

## The Recreation Room

by Albert E. Cowdrey

These facts are known: *When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Mr. Cowdrey had already evacuated safely to a town in western Mississippi. A longtime resident of the Crescent City, Mr. Cowdrey had plenty of past experience with hurricanes and always had an emergency plan. (In fact, his previous hurricane story, "Grey Star," appeared in our Jan. 2003 issue and is currently reprinted on our Website.)*

Here's the speculation: *After Katrina, when Mr. Cowdrey returned to his home near Tulane, he found that his muse had moved in. How else to explain the string of stories we've received over the past two years?*

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Sweating, Jim Guest trekked along the street where he'd spent most of his life. All the way, he marveled that it could be so absolutely empty.

The lawns were dead, the magnolias dying. White dust covered the brown leaves, and a dry pungent reek almost like burning sulfur set him coughing. In the distance he could hear men's voices, a hound's mournful baying, but here on Lark Street the vacant bungalows stood silent. Power lines hung like Christmas festoons, poles interlaced like jackstraws. A clapboard garage had floated into the roadway and lay becalmed, like an ark that had failed.

The sky was a blue steel bowl, the sun blinding. With every movement an effort, Jim seemed to breast a tide of molten wax.

Just beyond the garage, No. 488 came into view. Well, it was still there, not looking abandoned so much as never lived in. The big pines he'd planted as seedlings had all blown down, but they'd fallen away from the house instead of crushing it. Next door, Dr. Dreyfus's house had been impaled by a boat, a pricey SeaCraft with twin outboards now suspended in midair. Both houses bore the watermark, what people were calling the bathtub ring, almost at the level of the eaves.

He hated the thought of going inside 488, seeing what had happened there—especially if Madame Lott's prophecy turned out to be right and the dead awaited him. Yet he'd come a long way, and couldn't turn back now.

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Back before Katrina—everything these days was reckoned BK or AK, as it had once been antebellum or postbellum—back in those distant times, Madame Lott had been Jim’s private oracle, consulted with a mixture of faith and irony.

As a scientist—before retirement he’d taught biology at the university—of course he knew it was all nonsense. Consulting her had been a gag at first, like sitting down with one of the Tarot readers who infested the sidewalks around Jackson Square. And a gag it seemed (who was the “mystery woman with flame-colored hair” whose fate was entwined with his own?) until Madame Lott remarked that if he drank less coffee, he’d get rid of his “migrant headaches.”

How the devil did she know he had migraines? (And, by the way, the prescription worked.)

That first visit to her Royal Street “studio” on an idle Saturday morning twenty-two years ago had set the pattern. She’d opened a narrow doorway to another realm in Jim’s careful, fact-obsessed life. Sure, she faked a lot, that went with the Reader and Advisor game—intuition didn’t come at anybody’s beck and call. Yet from time to time insights emerged from her purple-glossed lips that were hard to explain. About his father, for instance—the revelation that finally had convinced him there was more to her than turbans and twaddle.

“I see a man with white hair,” Madame Lott had intoned. “Somebody close to you, somebody you love. He’s facing a storm. I see the flash and I hear the thunder.”

Only Jim’s father qualified in the white-haired and close department. He was a cool, dim, abstract man, a bookkeeper whose frustrated yearnings for science had helped nudge Jim into the field. He’d never really thought about loving his father until two weeks later, when he astonished himself by breaking down after learning that the old man, for reasons never made clear, had shot himself.

Then there was the case of Dot, Jim’s wife. One day in 1997 the seeress had announced, “The woman in your bed, she carrying a dangerous baby in her womb, a baby she won’t be able to get rid of.”

Since 55-year-old Dot was in no danger of contracting motherhood, he’d ignored this bit of fantasy until she was diagnosed with disseminated and inoperable cancer that had originated in her cervix. After her death left him stunned, dry-eyed, a man suddenly adrift and alone in a universe

without meaning, he'd asked Madame Lott to tell him about heaven and hell and God and all that.

"Heaven and hell," she'd said, "is something you makes up. Your hell is *your* hell. Your heaven is *your* heaven. Sometimes you wills 'em without even knowing it."

"What about God?"

"Nobody knows him, whatever they say, so don't you try. Go read your Book of Job. It's all in there. And watch out for false comforters, the ones who deny that life is hard. Only death is easy."

Why in the world did that make him feel better—hearing that God was unknowable, death was easy, and he made his own heaven and hell? Yet that night, as if weary of his private Hades, he wept and slept, and next day began a slow recovery from his grief.

Since her days of glory, when she'd been all three Fates rolled into one, Madame Lott had definitely gone down in the world. By the last time he'd seen her, the week before the storm, Royal Street was a fading memory—like other marginal businesses, Madame Lott had been driven out by soaring French Quarter rents. Now she handed out advice on love, death, and (ironically) money in a large dingy room, formerly an agency specializing in cut-rate travel, in a strip mall on Airline Drive. Her neighbors were a remainder outlet, a karate school, a ratty Chinese restaurant, and several boarded-up storefronts. What had been the show window was swathed in muslin drapes that created a dusty gloom.

In the noontime shadows, her fat fingers had rested lightly on the backs of his pale bony hands, occasionally stroking the hairs like the strings of a zither. She wasn't a palmist—she'd explained that many times; she touched his hands to (why else?) sense his aura. That day he'd figured his aura must be cloudy, because she hit him right off with a truly startling pronouncement: "There be dead folks in your attic."

After a moment to get over his shock, he told her, "I finished the attic years ago. Turned it into a rec room. I spend a lot of time up there. No corpses anywhere—I'd have noticed."

He'd felt sorry for her, overflowing her iron folding chair and handing out fake insights. When he first met her, she'd been a handsome *café-au-lait* woman, and her robes and turbans had made her look imposing instead of merely hokey. Now she was just one more American

behemoth, her huge sagging bosom overhanging the card table like an avalanche waiting to happen. On the wall, dim in the shadows, hung decaying travel posters for Aruba and Curaçao and framed photos of two solemn brown babies—grandchildren, Jim supposed. He indulged a brief fantasy of Madame Lott at home, stringing up one of her bras like a hammock and rocking both children to sleep in the giant cups.

And she wasn't improving her reputation by filling his attic with imaginary corpses. When he told her she was wrong, the woman-mountain stirred uneasily and muttered, "Well, maybe there *used* to be some dead folks up there."

Oh fine, he thought. A new tense—the Past Prophetic. "I've lived in the house off and on since it was built," he pointed out. "I grew up there. There's *never* been a corpse in the attic."

She sighed deeply and tried a new line. "Maybe they'll be dying, not dead. I hear somebody gasping for breath. And now they be quiet, so quiet."

"So this happens in the future? That doesn't tell me much. The future's even longer than the past."

"Oh no, Mr. Jim," she said, suddenly decisive and firm. "The future ain't long. It ain't long at all." And in that, as it turned out, she'd been dead right.

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On a sulfurous August day, the last day he'd seen or ever would see Lark Street as it was supposed to be, clothed in a hundred shades of green and heavy with summer scents, Jim had clipped his privet hedge and brooded about life's monotony.

Snick, snick, snick. Keep everything level. Right. Nothing ever happens in New Orleans. Dull goddamn town. Snick, snick, snick.

Life had been tedious since Dot's passing had left him alone. He was not an exciting man ("dependable," people said, "conscientious," "sensible," "means well"—in brief, a bore). Well, his trade had been teaching science to undergraduates; he wasn't *supposed* to be lively. Back when he was a student himself, he'd dated and thought cautiously about marrying a girl named Gwen—only he thought about it so long that she married somebody else, moved to a town upstate, and for twenty years

they communicated only by Christmas cards. In time he'd relapsed into a not-too-uncomfortable bachelorhood, expecting to live and die that way, perennially alone and boring.

He still shook his head when he remembered the day the Dean had sent Dot to straighten out the Biology Department's finances. (Like Jim himself, the Accounts Payable had been scrupulously honest but muddled.) She was slender, with suspiciously red hair and a quick, sardonic wit, in spite of which she managed to set his budget right without making him feel like an idiot.

Afterward they began meeting for coffee in the student center. He could hardly believe she liked him. But she'd just escaped from an abusive husband and wanted a gentleman the second time around. She seemed to like his somewhat gaunt good looks, old-fashioned courtesy and quiet smile. After a brief courtship they married, and his life had never been the same.

When Papa shot himself, Jim had moved back into the house in Lakeside, by then an aging subdivision of shade trees, deep greensward, and bird-named cul-de-sacs ending in small circles. He never even thought of selling it; he'd grown up there, learned to swim and paddle a pirogue on the Seventeenth Street canal, played inept but enthusiastic baseball in Lark Street, which had always been kid-friendly and almost without autos. The anonymous interior of the house reflected its occupation by two isolated men in succession. The only emotional focus was an oil portrait of his mother, who'd died when he was three and existed only as a lady with wide-spaced gray eyes and a surprised expression, imprisoned eternally under glittering varnish in a gold-leaf frame over the blond and sootless fireplace.

Under Dot the picture stayed, but the house changed. She'd done poorly out of her first marriage but well out of her divorce, so she quit her job and they lived on his salary and spent the income from her shrewdly invested community property on improvements to their lifestyle.

He'd never been to an auction sale, but for two or three years they went every few months, buying handsome, solid furniture that Dot refinished in her spare time. Without obvious nagging, she somehow inspired him to turn the dusty attic into a rec room that became their favorite relaxing spot. Here they took it easy in elderly but still comfortable chairs, whacked a ball around a pocket billiard table if they felt athletic, otherwise read mysteries and drank their evening wine. Through a casement window they looked down at Lakeside—once part of the *cyprière*, the great cypress

swamp that had absorbed the river's overflows for millennia—now, dried out by pumps and canals, an extended pine-and-magnolia grove where thousands of red-tile or gray-slate roofs nestled among the trees.

Dot bought a genuine 1950s jukebox with a pile of authentic 45-rpm vinyl records and a diamond-needle Cobra tone arm, so they could listen to the music of their teen years—early Elvis from the days of “Heartbreak Hotel,” mid-course Sinatra, platters of the Platters, Al Hibbler quavering out “Unchained Melody” and Satchmo growling “Mack the Knife.” While he listened, Jim worked at an old desk—his ambition was to write a book called “Vanished Worlds” on extinct New World species like the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and Florida wolf—while Dot relaxed with bright heaps of seed catalogues and, increasingly, travel brochures.

She became uncannily adept at squeezing the lowest rates out of airlines, finding comfortable hotels at off-season prices, saving and exploiting bonus miles. Protesting mildly all the way, Jim let her drag him to Moscow and Macchu Picchu, Shanghai and Siena. How'd she locate that villa in Tuscany, find an affordable bug-free room for the *Carnivale* in Venice two days before it began, persuade the Capuchin monks to open their boniest and most fascinating Roman grotto for the Guests, though at the time it was closed to the public? Somehow. She was Miss Sweet Persuasion, never obviously pushing yet nearly always getting her way. When she died, all his life's adventure went with her.

Now he hardly ever left Lakeside except during Mardi Gras, when he fled the crowds to an upriver town called Bonaparte where his old girlfriend Gwen greeted him gladly. She'd lost her husband, started a business to fill the gap, and wore a groove to Baton Rouge airport, jetting off to foist educational materials on school boards throughout the English-speaking world. A little of her dynamism woke him up, a lot tired him; Gwen found his inertia first restful, then hypnotic. Come to think of it, things had been much the same back when they were dating. Now as then, they enjoyed each other best in small doses.

Otherwise, he relaxed into a life built around habitual tasks and memorabilia. His house was his private museum. His mother's portrait held its old place of honor, and silver-framed photos of Dot against a dozen exotic backgrounds crowded a marble mantelpiece she'd salvaged from a defunct mansion. Exotic figures found homes in this nook and that cranny—shadow puppets from Java, plague-doctor masks from Venice, a Ch'ing statue of the Goddess of Mercy in fading reds and greens.

Here he dreamed away his days, usually content though sometimes

weary of the sameness of existence. Indeed, of existence itself. In dark moments he wondered how long death would take to find him. He asked Madame Lott, and her answer had been worthy of the Pythoness at Delphi. “Death will come for you too soon,” she intoned, “and too late.”

“And what,” he snapped, “is *that* supposed to mean?”

She gave him an odd sort of smile. She’d had some dental work, and one of her incisors was now encased in gold, with a star-shaped porthole through which the tooth gleamed whitely.

“It’s always too soon to pass,” she explained. “Just ask anybody. And also too late, because death don’t never come in time to save you from sorrow.” Hard to argue with that now.

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Jim heard about Hurricane Katrina on the news, but paid no attention to it until Gwen called. A storm snob, he quietly scorned nervous Nellies, convinced that anything could be ridden out if he ran the bathtub full of water and laid in an ample supply of sardines and bread. Hadn’t he survived three big ones and a dozen little ones in the course of his life?

But Gwen was worried, and called from Bonaparte to tell him so. “I don’t like the way it’s waltzing around the Gulf,” she said. “You know it’s picking up energy all the time. Come on up, Jim. Beat the crowd. Besides, I want to see you,” she added. “It’s too damn prim around here, with no smelly old man in the house.”

He spent another five minutes grumbling, just to make her realize he was doing it for her, not because he was scared of some damned storm. Then he packed a few clothes, and went outside to close the storm shutters. He waved languidly to his neighbors, who seemed as casual as he. Dr. Dreyfus was parking his Lexus. A lesbian couple—Jean and Carol, was it?—who lived on the other side were walking their pugs, Bunch and Bundle. In the yard that backed on his, the Campbells’ kids were enjoying their new pool as noisily as usual.

He considered, then decided against emptying his fridge. How long would he be gone, after all? He tossed his suitcase into the trunk of his car and took off.

It was Saturday, August 27, 2005, a day in the doldrums, windless and searing. The last storm coordinates he noted before turning off and

unplugging his TV made him uneasy—Katrina had finally made up her mind and was taking dead aim at New Orleans. A Cat 3, she was as big as Hurricane Betsy had been, back in 1965—the strongest storm he'd ever lived through. He wanted to ask Madame Lott about Katrina, and drove twenty miles up the Airline before cutting over to I-10. But her studio was closed and locked, so he slid *Ella Sings Cole Porter* into his car's CD player, turned up the air conditioning, and headed without undue haste northward toward the land of loess bluffs and kudzu infestations.

Three hours later he was drinking iced tea on the long curving porch of Gwen's neat, elderly house among the walled gardens and wisteria of Bonaparte's Old Town. She smiled at him, a big busty woman with close-cropped gray hair and a formidable Armenian nose (her maiden name had been Sarkosian). "It takes a hurricane to make you come see me," she complained, as if it were all his fault.

Then she launched her conversational surfboard on a tide of gossip about the town that she, like the natives, called Bony Part. Who was sleeping with whom. Who was sleeping with what. Juicy little scandals from a juicy little town. Some teenage kids of local bigwigs had been caught buck nekkid in a Sweet Dreams Motel with Mazola for lubrication and Ecstasy for, well, ecstasy. Jim smiled tolerantly and succumbed to a summer trance, sipping the cold tea and enjoying the hum of her voice as if he were napping near a beehive.

He became aware that Gwen had fallen silent. "You haven't heard a word I said," she accused him.

"Not true. I heard everything."

"Meaning you heard but you didn't listen. In your own world as usual, dammit. What are you thinking about now?"

"Fried catfish. Good old *Ictalurus furcatus*. That joint down on the river still open? I won't be here long, so let's make the most of it."

They spent the next couple of hours eating good fish and drinking bad wine, gossiping and gazing through tinted windows at the curving Mississippi, a vast brown anaconda with countless glittering scales now touched by the setting sun. Small tugs muscled enormous barge trains upstream against the current, and flights of small birds flashed low over the water. Above the bar a TV blared sports bulletins about local teams and updates on the hurricane nearing New Orleans. They asked a waitress to turn it down, for despite the casualness of their talk, something seemed to



be happening between them—something both old and new.

That night Gwen assigned him to her guest room. Then changed her mind, and just about the time he was getting sleepy, knocked at his door and joined him in bed. Nothing but snuggling happened then, but he woke before dawn ready for action and feeling strongly that he'd better not waste his opportunity. He tickled her awake and found her agreeable. So they became lovers again, after a lapse of forty years, on the solid adult grounds of long affection and close proximity.

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After his unaccustomed exertion that Sunday morning, Jim went back to sleep and slept long and woke late.

At first he didn't know where he was. A pink sky hovered over him, yet a bedside clock said ten-twenty. Okay, the sky was actually a pink tester, and a roseate symphony of swags, ruffles, and other femstuff surrounded and enveloped him. Soft-spoken Dot hadn't cared for furbelows, but pushy, domineering Gwen doted on them.

Speaking of Gwen, her side of the bed was not only empty but cool. Between the double hillocks raised by his feet, Jim next contemplated a TV gazing blankly at him from a marble-topped table. He felt pretty blank himself, knowing there was something he needed to check up on, but for several minutes unable to remember what it was. *Oh yeah, Katrina.*

He fumbled at the bedside table, found the remote and turned the set on. The first thing he saw was a satellite image of the Gulf and the two-bladed red symbol of the hurricane, now labeled Category 5. The image was suddenly replaced by the city's mayor, a milk-chocolate gent with waxed and gleaming head, ordering a mandatory evacuation.

Jim pulled pillows randomly behind his back to prop himself up. The damn thing was a *five*. Of course it'd weaken when it hit the continental shelf—they almost always did—but back home it'd be Betsy all over again. Roof tiles would go flying, trees would fall, the lines would go down, the power would fail. The city might take weeks to recover. Thank God his house was sound and strong, a proven veteran of many storms.

*Goddamn*, he thought, *I wish I'd emptied that fridge*. Had he brought enough clean clothes? Would he have to sample Napoleonic fashions at Wal-Mart?

He stumbled into the bathroom, not even bothering to grimace over the pink toilet cozy, the pink tiles, the shower curtain decorated with pink bunnies and duckies. Heading down to breakfast, he found Gwen in the kitchen, the room where she actually spent her days, kissed her good-morning, and got a smile and a moderately bawdy wink in return. Her maid Olivia, an ebony woman of middle age who worked two hours on Sunday morning, cooked him an enormous breakfast of ham and eggs and biscuits and everything he wasn't supposed to eat, and Jim pigged out because, after all, he needed to keep his strength up in these trying times.

When Olivia departed to make the beds—*beds* because Gwen had rumped her own, to preserve appearances—she commandeered him for church and they set forth in her Audi. Bonaparte's Protestants worshipped in marble Greco-Roman temples, and so, paradoxically, did its handful of Jews. The priest (genus *Episcopalianus*) gave a fluent sermon on the Kingdom of Heaven, which unlike the kingdoms of the Earth operated on the pure generosity of a God whose essence was love. Then he offered a brief prayer for the people of the Gulf Coast, so soon to feel the wrath of Nature, whose ways for some reason did not mirror those of its Creator.

Jim enjoyed the rest of the day, mainly because he wasn't on the road. From time to time Gwen turned on a wall-mounted flat-screen TV that was one of the newest gadgets in her all-purpose kitchen, and they watched repeated scenes of orating weatherpersons, the tormented Gulf, and the impacted highways leading away from it. The phone rang several times: people who ran bed-and-breakfasts were hunting rooms for new arrivals they couldn't accommodate. Gwen hesitated to take in strangers, but finally accepted an NOPD cop on his honeymoon, and in due course a thick-bodied young man named Tommy Leboeuf and his new bride, Lydia—who (Jim thought privately) looked less like a blushing bride than a hooker from a Texarkana truckstop—showed up in a shiny new pink-champagne-colored Cadillac.

The Leboeufs went straight to bed. To make room for them, Jim moved into Gwen's room, murmuring as he unpacked for the second time that he hoped he wasn't destroying her reputation as a Christian woman. "Honey," she replied, "desperate times require desperate measures."

That night they both slept badly. The wind was picking up, the storm passing over the mouth of the Mississippi and veering eastward, back into the open Gulf, heading now for the Redneck Riviera with its white sand beaches, endless bungalows, and garish motel-and-casino strips. Jim understood that the storm's counterclockwise winds must also be pushing the Gulf into Lake Pontchartrain, the lake into the city; the thought kept him

restless, and his unease made sleep difficult for her.

Toward dawn he fell asleep at last, only to wake suddenly to the incessant rattling of window sashes. Greenish daylight filtered through the drapes, and so did the wind, setting all Gwen's furbelows into tremulous motion. He dressed, hastened downstairs, and found her in the kitchen, sitting at the battered table where they ate, left hand pressed to her mouth, gazing at the TV screen. When Jim touched her, she took his hand without turning to look at him.

"Where's that?" he asked, staring at a widening breach in a concrete floodwall, with coffee-colored water pouring through.

But he didn't hear or need to hear her answer. The wall guarded the Seventeenth Street Canal, less than six blocks from Lark Street. Lakeside was doomed.

He muttered, "The future ain't long at all."

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That afternoon they took a siesta together, lying side by side in their underwear on Gwen's bed.

They held each other and Gwen cried for friends she'd known, for houses where she'd partied, for the deleted portion of her youth and memories. Jim wanted to cry, but couldn't. Grief stifled him. What do you do when your life is nothing but the past, and the past is suddenly swept away?

Bonaparte had a wild night of howling wind, tossing boughs, and crashing trees. It was only the western edge of the storm, but the power went off, the air conditioning died, and Jim and Gwen retreated to the front gallery, where they sat in the tumultuous darkness, holding hands. She said more than once, "Jim, I'm so sorry," but he only grunted.

Next day the power came back on and they viewed the scope of the catastrophe in New Orleans. Television showed three-fourths of the city submerged in water, with islands of fire. Where was the President, where was the army, where was everybody? Days slipped by like a road without mileposts as the world gazed at hunger, filth, and thirst in the Superdome, exhausted people sweltering on blinding-white freeway bridges that rose out of newborn lakes and marshes, bodies floating and swelling at familiar intersections gone unrecognizable. Looters stumbled through knee-deep

water, toting stolen TVs in a city without power. On quiet Uptown streets, oaks gracefully mirrored themselves in canals where no canals were supposed to be.

And Jim was so far away, so comfortable, so safe. He felt bubble-wrapped.

Bonapartians gave fund-raisers for evacuees who'd run out of money; churches prayed for the dead and gathered food and clothing for the living. People Jim had never met stopped him on the street to ask how things were going "down there"—as if he knew! Olivia hugged him and cried against his shirt and refused to take any money for the extra trouble he was giving her. He held her and for the first time cried too, not for anything he'd lost, but for the utterly unexpected kindness of strangers.

The town was full of refugees now, and they had little to do but gossip. They checked maps posted on Google and divided into castes based on how deep their houses had flooded. Jim gained some cachet at a charity jazz brunch when an Uptowner remarked that his house was high and dry on the natural levee of the Mississippi. Jim said, "Mine was on the natural levee of the Seventeenth Street Canal," and the Uptowner retired from the field, badly worsted. Yet the Davy Jones Award didn't go to Jim. During a break when the musicians were lunching, the pianist commented *en passant* that his concert grand at home was under twelve feet of water. Somewhat staggered by this—what were they talking, a fifty-thousand-dollar instrument?—Jim heard himself rather stupidly saying he didn't suppose it would be worth much now. The musician replied, "Well, not as a *piano*," returned to his bench, and launched into a riff, triumphant in this curious sweepstake where you won by losing.

Those stories were nonfiction. There was also plenty of fiction to be heard. Tommy Leboeuf came up with new and more colorful tales at every gathering. At the jazz brunch he became the center of attention by revealing that he'd earned a week's leave to get married by first serving at the Superdome during the worst of times. While he was there, a predator took advantage of the darkness and disorder to rape two children, and when Tommy and his partner caught him, they threw him to the mob and watched them tear him limb from limb.

"Me, I'da liked to jern in, 'cept I was on duty," he said, and all the polite folks in their ice-cream suits and summer dresses nodded agreement. Jim and Gwen, knowing perfectly well that Tommy and Lydia had fled the city *before* the storm hit, wigwagged to each other with raised eyebrows, but said nothing.

Still, Gwen had had enough of her Cadillac-driving charity cases with their tall tales, and she told them they'd have to leave. They departed while she and Jim were out to dinner, taking with them a harvest of knickknacks from the house. A couple of days later, Jim saw the cop and his lady friend on TV. They'd been arrested in St. Louis on a warrant for a stolen Cadillac. Lydia was a hooker ("exotic entertainer," said the reporter), though from Biloxi and not Texarkana. Their stories had one real element: Tommy Leboeuf was a cop, and soon faced charges of desertion as well as grand theft, auto.

Gwen said, "Well, how about that lying, thieving sonofabitch!" But Jim said that a crooked cop made him homesick.

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That joke was typical of his dry humor. But an undercurrent of horror ran beneath his thoughts of home. Stories about attics formed a staple of TV news, and every time he saw one he thought of what might be waiting for him at 488 Lark Street. He couldn't shake the image of dead people sprawled out and rotting in the recreation room he and Dot had worked so hard to build out of the dusty emptiness.

Who could have taken refuge there, and when and why? Alas, there was an obvious answer. Most of his neighbors lived in one-story ranch-styles built on slabs. His attic might have been the highest spot around when the floodwall collapsed and a tsunami poured into Lakeside. Several neighbors kept keys to his house for emergencies, as he kept keys to theirs, so getting in wouldn't have been a problem for old Dr. Dreyfus, the Campbells, Carol and Jean, and their little dogs, Bunch and Bundle.

Was that what had happened? He had no way to find out; the land lines were down and when he tried to call into area code 504 on Gwen's cell phone, he roused only monotonous robot voices saying the towers were down, everything was out of service.

In front of the TV, he stared hypnotized at stories about desperate people trying to break out of attic prisons, images of rescuers from airboats and helicopters breaking in. Here, the searchers found only a guttered candle, a half-empty Fritos bag, a plastic water bottle. There, the remains of an old man who'd holed up and drowned clawing at a roof he couldn't break through. A black kid pointed to what had been his house and told a CBS reporter, "Mama's up there, and she's stuck to the floor."

By now Jim had forgotten what sound sleep meant. He woke and dozed and woke again. He wanted to go home and, at the same time, wanted never to go home. Life went on all around him, yet increasingly apart. Gwen had wasted enough time away from her business, and spent the days at her phones and her PC, lining up customers for new textbooks and multimedia gadgetry. Meanwhile he idled around Bonaparte, an accidental tourist, viewing such depressing sights as the overgrown and cricket-haunted Confederate cemetery, and the Catholic basilica whose many spires made him think of a crown of thorns.

He ate often with strangers, devouring information about New Orleans with greater appetite than the bland, heavy food. Refugees swapped stories as they consumed burgers at Cow-Cow Boogie or munched huge, tasteless crab salads at the Plantation Kitchen. All of them except Jim carried arsenals of gadgetry that beeped and vibrated and played the opening bars of “My Blue Heaven,” and by one means or another they all seemed to have reached hundreds of contacts who were ready and willing to give eye-witness accounts of the city.

So he learned that Uptown now was dry and the power back on. Bourbon Street was flourishing again, all sleaze, noise, and neon. The casinos were rushing repairs, seeing gold in a new flood, this time of construction workers pouring into town to stuff the pockets of their jeans with FEMA money. Whores were, as ever, fully employed.

Elsewhere the news was not so good. Plaquemines Parish was mostly under the Gulf, patrolled by pompano, redfish, and mackerel instead of the Isleño fishermen whose ancestors had come from the Canaries centuries ago to catch them. Poor-white St. Bernard Parish had hardly a house standing. Lakeside? Still forbidden country, daytimes roasting in the merciless sun, nighttimes dark under a sliver of new moon.

One day five weeks after the storm he told Gwen, “I’ve got to go back and see what’s left of my house. If anything.”

She nodded. She’d been expecting the news, had been Googling the situation too, and had already reached her own conclusions. She’d changed her locks after the Leboeuvs departed, and now gave him a set of the new keys.

“You won’t find much down there,” she warned. “I’m flying to Albuquerque. Those people need bilingual textbooks whether they know it or not. When you come back, just let yourself in. You know where everything is. The stuff you salvage from Lakeside—let me see.... Put it in

the garage. We can park our cars outside for a while.”

All this was brusque and businesslike, and it didn't go down at all well. Where did she get off, taking charge of his future? After all, *his* life had been destroyed, not hers. All he could feel now was the sense of loss, a palpable absence like an amputee's phantom limb. What to do about it he didn't yet know. Until he faced the bodies of his neighbors lying amid the wreckage of his home, he couldn't decide ... decide ... decide what?

Maybe whether to bother living on. His father had faced that question once, and decided not to.

When he was packed and ready to go, Gwen surprised him by embracing him passionately, then holding his head in both hands and crying against his cheek. He whispered, “I'll be back, I'll see you soon,” over and over. Then he drove away, wondering if either of them really believed it.

\* \* \* \*

Traffic on I-55 south was heavy but moving well, a river of homebound license plates. I-10 east was frantic, the center lanes filled with swaying empty FEMA trailers under tow, racing to dates with the homeless. Trucks and cars filled the other lanes like rush hour on a California freeway, a traffic jam moving at 75 mph, everybody driving with the pedal to the metal, frantic for their first sight of bad news.

When the city rose out of the marshes, Jim didn't see much destruction at first, just blue plastic tarps covering damaged roofs. Expecting police roadblocks in Lakeside, he turned into the Uptown. Here, instead of hysteria, an eerie quiet prevailed—the traffic sporadic, the streets clear, Chinese walls of debris piled along the curbs, huge yellow trucks and handling machines with bigger teeth than the denizens of *Jurassic Park* hunkering between the oaks on the wide grassy median of St. Charles Avenue. He smelled for the first time the dry stink of the city, the decay of sheetrock and insulation, carpets and wood soaked with the foul residue of departed floodwater.

Yet some people were home and starting to clean up. Duct-taped refrigerators lined the streets like fat tombstones, many with spray-painted epitaphs, some political (Cheney Inside—Do Not Open), some gastronomical (Free Lunch—Maggots Only), some vaguely erotic (Mr. Trashman! Take me, I'm yours!). On doors and housefronts he saw spray-painted signs, many enigmatic like X/OB, but others perfectly clear, like U LOOT—I SHOOT. A hand-painted sign on a barricaded shop that

sold Persian rugs warned:

I AM INSIDE SLEEPING  
WITH A BIG DOG  
AN UGLY WOMAN  
TWO SHOTGUNS  
AND A CLAW HAMMER

That made him smile; his congested spirit lightened. Suddenly he felt hungry, and began to search for food. Outside Magnum's, a four-star restaurant whose roof had mostly blown off, he found chefs in tall white hats making hamburgers on open grills, adding to each a dollop of bleu cheese and a squirt of some sauce from a secret recipe. Jim stopped to eat a burger—*Finally some food with an attitude!*—drink an icy Coke that tasted better than Mumm's, and troll for information.

Some customers had brought folding chairs, à la Mardi Gras. Others lolled on green grass that had never tasted floodwater, or huddled under battered oaks and date palms in scant spots of shade. Like all New Orleans crowds, they were noisy as a cage of toucans; gossip had always been a popular local sport, and everybody talked to everybody, for everybody had a story to tell.

A young guy wearing a T-shirt that said Thanks Katrina, That Was a Hell of a Blow Job told about meeting two girls who'd come to town to save abandoned animals; he offered to share his house with them and wound up living in a Noah's Ark of dogs, cats, horses, and chickens. ("But no nooky," he added in an aside to Jim. "Just my luck, those ol' gals only like animals and each other.") An eighty-year-old Dutchman so gnarled as to resemble a driftwood statue told gutturally how he'd stayed home through the whole damn thing, the storm and the aftermath, drinking bottled water and eating MREs cadged from the army. "Vot I care about floods for, anyway?" he demanded.

Jim talked to a young woman named Molly. Attired in shorts, bra, and flip-flops, she'd wrestled a defunct refrigerator to the curb, then come out for food. Her freckled face shone with grease, her body with a fine sheen of perspiration. She told him he'd have trouble entering Lakeside. The water was all gone, pumped back into the lake, but the power was still out and the army had blocked all the usual entry routes. The only people living half normally in the area were in the big houses along the lakeside ridge, where behind the green levees the ample L.A.-style dwellings of the rich and tasteless had passed through the storm almost unscathed.



Then Molly had an idea. “Look,” she said, “most of these guys in the Hummers are from out of town. When they stop you, show them your driver’s license and say—what street did you say you lived on?”

“Lark.”

“Tell them your house is right off Lakeshore Drive and the power’s on there. They won’t know the difference. Say you’ve already been there and you left to get ice, is all.”

In the end Jim’s problem, like so many, solved itself. He drove down Elysian Fields between rolling prairies of wreckage that would have done honor to a major war. When he passed Hummers, young guys in cammies waved languidly at him or simply sat, cradling their rifles and chewing gum. Nobody stopped him until the wreckage itself did. At the border of Lakeside he had to get out and walk the last mile under the dazing sun, clambering over toppled poles and trees, watched by starving dogs uncertain whether to beg him for help or eat him.

And so he came back to No. 488, Lark Street.

\* \* \* \*

He unlocked and forced the front door open, stared and gasped. Then scuffed inside over stinking mud that lay caked and gray on what had been honey-colored heart-pine floors.

The silver-framed pictures had vanished, maybe into the hands of looters. The furniture had floated here and there in the oddest way—a new Sony TV was standing on its head, while the dining room table had ascended the stairs about halfway before becoming stranded. Protected by its layers of varnish, his mother’s portrait in oil looked down on the ruin, astonished but unharmed.

The bathtub ring was roughly at four feet. Yet the flood had initially been much higher. The tsunami had rushed down Lark Street, knocked in windows, filled the houses, then subsided to the lower level—where it sat, and sat, and sat for weeks on end. As a result, black mold made the pale walls look like monochrome Jackson Pollocks. Thirteen inches of rain had come through the roof and contributed to the ruin. In the kitchen, the ceiling had fallen on the stove, insects buzzed and unseen frogs brayed as they had in the pools of the vanished *cyprière*. Tiny flies hovered around the fridge amid whiffs of graveyard odor. Jim knew the creatures well; common fruit flies, *Drosophila melanogaster*— he used to breed them in his lab.

Getting to the second floor was tough. The table had lodged at a precarious angle, blocking his way, and he had to wrestle it loose and tip it over the banister, back into the ruin of the dining area. But at last he stood panting and streaming sweat in the upstairs hall. He touched the doorknob of the bedroom where he and Dot had slept for twenty years. Then thought: *No, I don't want to see it, and thank God she can't.* He climbed the last flight of steps, the ones he'd built himself when he was preparing to floor and insulate the attic, and pulled open the door at the top.

Above him the suspended ceiling and the pink battens of insulation were mostly gone and stripes of hard blue sky slotted the brown rafters. The wind must have roared through here, emptying his desk, taking south all but one page of prophetically named *Vanished Worlds*. The pocket billiard table balanced like an acrobat on the legs of an overturned captain's chair. One of the retired armchairs had been flung against the far wall and smashed. Yet a guitar he'd trucked around the country back in the Sixties—his sole adventure before Dot came along—still hung from a nail in a sheltered corner, a fragile survivor of the wind's manic attack. The jukebox stood unmoved, seemingly ready to light up in orange and purple glory. A green anole lizard basking in a dapple of sunlight on the selection keys turned its head and watched Jim with an eye like a tiny bead of black glass.

So Madame Lott had been wrong. Nobody had died here. He'd come all this way, slogging through the ruins, risking heatstroke, only to gaze on the mutilated face of everything he'd been and done with his time on earth.

Suddenly he felt faint. He leaned over and vomited; a fist seemed to close on his chest, and for a few seconds he couldn't breathe. Time compressed, then expanded, and he was out on Lark Street again.

He really didn't know how he'd gotten out of the house, and yet here he was, drifting along like any idler, watching through the swags of power lines as guys in gloves, masks, plastic coveralls, and blue hardhats came around a huge trash pile blocking the corner. Accompanied by a big brown dog, they began making their way slowly toward him across the blasted plain that once had been his part of New Orleans.

He wondered whether they might take him for a looter, maybe arrest him. But they passed him by, attentive to their jobs, paying him no attention—except for the dog, a rangy mutt with bloodhound in his genes and furrows above his eyes, who sniffed warily in the vicinity of Jim's feet until his trainer pulled the leash and recalled him to duty.

Systematically the men worked through house after house, kicking in doors where they had to, trusting the dog's educated nose as to whether they should enter or not. Afterward they spray-painted X/OB on the walls, and now he understood its meaning: House checked—no bodies.

They reached 488, and the dog began to bay. For the first time, somebody went inside. Jim watched with a tingling sense of having missed something all-important. After five minutes the searcher emerged and put in a call on a cell phone. Then the team dawdled until, with an unholy racket, a helicopter dropped out of the sky and landed with all the usual rattle and roar beside the errant garage, the prop creating its own mini-hurricane.

When two guardsmen in brown and green-spotted fatigues jumped out and carried a stainless steel gurney into his front door, Jim started forward, moving like a man breasting a strong chill current, trying to shout, and angry at the way everybody ignored him.

Then the gurney reappeared, carrying a burden in a black plastic bag. All he could do was stare. The guardsmen loaded it, jumped aboard again, and the helicopter departed in a tornado of white dust. The guy who'd gone into the house spray-painted X/1B on Jim's front door, and he and his team moved on.

\* \* \* \*

So now he knew the score. During his life people had often called him boring, but never stupid.

In a dream he entered his house again, this time with singular ease, delighting in the soft glow of the honey-colored pine floor, the gleam of the silver picture frames on the mantel. The shadow puppets danced sinuously on their bamboo wands, dark eyes watched him through the Venetian masks, and the Goddess of Mercy raised two fingers in serene blessing as he passed.

Upstairs the jukebox began to play "Unchained Melody," the 1956 version that he'd heard the first time and danced to (clumsily, of course) with Gwen at a high school hop. Jim ascended the stairs without effort, glancing *en passant* into the bedroom, noting that it was looking neater than it had in a long while, thinking that Dot must have made the bed and tidied up.

The attic stairs, the open door. The recreation room was

crowded—Dot leafing through a *Better Homes and Gardens*, Papa relaxing in one of the tattered old easy chairs, and the mother he could hardly remember gazing through the casement window at a bygone Lakeside of building sites, scattered new homes, and small thin pines. Madame Lott was there too, dandling two sleeping brown babies on her wide lap, and Jim recalled suddenly hearing her say once that she owned a house in the Ninth Ward.

He tried to tell her, *No, I want this but not yet, Gwen's waiting for me, I haven't finished with life, this is too soon.* She looked at him and shook her head, somehow conveying, without anything being said, that Gwen had only been an interlude, that she and he weren't made to stay together for long.

Then Dot looked up and smiled, and his mother turned to him with astonished gray eyes—he'd been all of three years old when she'd seen him last—and Papa raised his head and smiled one of his rare smiles. Home, really home at last and forever, Jim relaxed and moved with open arms toward the other inhabitants of his personal heaven.