

The Long Road Out of Mordor

D Rose of New Orleans writes:

Tuesday, August 29, 2005

(transcribed from crumpled pieces of paper written by candle light)

Last night we were prepared for the worst. We watched every news channel and emailed and called everyone.

The wind started howling at 2 a.m. I never went to sleep. I couldn't even drink a glass of wine. I thought I had to be on top of my game for whatever came at us.

By 5 a.m., Kevin was doing his Lt. Dan impression and yelling out the window, "You call this a storm?" I laughed and told him not to make the hurricane gods mad.

At around 5:30, Kevin called me to a bathroom window, for (oh joy) the crack heads were already looting the pharmacy on the corner of Esplanade and N. Villere. They were carrying loads of chips and crackers it appeared in plastic tubs.

Then all hell broke loose. The wind was so loud. If you ever saw the movie *Twister*—the noise was the same deafening tornado sounds with the occasional booms. The house started shaking and the second floor was swaying. I was getting dizzy. If it wasn't so life or death, it would have made a fun ride at Six Flags. All I could think about was that the house was going to crumble into a pile of thousands of pieces of rubble and we would be stuck under all the muck, half alive and no one to help us.

One of the walls in the master bedroom started swaying back and forth. It was surreal. Kevin and John climbed a ladder to the attic and secured the rafters (or whatever it is that guys do with wood and screw guns). I prayed and stood in the doorway since I heard somewhere that's what you are supposed to do. That's probably just for an earthquake but I figured it couldn't hurt.

We all went downstairs because the carnival ride on the second floor was getting old. It still sounded like a freight train outside. It looked like it was daytime.

Well, daytime behind a Category 4.9 hurricane. Roof pieces were flying off like missiles and smashing into the houses around us and on the concrete. Each one was like a mini bomb.

Windows started breaking, water started dripping from the ceiling. There was a waterfall coming through the chandelier in the dining room. Every couple of minutes a loud crash came from somewhere in the house. We were running around frantically making sure nothing had collapsed or needed to be secured. My heart was thundering in my chest and my whole body was on edge with exhaustion and fear. The unknown is always scarier than what you know will happen.

The sheetrock and plaster started falling in. We could see the barge boards they made our house from back in 1890. The fireplaces were trembling. I sat on a chair in the greatroom waiting for it all to stop. It seemed like it went on for days. I begged the house ghosts to help hold up anything they could. I may have even had a conversation with them at some point in my delirium.

The ceiling on John's side fell through all the way through the dining room, the back fence went over, the 8-foot stone walls that surround the house on one side crumbled into thousands of pieces—like there was never any mortar there to begin with. The telephone pole on the right side of the house started swaying, if it fell, it would crash through the front of the house, destroying the columns and windows. It seemed to be hanging on by a few wires.

Across the street, the house that they had been working on for a year had completely crumbled. The roof was lying on top of the rubble like the whole thing just dropped down. I prayed that no one was inside. All you could see was the water heater standing in the backyard.

During all this, Sherlock, my American Staffordshire Terrier, did not leave my side. His body was always touching my leg. He looked up at me with his big almond brown eyes with trust that I would protect him from above and he would protect me from below. After the wind died down, I took him outside to go to the bathroom. Our backyard was littered with debris—most of which looked like our roof. The giant terra cotta caps were shattered into pieces everywhere. Tiles were everywhere. Our sweet olive tree looked like it wanted to go over but it was hanging on until help arrived. The orange tree looked like it lost some of its fruit but there were a few left. They will be the best oranges we ever tasted once they ripened in November. Looks like a few screwdrivers for Thanksgiving may happen!

Sherlock cut his paw on the walk. There were some stray dogs in the back and he lunged at them and sliced the fleshy part. There was blood everywhere. We cleaned it up and Kevin bandaged him up with a towel and a shoestring. He was walking like a duck and not happy about it but he was going to be OK.

Wednesday – Part 2

Things I've seen floating down the North Robertson River (formerly North Robertson Street): a sofa (it turned the corner at Governor Nicholls Street and went towards Claiborne), cartons and packs of cigarettes (Spur must have been looted), a dirty diaper, a Cheerio (only one), minnows swimming around, empty liquor bottles—pour spouts still on—probably from Little Dizzy's, an empty keg, a full keg in a boat with two guys pushing it, windows, trash bags full of what looked like supplies, and trash, lots of trash. I keep hoping I will never see a body.

Yesterday John and Kevin went into the French Quarter to check things out. On the way in, a lady on a balcony on Esplanade was white as a sheet so Kevin asked her if she was OK. The person with her said she was having a stroke. Kevin said he would get help in the Quarter. That help never came. The one police officer Kevin could get to talk to him (all the others he said were more interested in the barbecue some-

one was cooking them) said, "Son, this is a disaster zone, there is no help." These guys were 15 on every corner downtown. We never saw one in the Treme. I don't blame them. They said on the radio that looters were shooting the cops. The world seemed to be coming to an end.

When they returned, they had wine. WAHOO! I'm brewing up a batch of cabernet but it won't be ready for 6 weeks. I probably won't be here by then and the crack heads will be drinking it out of plastic cups on my Egyptian Cotton 450 thread count sheets wearing my underwear and jewelry. The world is definitely going to end.

The water service stopped this morning. We have plenty (a 55 gallon drum full) but I will miss those long showers. I knew I should have had one first thing this morning. Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda.

Right now I'm sitting on the front porch watching the neighbors across the street fight. She locked him out last night and he had to sleep in the half flooded Dodge Ram sitting in the river in front of their house. He's already mad at us because John videotaped him looting the pharmacy and running out with an armload of pills. Honestly, this is like an HBO show. Not something happy like Sex and the City but something more gritty—think Hookers at the Point—lots of big nasty curse words and I Work Too, blah, blah, blah. This would make a great reality show. Too bad we are out of camcorder battery. OK—his wife kicked him out 6 months ago in the freezing cold and then threw cold water on him through the bars on the front door. You would think he had secured his own key by now. What a maroon.

A little pit bull has been stalking our back yard for a few days now. He's small and chestnut brown. He's really cute and seems very sweet. I'm sure that would change if I was holding a cheeseburger. John walked him to the Quarter but he came right back to the house. If we weren't dealing with a horrible disaster and didn't need another mouth to feed, I would keep him. I started secretly feeding him so Kevin wouldn't get mad for wasting food but it turns out Kev was doing the same. We cooked all the

meat in the fridge because it was about to go bad and the little guy must have eaten 7 hamburgers and 2 steaks. On a side note, I believe this goes along with Murphy's Law, as soon as you fill your freezer completely with expensive meat, you will lose power.

I took Sherlock outside to go to the bathroom (would it be called "going to the bathroom" if he does his business on the ground?) Anyway, the little guy came up to us wagging his tail. Sherlock made the deepest guttural growl I have ever heard and attacked him—it looked like he was going for his neck. I had to pull him off using every muscle I had. I know he was just protecting me. You would think the little guy would have taken off after that but nope. I called him every name in the book (not curse words but dog names) and he didn't seem to recognize any of them until I said "Dude." After that he was Dude. Now we only needed another named "Sweet" and we would be all set.

I can see hundreds of people walking on the interstate from my front balcony. They all have backpacks and bags. That may be us soon. If so, I'm wearing my pink go-go boots and hot pink wig. That would make the news for sure.

They are now evacuating the entire parish—including the Superdome. The world is not coming to an end—just New Orleans it seems. I haven't left my island since it all happened. Island Fever has set in—along with exhaustion and delirium. We have decided to leave. I have adamantly refused every day so far because I will not leave my dog. John says he will stay at the house until the water goes down and he will get my car out of the driveway and take the dog. I hope he's not just saying that. It will break my heart to think that Sherlock is left alone in the house starving and sad. Dogs are not supposed to be sad.

Thursday

We plan to leave today at dusk. We think it will be better to travel at night because of the heat. Who knows how long it will take us to walk to Texas. My brother said he would get us but he can't get into the city. We heard on the radio the

only way out is to cross the Greater New Orleans Bridge to the west bank. Yesterday, I walked to the pay phone on the corner of Esplanade and North Villere. I had to hold my gun up for everyone to see. I didn't want any problems. People left me alone. A lady at the pay phone asked me for money. I was using a credit card to make calls and was tempted to let her use it but no one can be trusted right now. I called Heather, Cathy, Anthony, and Bridget. Anthony said he would come get me. A plan started to form.

Apparently there are thousands of people wandering along the interstate. How could this happen in America? Where is our help? Who's in charge here? I am seriously thinking about not paying taxes ever again.

We have to find a boat and a wagon. I can't leave my pets to die. My soul cannot handle that. John says he will get them out. I trust him but what if he can't? I will go back if he can't. We need to leave soon. We can see fires everywhere. I know there are gas leaks everywhere. You can smell it in the air.

We make a plan to leave in the morning instead. Daylight seems to be safer now—even with the hot sun. We hear fewer gunshots during the day. I packed our bag. All I put in there was a change of clothes for me and Kev, the hard drives from our work computers, MREs and water. There was no room for anything else. We have a blow up bed that we tried to blow up with our own hot air but after hours, it didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Brilliant Kev (BK for short) came up with a really—well, brilliant—idea. He took the blow up bed outside to John's half-submerged car and used the air in the tires to inflate it. We packed our wagon and were set.

That night since it was our last, we had Ms. Bernadette over for a "dinner party." We cooked a frozen pizza, and corned beef hash and Kev made some fried potatoes. We sat on our back parapet listening to the only channel on the radio that worked and ate. I barely ate three bites. I was so nervous about our journey. What would we come up against? What if there was no help anywhere? What if we were attacked and raped?

We tried to sleep but that was a joke. We probably slept for an hour tops and we got up at 4a.m. to double check our little red wagon and bag. We all sat around waiting for any bit of light outside. Everyone was on edge—Kevin was in survival mode and John was acting a little crazy. They were both nervous. I was trying not to cry. I was scared but it was time to leave everything we had.

I took my dog's head in my hands and looked in his eyes. "Make it back to me my baby" I told him and gave him a hug. I cried.

Over the last 2 years, we spent every penny and weekend working on that house. Every Saturday we were up at 6 a.m. to renovate and work. It was our life savings. Now it was destroyed and we had to leave it with everything else in the world we owned. All our pictures and books and clothes and furniture. We were certain that with more rain, the entire house would be soggy and ruined. What good is all that stuff anyway if you're dead, right?

Friday—Escape from Mordor

We set out at dawn-tired and scared. No one could eat before the journey. Funny how that works. You can eat your little heart out when there is no life or death emergency and you don't need all the calories but when you really need them, they would come right back up. I guess we're not all that evolved after all.

So long and thanks for all the fish. . . .

We went through the backyard across the downed back fence. We didn't want to go through the front or the crack heads would see us leaving and know John was there alone. John came with us to carry the water bucket and blow up bed to bring back to the house. We put the bed in the water on Esplanade. I could hear my dog howling at the back door. It was breaking my already sore heart. Giant crocodile tears began to well up in my eyes. Kevin looked at me and told me to put those emotions in a drawer and save them for later. We could not appear weak. He was right. I didn't look back at the

house and I blocked my ears. Ms. Bernadette was on her front porch waving at us looking very sad. She was worried about us and for her own safety when we left. John would help her all he could.

We put the blowup bed in the water and put the red wagon and fresh water bucket on top, and set off into the unknown. Esplanade looked like a giant swamp. The water burned my legs. It was thigh deep and little things were nipping at my legs. I kept thinking an arm would reach through the water and try to pull me down into it. I cursed myself for watching all those Friday the 13th movies. We made it to Claiborne and took a left to get up on the Esplanade exit off of I-10. There was a tiny kitten underneath the overpass. He was meowing for us to help him. It was so sad. I wanted to take him with us but we had to save ourselves.

We made it to the ramp and once we got out of the water, we stripped off all our clothes with the nasty sewer water and showered ourselves with the fresh water from the bucket. A guy was on his balcony watching me. He got quite an eyeful. My big stripper debut and it was the end of the world—go figure. We then put our only other clothes in the world on and hugged John goodbye. We were all trying not to cry.

Kevin and I set off pulling our little red wagon by ropes—we each had one. We had our Jazz Fest hats on. I thought if someone saw our hats, they would pick us up. Everyone is nice at Jazz Fest, right? When we got to the top of the interstate I looked at Kevin and told him we were like Sam and Frodo leaving Mordor. He laughed with me and it felt good. We had a lot of hope. And hope is a powerful thing.

The interstate was more like the end of the world than anything I had ever seen. You could see the giant smoke plumes from the fires everywhere. There was trash along the road as far as the eye could see. We walked by a blind man sitting on the ground and he said "Good morning." I guess we weren't as quiet as we thought. We got to Tulane Avenue and looked at Charity Hospital. The water must have been 10 feet high at that point. Thank God we were on the interstate

looking down at it instead of sloshing around in it.

There was human feces everywhere. It was sickening. We saw people who had gone to the bathroom on themselves. We saw them sprawled out on the ground. I would like to think they were sleeping and not dead but when I think back—it could have been either. There were many, many people just sitting around. Old, young, weak, and strong. They seemed to be waiting for something that was not ever going to come. Many were in a daze and just wandering around. It reminded me of the movie *28 Days Later* where the zombies roamed around and there was nothing else that resembled any form of sanity. They looked at us like we were there to help them. I wish I could have but we needed to get ourselves out first.

A lady in her early forties came up to us and said she had been there since Tuesday—just wandering the interstate. Why were these people just sitting there? **THERE IS NO HELP!** I wanted to scream at them to get themselves out but I kept my eyes straight ahead and concentrated on the task of pulling our little red wagon to the Greater New Orleans Bridge. They said on the radio that this was the only way out.

DRYLAND IS A MYTH. Of course, random movie quotes and songs were going through our heads. We started singing. . . .

One way . . . or another . . . I'm gonna find ya . . .
. I'm gonna getcha, getcha, getcha, getcha. . . .

Don't WANT to live like a refugee . . . don't want to live like a refugee eeee. . . .

We got to where the Superdome was next to the interstate and we looked down at the chaos. Thousands of people were moving around. We could see busses under water nearby but none close to pick anyone up. The Superdome was never an option for us. We considered it for one short second and then realized it was a worse place than where we were. We saw where the roof to the Dome was ripped apart. Good thing we didn't get season tickets to Saints games this year.

While we were passing where everyone was waiting to go down the ramp to the Dome, an elderly Vietnamese lady grabbed my arm. She asked where we were going. I told her we were walking out. Her eyes pleaded with me to help her. Her husband had a cane and could barely walk. We couldn't help them. I felt so sad for them. They didn't belong there. Honestly nobody belonged up there but some more than others. I smiled at her and said someone would come to take them to the buses. I hoped that wasn't a lie.

We kept going and got to the top of the turn towards the bridge and stopped. We looked at the city. It was a mess. We wondered what would become of New Orleans. Would there be another Mardi Gras? Jazz Fest? So many fires and so much water. How could anyone begin to fathom what it would take to fix this mess? We shared a bottled water and kept moving. We had places to go (not sure where yet) and people to see.

Along the walk we saw a couple of abandoned police cars, army tanks, and prison busses. All were empty and looted. Where were all these people?? What the hell was going on?

One way or another . . . I'm gonna find ya. . . .

As we approached the hill up to the bridge, we saw a lot of people coming back down. I started to get scared. Why were they coming back? **THAT'S THE WAY OUT!** A group yelled at us that they would not let you through without a Jefferson Parish ID. We had a business in Jefferson Parish—surely they would let us through. As we approached the top, we saw a group of people sitting by the side with their hands up. I thought it was very sweet they were praying. I told Kevin this and he said they looked more like they were under arrest. They had kids with them—how could they be under arrest? We saw police cars at the top of the entrance to the bridge. We saw guys in camouflage holding shotguns. **OH MY GOD—PROTECTION!** I was smiling—we would get help up there.

A young guy in camo pants and a light colored shirt pointed his gun at us and yelled for us to

get off the bridge. It was then that I realized these guys may be worse than the looters. Kevin yelled at him that the bridge is the only way out of the city that wasn't underwater. He chambered a round and fired over our heads. I felt like the world would never be the same for me. It all came crashing down right then. Kevin started yelling at the guy, "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Then the guy started chasing at us with the rifle pointed our way. We started running. I was sobbing with my whole weary body as I ran pulling the wagon. How could this be happening? How could our government let us down like this? We were being attacked by the very people who swore to protect and serve us. I HATE GRETNA POLICE. I am going to have T-shirts made. "I survived Hurricane Katrina and all I got was shot at by the crummy Gretna police." We had our Jazz Fest hats on. How do you fire a gun at someone in a straw hat? Now what? I was not going back towards the Superdome. It was surely the best way to die fast.

One of the prayers (I know, they were detainees) yelled at us to get in a car to get across the bridge. She was very earthy with blonde dreads and Birkenstocks. How do you arrest someone in Birkenstocks? Thank you ma'am for helping us. I owe you a drink.

We started flagging down cars. No one would stop. There were policemen in unmarked cars and they averted their eyes when they passed us. They had empty SUVs and still wouldn't help us. Finally, I jumped in front of a car. They would have to run me over. It was a family with an almost packed vehicle. They said they were picking people up on the other side of the bridge. We asked if they could just take us that far and they said OK. They tried to split up me and Kev between the two cars they had caravanning but Kev insisted on riding with me. They took us to the other side and dropped us off at an abandoned gas station where they were supposed to pick up someone. We hugged them all and thanked them profusely. They would have some good karma to them. They saved us from Mordor—the way out was being guarded by some over zealous Orcs who didn't care about

human lives. What happened to life over property? Did people in Jazz Fest hats strike anyone as looters? I'm sorry but I've been to Gretna before and there is nothing there worth more than anyone's life.

After we got to the gas station, we saw some police there. They were standing with four empty buses. Kev didn't want to get close to them to ask where we could catch a bus to Texas. I walked up to one of them and I was scared. Would he try to shoot me? I walked up and he stared at me like I was from Mars and told me the buses were not for me but employees at Murphy Oil. Yeah, that's nice. So where do I get one, butthead? I didn't actually call him a butthead out loud but I sure did think it. He had no knowledge whatsoever to help me. He was just there to get the Murphy guys out. Thanks man, you were just as worthless as the rest of the authorities out there.

We started talking to two girls in a blue truck. They were very cool and lived in the Marigny. They agreed to take us to the I-310 on ramp in Boutte. (THANK YOU AMBER—WE OWE YOU BIG TIME). We were so happy to be riding in a vehicle. We saw so many people walking down the interstate with their bags. Entire families. We sat in the back of the truck with the wind blowing on us feeling safe at last. Kev and I held hands and stared at each other. We were making progress towards a new home, life, place, or whatever. We were making progress.

They dropped us off where they promised. They were awesome. More good karma. I hope I can sit down with them and their families one day and have some drinks. Talk about our stories. They helped us remember that human beings can be good and kind. We weren't the only nice people left in the world, and that made me happy. Maybe life would go on.

Once on the 310 on ramp, I pulled out the sign I made on a legal sized folder. It said "NICE PEOPLE NEED RIDE TO TEXAS" and had a big smiley face. I figured that murderers don't put smiley faces on their hitchhiker's signs. We hoped that other people realized it too. So many cars passed us, reading the sign and smiling.

STOP AND PICK US UP PEOPLE!
HELLLLLLLLLLLP!!! THROW US A
BONE!!!!!!! Finally a giant red truck pulled
over and told us they could take us as far as
LaPlace. WAHOOOOO! They were a husband
and wife with their daughter in the cab. Once we
got in, the little girl waved to us in the back of
the truck. We waved back. Innocence was still
alive. It made us feel good.

They dropped us off in LaPlace and we saw
hundreds of buses parked at another abandoned
gas station. There were hundreds of policemen
and army personnel walking around. We pulled
our red wagon up into the parking lot—not sure
if there would be any help or what we would
encounter. Kevin asked a state trooper if we
could wait there for someone to pick us up and
he said we could. He asked Kevin if he was
armed. Kev said yes but we would leave if we
had to surrender the weapon. State Trooper said
we could keep it but if there was any trouble
with the other refugees waiting there, let them
handle it. No problema, señor. We pulled our
wagon to the shade and sat down and cried and
hugged each other. Then the media swarmed.

I'm guessing that the only reason they swarmed
us was because we were the most presentable of
the bunch. They filmed us crying, interviewed us
and after a few hours, they still didn't go away.
Norway, California, France, England. The Brit-
ish guy was the coolest. I will invite him to the
wedding. He says we should have it whether the
house is finished or not. Kind of like a FU
Katrina; you can't keep us down.

People started trickling in from the highway.
There was one family that didn't wash the muck
off before they walked and their feet looked like
they were falling off piece by piece. It was sad.
We started helping everyone that staggered up.
Feeding them MREs and giving them water.
They thought we were volunteers until they
asked for money. I had to tell the lady that we
came out of New Orleans too. They stared at us
unbelieving.

I would like to take this opportunity to give a
shout out to the makers of MREs. I like that they
have several courses—the cheese and cracker

part being my fave. I keep singing the Bud-
weiser song with my own words: real american
heroes . . . mr. mre maker mannnnnn. . . .

We stayed and waited for my brother to get
there. We fed babies and put water on busses.
We cried and laughed. A van from a Baptist
church pulled up with boxes and boxes of food. I
was too digging on the MREs to get a box but
we got a ½ gallon of ICEY orange juice. ICE,
YEE HAWWW!!! It was the best OJ I had ever
had in my life. We sat on the curb sharing it in
plastic cups. A young boy walked by with his
mother and Kevin offered him a glass. He took it
reservedly, tasted it, and lit up. It must have
been his first icy experience in days as well. We
filled his cup several times. He walked off
happy.

We finally saw my brother's SUV pulling into
the parking lot. I ran up to him and hugged him.
We were both sobbing. We packed our stuff up
and got on the road. We were finally safe.

He took us to Outback Steakhouse on the way to
Baytown, Texas. I had a cold beer and laughed.
It was so good. I felt like a human being again.
The salad. Oooooooooohhhhhhhh the salad.
Fresh raw cold veggies. I was so happy and I
cried again.

Back in NOLA

We're back in New Orleans now. The National
Guard rescued my dog and we busted him out of
puppy jail in Baton Rouge. We are working
every day to rebuild our house and our
neighborhood.

It was never a question of "if" we would go back
but "when." Yes, it's hard here but it's home.
New Orleans has a way of getting in your soul
like no other city in the world. Life throws you
lemons; make lemon drop shots.

The city will repopulate on its own. There is a
something in this city that draws its people back
and makes believers of skeptics. The way of life
is something I could never give up.

You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only
one. . . .

(Sorry to cheese up your song John L but it was
appropriate).

Cheers and Peace.