. We could manage without food but not without water, not given the heat and exposure to direct sunlight. I scrounged around among the refuse that was fast accumulating along the curbsides of the overpass and found a few remnants of MRE's (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. The MRE's were left over from prisoner supplies by the deputies, someone explained. Not knowing when nor from where the next food or water was coming bothered me at first and soon began to consume me.

As I passed by the above mentioned Linda standing in a family group and greeted her, she offered me a bottle of water. I didn't bother to ask where she had gotten it, was only too grateful to have the liquid on my throat. She 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 me along a down ramp a man in his sixties was moaning. I went to him as he sat there completely alone, a life vest partially on. He was a 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 Ave.” 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 hardly 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 then, 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. As I began speaking to them in fluent Spanish, they brightened up and started asking questions. How long before we got help? Where was food, water? They had 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 said 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 our predicament and not able to understand the language.

Desperate search for food and water

The hot 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 Ave. They divvied out the much in demand items to immediate family and friends and then offered to sell what was left. I happened to get toward 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 meager mercy lowered the price to \$3. 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 over the money. For a moment I thought that perhaps it was only fair for the men who had gotten soaked in the grimy water and bought the goods they so carefully steered back in two large Igloo coolers for their families to reimburse themselves by gouging the rest of us, but then it quickly occurred to me that the items had been “liberated” from the superette and the so called salesmen were common thieves AKA looters. 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.

One of the women I had noticed before was a thin white woman with a green shirt draped over her head for protection from the sun. Her name, it turned out, was Laura, and she lived only a few blocks from me, though I had never seen her before. At first I took her for a nun or at least a missionary of sorts, but she explained 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, even to belong in some sense of the word. She had some acquaintances among the overpass crowd but like me was basically 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 Walkman.

Laura and I gradually 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 a cross to me of one of my best friends, Mary R, who had moved away from Louisiana years ago and a teacher at Delgado also named Laura who shared an office with me for several years. I took it as a consoling sign from my guardian angel to have brought those two fine women together in a new friend on the overpass. I should mention here that contrary to media reports and images, there was a smattering of white people evacuating right along with the majority of blacks (there were at least a dozen of us on the Broad St. overpass), along with another 10 or so Hispanics. I didn't sense any overt hostility. We were all too busy staying alive. After the brutal sun of Wednesday, I took to calling us pale faces "melanin challenged" since it was obvious that we suffered from exposure to the sun more than our darker skinned friends.

Wednesday night approached with its grim prospect of a second uncomfortable sleep on the concrete curb. Earl, my trusty toothless neighbor, showed up. I thought he and the rest of the Primm clan had left the overpass for good—at least they had said they were going to. Earl filled me in on their day. They had waded through the water up to their midribs, stopped near the Superdome ("You don't want to go there," he told me. "Nobody should go there.") and foraged for food and water, "finding" some good supplies of both at a store near the Greyhound bus station. Eventually, they had wandered back to the overpass since it was the only place to be out of the water for the night. He handed me several welcome bottles of water and some crackers with peanut butter from the group's stash. Later I caught a snatch of news on a battery operated radio farther down the ramp; it mentioned rapes and murders going on at the Superdome and gave the impression that things there were totally out of control.

The deputies looked like zombies as they waved their night sticks with half-hearted force. We could see they were exhausted and at their wits end. Their families too were complaining. Some had left the overpass though we couldn't figure out how, but we appreciated the sheets, pillows and other items they had left behind and put them to quick use. A young woman deputy had a shouting match with a male colleague (she black, he white) that quickly escalated into a race issue. The woman had to be constrained, walking away finally and throwing her badge down on the roadway. "I quit!" she yelled over her shoulder, followed by a string of epithets. There were reports other deputies had quit or simply not shown up for duty. This low morale plus the gathering

nightfall made us a bit uncomfortable. It would be no fun for us civilians to be left alone with the prisoners and a deputy force in chaos.

A good night's sleep on concrete

Around 8 p.m. after eating the crackers, with Earl's help I found a quiet spot behind a car on the curb and bedded down for the night. He promised to keep an eye on me and my bag. There was still all the chaos of the helicopters, the air boats and the prisoner evacuation farther down toward the Tulane end, but I was so exhausted and weakened from the day's events that I fell asleep quickly and didn't awake until early morning. Maybe it was the cardboard mat we had fashioned that helped ease the discomfort, or the pillow I made out of the rolled up shirt and pants from my school bag; whatever it was I slept soundly and without dreaming, something that amazed me upon waking some 8 or 9 hours later.

Thursday September 1

It was a rude awakening in the dawn of Thursday to find myself still on the overpass with no hope of getting off. There was talk the night before of boats that would be coming for us Thursday, but all I could see was the long expanse of the overpass, more prisoners, the same ragged civilians, and the same helicopters circling overhead. The men and women who were herding and guarding the prisoners had changed. These looked like a fresh crew and wore white shirts with dark blue bullet proof vests. Several carried long rifles, and their shouted commands to their charges were considerably more attention provoking than what we had been hearing. When I asked one about the changing of the guard, he explained that probation and parole officers from around the state had been called in to relieve the overworked deputies. There was also a scaffold that had been constructed under the crest of the overpass to allow for prisoners to be marched up there, hoist themselves over the railing and climb down the steps to the waiting buses below. What a great idea! I wondered why no one had thought of it before. The plan worked well for the younger inmates, but soon the air boats started up again to augment the evacuation process and to handle the older men. It also meant we civilians had to stay clear of much of the roadway from the Tulane end to the crest.

I started my rounds of visiting, much like a doctor on a hospital floor. Alice, the woman with a large yellow haired Labrador mix she called Baby (because the dog was her only "child", she said and went everywhere she did) had survived the night. Her friend and neighbor Bill, an older man with a heart condition, also had a dog with serious mange. He had it wrapped in wet towels much of the time. The two dog lovers had cast their fate together and it was all they could do to keep body and dog together. They argued over how best to ration the little dog food they had between them. I saw Alice break off a large piece of a roll she had found and feed it to Baby rather than nourish herself. When it had gotten so hot the day before, Alice had resorted to bathing Baby in the putrid water that surrounded us—better that than let the dog die of heat stroke.

The five Guatemalans were very thirsty and begged me to help them find water, a difficult request until someone passed with a load of new bottles of water. A deputy stepped in and began to handcuff one of the salesmen. We had all been warned that selling bottled water was a crime because it was "stolen" from the prisoners' supply. An angry group formed quickly to protest the arrest. If it was a crime to steal the prisoners'

water, was it not also a crime to let us die of dehydration? We had sick people among us, we shouted, and babies! Nothing helped. The logic was so contorted that I had trouble containing my frustration.

I met a Cuban fellow I'd seen before in the neighborhood who told me about having swum 20 blocks to the overpass. He had \$3000 in cash and several gold chains and all his personal papers carefully sealed in a plastic bag that was wrapped around his wrist. Somehow during his struggle to get through the deep water, the bag came off his arm and disappeared. He had told a policeman friend of his to be on the lookout for it and seemed oddly certain the bag would be found in tact. Meanwhile he had no money, not even a dollar to buy some water. I dug into my wallet and gave him a \$20 bill, figuring he'd need something for the bus and thereafter. He thanked me profusely. It was more than I should have parted with, but I thought less about my own needs in such a case. I honestly believed that generosity for its own sake was rewarded in life, especially on an overpass in the middle of a Kafkaesque scene such as this.

Then about noon the rain began, just as Laura and I and a few other "white" people were setting up a tent-like sheet structure to avoid another day of broiling in the sun. A wonderfully cool breeze kicked up and a fine mist fell like an angel's blessing on us. I was busy helping a tall, dark-skinned, deep voiced man with an incredibly long graying beard and wild hair set up a protective shelter over his mother's head. She was much lighter skinned than he (noticeably so) and of fragile age and health. I had watched the day before during the awful sun's glare how he sat patiently beside her all day, holding up a black plastic bag above her bowed head, cooing to her, almost like a bird to its offspring, the child now the parent. The tenderness and affection of this tall, imposing man impressed me as it personified in so many ways the Creole spirit of New Orleans, of families caring for each other, no matter the sacrifices. The plastic bag had been lost and we were looking for a new one or something similar. Eventually one was fashioned out of cardboard and a strip of canvas.

Reciting in the rain

As the rain came down harder, I found myself a swath of bright yellow canvas from the same billboard that had been shredded during the hurricane and crawled under it to shield myself and my book bag in it. As I lay there on a piece of cardboard, a strong voice sounded from a bit farther down the railing. I peered out to see the bag lady from Canal and Broad reading from a Bible. The woman, dressed in all seasons in layers of sweaters, scarves and skirts, surrounded always by several shopping carts heaped with black plastic bags bulging out over them, had become a fixture for at least a year. It amazed me to see her bereft of her shopping carts but firmly planted on the overpass. Oblivious to the rain, she read one Bible verse then stopped to launch into a diatribe of foul language: "You mother f-----, who the f--- you think you are? You pick up that stick you threw down there. F--- you, can't do anything f----ing right!" This went on for a full minute or two. Then suddenly it stopped and without taking a breath, the bag lady read another Bible verse: "Ye shall know them by the fruits of their labor...."

That was followed by a totally different voice, like she had clicked on another button in her brain. This one was conciliatory and soft as it told of a young girl playing in a park with her friends. It was well put together, almost literary, as though read from a page in a novel or memorized verbatim. I sneaked a peek to make sure the bag lady was not reading it aloud but her face was turned upward toward the sky, her eyes

closed. “And she walked along the path where deer and other wild animals trod, her heart skipping to the breeze of the late afternoon...”

That continued for a minute or two, then the abrupt switch to another Bible verse: “Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil...” The voice that followed this verse was matter of fact. It told a story of crocodiles being sold at the Riverwalk and sounded like one half of a conversation with a customer, something about crocodiles, not alligators even though crocodiles don’t appear in Louisiana swamps. I couldn’t determine if the speaker was the salesperson or the customer. Actually, I wasn’t even paying much attention to her long harangue until the words “crocodiles” and Riverwalk” came around the second time and I realized she was repeating herself, that these voices were part of her mental repertoire which she recited time and time again, probably every day.

It let up a bit and the sky cleared, so I climbed out from under the canvas swath to stretch and converse with people nearby. Almost everyone was wet but thankfully so—the coolness felt clean and fresh for a change. Some overpass dwellers wiped the water across their soiled faces, trying to wring out the last bit of comfort. The bag lady sat there like a gentle mound of dark fabric, her Bible open before her. When I ducked under the canvas ten minutes later as the storm continued, she was launching into yet a fourth voice, this one indignant but not obscene. It was addressed to an imagined passerby who had tossed an Egg McMuffin from the nearby McDonald’s restaurant at her feet. “You could hand it to me, you know. I’m a human being too. Oh sure, you think you’ve done your good deed for the day. Well, let me tell you about good deeds...” Then there was another Bible verse and the reappearance of the foul parent voice berating a young child. As if the constant buzz of the air boats below ferrying the prisoners and the helicopters guarding them from above were not enough interference in the rain, I had to listen to this mad woman! Finally the rain stopped and the afternoon yielded to scrounging for food and water again.

It was about 3 p.m. and I sat on the curb, my book bag beside me, head in hands. It occurred to me that at this time in the afternoon I would normally be having the second cup of coffee for the day. How good a steaming cup of chicory coffee would taste at that moment! I could look to the right only two blocks away and almost see the roof of my house, though it seemed now miles away. I also wondered why, having done nothing all day for two days in a row I was not bored. And I learned at that instant a very important lesson: people who are in survival mode spend all their time and energy on wondering where their next meal is coming from and how they can scheme to have a place to bed down for the night. They scrounge and forage to keep body and soul together, to find something to keep their children from complaining of thirst or hunger. We middle class people often view the homeless or poor with pity but wonder why they don’t take a course to get a job skill or what keeps them from finding at least a minimal job. What we don’t understand is that they are busy just figuring out how to get to the next food line! Someone walked past with a fresh bottle of water, and I was off to find out where it had come from.

Boy prisoners becoming men

Further down the overpass toward the Tulane end a long line of juvenile boy prisoners were being led to the scaffold and down to the buses below. A small group of us stood to the side, watching them pass, thinking how young most of them looked to be in handcuffs. Bringing up the end of the line was a slim kid, shaved head bowed. A woman from our group cried out,

“There’s Little G! Back there at the end! Got his hair cut, looks different.”

“Hey Li’l G!” several voices rang out, and the boy at the end of the line looked up briefly, allowed a grin of recognition to pass across his face, then quickly hung his head again.

The woman who had first identified him stood with several young children at her side and called out, “Li’l G! Last time I seen you, you was a boy. Now you a man!” I cringed at the message her words were marking indelibly on the minds of the children beside her until I withheld judgment, figuring this might be the one and only contact between the child-man and his family in a long, long time. Jumbled among hundreds of other images and impressions of the overpass sojourn, Li’l G still haunts me a month later.

As evening came on, someone arrived with a cooler full of liquors and wines. They were selling for good prices though far below market retail. I was sitting with Earl and his group. He bought a fifth of scotch and one of the women bought some whiskey. They began to down the bottles and we all knew a free for all drunk was coming. The woman started getting loud and cussing President Bush. “Sending us to Texas—enemy territory!” she kept exclaiming. “Bush thinks he can send us all to f---ing Texas!”

I wandered off at that point, wishing not to witness the confrontation that was sure to follow. According to Earl the next morning as he was coming out of his hangover, it had been a crazy time and both he and the woman friend had had to be constrained. He shrugged it all off as just another day in his life.

The announcement was made toward dusk that boats were coming to pick us up. Indeed, all the prisoners were finally gone. Nothing but tons of plastic bags with their personal belongings was left at the Tulane end of the overpass. We started to sort through the bags as we waited for an hour and a half for the boats to arrive. It was the ultimate indignity to deprive the inmates the chance to carry with them their few personal items like letters, photos, tooth brush, comb, and a Bible or Koran. All these things lay scattered about, picked over by strangers, once in a while a photo snatched up by one of us who recognized the faces in the photos. Earlier the prisoners had been allowed to take their plastic bags with them on the buses; presumably there wasn’t any way to check for contraband later on, so the bags were left behind. I looked carefully through a cache of letters, thinking I might try later on to return them to the inmate to whom they belonged but scrapped the idea when I realized how hard it would be to track down anyone after what had happened to us. I was beginning to understand how all our lives had been turned upside down to a greater extent than I cared to think about.

There were all sorts of rumors whirling around. It was hard to give any of them credence. Some were told by deputies, others by people on the overpass. Hundreds of prisoners had been killed inside the jail in a riot, their bodies tossed into the water (though we saw no such bodies.) Inmates had drowned in the rising waters. Sheriff Gusman had appeared on the overpass for a brief encounter with the local press (though I missed him completely). Others said Gusman had not met with the deputies and had stepped off a helicopter in hip boots to see how the evacuation was going, as though he had traipsed through the water with his underlings. I heard how one of the deputies had been fatally shot by his own gun wrested from him by an inmate, and that the deputy’s son, also a deputy on duty, had come up on the overpass very distraught about it, but I did not see or hear him.

The boats came but only a few, and they admitted on board only the families of sheriff’s deputies, although the rest of us all crowded around after waiting with expectation for several hours. We continued to stand around and wait for more boats,

as we had been promised, but none came and by 9 o'clock we gave up and began to find places to bed down for another night under the stars. It was strangely quiet with all the airboats gone. Only a few helicopters continued their rounds above us. There was more water available, some from a stash of bottles left behind by the deputies. I settled in with our small group, the man and woman with the two dogs, the woman who had bought a house on Palmyra St. near me and fixed it up, a man in a wheelchair who had a radio that he played for several hours--it was the first real news we had had, and I moved closer to him so I could hear, even though the stench of urine along that stretch of curb nearly choked me.

Help was on the way, the radio commentator said, for all evacuees in the Superdome, the Convention Center and on the overpasses. The National Guard had arrived fresh from duty in Iraq. There were thousands of Red Cross workers, whole battalions of Army and Navy troops, including the Navy Seals. They were securing the city from looters with a "shoot to kill" order from the governor herself. They were evacuating stranded people to buses to be sent out of New Orleans. The whole nation was aghast at the suffering and deprivation of the people abandoned in New Orleans, and like us they too were asking what the hell had happened to delay the aid for so long! It was comforting to hear that at last we might get some attention, though when and by what means was still unclear.

A tall uniformed man, a Mr. Francois and presumably a deputy, came by and spoke with us, his rifle resting jauntily on his knee. Boats were coming later that evening, he assured us. Even in the dark. Yes, we would be taken out and put on buses for Texas or Arkansas. The Superdome had been evacuated, he said, and we were next. We thanked him for the information. Then he disappeared, all the deputies were gone. No boats could be seen or heard anywhere. That's the way it would remain through the night.

The MRE's have landed

I tried to find a spot to stretch out for the long night, but the agitation of the day wore on me, keeping me awake. Military helicopters continued to pass overhead and beam their long rays of light over our tattered group. What they were looking for or whom they thought they were guarding eluded us, now that the prisoners were gone. At midnight, just as we were huddled in near sleep there was a tremendous ruckus at the crest of the overpass. We watched as a helicopter lowered itself and hovered noisily above, its eerie blue and red lights flashing. Some of us, still awake and ready for adventure, started running up to the scene of the commotion. It was like the movie *ET* where the space vehicle lands – I was ready for space aliens to appear. Instead there was lots of noise, heavy wind from the chopper's blades that whipped up refuse around us, and some silvery things rolling down the overpass incline. People were rushing to pickup the shiny objects, and suddenly I saw they were grabbing for plastic bottles of water tossed out of the helicopter.

Then there were several large cartons dropped from above, amazingly none landing on any unsuspecting heads. Strong young men rushed forward out of the darkness and into the surreal flashing lights to grab up the heavy cartons and take them back to family and friends as the big mechanical bird lifted off into the sky. Once someone beside me yelled, "We want some too. We're hungry just like everyone else!" I understood that the cartons contained MRE's, the meals ready to eat, and rushed to the closest distributor to snag one for myself. Back at the curb where several of us were camping together, the two of us who had managed to get an MRE each opened them

and shared the contents with several other friends. This MRE batch was particularly good, having barbecued beef and pasta in a tasty sauce, plus some crackers, a can of juice and the most treasured of all, a small container of applesauce and cranberry. The taste of that sweet mixture reminded me of happier, less hungry times. Under the circumstances, having that little cup of dessert to myself was a true luxury. One of the women gave her dog a bite or two of the meat, an extravagant gesture that we chose to ignore.

With that bit of sustenance in my stomach, and unable to sleep, I got up and wandered to the top of the overpass where I stood looking out over the dark skyline of New Orleans. There were no lights except some from generators near the Superdome, lending a sadly dramatic backlighting effect. Clouds of smoke rose from several angles, and there was an acrid stench coming toward us. I felt I was viewing a graveyard, the demise of a once vibrant and beautiful city, reduced now to nothing. In that incredible sadness was also mixed uncertainty and fear as to what would become of all of us. Would we also go down with the sinking city we so loved?

Laura joined me and then Arturo, her friend, an Honduran who I had seen several times before but not met formally. Earl, shrugging off a hangover, showed up sprawled out on the curb nearby. We formed an oddly familiar group, all focused on the fires burning downtown, wondering how it would all end. Laura asked Arturo for his battery lamp and said she was heading off on a “restroom run”. Arturo and I became engrossed in a conversation about racism in New Orleans. Dark skinned, he was always assumed in the U.S. to be African-American, but his accent told the blacks with whom he associated that he was not one of them. He described the difficulty in trying to maintain his own identity and the problems he had with the attitudes of many blacks here who blame their shortcomings on whites, on history, etc. Well educated and from a culture very different from many New Orleans “brothers”, Arturo related several episodes where his love of the city and its people had caused conflicts.

We realized almost simultaneously that Laura had been gone too long and had not returned the light. Arturo immediately started out to find her, and I followed close behind. It was very dark. Along that isolated stretch of railing a woman could easily be snatched into the darkness and attacked. For the first time on the overpass I felt fear. What if something sinister had happened to her? Why couldn't we see the glimmer of the lamp anywhere? Another man along the railing joined us in our search, but we all had to turn back and look for her in the other direction. I sensed danger, my heart near my throat. As we walked back toward the crest of the overpass, there was Laura sitting on the curb as if nothing had happened. What a relief to see her! Our nerves were wearing thin.

Friday, September 2

Night was yielding to dawn and another hopeless day. Maybe there would be more water and MRE's dropped to us from the sky, maybe not. We were a forlorn, ragtag lot wandering, stumbling into Friday morning. From about 300 civilians originally, our numbers had dwindled to half if not less—presumably some had given up and, like Primm and his entourage, waded off in search of food and shelter. Helicopters whirred above but gave no indication that they saw us, and though we noted a few boats in the water nearby, none was coming in our direction. We couldn't believe that we'd be abandoned for another hot, tiring day. At the Tulane Ave. end a sheriff's white van sat with its doors wide open and a hugely obese woman sprawled inside, hyperventilating. Her daughter, a sheriff's deputy, would not leave without her. Tears steaming down her

cheeks, the daughter stood there begging anyone who would listen for help. I suddenly thought to myself, what if that were MY mother dying in the hot van? What would I do?

The message: Dying, Help!

Laura and I decided to act. In the face of total hopelessness I sensed that if we could just get the attention of one of the helicopter pilots, there was a chance he'd land on the overpass. Far more difficult things were possible in times of war, why not now? Why not here? We scrounged up as many felt tipped markers and crayons as we could, begging them from children and anyone else. We found a large piece of white canvas from what had been a billboard before the hurricane winds shredded it and began to sketch out two words in letters as large as we could make them: "DYING. HELP!" Someone wanted to put "PLEASE" before the word "HELP" but ever the English teacher, I pointed out courtesy was not the objective. Besides, we'd be lucky to have enough ink in the several markers to fill in the letters of two words, let alone three.

Mission accomplished with the help of several children and their crayons, we then waited till the next chopper passed overhead and jumped up and down, around the canvas on the roadway, waving our arms, T-shirts, hats or whatever we could find. It was hard to believe that no one seemed to notice us at all. For the next hour or so we watched out for approaching helicopters and marshaled the troops each time one passed. Very few people left on the overpass joined us. When I tried to arouse enthusiasm from a group of women seated nearby, they looked despondent. "All we can do is pray," one of them offered. I told her praying was fine but we needed to act as well if we hoped for relief. A young man in a wheelchair came over and sat by the sign for a while, but the sun was so hot that he had to soon take cover under a cardboard canopy he had managed to construct.

We were hot, tired and thirsty and about to give up when a miracle occurred; one of the helicopter pilots lowered his vehicle enough to motion to us to clear the top of the overpass where one of the street lights with its pole was missing. He made several attempts, each time coming closer, lower. Several men sprang into action and physically pushed people out of the way so that the blades of the chopper would have enough clearance. There was a rush of chaos with our meager belongings blowing every which way, but at last and to great applause, the helicopter pilot maneuvered the aircraft into a landing position. We were in tears, tears of joy and gratitude. Perhaps there was an end to our long ordeal after all. The sickest among us were put aboard that first flight, with others to follow.

Meanwhile from behind us there arrived several motor boats manned by Texas Wildlife Rangers. I was among the twenty or so evacuees to climb into those boats. We were almost too exhausted to appreciate the exhilaration of the moment. What happened to the obese mother who had moved us to action isn't clear. I have to assume she was rescued soon after. There is also no information available on the several people who nursed dogs during those long, difficult days, nor the old lady in the red upholstered chair. Even the bag lady with the disparate tapes in her head has not returned to her former perch at Canal and Broad. I wonder what shelter took her in. In the rush to leave the overpass, there was no time for good-byes.

Whether our small effort to get that pilot's attention was the only reason we were finally evacuated off the overpass isn't clear. Surely deputies, once they got off the overpass, had reported our plight as they promised they would. Maybe FEMA or whatever power was in charge had gotten around at last to dealing with us. I don't know and probably never will. I just savored the fantastic relief of being in a moving boat

going to what we had been told was a bus that would take us out of New Orleans to a shelter.

As the boat motored down Broad and turned right on to Tulane Avenue, which now resembled a lake, I could look down the alley and see my house still standing. A lump rose in my throat as I strained to see signs of my dogs on the balcony but there was none. In the past few days I had not allowed my spirit to be crushed by thinking about them. Now I wasn't sure if it was relief or horror that gripped me. Quickly I turned to chatting with a friend in the boat. Six or seven of us had become comrades in arms and would stick together through whatever awaited us. We never said this but it was understood; considering the challenge ahead, it was a wise choice.

Off the overpass into obscurity

Along the ten to twelve blocks we traveled down Tulane Avenue every building had taken on massive amounts of water. Laura pointed out her house, second in from the corner at S. Rocheblave. It too was still standing, in six to seven feet of water. Her neighbors, an elderly couple on the second floor above a shop on Tulane had hung a simple banner made from a bed sheet with the words "Need Rescue" in runny ink. The woman waved to us through the front window and asked when the boat would be coming for her and her ailing husband; she was assured the rangers would be back for them. It was disorienting not to recognize familiar buildings and streetscapes. We had to navigate over the median and around parked cars submerged to their rooftops because it was impossible to see where the actual street was.

That ride convinced us all of the magnitude of the flooding and sobered us about what was to become of our city after so much of it sat pickling in the brackish lake water for another week or two. It was unimaginable. We felt lucky to be leaving the death and destruction all around us, yet there was an unbearable sadness to knowing we might never see our homes again. The reality that life would never be the same post-Katrina hit us hard, taking precedence to our fatigue and hunger. The boat dropped us off in front of the Public Library at Tulane and Loyola. We were instructed to wade across the street and wait on the neutral ground (local term for median) for a bus. The water was mid-thigh and smelled of salt and vomit. Bedraggled and dripping wet we scrambled up on to the knoll of a median and waited in the broiling sun for a bus. More boatloads followed and their passengers joined us.

What bus? After a half hour or so, a National Guardsman came by and asked what our ragtag group of about fifty souls was waiting for. There was no bus coming for us, he explained. The only way out of New Orleans was by bus, true, but the only buses were in front of the Hyatt Regency Hotel farther up Loyola Avenue, and to get on one of those we'd have to go to the Superdome. My heart dropped when I heard that fateful word. Besides the atrocities that were supposed to be committed in the Dome, getting there would require wading several blocks. I didn't think I could carry my heavy book bag with the laptop in it above the water for that long stretch. My buddy Earl had somehow managed to join us, and he graciously saved the day by hoisting my book bag over his head and tromping through the water. We switched off and on stumbling down the two and a half long blocks, feeling our way up and down curbs and steps, since the water was pitch black. Several people in our group fell along the way. Eventually we reached the up ramp to the Dome beside the New Orleans Centre, formerly a posh shopping mall.

A chain was draped across the entrance at the end of the ramp. There were no signs, no one to ask for directions. We were told we could not enter that way, that the

line to get on the buses wound several times around the dome, that it would take four days of waiting in line, that to get in line we'd have to walk (through the water in the street) to the other side of the dome and enter from the front. After having been told nothing but false information for the past four days, this casually imparted news did not sound convincing. Ignoring the speaker, we took some planks of wood from the debris scattered all around and fashioned the semblance of a ramp to help us scale a four foot wall at the side of the ramp. By pulling each other up and over the wall we gained access to the large veranda-like plaza around the dome where thousands of people were milling around. Willie, a 90 year old gentleman, mustered all his strength and supported by his son Will managed to scale the wall. One of our number, Harold, a rotund man in his fifties, gave up. He sat down on the ramp and declared he wasn't going a foot farther. He'd simply die there. We shared his sentiments but were unable to convince him to try it again. Though we had to leave him there, it was wonderful to see him rejoin us 15 minutes later. He had tried to wade through the deep water around the Dome but fell and went under. In light of that danger, scaling a four foot wall was apparently not as daunting. Harold was doing what we all were—pushed beyond endurance, he found reserves of courage and strength that surprised him and the rest of us.

In the bus line at the Superdome

Once on the plaza it was apparent that a single line of several hundred had formed for the buses. We took our places at the end and prepared for a long wait in the direct sun. It was about two in the afternoon. Bottled water was available but no food. We were told MRE's would be passed out at a check point off to the side at 5 p.m. Of course, that involved losing one's place in line! The line moved in mysterious ways, sometimes fast, sometimes very slow. We had to be vigilant about moving our belongings quickly ahead as the line moved so as not to lose our spot. At first Earl was in on our group, but he quickly tired of the sun and heat, and after striking up a conversation with an acquaintance on the sidelines, he decided to stay at the Superdome for the night. I asked him why he didn't want to get on the bus.

Earl looked at me with that quizzical tilt of his head and gave the most rational statement I had heard all week. "Miz Mary," he said, "what am I gonna do on a bus goin to somewhere I don't know, where I never been, with no money? Nope. That's not for me." And with that he turned to the bottle of beer in his hand and continued chatting with his friend. "I'll take care of your dogs, don't you worry about them," he called after me. I thanked him and said goodbye, that I'd see him soon back in the neighborhood. I didn't believe for one minute that he'd look in on my dogs, but it was nice of him to offer.

We spent the next few hours in line, the small group of us who had decided to tough it out together. It didn't make sense to have all six or seven of us standing in the hot sun all the time, so we rotated keeping two people on the line to push our pile of bags along while the rest of us found chairs in the shade under the overhang of the Dome, visited, and rested. The people in front and behind us on the line were consulted about what we were doing and approved of it. A confrontation over space rights in the line was the last thing any of us wanted. As long as we moved our things quickly when the line moved, everyone was mellow around us. We were all pretty well exhausted and also anxious as to whether or not we'd get far enough in line to get on a bus out of there by nightfall. One of the women who had befriended us on the overpass showed up suddenly after we had held our place in line for nearly an hour. Some of us objected to allowing her to join us while others were too tired to argue. There were just too many

irrational and crazy things going on that our sense of “right and wrong” began to warp. In the absence of any majority of opposition, she stayed on with us.

I was trying to make some sense out of it all. National Guardsmen, back fresh from the war in Iraq we were told, walked around the perimeter of the Dome, their rifles very much in view. Someone told us there were five lines in front of the New Orleans Center but we could locate only one long one. I asked a soldier when he walked by about it. He confirmed there were five lines but only after a certain point—where that point was he was not able to say.

“You’re fine where you are,” he assured me. I asked the next soldier to pass us and he said there was really only one line, the one we were in, that 50 people at a time were being let through to get on the buses, that there were enough buses for everyone who wanted to leave. Though I wanted desperately to believe him, the young man behind us in line said he had waited the whole day before when the buses stopped arriving as it got dark. He thought he had a better shot today but wasn’t sure. Nothing surprised me after all the stories we had been told for days now.

On one of my rotations off the line I had time to take a close look around me. Besides the absolutely putrid odor emanating from the large doors of the Dome that stood open to allow for ventilation, there was little indication of the horrors that had been reported about the facility. Several card games were going on. Children romped farther out on the large open space where makeshift tents of towels and sheets dotted the view. Many of the individuals sitting or walking around me were mental cases or seriously disabled, some talking to themselves, others drooling. Off to the side two young dark skinned men were doing a spider dance, leaping into the air and shouting. At first I thought it might be an African ritual dance but their erratic moves and shouts were more those of someone coming off drugs cold turkey. The evacuation had interrupted thousands of drug deals and neighborhood dealer networks, leaving former customers to fend for themselves. From the looting of stores with their stocks of liquor there was also considerable evidence of drunkenness. I wondered where all these people would go, what would become of them. For all the generous folks offering to take in evacuees, how many were prepared to handle this bunch?

Several people who had survived three or four days at the Dome told us differing stories. At night was the worst, when there was no light and people prowled the aisles. There had been at least one rape, that of a young girl when she went in the darkness down a ramp to relieve herself, and at least one suicide by a young man who leaped from a railing several floors’ height to his death. There had been shots fired but how many people killed and by whom no one could say. It definitely wasn’t hundreds as had been reported in the national media. The survivors seemed more tired and frustrated than afraid.

A pushing, crushing mob

It was about 6 p.m. when our spot in the line reached the open plaza that slopes down into the New Orleans Centre shopping mall. Gradually the line oozed out to the sides and people filled the plaza so there was no longer one clearly defined line but rows of people pushing their way to the front. In the absence of signs, barricades or someone to keep order, it became each to his or her own. The family group ahead of us had a huge flatbed cart piled high with their belongings but were soon forced to abandon the cart because of the crush of people. Our small group stayed together as best we could. Whereas earlier we had thought about having one or two of us go through a line at a table off to the side to procure MRE’s that were being handed out

there, we decided it was better to stay together and forgo eating. In the heat and close crowd it was hard to breathe. We pushed ahead along side elderly people being helped by their children, babies in strollers, pregnant women and people almost too sick to stand up. It was really our worst nightmare come true.

The next two hours spent in that crowd are blurry in my mind, partly because it is painful to remember the pointless agony of it all. Not only were we jammed into a suffocatingly hot and fetid mob of desperate people, but we also had to climb up over at least a foot and a half of debris to advance: mattresses and bed clothes with curtains, all of which appeared to have been blown out of the Hyatt Regency Hotel during the hurricane four days before, folding chairs and military cots abandoned by whomever, and hundreds of empty water bottles. It was very hard to find one's footing, especially for anyone pulling a heavy school bag as I was or for the elderly who had already been standing for hours on end. I recall a middle aged woman to my right, apparently alone, bracing herself stoically, tears falling silently down her cheeks. At that moment I could not think of a word of comfort to offer her. Nothing made any sense, nothing but sheer endurance.

At some point we were close enough to a National Guardsman for me to ask him why no one was controlling the crowd or cleaning away the debris. A man in the crowd had just had a vomiting episode and was shunted to the side to catch some fresh air. When he was told that he could exit at the side stair but would lose his place in line, his family pulled him back into the anonymous crowd. The soldier turned his attention back to my question and looked at me blankly.

"The Army is in charge of getting you all out of the Dome and on to buses," was his reply. When I asked why then was the Army not doing anything to help us, he said so matter-of-factly that at first I mistook it for a joke, "We don't talk to the Army and they don't talk to us." My thought was interrupted by Laura in our group crying out in pain because of a muscle spasm in her back. The stress on us all was mounting; we just didn't know what to do. Fortunately, Bill knew something about massage and was able to gradually relieve Laura's back pain, though she continued to suffer several more bouts during our wait.

Psychologically it was torture to hear someone up front shout into a megaphone "We'll take 500 more for the buses then break for the night." Where was the 500th person in that mob? Would we make it together? Might we be split up? Would we be condemned to spend another night under the stars with the stench of human waste assaulting our senses? Panic spread fast, causing us all to stiffen with resolve to make it to the front as soon as possible. Willie had managed well despite his advanced age. It was hard for him to climb over the mattresses and water bottles, but we all helped by offering him a hand or a shoulder to lean on. When he apologized for steadying himself on my arm, I joked that I didn't mind his being fresh with me—his smile was a ray of light in that dismal day.

As we finally worked our way to the front, the five barricades manned by Army soldiers in full uniform became visible. Beyond the barricades order ruled. An officer in a very authoritative voice called out periodically on a megaphone "Three people from Gate 2, five people from Gate 5," and so on. There appeared to be an attempt to keep families together, so we quickly agreed to call Willie "Grampaw" and insist the rest of us were siblings, an improbable plan but not one likely to be challenged by soldiers under the circumstances. When we thought we could not make it another few minutes, the gate/barricade in front of us opened wide enough to permit us to pass, and we were free!

On to the bus at last

We expected to be processed in the New Orleans Centre and had our identification papers ready, but no one asked for them. Instead, we were walked down through the now vacant shopping mall with its Victorian touches bathed in the eerie blue lights from a generator. New Orleans police officers and Army personnel nodded to us at various points as we passed. Someone mentioned we were headed for a bus to Dallas. No choice – it was Dallas or else. We were just indescribably relieved to be heading out of New Orleans. After a long walk up one set of stairs and down another we emerged from the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Hotel to see a large tour bus parked several yards from the curb. That was our bus, we were told, and in a final surreal touch, we had to slosh through the filthy water in the street to reach it. That would mean cold feet during the trip with air conditioning blowing from the edges of the bus.

So we braved the water, carrying our bags close to our chests, and boarded the bus, collapsing into the seats. A cheerful barrel-chested bus driver said in his Texas twang, “Welcome aboard. You all must be very happy to be on the bus.”

I don’t know what it was about his bright smile that set me off. He had no idea what we had been through nor the awful uncertainty to which we were headed. I simply let him have an earful of where we were coming from. The smile melted from his face.

“Happy?” I shouted. “Why should we be happy after what we just went through? Why did we have to be treated worse than cattle? Why? Why? We’re exhausted, pushed to our wit’s end and we’re supposed to be happy!” My voice cracked and I dissolved into a paroxysm of sobs. I had literally reached my breaking point.

After a cathartic cry that cleared the air for all of us, I was able to compose myself and sit back for the night’s ride into the unknown. My family still had no idea where I was or if I had survived. I didn’t know whether I would ever see my house again nor any of my life’s work of research and writing. Everything seemed closing in on us, the depression, fear and exhaustion. Several people from our group later expressed surprise that I been the one to break down on the bus after having been so strong and determined on the overpass. They had to agree that we each had our limits; some just knew how to push them farther than others did.

On the bus we were finally offered MRE’s, though I have to say the hamburger one I got, with its pasty, compressed bread and wooden patty, was the worst of the military meals I had tasted. My hunger was not severe enough for me to tackle it. We drove out of New Orleans over the Crescent City Connection and down through Gretna. Some areas had lights while others were totally dark. I recall just before dozing off our passing dozens of other buses parked along the highway along with lots of military vehicles and soldiers. New Orleans was an occupied city—we’d have to get used to it.

Welcome to Texas

Texas was as prepared for evacuees as Louisiana was not. Sometime around 3 p.m. our bus pulled into a rest area. Dozens of other buses already lined the parking lot, and we sleepy-eyed passengers got off ours to join hundreds of other people fleeing hurricane ravaged New Orleans. We stumbled to the restrooms then were directed to a line of tables that offered everything from medical assistance (I got some lotion to put on my sunburn swollen legs and ankles), to brochures about FEMA, to breakfast fixings of cereal, muffins, granola bars, juice and coffee. Each table was supervised by cheerful volunteers anxious to help us. I was so unaccustomed to attention that just thinking

what these volunteers had gone through to be up at that insane hour of the morning to assist us put a lump in my throat.

We had only a 15 minute break at the well organized rest stop. I met Rosemary, a neighbor, and we had a quick exchange of information. She said she had left her large dog at the Superdome—I haven't seen her since but have wondered what became of her and her dog. Long time friendships were only one of the many casualties of this disaster. In no time we were back on the bus and headed back onto the Interstate. My feet, soaked from wading on to the bus in New Orleans, were freezing from the air conditioning on the side vents. A Spanish speaking passenger who spoke little English and looked lost asked me to explain what was happening. As it turned out, he was an illegal alien, had spent several traumatic days in the Superdome and was worried now about being deported. I had no idea if customs agents would be interviewing us at the center or not but suggested he prepare himself for that possibility. It was poignant to hear him on his cell phone telling his wife and teenage son in Honduras that he might be incarcerated for a while and then sent back and that they should not worry about him.

It was daylight by the time we arrived at the center somewhere in or near Dallas at a facility adapted from a vacant shopping center. The abandoned Walmart Superstore had been equipped with computers and phones operated by a phalanx of social workers and volunteers. A Texas Ranger boarded our bus and explained that we would have to wait for ten minutes or so until the center could accommodate us. There were already a thousand evacuees there, he said, and a brawl had broken out. That would have to be taken care of before anyone else was added to the mix. While we waited, a passenger in the back of the bus was taken away on a stretcher by a medical team, something about her having heart pains. It was a reminder that we were far from whole at that point.

Apparently the brawl was not quelled because 15 minutes later the same Texas Ranger rejoined us on the bus and announced that we were being sent on ahead to a center at a Baptist Encampment outside of Dallas. It was the best of all the assistance centers, he assured us, and we were lucky to be going there. Only one other busload had preceded us, he said. At that point we really didn't care where we ended up, just as long as there was water, food and a phone to call our families. When the bus pulled up at the center, a policeman boarded the bus and told us that we would be searched for contraband after leaving the bus. If anyone had any drugs, guns, or weapons of any kind, those items should be left at the front of the bus as we disembarked, no questions asked. As to whether or not the weapons would be returned later, the officer was vague.

The center turned out to be terrific. And no customs agents. Sixty some volunteers stood around the facility applauding us as we disembarked from the bus, teaming up with us one on one to walk through the security check, carry our bags and discuss with us what we needed. I couldn't stop the tears from rolling down my face. The kindness and consideration given us weary, confused evacuees contrasted so starkly with what we had known throughout our ordeal. It was hard to believe the nightmare had ended.

After listening to a brief orientation, we were attended by doctors, counselors and staff who took down our vital statistics, checked us for physical and mental problems, gave us clean second-hand clothes and a bag of toiletries and showed us to our bunks in a dorm nearby. Before going through the line for the check-up, I was approached by a bubbly Red Cross coordinator who asked if I had called my family yet. When I said no,

she asked me the number and started dialing it on her cell phone. I was too emotionally fragile to speak to them, but she made the initial contact.

“She’s all right,” the coordinator kept repeating. “She’s been through a lot, but she’s O.K. now.” As I listened to her giving directions to my son as to where I was and how he could pick me up, I somehow gathered myself together enough to stop crying and take the phone. It was wonderful hearing the voices of my loved ones who could do nothing but yell back and forth to each other, “She’s safe! She’s O.K.!” They had waited with such anguish for days, not knowing if I was dead or alive. My name had been all over the Internet, they told me. People from all over had been inquiring about my welfare. It was the first time I realized what I had put my family through – I had been so preoccupied with surviving that I assumed they guessed I had made it. Actually, I had no idea how big a story New Orleans had been that whole week, that the images of us forgotten *les miserables* had passed in slow motion across the TV screens of the world for 24 hours a day, like misbegotten celebrities.

It was strange how that fairly brief reconnecting with my family helped to calm and center me. Suddenly I knew again who I was and my place in the world. Being a mother and grandmother had not stopped for me, and I was needed by others in ways that only desperate separations can clarify. I went on to take a shower, relish my first delicious civilian meal, read the local newspaper with its front page stories about New Orleans, and finally crawl between clean, cool bed sheets for the first time in a week.

Poor Laura, whose bunk was below mine and who had come through the whole trek with our small group, had a hard time that night. When I awoke Sunday morning I learned she had been taken to the hospital with impacted bowels, her way of dealing with the enormous stress and dehydration. Later we spoke by phone—she had made it out to her son’s house in California and was doing fine. I flew out of Dallas that morning and on to Little Rock where my son picked me up for the two-hour drive to Senatobia, Mississippi, a tranquil small town where I could relax and spend time with the family, especially with my toddler grandson. It had been his photo on my night stand in New Orleans that made me get into action and evacuate—I wanted to see him grow up.

In the airport I fell apart at the check-in counter. Everything seemed too overwhelming and sad. I couldn’t make one more decision, not even about a window or aisle seat. The puzzled clerk waited for me to explain.

“I’m from New Orleans. I’ve been through it all. I just can’t keep it together,” I said, choking back the tears. And she understood. They all understood. A sky cap came up to me, took my worn school bag and walked with me to the gate. I didn’t think I’d ever be myself again. The counselor at the center had told me that Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome is very common among survivors and suggested steadying myself by grabbing my knee or arm and simply saying to myself my name, address, the date, etc. to ground me and be assured I wasn’t going mad. I tried that in the airport and was relieved to find it worked. It was the last time I had to do that, because once I was back with my family in a somewhat normal routine, things fell into place and I began a quick recovery.

The aftermath

When I first saw TV at my family’s home and the dramatic images from New Orleans flashed over network news channels 24hours a day, it shocked and angered me. How was it possible that those awful photos had been broadcast around the world while we were abandoned on the overpass for days? Who and what had failed us and why? The answer to that is still being debated, but to those of us caught up in the horror

it is an experience burned into our long term memory and will mark us for the rest of our lives.

It is early November as I complete this account, a full 10 weeks after Katrina. I'm living back in New Orleans with friends uptown where there was no flooding, and I'm dealing with insurance adjusters and clean up crews. Like most of my friends who have managed to return (I lost a number who did not), my life has been turned inside out and so far the future remains murky and confusing. Several impressions that have stayed with me from my ordeal are the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, the transience of material things, the importance of family and support systems, and the basic decency of us all when forced to confront horror. I'm very fortunate to be paid by the college where I've taught for many years—we are anticipating full class schedules in January, many courses of which will be offered online. This requires retraining and adapting, something we are all taking in stride. Patience is also a virtue in great demand.

Will New Orleans survive? Yes, it will come back in some form or other, like those of us survivors. Things will be different in this smaller New Orleans with enormous challenges ahead. Once a people has lost so much, suffered such devastation as we have, and on the massive scale we have, it's hard to trust again, to acquire new furnishings and books, to write again. It could all be snatched away from us once more, in a matter of hours. My concern is for the many former residents who cannot afford to come back, who have had to sign one year leases elsewhere, put their children in schools far away, whose houses in New Orleans will not be habitable for months if not years, whose close knit families are now scattered across the country. How will their absence change this city?

I don't regret that I stayed through the storm—I was able to salvage a lot of important papers and items that are now of great comfort to me. The overpass will never feel the same to me as I pass over it nearly every day. My lovely dogs still haunt me. Their questioning faces swim up to the surface of my consciousness now and then—I tell them I left them for their own good. They seem to understand. They have no choice. None of us does.

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