

AN EYE INTO THE STORM

by: Jacqui Ipp

The sun was beating down hard as we sped along the open highway on that perfect day in July. Bursting with excitement, we barreled along towards our next destination, New Orleans.

Only five days into our six-week road trip across the States, we were high on the sheer beauty and wonderment of existence and every instant declared itself as if there couldn't possibly be a better place or moment in time than the one we were living in.

Our music blared, as we bellowed out the lyrics, always selecting a song that

best matched our sense of the city we were about to enter. This time we chose to listen to the Tragically Hip, a band from our hometown, Toronto. We sang along with ear-to-ear smiles, "My memory is muddy what's this river I'm in? New Orleans is sinking and I don't want to swim..."

Giggling, and bearing the heat under the azure sky, we failed to recognize the inescapable irony of this song.

Roaming the streets of the Big Easy, the merciless heat was exhausting yet the urge to explore and embrace this magical



place kept our feet moving. It was the eve of my 24th birthday, and also Independence Day. The streets were packed with tourists and locals. Live music was beaming out of all the pubs and the nooks and allies. The city was literally pulsating with an infectious energy, and it was only 2:00 p.m.

That evening we headed out to embrace the famed nightlife, starting with a glorious fireworks display. Darkness had fallen, and the heat refused to let up. There was an eeriness in the air. As night progressed it drizzled on and off, but we were undeterred. We took Bourbon Street by storm, enjoying every moment to the fullest.

By the next morning the slight drizzle had turned into heavy, unrelenting rain. Undaunted, we allowed ourselves to be led by our excitement and urgency to experience so much more.

That night we set out for a celebratory dinner and another night on the town. All decked out, we soon realized we had few places to go. What was going on? We wondered. How could mere rain bring a halt to the tireless vivacity of legendary Bourbon Street?

We approached one of the fancy hotel restaurants, only to be shut out by a sign that read: "Due to Tropical Storm Cindy our restaurant will be closing for the safety of our customers."

Comfortably naïve about the potential implications of the situation, we resorted to our unflinching humor to buoy us through the experience. We chuckled about singing "New Orleans is Sinking" on our way into town.

By 8 in the evening we still had not found an open restaurant, and the rain and winds were speeding up rapidly. We continued on our mission. Hell, we were two Canadians and a Swede; what did we know about tropical storms? Rain was just rain to our ignorant selves, just something to spice up the adventure.

After no luck on the food front we found ourselves dining at the Ritz Carlton, not exactly what our budgets had in mind for us.

At about 9:30 pm., I received a call from my mother wishing me a happy birthday. I told her we were in a tropical storm and all the restaurants were closing so we were at the Ritz. Five minutes later she called back and said, "The tropical storm is not your concern, Hurricane Dennis is predicted to make landfall in an hour. You might not be leaving the Ritz tonight!"

We asked the waitress her thoughts on the matter. "Dawlin'," she said, "this is N'awlins, unless they say evacuate, you've got nothing to worry about."

We took comfort in her words, placed our one-dollar "Bourbon Street" plastic bag ponchos over our heads and braved the storm. The winds were banging us into walls, and the water on the road was rising well above our ankles. We ran, giggling at our situation, wishing we were dry, but simultaneously loving the edginess of the predicament we found ourselves in. As we sprinted and splashed down Bourbon Street trying to find shelter and some drinks to celebrate, we were hit with our next obstacle- every venue was shut down, or shutting down as we approached.

Disappointed and mystified, we were beginning our reluctant and severely windblown journey back to our hotel, when we stumbled upon a hole-in-the-wall bar. The door was wide open, classic rock was booming from the jukebox. A lone guest graced the inside.

We stood in the doorway huffing, puffing and dripping wet, and asked if they were closing. The man behind the bar said, "We never close, it gets way worse than this in this town, and that still doesn't stop us...I even kayaked to work one day." We exchanged looks, knowingly smiled at each other and immediately grabbed barstools.

The bartender gave us shots on the house and said,

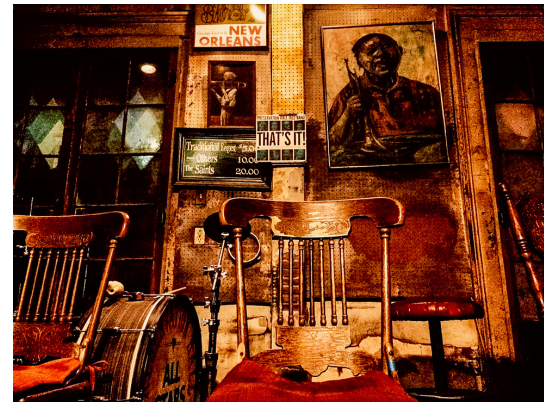


Dear Guests,

Due to tropical storm Cindy, for the safety of our guests and staff, we will be closing our restaurant at 8:30 p.m.

We apologize for any inconvenience.

-Bourbon House



“The juke box is free, go choose some tunes.” Things were looking better every moment.

Inspired one of my friends ran out into the storm and screamed out to Bourbon Street, “Hey, get in here, this is where the Hurricane party is tonight!” Within minutes the bar was full.

The rest of the night was spent listening to good rock, sipping on inventive drinks, telling stories of our journey and hearing stories from others. It was perfect.

We proceeded home at about 7am. The rain had stopped and we watched the sun rise over the Big Easy-- a brilliant end to the storm, an amazing birthday.

When we rose from our slumber, the furies raged again. The winds and rain were so ferocious we had to hitchhike one block just to get some food and supplies. By the time we were finished at the store the sun was shining again. Were we in the eye? We had no idea.

We found an internet café, and discovered Hurricane Dennis had not even hit yet. As a matter of fact, Dennis had not even made landfall in Pensacola yet.

We weren't ready to leave, the oscillating weather wasn't bringing us down and our passion for this enchanting city kept us from being more fearful.

"We never close. It gets way worse than this in this town, and that still doesn't stop us...I even kayaked to work one day!"

Final decision: we would stay.

We gambled on the notion that as the storm was about to hit Pensacola, we would be able put the pedal to the metal and boot it west. We spent the days exploring the markets, cuisine, live music and kaleidoscopic culture, from the voodoo stores and vampire “historical haunts” to the churches and Garden District. Every night was spent at that same little bar we found during

Tropical Cindy. We got to know the staff, their jukebox, their regular and and visiting clientele.

Several days later we left New Orleans, as scheduled, right before Pensacola was hit. We traveled for a month through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, up the California coast and back home to Toronto safe and sound.

Just after arriving home, the devastating news arrived. Thousands upon thousands of New Orleans' inhabitants were no longer safe and sound.

I reflect on our song of choice, “New Orleans is Sinking,” and realize that when I perceived it as ironic, it was coincidence, the song in and of itself wasn't ironic, the timing we chose for it was. The rains we were in and the rains we purposely avoided were but a tiny foreshadowing of what was still to come.

As “our” song implied, Hurricane Katrina was something that had been anticipated for a long time. Reports detailing the incredible vulnerability of New Orleans to the ultimate storm had been in the public domain for several years. Eradication of this state had been determined as not a probability but an eventuality if urgent steps were not taken to shore up the city’s levees.

The pressing questions, the rage and the unrelenting sorrow that now dominate the public sensibility speak not only to what was not done to prevent this catastrophe, but what little was done in the days after to rescue and aid the traumatized, displaced and dying inhabitants.

Why was there such failure at all levels of government? Inconceivable, impossible, intolerable – after all, this is perhaps one of the poorest states, and is this not the United States of America? The wealthiest country in the world.

I think about the southern hospitality that we were so enchanted by. I had heard so much about this dimension but to experience it in the flesh gave a whole new meaning to these oft quoted words. I think how the majority of that warmth, joyous and welcoming hospitality, was most definitely emanated primarily from the Blacks of the southern states we visited— undeniably the poorer majority of those states as well. My heart aches thinking about how far too many of these kind souls ultimately received a brutally bitter end in the aftermath of the storm. This was not just a racial struggle, it was a class struggle.

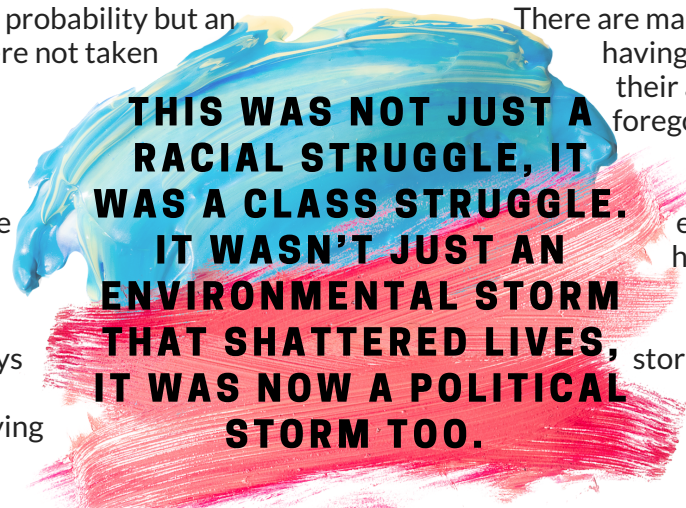
It wasn’t just an environmental storm that shattered lives, it was now a political storm.

I think about this old Black man I saw every day, a man who fascinated me beyond words. He was clean cut, groomed, and always in a suit. His dignified appearance and manner led me to believe he was not, in fact, homeless, although he always carried a bucket around with his belongings in it. What really captured my attention was his face etched with so much sadness; every line in his face seemed to tell a dozen stories. This somber looking old man wore the happiest hat I’ve ever seen- a large straw hat, wrapped in colorful leis. I wonder where he is today.

I think about how the media repeatedly portrayed Black people looting. Of course there were looters, some desperate for life-sustaining supplies, some opportunists, some angry. No doubt, there were white

people who were desperate for these life-sustaining supplies as well; the difference is they were not portrayed as “looters” through different media outlets.

There are many more heroic stories of people having lost families and homes, risking their all to save the lives of strangers, foregoing food and water for days on end, gambling with disease and death as they stayed on in their efforts to help. This is the face of humanity that has revealed itself far more poignantly for me. It is these types of stories, the stories of the exceptional survival of the human spirit in the face of adversity that should be told and retold.



I think about that bar we spent every night at for a week straight, and all the people we met and bonded with, the owner/bartender who took us in like his own. I cannot help but hope that he did not stay open this one time. That this time he found refuge somewhere else.

Are these people I speak of my friends? No, just transitory connections along the traveling road. Would they remember me? I cannot know that. What I do know is that they played a crucial role in making a truly wonderful experience even more magical for me, just for being there. So to those who ask if I feel more affected for having just been there, I offer a resounding “yes.” Do I feel utterly embarrassed for thinking the storm I was in was extreme? Most definitely. Am I thinking about them, wondering about them, hoping that their lives have not been snuffed out or torn asunder in irretrievable ways? Without question. Each of their faces are etched in my mind.

I, as a Canadian, had the best July 4th of all my American visits, in that city, a city celebrating Independence, for their country; the land of freedom, the land of hope, the land of prosperity. How strangely cruel and unjust a response they received.

The bar was called Sing Sing; His name was Angel.

How perfect. How ironic. How unsettling.