

Hurricane Katrina 15th Anniversary Edition

CAN EVERYBODY SWIM?

A SURVIVAL STORY FROM KATRINA'S SUPERDOME

BRUCE S. SNOW



**et alia
press**

Little Rock, Arkansas

2020

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DEDICATED TO
FREDERIQUE FRANÇOIS

DOLJA

1997 - DECEMBER 24, 2010
SUPERDOME SURVIVOR, DEVOTED COMPANION, FRIEND

CHANCE BROUGHT US TOGETHER.
LOVE WILL ENSURE THAT WE NEVER PART.

EDITOR'S NOTE

On the eve of the 15th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, it is with great pride that we offer you a new edition of *Can Everybody Swim?* My pride issues not only from once again standing behind a book that is so engrossing I can almost guarantee you will not be able to set it down but also from anticipation that the light will shine more brightly on an incredible storyteller turned friend, a man who in life is the very person of depth, sensitivity, humor, and grit that you will come to know in these pages.

You'll gain greater insight into that grit in Snow's epilogue, new to this edition, which shares his return to the New Orleans home from which he and his "family of four and a half" were once forced to swim. Like so many indomitable New Orleanians, against stacked and unjustifiable odds, he has swum right back to the city he loves. Again in this edition, we capitalize "city" in the City of New Orleans to pay reverence to one of the greatest cities in America—which so often, accurately, painfully, and gleefully reflects the worst and the best of what we most urgently need to understand about ourselves as a nation.

Following the release of the first edition in 2016, I attended a reading for *Can Everybody Swim?* at which someone posed the dreaded question: *Why didn't you leave?* Followed up with: *I had some friends who were there and they just chartered a plane and flew out.* As the otherwise festive air was sucked from the room and replaced with the reek of condescension (umm, *Didn't you even bother to read the back of the book before you came to the party, buddy?*), all turned to see how Snow would respond. In his gracious style, he didn't miss a beat nor did he lambaste the asker—which he would have been well within expectations to do. Instead, he calmly explained that having \$15 cash and a quarter-tank of gas in a beater truck wasn't going to get him and his ill mother, uncle, uncle's wife, and a dog very far for very long. As we saw during Katrina and in the Superdome, we on a global scale with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, captured in Damian Barr's viral pandemic poem: "We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat." This book shows us the contours of that notion in the gentle but resolute way that Snow handled the party pooper—by delivering the reader into the circumstances and allowing us to know characters nefarious and endearing. In this way, he guides us to deeply understand the meaning of what *was* and *is* at stake in catastrophic circumstances that have wildly varying impacts. Reading this tale offers an opportunity to expand our compassion and scale up our empathy without realizing what's happening, as good memoir always does.

As one reviewer noted, Snow's book "could someday gain fame as the most richly detailed and complete account of the human misery at the Louisiana Superdome in late August and early September 2005." As far as we know, there is no other memoir published by a New Orleans resident that takes us inside with a native's perspective. This makes *Swim* not only a remarkable story of survival and

triumph, and a well-crafted memoir, but an essential historical document. When I first read the manuscript, I could hardly believe the treasure I'd lucked upon as a small press owner and editor. Given the quality and importance of this book, I am repeatedly shocked that it wasn't bought up by a big publishing house. Their loss in not rooting for the underdog has become my honor. Team Snow still has faith that this tale is fit for the big screen, so if you are or know a film industry person who sees the vision, we'll be waiting when you send up the flair.

May you find hope in this edition, knowing that the same walls that soaked up heat, horror, death, and destruction, purging a frightened family into the dark unknown have once more embraced that family, albeit reshaped, holding them safely and joyfully within.

Erin Wood
July 1, 2020

“As I write these thoughts I had so many years ago, thoughts that come back now to assail me with such terrible clarity, I am struck by how absolute silence and total isolation were able to lead a young man shut up in a cell into a true life of the imagination.” —Henri Charrière, *Papillon*, 1970

Substitute *my roof* for the word *cell* and that’s pretty much the idea.

—Bruce S. Snow, 2016

INTRODUCTION

(2016)

I was there.

It was the media event of the year. People across the country were watching their televisions. Comprehensive news coverage spanned the globe. America held its collective breath for an entire week. They were all watching me. I was there.

The City of New Orleans lies within the Tropic of Cancer and is therefore a subtropical City. Torrential thunderstorms pour rain onto the streets and fill the canals regularly. The pump and levee system works astonishingly well despite the City's topographical challenges. Low-lying areas may collect water during an especially heavy downpour, but usually within an hour it's all gone. The simplest of machines failed in New Orleans. Pumping machines. Turn them on, simple. Earthen levees—not even machines—just piles of dirt and concrete, they failed, too. No nuclear bombs, just brown water and the crazy music it made in the darkness of night. And when the water finally did recede, you might have thought a hydrogen bomb had gone off in the City. Whether water or fire, when there is too much of either, man-made structures don't stand a chance.

Due to extensive coverage, the events of late August and early September 2005 along the Gulf Coast are forever etched into the collective American subconscious. Good or bad, these events will engage some sort of mental video recall for nearly every citizen with a television set in the English speaking world and beyond. The images, all of the sobering images, were replayed over and over and over again on the big networks and their affiliates. Images of cars and homes poking out of filthy brown water, images of people's lives and livelihoods dotting the endless surface of the brown water, images of brown water that nothing could contain. Men and women, children, babies, the elderly, and the criminals—all caught on camera and broadcasted via satellite. Some were looting stores and floating flat screen TVs on inflatable rafts through flooded streets.

The world saw seemingly countless people waving from rooftops at passing helicopters, hoping to find relief from all of that brown water. Human beings stranded atop their tiny islands of memories, all begging for help, hoping to escape the flooding and the broiling, subtropical sun.

A full week's worth of round-the-clock news coverage, that's what people remember from the Hurricane. Some details are remembered more clearly than others, and these details vary greatly from one individual to another. Personal opinion fills in the remaining spaces—a tragic chapter in American history taught entirely through the camera's lens.

Without fail, whenever Hurricane Katrina comes up in conversation, the first thing people ask me is, "Was it really as bad as they were showing on TV?"

The emphasis is always on *really*.

Whether they believe the news stories to be exaggerated or that they were part of a greater cover-up is, once again, a matter of personal opinion. But, regardless of the individual's feelings on the matter, the question never changes. "Was it really as bad as they were showing on TV?"

I've learned that the only honest way that I can answer this question is, "I don't know what they were showing on TV. I was there."

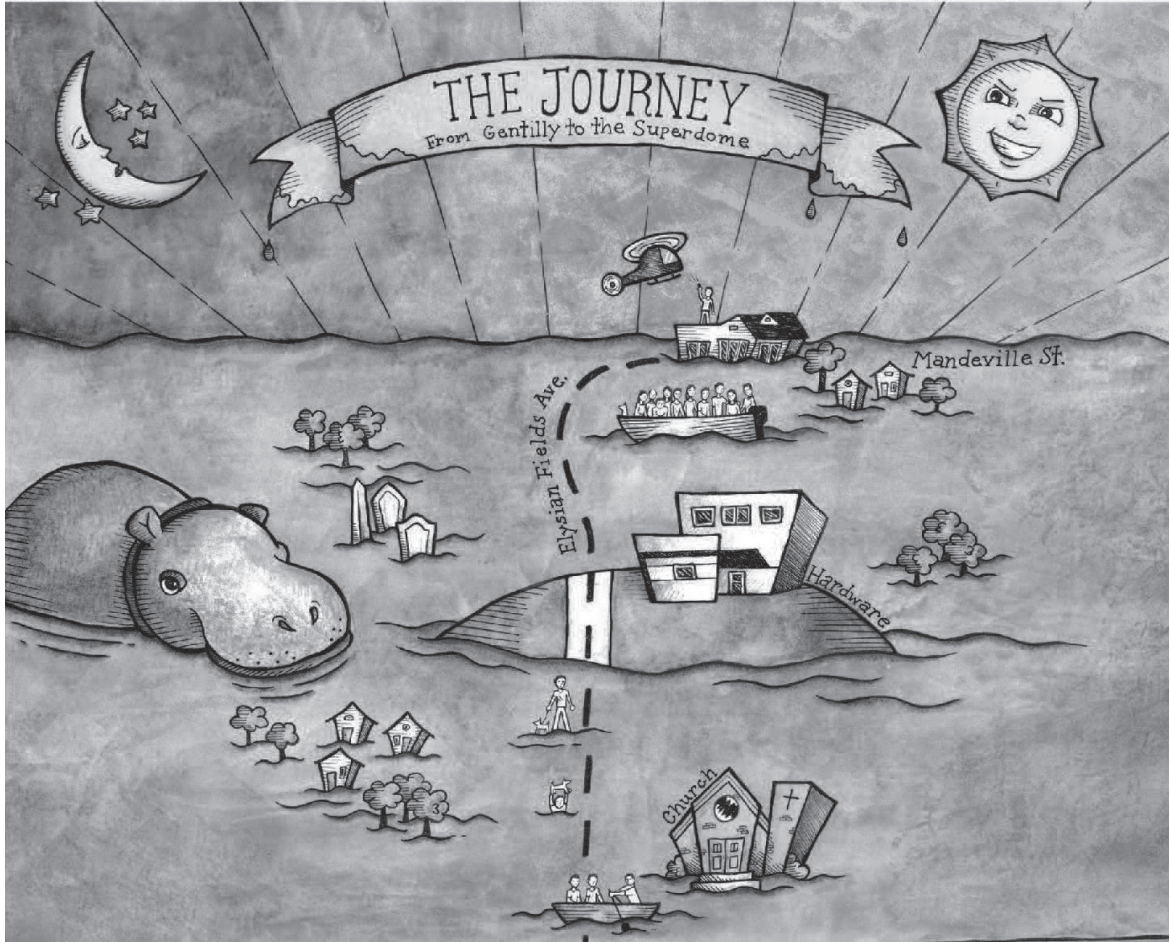
This was a large-scale human tragedy and to retell it would be impossible if mention were not made of what I saw others doing. The people are what make the story. I had the good fortune to meet and talk with people from many different backgrounds, all affected and brought together by events far out of their control—people under immense and indescribable stress. In this narrative, I recount how their paths crossed mine and how we impacted each other's lives, however briefly, for good or for ill. More than a million people were directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, and each one has a story worth telling. Several years have passed since what I like to refer to as the B.C. and A.D. moment of my life. A new existence began as soon as I left the attic of my home on Mandeville Street. The life I'd been living ended that day, and as time passes and the Earth keeps spinning, my memories of who I was and where I was seem to fade away.

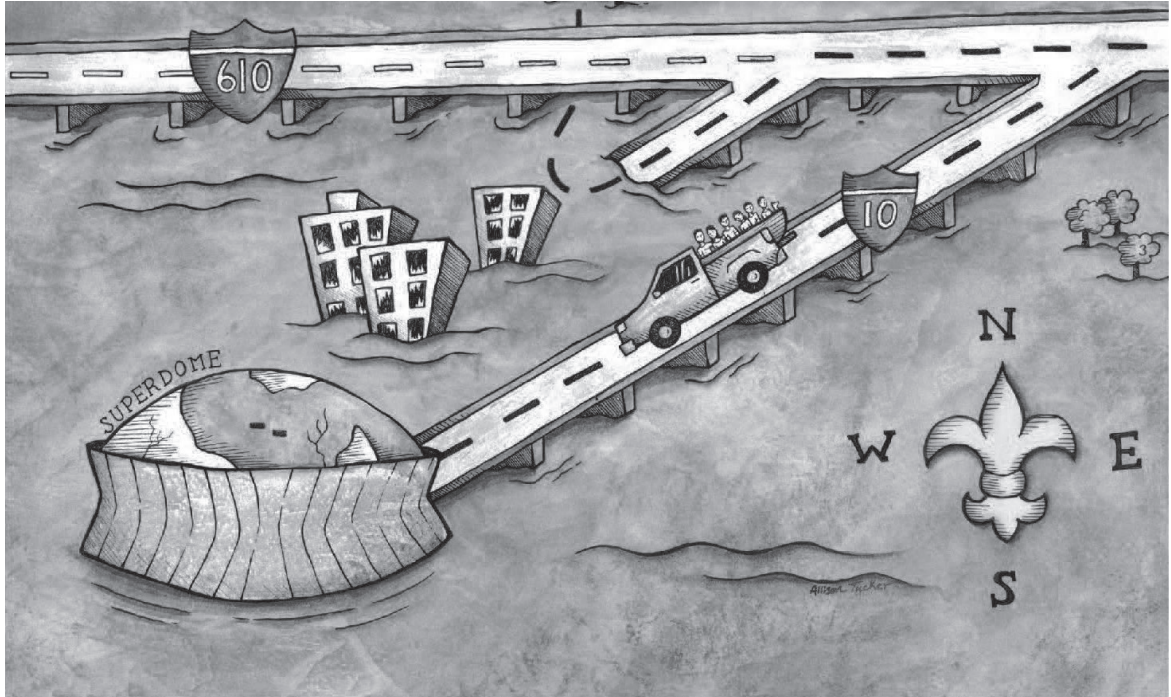
My most vivid recollections of the events surrounding the Hurricane come to me in terrifying dreams. A mid-afternoon catnap is the typical time for these dreams to appear. A distant, forced-down reality pours from my subconscious and I return wholly and completely to late August and early September 2005. My mind deposits me into the thick of the turmoil. I can feel the breathless humidity on my skin, the sunshine blinds my eyes, and my nose is filled with the terrible smells of stagnant water and the inch of piss and shit that covered the bathrooms and hallways of the Louisiana Superdome. And with that also comes the unmistakable smell of death. Fresh death. Human death. Even hundreds of miles from 2005, in my home in Little Rock, Arkansas, it's 1:30 in the afternoon and this smell is mere feet from where I am lying in my bed.

I take the retelling of these moments in time with all seriousness. I am not trying to make light of any portion of the situation. The conditions inside the Superdome were repulsive; real human beings were suffering all around me. It was some depressing shit. But I can't present the truth, my thoughts, without both the serious and the asinine. It's how my brain works. I mean no disrespect to anyone whose life was wrecked by Hurricane Katrina. I'm just trying to come to terms with my share of it.

Aside from myself and my mother, the dog, and the hippo, all of the names in this tale have been changed in order to protect the individuals mentioned hereafter, especially myself.

This is my attempt to give shape and clarity and a big middle finger to my mid-afternoon nightmares. This is my attempt to confront the past and grip tightly onto something that I can consider positive, productive and, above all, sane.





SUNDAY
AUGUST 28TH, 2005

COUNTDOWN TO LANDFALL

Satellite images of the multicolored, vicious swirl overlying the entire Gulf of Mexico were in my peripheral vision, but I wasn't paying much attention. The sun filtering through the Venetian blinds of my grandparents' home began to fade. It would be the last sunset of my old life. Sitting still in my worn blue chair, my heart raced astride my thoughts. The room felt terribly close and warm. I lit a cigarette, and it tasted like battery acid on my tongue.

Throughout the day, friends had called as they headed out of town, evacuating to one destination or another. They asked when my family and I were leaving and where we were going. "Maybe we can meet up." When I told them my grandparents were in Florida and that we'd decided to stay, silence followed.

Some asked—others begged—me to come with them. They had extra space and weren't evacuating too far. "Just come along. Let this thing blow over, and we'll be back in a couple days." I must admit it was an attractive invitation. A couple of nights in a hotel playing drinking games, eating fast food, and swimming in a pool with friends was very tempting, but there was only room for one in each of those golden opportunities. I couldn't leave Mother, Uncle G and his wife Jimena, and my furry black companions, Dolja and Klaus. Before hanging up, my friends wished me good luck.

Eventually, the phone stopped ringing. The gravity of that silence pulled me in. Ugly thoughts flashed through my mind as I pondered potential outcomes. All of my friends had evacuated to points as far away as West Texas and Kentucky, others only as far as Baton Rouge. Regardless of where they'd gone, they were all gone.

My panic was rising, so I walked outside to get some air. Outside, I found a desolate ghost town. Nothing moved unless the wind motivated it; the leaves and branches stirred, creating a gentle whirling sound, very much like running water. The breeze blew softly, without major gusts. I neither saw nor heard anyone. Not a single automobile moved on Mirabeau Avenue, a fairly busy street, nor on Elysian Fields three blocks away, normally a major thoroughfare day and night. Stillness. My neighborhood totally devoid of life. I wandered my block in a catatonic stupor, nothing moving around me but the gentle breeze. Everyone was gone. Not just my friends, but everyone. The City had been emptied, and we were all alone. Our home, just a tiny island of light in the silent metropolis.

Wandering the neighborhood, my family's conversations replayed in my mind. This house survived Betsy and Camille without a scratch. This neighborhood is some of the highest ground on the East Bank. Everyone is wasting their time and money evacuating. This one will pass over, dump some rain, and move on, just like all the others.

But what if it didn't?

We hadn't spent the day rushing around in a state of urgency, just taking a few precautions. We ate. We filled some plastic water jugs. Mother and I had been too lazy to throw away with water from the bathtub. We normally park our vehicles on the street, but we drove my little pickup and my uncle's big twelve-passenger van up onto our sloped lawn. Pulling the cars onto the lawn was standard battening-down-the-hatches while awaiting a tropical storm or hurricane. The sloped lawn allowed our engines and front ends to sit about five feet above street level, and three feet at the tailpipe. Was this enough?

Once back inside from my walk, I stared at the giant swirling red, blue, and green radar image on the television and felt unsure. Recently, the system had made a slight turn to the east, and now its path was charted directly at the City, seemingly right to my address. The winds had risen significantly, and stronger gusts shook the trees.

Was there still time to leave? Where would we go? How would we get there?

We had no lack of transportation, but each mode had its drawbacks. My uncle's big van was the obvious choice to move us all and the dog, but it didn't run very well. Uncle Gene mostly used it for short A-to-B trips. The thing would overheat or worse before we found X or Y. My little truck ran well enough and would have certainly been the more fuel-economic option, but it was a "little truck." A 1994 Nissan, it could seat four, but the rear seats were tiny and terribly uncomfortable except for the shortest of rides. In the driving force of a Category 5 hurricane, riding in the bed of the truck wasn't an option. Also at hand was my grandfather's early-80s Toyota 4Runner. With big tires and four-wheel drive, it would have been my first choice. And then there was his late-70s camper conversion van, also parked on the lawn. The camper van had beds we could fold out and a two-burner stove, microwave, toilet, and shower. Not too shabby. It had been driven cross-country many times, but that didn't matter. We didn't have keys for either one.

And how far would we get?

I might have had a quarter-tank of gas and \$15 cash. Mother could overdraft her ATM card, maybe, but if not, she only had about a \$40 balance, the remainder of August's Social Security deposit. Uncle Gene was out of work. Jimena had a job and worked and saved as much as she could, but she also sent money to her teenage children in Ecuador. I wasn't going to attempt to coerce her into supporting all of us on an adventure into the unknown with the storm just over twelve hours away. Not after we'd already committed ourselves to riding it out. As for the other two, we couldn't hope to squeeze any money out of a little black dog and a stuffed hippo.

The radar continually repeated the same image. A multi-colored, churning blob filled the entire television screen; it would advance an inch or two, then return to the starting point, advance an inch or two, and then go back to the starting line, over and over and over again.

The images, my thoughts, the possibilities—everything was flashing. It became

apparent that I was driving myself insane. That's when I knew it was time to begin *the ritual*.

Everyone living in New Orleans has a hurricane ritual. I'd cemented mine into refined perfection, meticulous and unequalled by modern man. I'd already celebrated this rite once this season when Hurricane Cindy gave us some rain and high winds. I muted the television and turned on my stereo, a motley matching of components I'd acquired one-by-one throughout the years. I loved my stereo. I knew what I wanted and found it still in the disc tray from a previous listening. Disc two, track one of Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*, a track called "In the Light." A nine-minute piece of audio-sonic poetry. It had been my "happy place" song for about a month. I set the player to repeat. Next, I cracked open a beer and sat at my computer to play a real-time sim-based game in which you build castles, grow food, and raise troops to fight in the Crusades. To play and win a single game can take hours, and I had hours to give. The rules are simple: drink, play, win, pass out, or play until the power goes out. Either way, don't forget to drink. The hurricane ritual had begun.

After a few beers, all of the apprehension melted away, for a while.

Mother lay napping on the couch. After hearing "In the Light" two or three times, I turned off the repeat mode and allowed the player to move through the rest of the disc. Nearing the end of beer number four, I was managing a healthy castle and had repelled several waves of attacking infidels. The storm's outer bands were reaching the City, the wind came in stronger gusts, and lines of rain clouds raced over the house in quick succession. This was it. Bring it on. I'd held up my end of the deal. The ritual had been going on for close to two hours and, like the storm, was gaining momentum. Yet somehow our lights hadn't flickered once.

It was past midnight when the phones rang for the last time. I mean it. The last time from that day to this. The hand-held cordless phone was in the living room next to Mother. I had a land-line phone on the desk where I sat doing my fighting in the kitchen. I told her to go back to sleep, and answered the phone. I knew who it was. I recognized the number.

"Whoa."

"Whoa . . ."

And that was it for a moment.

Not much else needed to be said. I noticed a hauntingly unique tone in her voice that screamed, "I have no control over what is happening or what may happen next." I wondered if my voice sounded the same way.

After listening to my breath and hers for a bit, I tried to move on, "So . . . they keeping you real busy at the station, Simone?"

"Hell, yeah. I'm sitting in my car, charging my phone, listening to a CD. I don't need to be here to listen to a CD. This is fucking . . . just so fucking stupid." Simone worked as a clerk in the warrant office of the New Orleans Police Department at their headquarters building. NOPD had ordered all hands on

deck for its employees. Despite this command, many seasoned officers fled the City. Scared for her job, Simone had gone to work. Now she sat in a parking garage, triple-parked with police and civilian vehicles. She couldn't leave if she wanted.

I'd met Simone about eight years prior to Katrina. She was dating one of my good friends, and over time we became very close. For several years, I considered her to be the perfect woman for me—the one I wanted to be with forever and other nonsense of the sort. Half a decade of rejection and her then-recent disappearance cooled these emotions, and I began to see her more as the one true unrequited love of my life, in a purely Woody Allen sense. So what if she didn't physically love me? It was more than worth it just to have someone around I really knew and could talk with openly, not to mention the years of inside jokes we reveled in.

As for her disappearance, until the spring of 2005, I hadn't seen her for nearly two years. She'd gotten pregnant and had a beautiful baby daughter. Now she was adjusting to life as a mother and trying to make things work with the girl's father.

Only forty-eight short hours before this last phone call, I'd taken her out to a Friday night dinner at Lorenzo's Restaurant in Metairie.

Several of my friends worked at Lorenzo's. Simone and I ate at the bar and made small talk with the bartender, another good friend named Jay. After the customers made their exits, the bar area filled with the servers and cooks, ready to enjoy their shift drinks. It wasn't long before all conversation was taken over by one of the waitresses, Sandra, and her emphatic diatribe concerning the swirling images on the big screen over the bar.

"I'm fucking leaving."

Alberto, the head chef, chimed in, "They haven't declared an evacuation yet. We're still open tomorrow and you better come to work."

"Are you crazy?! No one's going to work tomorrow. We've all got to go. If you don't leave, you're fucking retarded. It's a Category 5 and it's huge. It takes up the entire Gulf," Sandra exclaimed.

"But it shows it's going to Texas," Alberto countered.

"It doesn't matter, asshole. Look at how big it is! If that thing comes anywhere near us, we're all screwed. Look, I'm fucking leaving, and so should everyone else. You're stupid if you try and stay."

This back-and-forth went on until all the money was counted. Simone and I had stepped outside to join the night's entertainment. Four members of the crew had gone to a nearby grocery store to buy gallons of milk, step one in the gallon challenge. It's pretty easy to do. Just get a bunch of milk and start drinking. Whoever can get down the most before throwing it back up wins. We laughed and laughed as they chugged through the ice cold gallons of vitamin D, and then laughed even harder as it started to come back up. When Roger, one of the busboys, released about a quart in one stream, raised his head and,

eyes watering, said, “It’s still cold . . .” I knew this was not the sport for me. I’ve always had trouble with dairy. All that milk would turn my guts into curds for days.

No one really wins the gallon challenge, and yet we all had a good time. Before long, a huge white puddle stretched from one end of the parking lot to the other. Lorenzo himself arrived and chewed us all out for the mess we’d made. So the next hour was spent hosing all of the regurgitated milk into the street, causing still more laughter. Watching, and laughing, and hosing, the monstrous swirling storm on the television screen had been the furthest thing from my mind.

As Simone and I talked on the phone, my game on pause, all of that laughter and all of that milk seemed like ancient history.

“Simone, we’re the only ones here. Everyone else in the whole City is gone.”

“I know. It’s so quiet. If shit gets bad, what will y’all do?”

“We’ve got water and food and stuff. It’ll be bad for a few hours, after it passes over. If the lights don’t come back on for, ya know, more than a couple days, then maybe we may do something. Or if the roof flies off, we’ll figure that out, too.”

“Word,” she said in agreement.

Simone told me the office was abuzz with talk of the volume of people showing up at the Superdome. She’d heard there might be two or three thousand, maybe more. Historically, the Superdome is opened during major weather events to provide citizens without means to properly evacuate a safe structure in which to ride out the storm, and then go back home. The Superdome was never intended to house and feed people for a week, and certainly not 20,000 of them.

“Damn. A couple thousand people, huh?”

“Yeah, they’ve been letting people in since Friday afternoon. But now that it’s on, it’s . . . you know . . . ON.”

“Word. Glad I’m out here in chilly Gentilly. I still have eighteen beers in the fridge and I still have power. I’m going to make it to the end.”

“It’s not supposed to be over us until like eight in the morning, jackass.”

We talked for another hour or so, made plans for next weekend, stuff like that. But it would be many weeks before we’d see each other again. Simone has fair skin, celestial blue eyes, and that particularly New Orleans way of enunciating everything. Early on, I’d noticed something special about her and tried very hard to make her my friend. She’s one of my favorite people. On that night in late August 2005, we were the last two people on Earth, and we were scared. More than ever before, I wanted to hold her in my arms as the wind and thunder swallowed our every heartbeat. But, she was miles away and had used up nearly all of the gas in her car idling in the garage. She might need to charge her phone again.

I said goodbye to the last person in the City I knew, outside of my own

home—and a very important person at that—who was directly exposed to the conditions of days two, three, and four in post-Katrina New Orleans. There were times when I feared the worst for her. And there were many times over the coming days when just the thought of seeing her again was what kept me going. In the coming week, I wouldn't have a single moment's privacy, and yet throughout it I felt intensely alone. Like *Mad Max*, but in a football stadium. There would be life-changing and life-threatening events ahead. Saying goodbye to Simone cut the last tie to myself as I understood myself to be. Saying goodbye to Simone, hanging up the phone with her, enacted the ordeal, my trial by water.



It was nearly four in the morning when we ended our call. The sun would be up in less than two hours, and the worst Katrina could dish out would hit shortly after that. My eyes were leaden, back stiff. Rain, wind, and thunder came at us in waves, one band and then another would roar through just a bit louder than its predecessor. I looked around the kitchen, which doubled as my "office." Along the windowsill were a couple action figures and other knick-knacks. I took them down and gently arranged them in an empty laundry basket on the floor, fearing that they'd be damaged if flying debris took out the window. After that, I grabbed another beer and re-entered the battle. No time for sleeping while the giant approaches.

The wind had strengthened into a continuous gale. I noticed the darkness turning into gray. There was to be no true dawn that day, just a brightening of the world through a cloud-blackened sky. All at once, the band overhead would pass, the sun would throw down bright, brilliant light for a couple of seconds, and then there would be clouds and thunder again. The wind wasn't subject to this patching effect of light and dark. It kept on blowing ever stronger.

The CD player had stopped long before. That Led Zeppelin disc would become the sole prisoner in a watery grave. The room was becoming bright when the computer screen went black. I opened the fridge; the light inside was off. It had stopped running. The power had quit.

I grabbed a beer, woke up my mother and said, "Grab your shoes; it's time."

"Okay, baby. Let me brush my teeth."

"That's a good idea. The lights just went out. Let me light a candle for you."

I stepped out onto the patio and lit a cigarette. Dolja came running toward me from his nest in the garage. Also with him was Wednesday, a little gray alley cat. My grandfather would always adopt an alley cat and, interestingly enough, they all became close companions of Dolja. He'd even try to know them in the biblical sense. He's a small dog, weighing about sixteen pounds. Wednesday took a look at me, took a look at the sky, and ran directly under the house.

Uncle G opened the back door of the main house wielding a flashlight. He said, "Bruce, the power's out."

"Yeah, we're coming. She's brushing her teeth."

"Jimmy's making coffee."

"Mom'll want some. I'm good," I said, raising my beer.

And so the sun rose on our family, and we began this most ultimate of days. I ran back inside my place, the back apartment, to grab another beer and Klaus the hippo. I passed over the H. G. Wells novel I'd been reading and left it on the coffee table. Klaus makes an excellent pillow. There was naptime ahead, not reading time. How different things in my nuclear life would be if I'd grabbed the 75¢ thrift store paperback and left Klaus to drown. I walked inside my grandparents' home to join my family, to face the tempest.

MANDEVILLE STREET SOLJAS

There were four of us at 4899 Mandeville Street. Well, four and a half, really. I'll explain. This is the home my lovely grandparents purchased in 1972, nine years after arriving in the United States nearly penniless. Luckily, my grandparents were away visiting their younger daughter in Florida, my Aunt Helen. Thank God. Present for Katrina were my mother, my Uncle Gene, or G, short for Eugenio, and his wife Jimena. Like the rest of my family, Jimena is from Ecuador. They'd been in the United States for several decades, and she'd been living in this country for about two years. Her English was poor, but proficient enough to communicate. I'm the first member of my family to have had English as my first language. My Spanish is miserable; I understand much more than I can speak.

That's two out of four and a half. I make three and a half. And next comes my mother, Cecilia. Mostly, I simply call her Mother. St. Cecilia is the patron saint of music. And while Mother is anything but a saint, throughout my life she has exposed me to a wide spectrum of fantastic music. Everything from Earth, Wind and Fire to Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Gladys Knight, to the whole of Motown, to Santana and Pink Floyd. Even more obscure guys like Michael Franks. She has always been one of those people who *needs* music, and she has a deep emotional attachment to certain songs. I love this about her.

Mother had been battling illness for years by the time she and Katrina crossed paths. Around 1996, she was declared legally blind and forced to give up her driving privileges. Seriously, she hasn't driven a car in nearly twenty years! In late 2004, her Social Security disability claim cleared, allowing her to receive proper medical attention via Medicaid. CAT scans and MRIs revealed tumors in her brain and in both breasts, all benign. At 45, she had a full hysterectomy. Her woman parts were a web of pre-cancerous tissue. First came the Gamma knife surgery for a brain tumor in early 2005. They placed her head into a cage and screwed it into her skull at certain points to prevent her head from moving while the lasers did their work. She came home with large bruises on either side of her forehead and little red points where the screws went in. She looked like Latina Frankenstein. Mother was the first to make the Bride of Frankenstein analogy. She can always laugh at herself, another thing I love about her. Spring 2005 was the hysterectomy. They cut her open, pulled everything out, and stitched and stapled her closed. The incision wasn't healing properly, and a couple staples actually fell out one day in the shower. We rushed her to the hospital and they closed her up again. By late August 2005, as Katrina bore down on us, she was left with a big scar and a tender belly.

The healing process and medications left her more or less couch-ridden for much of the year leading up to the hurricane. Much of it an air-conditioned, prone position, hot flash nightmare. She took a medication called Depakote

every day. It helped to stave off seizures and balance her mood. That all came to a screeching halt when the flood forced her out into the City to walk for hours in the broiling Louisiana heat. Needless to say, I was deeply concerned for her health throughout the coming events.

Last, but certainly not least, comes the half to our four and a half. The glue that bound us. A seven-year-old mutt named Dolja. He was part Miniature Pinscher, mostly Rat Terrier. I took in Dolja in early 1998. A friend's sibling found him as a stray with no collar and a temperament that could be described as pitiful at best. Dolja, if I'm not mistaken, was a term first coined by New Orleans rapper Master P on one of the first albums released by No Limit Records. Or maybe it was a Cash Money Records kind of thing. I forget, but in more than one song the guy was rapping about "blowin' that dolja" in a smoky room or some such. A slang term for weed.

In February 1998, I moved into the mother-in-law's apartment attached to 4899 Mandeville Street. The address reads 4899 ½ Mandeville St. on an envelope. To my knowledge, the post office no longer allows halves. Papi, my grandfather, had this addition built onto the house for his aging mother, Helen. My aunt is her namesake. In December 1997, Grandma Helen moved to a retirement community in St. Augustine, Florida, close to her daughter, yet another Helen. Living alone was awesome at first, but before long I began to feel pretty lonely back there behind the big house, by myself.

Dolja and I met at the perfect moment, for both of us. I needed a friend and he needed anyone. It was hard at first. I'm not a textbook, fully certified "dog person." I had a dog as a kid; I wasn't a good dog person then either. Dolja didn't need a dog person. He just needed a human being. Whoever he'd run away from must have abused him. Every time I stood over him and leaned down for a pet, which was mandatory (Dolja is less than sixteen inches tall at the shoulder), he'd cower and shake and shiver. If left alone, he would whine and yelp as if I'd never return. He broke my heart. And not being the proper dog person to fix the damage done to his mental well-being, it took time to gain his trust. By Sunday, August 28th, 2005, we'd been together more than seven years, and he trusted me with his life.

So, there's the crew: four adults speaking two languages, one small dog, and a hippopotamus. Yes, a hippopotamus. The inanimate member of the 4899 gang. A fat, plush hippo the size of a leg bolster pillow, full name Klaus Aloysius Devadander Abercrombie von Heepo. His middle names are "long for mud, so I've been told," a reference to the band Primus and their hit, "My Name is Mud." The rest, the Klaus von Heepo portion, is actually a mistake on my part. I'm a total History dork, so when I found myself naming a stuffed hippo, I pulled the name "Hipper" from my mental database. I remembered that Klaus von Hipper was a German Admiral during the First World War and sounded like a good name for a hippo. Two years later, while reading another book on the First World War, I discovered my mistake. The man's name was Admiral *Franz* von Hipper. By that time, it was far too late for a name change.

I found Klaus in 2002. He's my rescue hippo. Walking through a store, I saw him in a bin with some kind of dried gunk on his face. When asked, the manager told me he would be sent back to the distribution center to be incinerated. The store didn't clean stuffed animals that got dirty. Instead, they sent them back to be destroyed, and ordered more. This was protocol. He gave me four dollars off the sticker price on the hippo. I took him home and cleaned his face. It sounds crazy, but Klaus was a very real part of my life. And Mother's, too. We hosted a small gathering for the hippo's birthday the month before the storm. Klaus added a much needed third personality to our daily routine.

Mother, Uncle G and Jimena, myself, a dog, and a hippo. That was the team on Sunday, ready to ride out the storm in our Gentilly home.



July 25th, 2005: Klaus celebrated his third birthday just a month before the hurricane. Here he is being held, nice and dry, by his proud grandmother. Author's image.



Monday, August 29th, 9:50 am: The last drop of rain had fallen over an hour before on a "dry" street. This amount of water took an hour to collect. Remember the green van. Author's image.



Monday, August 29th, 4:40 pm: Roughly six hours from the previous shot, the water has risen from inches to feet. See the green van? Taken from my roof. Author's image.



Monday, August 29th, 7:25 pm: Just as the sun is disappearing, this image shows my truck and Uncle Gene's van flooded out on our sloped lawn. The last sliver of the green van's roof is visible. Author's image.



Wednesday, August 31st, Afternoon: Team 4899 Mandeville Street resting on Glenn's blanket. That's the face you get when you say, "Hey, Mom," to a delirious Cecilia. Dolja and his phone cord leash and the snout of a musty hippo are also visible. Author's image.



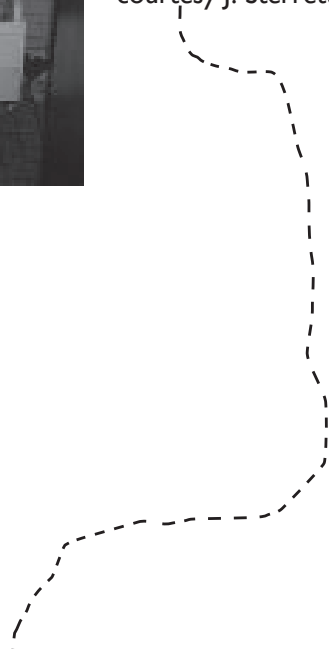
Wednesday, August 31st, Afternoon: This picture shows the broad pathway between the Superdome and the New Orleans Centre building. Thousands of people would pack themselves into this space like sardines. This would become the path to freedom. Image courtesy J. Sterrett.



Thursday, September 1st, Morning: A corkboard mounted near one of the entrances to the Superdome. A last-ditch effort for people to leave some info for missing loved ones. Image courtesy J. Sterrett.



Thursday, September 1st: Yes, it's hard to look at. Can you imagine the smell? This is just one of dozens of stalls in one of dozens of bathrooms located throughout the Superdome. Image courtesy J. Sterrett.



Thursday, September 1st, Afternoon: Superdome campsites and the path to freedom. How many thousands of souls are jammed into the walk path, inching their way toward the rest of their lives one busload at a time? Image courtesy J. Sterrett.





Thursday, September 1st, Afternoon: Days after landfall, families are still making their way to the stadium. Image courtesy J. Sterrett.

Thursday, September 1st, Afternoon: National Guard troops arriving from neighboring states dressed in full battle kit and loaded for bear. Makes me wonder what they were really thinking they were walking into as they entered the stadium. Image courtesy J. Sterrett.



Friday, September 2nd, Afternoon: Via the rumor mill, word had spread that the President would be taking a helicopter tour of the city on this day. Eventually, this would read, “HELP BUSH GET US OUT OF HERE.” What really gets me—then and now—is where did this woman get the chalk? I didn’t find any chalk in my MREs. Author’s image.



Friday, September 2nd, Afternoon: The smoke is coming from the fires we saw reflected off the skyscrapers the night before. This picture also shows the shady overhang between the stadium and the terrace—prime real estate. Arrow points to a “water buffalo” (military jargon), a five-hundred-gallon potable water container. The Superdome residents drained it in about fifteen minutes. Author’s image.

Friday, September 2nd, Afternoon:

Your author, loosened up after a cup of grog, proudly donning Jeanine’s canvas bag for a cap and a handkerchief around my neck. Notice the discarded jug of Kahlua to my right. Author’s image.

