TO STAY IN NEW ORLEANS

by Christopher Chambers

Sometimes, while walking in the Quarter, some street hustler will approach me, opening with “Where you from?” assuming a tourist. I nod my head across the river with pride and say, “Algiers. Where you from?” (Algiers being an old New Orleans neighborhood across the river from the Quarter.) Being from New Orleans has always been a mark of distinction. For me, it means I choose to live in this glorious mess of a city, a place where food and music and celebration take precedence over all else. A place where death is celebrated with parades in the street. A place always slowly decaying, but in a remarkably aesthetic way. And a place over which hangs the omnipresent threat of destruction.

Every year at hurricane season, talk turns to the Big One, the direct hit on the city that we all fear, and yet none of us ever quite believes will come this year. And so we do what New Orleanians have always done. We party. We eat well and we drink. We parade and we dance in the street. We celebrate the good that the city offers. We wake up every morning in a beautiful city with palm trees and banana trees drooping outside the windows of hundred-year-old shotgun houses and Creole cottages. We drink strong coffee on our porches and hear the crowing of roosters from the next street over and the foghorns of riverboats and ferries on the great river that flows past unseen on the other side of the big earthen levees. We walk down potholed streets and sidewalks heaved by great live oaks, and we greet neighbors and strangers alike. We go to work, but do not work too hard. We reminisce about the last meal, the last party, the last parade, the last band we saw. And we look ahead to the next.

Year after year passes, and the Big One does not come. Those who survived Hurricane Betsy are fewer and fewer. The tropical storms, the street flooding, the heat, and the humidity maintain the city in its constant state of decline. Houses freshly painted in the spring, by fall look old and weathered. Wisteria, cat’s claw, hibiscus, night-blooming jasmine, and birds of paradise grow and bloom so abundantly that you can almost watch vines creep up downspouts and clapboard siding and wrought iron fences, nature slowly reclaiming the city inch by inch.

These days, being from New Orleans means something different, a more dubious mark of distinction. I struggle with being a refugee, with accepting the fact that my family and I have become dependent on the kindness of friends and of strangers. The generosity has been heartwarming and humbling. And yet I am angry that my identity as a New Orle-

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nian has been changed as irrevocably as has my home. My feelings about going home change frequently, from day to day, hour to hour, vacillating wildly between hope and despair. One minute I am resolved to go back and help clean up and rebuild and reclaim the life that I’d built there. The next, I look around Houston, and think how much easier it would be to stay here, to start over in a place that is not in need of so much repair. But I cannot talk about New Orleans in the past tense.

Mardi Gras 2005. We go to Endymion, a huge parade that is not among my favorites. I prefer the small, quirky neighborhood parades like St. Anne’s and Muses and Krewe du Vieux. But we have friends, John and Biljana, who live near the Canal Street parade route and have a party each year, and other friends who have an Irish pub nearby. So we hit the party and fill up on red beans and rice and king cake. We walk to the parade and mingle in the massive crowd for a while. The parade is still rolling hours later when we make our way to Finn McCool’s where Stephen and Pauline are swamped, pouring Guinness and Harp for a packed house. AC/DC plays on the jukebox and Dylan does an impromptu jig on the pool table while we catch our breath. Stephen and Pauline left Belfast for New Orleans on a whim after seeing Streetcar Named Desire, and after years of bartending and renovating houses, they opened their own pub in Mid-City last year. We give them a tired wave on our way out the open door and into the festive night toward home.

The Bon Temp, a dive on Magazine Street, has a Sunday family street party in July with Caribbean food and a local reggae band. My wife and I eat black beans and rice and fried plantains off paper plates, wash it down with Red Stripe, while Dylan jumps up and down with a mob of other kids to the steel drum beat. At the end of the night, I carry him across the street to where I’d parked alongside a tattoo parlor. What that, daddy? he asks, pointing to the colorful flash of a flaming sacred heart in the window. That’s a tattoo, I tell him. I want a tattoo, he says happily. Laura glares at me, and I shrug. We pile into the car and head for home, echoes of the last live music we’d hear in New Orleans ringing in our ears.

On a hot Saturday in mid-August, 2005, I drive to a friend’s house in Hollygrove, a poor neighborhood plagued by drugs and violence. My good friends Ed and his wife Jill are leaving New Orleans for a new life in California. I help them load their U-Haul and realize it will not be the same place without them. In their ten years in the city, they have embraced it fully. Ed taught at the city’s arts high school, and they became fixtures in the tight-knit local community of writers, artists, and musicians. Ed and Jill hosted some of the best parties and were at most of the others. They put out a Thanksgiving dinner of Roman proportions for anyone who did not have a place to go for the holiday. As we load the truck, their neighbors, most of them elderly stop by to wish them well. And as I watch Ed and Jill drive off in their U-Haul, I realize that a part of my New Orleans is gone.

Sometime in late August, Laura and I arrange for a babysitter for Dylan, our two-year-old son, and look forward to a rare night out. By dusk, the evening has cooled enough for us to walk over to Frenchmen Street, an area of restaurants, bars, and cafés in our old neighborhood on the edge of the Quarter. We consider our options as we walk down the quiet streets of Algiers to the ferry that will take us across the river. We decide on Adolfo’s, a cozy little Italian place upstairs of a small bar in a two-story, wooden-frame building. I have the scallops with lump crab in a cream sauce on linguine. She has the grilled salmon. We share a bottle of the house Chianti. After dinner we amble down the narrow staircase
and into the street. Live jazz drifts out through the open doors of the Spotted Cat, and a few people dance lazily in front of the small stage inside the door. The music is tempting, but we opt to wander further down the street as we make our way back to Canal Street and the ferry.

We walk down Decatur and stop at Molly’s for a nightcap. An infamous poet holds forth for a small entourage amid the usual noisy crowd. We take our drinks outside and lean against the brick wall of the old building and watch the nightly parade of tourists, gutter punks, drag queens, and New Orleans high society. All in all, a pleasant, but otherwise unremarkable, evening out. I never for a moment imagine it will be our last in New Orleans as we know it.

I have come to realize that the city I left on August 28 no longer exists. I imagine Adolfo’s may well have survived more or less, though the building did have a distinct lean even before the storm. The floodwaters did not reach that far down Frenchmen Street. CNN aired a short segment from Molly’s last week, and the bar was hopping, perhaps with some of the same denizens with whom we rubbed elbows in August. The poet Andre Codrescu is alive and well in Baton Rouge and appears in the September 11 New York Times Magazine predicting that no one will return to New Orleans, that the city will not come back. I fire off a scathing response in a letter to the editor, only to find that I’m agreeing with Andre a week later. And then days later he comes on NPR sounding as defiant and optimistic as I had been a week earlier.

When Ed calls from California in the days after the hurricane, I say, “You must feel as if you dodged a bullet.” “Yeah,” he says. “But like I turned around to see that it hit my brother.” There is sadness in his voice, not relief. His old neighborhood did not fare so well, the modest shotgun homes throughout Hollygrove flooded, and I wonder how many of his old neighbors survived and how many of those who did have anything to come back to, or will be able to come back.

Up on Magazine Street, the Bon Temp, for no good reason, abides. Like most areas close to the levee along the river, it is on relatively high ground and is probably serving beer again. Much of Mid-City flooded. I haven’t heard from John and Biljana yet, nor from many other friends, neighbors, colleagues. Stephen and Pauline’s house in the Marigny survived, we read in a text message from Mississippi. Finn McCool’s Pub flooded, and then was looted.

In the first week in exile, I watch the news and drink, searching for some real news amid the sensationalism and distortion and repetition, still hoping that it has perhaps all been a bad dream. Finally, after my son begins screaming NO NO NO NO NO in front of the television, we turn it off and leave it off. I return to New Orleans alone a couple weeks after the storm to find that our house in Algiers survived with only wind damage and a few broken windows. I am overwhelmed with relief and wonder and a twinge of guilt that I should be so fortunate amidst all this devastation. For the next few days, I help clean up debris on my block, and walk the eerily quiet streets of the neighborhood, and amid the flood of emotions, I feel a powerful urge to stay.

Ask New Orleans natives where they live, and they will tell you where they stay. That is, I stay Uptown, or I stay down on St. Roch and Rampart, or I been staying in the Ninth Ward all my life. Right now I’m staying in the Montrose neighborhood in Houston, an eclectic area of cafés, taquerias, used bookstores, art museums, and tattoo parlors. We
walk the streets here, taking in the place, sometimes trying to imagine a new life here. I like it, but I don’t think I can stay here. New Orleans is where my life is. It’s where I want to stay, even though I know that it will never be the same New Orleans and never again quite the same life.

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