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The Old Man

My journalism career began in 1982, at a dreary trade newspaper called *Energy User News*. About a dozen of us worked out of a musty cave of an office in lower Manhattan, writing about fluidized-bed combustion boilers and dreaming about Woodward and Bernstein. Our boss was a genial, if somewhat dorky, guy named Bob Butler who wore wide polyester ties and talked vaguely of writing novels on legal pads as he rode in on the Long Island Rail Road. He has since become known as Robert Olen Butler, the winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Lately, a line spoken by a character in Bob's first book, "The Alleys of Eden," has been on my mind. The character is Vietnamese, newly immigrated to the United States, and she notes that Americans don't seem to enjoy their rivers very much. This wasn't always true in New Orleans, but it is now. In the eighties, after containerized shipping put an end to generations of working-class prosperity earned along the wharves, developers built a mall that doesn't attract many shoppers, as well as a riverfront park that runs along the length of the French Quarter. Margaret and I ride our bicycles in the park just about every day, because it's a quick and traffic-free way for us to get downtown from the Bywater. It's a great place to watch the river. Tugboats push barges up and down, and gigantic oceangoing freighters and tankers stream by, bilgewater pouring from their anchor ports. But, even though it's within walking distance of downtown and is served by one of the few remaining streetcar lines, I've never once heard a New Orleanian say, "Meet me there." The only locals who ever seem to visit the place are the ones who enjoy their libations en papillote—wrapped in brown paper.

Among the park's highlights are the Monument to the Immigrant, a stylized marble statue by Franco Allesandrini.



A little farther up sits a lifesize bronze statue of local businessman and philanthropist Malcolm Woldenberg, for whom the park is named. He sits on a bench talking to an equally realistic bronze boy. Woldenberg is portrayed as a conservatively dressed man in his sixties, going bald, who, for perverse New Orleans reasons of his own, favored wildly upswept punk glasses. Well, that's New Orleans, I thought; even the revered city fathers are a little twisted. Then I realized that some knucklehead had climbed atop Woldenberg's metal back and wrenched the poor man's stately horn-rims upward. The effect, I regret to say, is hilarious.

An old paddle-wheel riverboat, the Natchez, operates cruises up and down the river; we haven't taken it yet, for the same reason that I lived in New York for years before visiting the Statue of Liberty. Atop the Natchez is a device that I intend to learn more about: a huge brass calliope. The first time I heard it, I was miles away. Then, when I heard it up close, it sounded like a particularly annoying electronic recording. It consists, however, of a battery of brass pipes, maybe ten feet long and several rows deep. A few yards away stands a keyboard, like an upright piano. On nice days, a heavysset person with long gray hair stands at the keyboard, and with every stroke a jet of steam rockets out of one of the pipes. As the loopy old-time music—"Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Darktown Strutters' Ball," and the like—wails across the river, the battery of pipes spews clouds of steam like an industrial-age vision of Hell. Maintaining the instrument must take many hours and many dollars. Some people in New Orleans hate it for the whooping sounds it imposes on everybody downtown; I find it enchanting.

Permalink

March 29, 2007

Buckwheat

Roger and Anthony are still in the pleasant housing project of neat brick duplexes in Newport, Tennessee, where I found them a year ago. They share a two-room apartment. Anthony has one room, and Roger shares the other with a sunny young woman named Trista, whom he met since my last visit. Trista had three young daughters when she met Roger; they've since had a fourth together, Shikara. The children live nearby, with Trista's mother. During the weekend I spent in Newport, she was always about to bring them over, but it never quite happened.

Other than the addition of Trista to the household, the lives of Roger and Anthony look about the same as they did a year ago—long days hanging around the apartment in a fog of Bronco menthol-cigarette smoke. A lot of their story was told by the documents in Anthony's manila folder. In January, a letter from the Newport Housing Authority informed him that eighty-five dollars was past due: fifty in rent and thirty-five in various charges. "If we have to evict you," the letter said, "you may be liable for two hundred dollars in court costs." Then another letter came from the Housing Authority, saying, "Katrina victims were to have received an initial payment of \$2,000 each from FEMA to pay for housing, etc. As far as I know the Newport Housing Authority did not receive any of these funds." The letter said that the brothers owed a total of \$1,025.06, and ordered them to be out of the apartment by February 19th. By making small payments, Roger and Anthony were able to avoid eviction.

Part of the the Housing Authority's problem with the Wells brothers seems to stem from what Roger describes as a mistake that Anthony made last year: he got a job. Anthony went to work at Wal-Mart. He had to walk two miles each way, because the brothers had no car then and Newport has no buses. First, Wal-Mart put him in the garden department, which he liked. "How are you today, Ma'am, and what would you like to plant?" Anthony said, pursing his lips, in a caricature of a white person speaking. He was soon moved to the warehouse, which was hard for a fifty-six-year-old man. Worse, his twenty-something white foreman insisted on calling him Buckwheat. It's been a long time since a white man in New Orleans tried calling a black man Buckwheat. "Here it's like going back in time," Anthony told me. "The white people think everything is theirs, and the blacks got to get what they give 'em. You go to a fast-food joint, it's like they don't see you. The only reason we're not sitting in the back of the bus is because they got no buses."

Once Anthony got his seven-something-an-hour job, the rent on their apartment shot up, from fifty dollars to three hundred ninety-seven dollars a month, so more than forty hours of every month's work went just to paying the increase. Anthony lasted six months, then argued with the store's assistant manager and was fired. Anthony appealed to the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development for unemployment benefits. A week before I arrived, the Labor Department's tribunal wrote to say that they'd found no evidence he'd been insubordinate and that his boss hadn't addressed the racial slurs he'd endured. Anthony said that he expects to receive a hundred twenty-seven dollars a week for thirteen weeks, with the possibility of an extension for another thirteen weeks.

Around the time that Anthony got the news from the tribunal, a letter from the U.S. Department of Education arrived, claiming that he owed the government \$12,354.30. In 1986, Anthony enrolled in a security and private-investigator class with a trade school on Canal Street, in New Orleans. As part of a federally funded job-training program, the school applied for, and apparently received, a forty-eight-hundred-dollar Education Department grant to cover Anthony's tuition. As Anthony tells it, he went to class for about six weeks, three times a week, until one day he showed up and the school was gone. The whole thing was a scam, he said, and now the government wants its money back from him, along with about seventy-five hundred dollars in interest, penalties, and other costs. I asked whether Anthony hadn't just stopped going to class, and this was the result. "No, man!" he said. "We was about to get taken for target practice, and then we was going to get our little badge and gun and shit!"

We were sitting around on Saturday. Trista had just plugged in a little crockpot full of potpourri, and soon the aroma of lavender and wild cherry was competing with the menthol-tobacco smoke. The mail arrived, and Roger lit up when he found an envelope from FEMA. But, as he read the letter, his face knotted like a cinnamon roll. He tossed it at me: "During our audit a review of your case showed that you were not eligible

for some or all of the funds that FEMA provided to you,” it said. FEMA was now demanding that Roger send back the two thousand dollars in emergency help he’d received soon after the storm, because the address he’d put down in New Orleans was not, FEMA said, his primary home. The letter invited Roger to send the money in right away to avoid interest and penalties. “Please note,” it continued, “that even if you made or make repayment in full, the United States does not waive its right to pursue any applicable civil or criminal remedies.” Roger threw the letter on the coffee table, among the ash trays and Bud Light cans. Several times during the weekend, Anthony told me that he would leave the projects and get himself a nice little house, if only he could get “the right kind of assistance.” But, according to the letters he and Roger showed me, the Wells brothers owe various agencies a total of \$15,379.36. Because of the Education Department debt, the I.R.S. kept the seven-hundred-dollar tax refund that Anthony had been expecting.

The brothers were starting to drive each other nuts. When they got me alone, each told me he was fed up with the other thinking that the world owes him a living. Both said they suffer from high blood pressure and anxiety. Anthony brought out some bottles of pills he’d recently been given at a free clinic: the antidepressants Citalopram and Trazodone. “I wake up hollering,” he said. “Just the other night I was dreaming I was in a place, L.A. or somewhere. Wasn’t New Orleans. And there were these people trying to kill me. These dudes got big Rottweilers, pit bulls. Roger and Trista had to come in and wake me up.”

“Yeah,” Roger said. “He was yelling, ‘Get them off me! Get them off me!’”

Permalink

March 28, 2007

No Glitter

Seven months after meeting the Wells brothers, during the evacuation of New Orleans, I flew to Tennessee to visit them. It took some work to find them; they’d ended up in an apartment in a housing project in Newport, about forty minutes outside Knoxville. They had no car, and buses don’t serve the area, so they had no way of getting to a job, even if they’d wanted one. Roger, who has a talent for flowery calligraphy and drawing big-eyed puppies, was trying to sell handmade greeting cards, but had had little success. Mostly, the brothers were living on food stamps and passing the time. They played the card game War as I imagine they did as children—holding the cards high above their heads and slapping them down with their whole bodies, laughing and teasing: “Shut up.” “*You* shut up.”

Anthony had a ragged folder full of worn and folded documents, among them a letter from FEMA granting twenty-two hundred forty-seven dollars in renter's assistance. Unfortunately, the letter was addressed to Carmelita Waterhouse, a person Anthony didn't know. Neither did he have any idea how to sort out the mistake. For Mardi Gras, Roger made a couple of paper masks to cheer them up, but he "couldn't get no glitter"; they shared a single strand of red plastic beads. Roger reminisced about how he used to walk around the corner every day to cook breakfast for his eighty-seven-year-old Uncle Bud. "He had lots of children, but three of his sons got killed, all of them blown away," he said.

Over lunch at a nearby buffet, the Wells brothers talked loudly about how happy they were in Newport. "If I'd a known a place like this existed, I probably would have left New Orleans before," Roger said. "I thought New Orleans women were something, but they got some Tennessee women—mmm-mm! Treat you like a king." Roger has struggled all his life with drug addiction, and he praised Tennessee for providing fewer temptations. "There's less of that here. In New Orleans, it was right there on the street. Open the door, it's right there. Curb service!"

The Wells brothers kept up their cheerful banter all the way back to their apartment. But Newport was the antithesis of New Orleans—as white, Baptist, and conservative as New Orleans was black, Catholic, and wild. As I was leaving, Anthony, sprawled in a chair, reached up to shake my hand, and held it tightly. His face was drawn, his eyes wet. "It ain't home, man," he whispered.

Anthony said he missed the constant noise on America Street, in the Ninth Ward—the roar of nearby Interstate 10, the pool hall downstairs, even the shooting. He'd known everybody in his neighborhood since he was a boy, and he'd seen them every day. Now he sees nobody but Roger. At home, someone was always ready to feed him a meal or spot him a few dollars. Sooner or later, he worried, Tennessee was going to roll up the welcome mat, and then he and his brother would be utterly adrift.

After leaving the brothers, I drove back to Knoxville and visited Parinda Khatri, a clinical psychologist. She told me that the majority of evacuees she was seeing initially said they'd never go back to New Orleans, but that didn't last. "They say, 'At three o'clock in the morning, there's nothing here,' or, 'The smell is different,'" she said. "They ache for it. I've had people say, 'I can't find a stoop to sit on, or a saxophone to listen to at night.'"

Then I met with Bill Haslam, the mayor of Knoxville, and Mike Ragsdale, the mayor of Knox County, cheerful, moderate Republicans who work in offices down the hall from each other. They said that Knoxville originally expected about fifteen thousand evacuees. “You walk up the ramp of the plane,” Haslam said, “and you see people holding garbage bags, people who should be in a nursing home, a lady with seven dogs, people with snakes.”

“There was a lady in a bathrobe and a wheelchair, with a dog on her lap,” Ragsdale said. “To call this animal a mixed breed was to give it a very high compliment. This lady needed to go to the hospital. They were explaining to the woman, ‘We can’t take the dog to the hospital, but we’ll take good care of him for you.’ She said, ‘Honey, all I have in the world is this housecoat and this dog.’ I made an executive decision to make that dog a service dog so she could take it along.”

“Street musicians!” Haslam said. “Ladies of the night! And about forty-five animals! It was wild. And then you had these white-bread, suburban, Evangelical churches dealing with them. Well, it was something to see.”

Knox County ultimately ended up with about four hundred evacuees who had no place else to go; they were folded into the region’s indigent population without adding much strain to the system. “It isn’t that we’re going to have to raise taxes because of them,” Haslam said.

A week after I left Tennessee, a letter arrived at my home. In a shaky hand, Anthony Wells had written, “I didn’t really want to say a lot about living here, but really I don’t like it. Roger has fell for this girl and lost focus on things.... Yes I want to go back home to New Orleans you know. But things are not fix yet.”

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March 27, 2007

The Heebie-Jeebies

This is a story I have to tell in several parts. It begins for me on September 8, 2005, ten days after the flood, at the teeming and fetid Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, in New Orleans. That’s where I first met the

two men I've mentioned in this column before as the Stingy-Brim brothers.

The people boarding the evacuation buses that day were the holdouts—too poor to leave before the storm, too stubborn or frightened to leave afterward. (Some New Orleanians had already begun objecting to the term “refugee,” and one man shouted to nobody in particular, “I ain’t no refugee! I ain’t no evacuee! I’m a motherfuckin’ evictee!”) Many had never left New Orleans at all; a good number may never even have left the neighborhoods where they were born. As the crisis wore on, they either were brought to the convention center forcibly, by police, or dragged themselves in, defeated by thirst, hunger, and heat. For many, it was a moment of bottomless despair.

A Harrah’s Casino bus was waiting to take the holdouts to Louis Armstrong International Airport. As they climbed aboard, a slasher movie called “Wrong Turn” was playing on a screen near the front. A thrown axe decapitated a pretty young woman hiding in a tree, and the camera followed her headless body as it plummeted through the branches. “Damn!” a wild-eyed man shouted approvingly; a woman in the back cried, “Why are they showing us this?” As we waited, we could either watch the movie or look out the window at Vice-President Dick Cheney. He walked across a parking lot, surrounded by aides and cameras, and climbed into a green-and-white helicopter that churned dust as it lifted off. “Wrong Turn” ended and “Ray” came on, with loving scenes of poor black families and jazz counterculture. In some ways, it was more painful to watch than the slasher movie. The bus went quiet, tear-streaked faces gazing up at the screen. Then we were rolling through eerily deserted streets.

The wild-eyed man who’d liked the slasher movie was forty-nine-year-old Roger Wells. With him was his fifty-five-year-old brother, Anthony. If Damon Runyan had written about black people, he might have created Roger and Anthony. They alternately quoted Scripture (“God said he wouldn’t destroy the world by water. That’s why there’s rainbows: God’s promise to the world”) and unspooled stories about living in the cracks of the old New Orleans economy (“You can make thirty, forty dollars in a day gathering cans”). Roger was compact and animated to the point of jumpy; his frequent wide smile revealed a missing tooth. Anthony was quieter and more ruminative. Wiry and gray-haired, with a gray bristle mustache, he wore a snappy stingy-brim balanced on the back of his head. His voice quavered when he spoke of New Orleans. “Won’t be anybody there to sing the blues no more, and you need the blues,” he said. “When you got the blues, you shake off the heebie-jeebies. The heebie-jeebies’ll kill you straight out.” Near as I can tell, the “heebie-jeebies” was Anthony’s way of describing the anxiety of being poor.

At the airport, National Guardsmen and Louisiana state policemen divided up the frightened, exhausted crowd into groups of about fifty. The Wells brothers and their group were shown to Gate C-5, which is where a Transportation Security Administration air marshal spotted me, flew into a noisy rage because a reporter was planning to take an evacuee's seat on a plane, and kicked me out of the airport at midnight. But as the Wells brothers told me later, they sat at the gate until 2 a.m., when they were herded across the tarmac onto a Delta jet. "First class!" Anthony told me. "Other people went on an Army plane or some shit. We had our little peanuts, our little drink." It wasn't until they landed, in the predawn gloom, that they were told they were in Nashville, Tennessee. Then they were put on buses—dogs, cats, and all—to Knoxville.

I caught up with the Wells brothers the next day at the shelter in Knoxville, a big basketball arena full of Army cots. A pretty blond Red Cross volunteer was sitting on Roger's bunk, helping him set up a cell phone that he'd bought with a debit card provided by the Red Cross. Anthony leaned back on his bunk, put his hands behind his head, and rolled a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "We went from station to station, getting I.D.s, answering questions, getting medication," he said. "We got a hot shower, hot food, a shave. Nice bed. Red Cross gave me a hundred dollars." He paused. "Only thing missing is, I ain't got no place to go."

Permalink

March 26, 2007

Small Potatoes

We finally became victims of a crime. Someone tried to steal our seven-year-old Toyota Camry, and, in the process, smashed the passenger-side door handle. By the standards of the current mayhem in New Orleans, it was barely worth mentioning. I'd like to say that we didn't call the police because we figured, well, they have enough to do. But reporting the crime never even occurred to us.

That's particularly embarrassing because, the night it happened, I spent several hours riding around with a grizzled New Orleans police sergeant, a friend of someone I'm writing about in my book. In the course of the night, he responded to one rape; the rest of the time we spent driving through his blighted district's nearly deserted streets, puzzling over poorly written patrolmen's reports in the trailer that served as his station house, and eating fried things with Coke at the Beach Corner Lounge, in fellowship with some Louisiana National Guardsmen.

This sergeant was as frustrated with the crime in New Orleans as anybody—he said he'd never seen police morale so low—and, in the manner of cops everywhere, he grew positively operatic about the need for civic involvement in reducing crime. The number of people actually committing violence in New Orleans is tiny, maybe fewer than a thousand really bad guys, he said, hunching over the wheel and staring into the darkness—which is from where, for all I knew, he was pulling his statistics. “Those knuckleheads won't stop until the rest of the hundred and ninety-nine thousand people in this city say they're tired of being held hostage, and start helping the police.” Which isn't likely to happen any time soon. Relations between the people and the N.O.P.D. are so rotten that, when a burglar took a shot at the sergeant, some years back, the district attorney declined to prosecute. There was too great a chance that the jury would side with the burglar.

The door handle of the Camry must have been shattered some time between five a.m., when I returned home, and daybreak. Margaret and I shrugged, called the Toyota dealer to order the part, and went about our day. Our landlord, when we told him about it, was furious. Petty crime has whittled away his porch furniture, his bicycle, even a couple of cement planters he used to keep in front of the house. And major crime put a bullet in his back a few years ago. (It's still in his body; the Charity Hospital emergency-room doctors wanted to send him home the same night, until they found out he was a lawyer.) “Call the police!” he said. “They have to know this happened. They do nothing, and when we complain, they say, ‘nobody ever reports it to us.’ Well, nobody ever reports it because they do nothing.” He scowled at the broken door handle, then turned toward the house. “Wait here,” he said.

He returned with a copy of the Times-Picayune. On the editorial page was a letter from a man named Robert Stickney who said that his fifteen-year-old son had been assaulted the day before by four teen-agers who took his money and his bicycle. The kid called 911, Stickney wrote, and eighteen hours later was still waiting for a police officer to show up to take the report.

We hated to lift the phone. Brenda Marie Osbey, the poet laureate of Louisiana, was scheduled to begin reading at the Gold Mine Saloon in the French Quarter in half an hour. Good citizenship, however, has its price. We called our local police station and started the clock. Our evening ruined, we put in the oven a shrimp-and-crabmeat-stuffed bell pepper we'd bought in Cajun country and debated whether we should risk a charge of misdemeanor possession of a steamed green vegetable by putting some broccoli on the stove. Fifty-one minutes later, we heard a knock, and a smiling, immaculately groomed police officer stood at the door.

I'm not going to identify the officer. I want to, but the officer refused to give me permission. Ask an N.O.P.D. officer, while wearing a press card, if he thinks it might rain, and most likely he'll direct your inquiry to a spokesman in the superintendent's office—and calls to that number usually disappear down the voice-mail hole. It's a pity. Years of high-profile brutality and corruption, the actions of a few officers during the storm, and the recent wave of killings have alienated the department from the people it serves. But most N.O.P.D. officers are committed public servants. A positive story about an N.O.P.D. officer might do the department good.

Before leaving our house that evening, the officer handed us a slip of paper neatly printed with our case number, some advice about discouraging further crime, and, in a very New Orleans touch, a hug. Now Margaret and I can look forward to getting a taste of what it really means to live here nowadays. We will begin fighting our insurance company.

Permalink

March 23, 2007

Bang

As the weather warms in New Orleans, thoughts turn to second lines, Easter clothes, barbecues, and hurricanes. The Atlantic hurricane season doesn't begin until June 1st, but this is a good time to begin thinking about laying in sheets of plywood before the prices go up, and maybe that sweet little generator one always keeps putting off buying. Another good pre-hurricane-season ritual is a trip out to the Pontchartrain Center, in Kenner, for the Great Southern Gun and Knife Show.

I'd be hard put to guess whether there are more trombones or firearms in the city of New Orleans. This isn't a gun culture like Texas, where people walk around with pistols on their hips or rifles racked in the back of their pickups. I don't see a lot of National Rifle Association caps, or hear much yammering about the Second Amendment. People here don't talk about guns, they don't celebrate guns, they don't elect or oust politicians on the basis of their stand on guns. But just about everybody, it seems, has a gun. Judging by the number of young black men who die by gunfire every month, many black residents appear to be heavily armed. During the flood, I had numerous guns pointed at me, but only by white New Orleanians, never by an African-American. Not a scientific study, I know, but it made an impression.

A few months after Hurricane Katrina, I attended the first New Orleans-area gun show since the storm. I happen to be a hunter and a collector of old guns, when I can find them cheap enough, but I went because an uptown friend of mine had told me, “The blacks are up-arming to pump-action shotguns,” and I wanted to ascertain the veracity of his claim. The show was a free-for-all—crowded and noisy, the air a-clack with bolts being snapped and a-sizzle with demonstration stun-gun jolts. Nobody was paying any attention at all to the Civil War muzzle-loaders or the elegant over-and-under fowling pieces. Portly white-haired men in yellow pants bought short black riot guns, and women who could be their sisters squinted down the barrels of Army-issue Berettas. Ten feet away, groups of young black men—gold teeth, baggy shirts, low-hanging pants—clustered sullenly near tables full of hundred-and-thirty-seven-dollar Hi-Point pistols. The atmosphere was tense and vaguely hostile.

Although this year’s show involved having my hand stamped with three block letters—“gun”—that, despite vigorous scrubbing, remained on my skin at an academic dinner party that evening, it was emptier and more civil. People of all ages and walks of life filed amicably among the tables. Historical items and weapons clearly intended for hunting and target-shooting seemed to be attracting buyers. There was only one small display of Nazi memorabilia, no Klan literature, and no booth for the survivalists who buy ammunition by the thousand-round can and tracts with titles such as “First Strike” and “Invasion America: Will Your Family Survive?”

We also seem to be in a swale between epochs of Clinton-hating. Time was, it took only a question like “How big a magazine is that?” to set off a twenty-minute tirade about how the 1994 Clinton assault-weapons ban was the first step toward Socialist tyranny. Perhaps the fact that President George W. Bush let the ban expire in 2004 has taken away some of the sting. The absence of any anti-Hillary propaganda at the gun show may be an early harbinger of the viability of her candidacy—though whether it means that firearms enthusiasts hate her less than her husband, or simply take her less seriously, is hard to say.

I stopped by the booth of J & J Guns, of Robert, Louisiana. From the wares laid out on their table and the color picture on their business card, J & J (“Getting the Lead Out”) specializes in AK-47s, from which New Orleans has suffered mightily of late. A young African-American man with short dreadlocks and tattoos all over his neck and forearms picked up a Romanian AK-47, turned it over, sighted quickly down the barrel, and said to the salesman behind the table, “I’ll take this.” The salesman smiled and said, “That’s three hundred fifty dollars plus the tax. Cash or credit card—we have to charge you three per cent more for the credit card.”

“Credit card,” the young man said, handing it over.

“Sit right down here and let me get you to fill out some papers.”

As the customer began filling out the federal firearms-purchase form, I asked him, “What the hell do you need that thing for?”

He looked up and smiled. He was a sweet-looking guy, with none of the gold-tooth menace that often goes with tattoos and dreadlocks here. “I just put it up in the case, that’s all. I got a bunch of guns. I just like having them in the case.” Then he added, “I got a little girl.” Whether that was an explanation for keeping the guns in a case or for having guns in the first place, I couldn’t tell. He handed his paperwork to the salesman, who picked up his cell phone to conduct the instant background check mandated by the Clinton-era Brady Bill, which put an end to the days when guys were swapping submachine guns in the parking lot and filling up Rubbermaid bins with handguns.

Nearby, a Jefferson Parish deputy sheriff was instructing his dreadlocked son, who was nervous about all the recent crime, in what to look for in a shotgun. The deputy sheriff looked at the young man buying the AK-47. “I may well end up looking down the barrel of that gun one night,” he said. “Ever since our fearless leader didn’t renew the ban.” For me, this was a first: criticism of a Republican President at a gun show.

Back at the J & J booth, the salesman closed his cell phone and told his customer, “Nope. Sorry. You got a court order on you.”

The young man cocked an eye at me. “That’s the little girl’s mother,” he said.

“You can go ahead and make the purchase,” the salesman said, “and I can let you pick up the weapon in

twenty-eight days.”

The young man shook his head, putting his whole upper body into it. “No,” he said. “That’s O.K.” He ambled toward the exit. Bill Clinton is still taking the vicious fun out of gun shows.

Permalink

March 22, 2007

Spring Break

Margaret and I were riding our bicycles to an interview when a light drizzle began, just as we were passing Johnny’s Po-Boys, on St. Louis Street. We came in out of the rain and, to be neighborly, forced ourselves to have fried oyster po’boys. Inside, there was a large group of young people wearing T-shirts that read, “Alternative Spring Break.”



Forget for a moment about all the drunken college kids debasing themselves on the beaches of the Gulf Coast or Cancún. This week, New Orleans is crawling with students from all over the United States, spending their own money to gut houses, clear trash, and perform other unpleasant tasks. The kids at Johnny's, who came from the University of Central Florida, in Orlando, were so immaculate and cheerful that they might have been the cast of a touring "Up with People" show or a band of fundamentalist missionaries, only without a whiff of sanctimony: They said they were having a good day, not a "blessed" one. Twenty-year-old Brittany Moscato, a junior majoring in micromolecular biology and Spanish, tried the beachfront spring break during her freshman year. It was fine, she said—and no, she added, she didn't drink herself to incapacitation every day; in fact, she doesn't drink at all. Then, last spring, she came to New Orleans to help out, and got hooked on the sheer joy of service. She could have gone on a cruise this year, but decided instead to shell out a hundred and twenty-five dollars to sleep on the floor of the Luling United Methodist Church and haul moldy wallboard out of ruined houses.

"The culture is amazing here; there's so much history," Ashley Heilman, a freshman, said. Her silver nose ring somehow made her look even more wholesome. "In Orlando, everything is brand new, and it's all about Disney World."

"New Orleans is the only thing these people know," Brittany added. "They can't go live with their cousin in Florida, because their cousin lived down the street."

People in New Orleans appreciate the students' work, they all said. "We'll be driving along, and they'll honk at us and thank us," said Ashley.

Much of the work done by out-of-town student and church groups—clearing trash from empty lots, nailing down roofing tiles, salvaging timber—takes no particular skill. And there are already plenty of idle hands and backs in New Orleans. Often, in fact, a group of, say, Michigan Presbyterians will be hard at work on a house, while, across the street, a group of New Orleanians will be sitting on the stoop, watching them.

This is awkward to talk about in New Orleans, let alone write about, because it gets into the question of class—which in New Orleans, as in many places, unfortunately, becomes a conversation about race. Many New Orleanians—both black and white, but all of them working for a living—have complained to me that

their fellow-residents “need to get off their asses,” and that, much as they appreciate the sentiment behind out-of-towners coming to help, they are embarrassed that New Orleans needs to import people willing to do manual labor.

This conversation quickly leads down a long corridor of on-the-other-hands. The people sitting on stoops all day cannot be expected to spring to their feet with a Protestant-work-ethic gleam in their eye, because they are traumatized and demoralized. On the other hand, so are a lot of people here who get up and go to work every day. For the out-of-towners, a week gutting houses in New Orleans is a lark; they know that in a few days they’ll be back home, in their comfortable lives. Then again, their lives don’t depend on New Orleans reviving. It is fashionable here to say that New Orleanians are weak and welfare-dependent, that their essential character can be boiled down to the Mardi Gras chant, “Throw me something, mister!” But try telling that to fifty-six-year-old Errol Joseph, whose house, along with the houses of his relatives, was flushed out of the Lower Ninth Ward just as he was starting to think about retirement, and who is now back at work remodelling houses and living in a fixer-upper he’s bought in another part of town.

An academic I met the other night told me he thinks that help from outside should take two forms: money and technical expertise. Match outside expertise with local neighborhood sensitivities, and, combined with an infusion of cash, real progress can take place. “Add up all the plane tickets, and the hotel bills, and the restaurant bills of the people who come to help,” he said, “and that’s a lot of money that could be better spent.”

I’m not sure it has to be an either-or proposition. Money and technical expertise are sorely needed here, but I wouldn’t discourage anybody from taking a week of their vacation and coming to do manual labor in New Orleans. There’s plenty of work to be done. And, just as the Peace Corps was created not so much to “help” people in developing countries but to create a cadre of young Americans with a familiarity of and sensitivity to the so-called Third World, cycling fortunate Americans through the ruins of New Orleans is good for the collective American soul.

Permalink

March 21, 2007

The Interventionist

There’s no first-name informality at O. Perry Walker High School. The students are required to wear orange

uniform shirts and khakis, and they call their teachers “Mr.” or “Miss.” Michael Ricks is an exception: he’s known simply as “Big Mike.”

The first time I saw Big Mike, I took him for a senior who, because of Katrina, was taking extra time, and so would be nineteen or twenty when he graduated. He was on a school bus, taking the school band to a Mardi Gras parade, and he took up an entire seat. He was telling stories about his upbringing that had all the teen-agers around him laughing like children: “Don’t you bring that in the house, my mama said, but I put it up under the bed, and, Lord, did she wear me out!” He kept it up for the twenty-minute ride, and when we climbed out a young girl in a twirler’s outfit turned and gave him a hug, her thin arms barely spanning his width. Big Mike put his arms around her, laid his cheek on the top of her head, closed his eyes and smiled. “Who’s that?” I asked a boy carrying his sousaphone off the bus. “Disciplinarian,” the boy said.

Wandering around O. Perry Walker a few days later, I found Big Mike sitting alone in a classroom. He laughed when I told him what the boy had said. “I’m the interventionist,” Big Mike, who is thirty, told me. And then he began talking about his job. Neither disciplinarian nor interventionist accurately describes it. A better description might be parent. Nine hundred teen-agers attend O. Perry Walker. Of those, Big Mike estimates that a hundred and fifty live with two parents and about four hundred with one. “The rest, what—live with grandmothers?” I asked.

“Well, I consider a grandmother a parent,” Big Mike said. The rest of the school’s students—somewhere between a third and half—live alone, he said. “They roommate with each other, they stay with friends, work till two and three o’clock in the morning, and come to school at seven. Some wash their clothes upstairs here. I have fifteen students that I call every morning at seven o’clock to wake them up, from my cell phone. Food? Sometimes they have money. I give them money, Miss Laurie”—the principal—“gives them money, and sometimes they’ll eat by other people houses. The football coach, he has about nine boys living with him.

“They call me Big Mike because I’m the person that you can come to whenever you have a problem. I’m the person that you can take a piece of paper and put your name on it and slip it under my door and say you need to talk to me, and I’ll come for you later when nobody knows what we’re talking about. It’s called caring.”

He ran a hand tiredly over his face and chuckled. “Children are children,” he continued. “Some children receive love at home, and you have some that don’t. So those that don’t, you as an adult need to say, ‘I love you! I care whether you get by.’ I mean, God gives me the honor every morning of waking up and coming here to serve these children. I call them Mr. and Ms. Sometimes I’ll call them sir and Ma’am. I’m like, ‘All right, sir...Good morning, sir...Good morning Ma’am.’ Because we serve them. We are here because of them. We pay our bills because of them.”

Before the storm, Big Mike was working at a middle school across the river. Only once did he think about leaving that job. The middle school had had about fifteen gang fights in one day, he said. “All the kids was, like, ‘Big Mike, Big Mike, they’re going to shoot, they’re going to shoot.’” He told a school administrator. “I was, like, ‘We need to shut this building down.’ She’s, like, ‘What do you mean? Ain’t nobody shutting this down. We got to make money—we have a dance.’ I’ll never forget this. Sometimes I still cry about it. I called one of the school-board officers. I said, ‘Something is going to happen on this campus.’ I then called Safe and Drug-Free Schools, where I worked. I was like, ‘Something is going to happen on this campus. I need you guys.’ ‘Oh, no Mike, the children always going to say that.’

“So, bang, bang, bang, on the schoolyard at lunchtime.” Kids were hurt; luckily, nobody died. “But my thing was, the children looked at me, like, ‘We asked you to help us, and you didn’t.’ And so after that I decided that I was going to quit.

He didn’t, of course. Katrina closed that middle school, and it hasn’t yet reopened. Not long after the storm, five teen-agers riding in a van near the school died in a volley of bullets. I asked Big Mike if he knew them. “All five,” he said. “All five were my children—Jesus’, mine, and this Lord’s. All five. All five.” He closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again and looked straight into mine. “All five.” Not only that; he knew the kid who killed them.

O. Perry Walker may have its stresses, Big Mike said, but the principal and the staff are great. “This school runs itself like it’s supposed to, because the children know we love ‘em and we tell ‘em that every day. We meet in the morning in the cafeteria every day—rain, sleet, or snow. We meet as a family every morning. One thing, and it took my heart: a young lady’s mom was going through surgery, and the young lady asked that we tell everybody and let them keep her in our prayers. She was overwhelmed, she was just crying. And all the kids were coming up and giving her a hug, saying, ‘I hope everything O.K., I’ll pray for you.’ And she left out of here with about a hundred and fifty dollars from children. From kids.”

Permalink

March 20, 2007

With Words and with Pretty

Sunday was cool and sunny, a gorgeous day for the Mardi Gras Indians' annual parade. Tribe after tribe—the Wild Mohicans, the Golden Eagles, the Wild Magnolias, the Wild Tchoupitoulas, the Golden Comanches, the Red Hawk Hunters, the Yellow Pocahontas, the Golden Blades—walked the potholed streets of uptown New Orleans in their feathered-and-beaded suits. The Hot 8 and Rebirth brass bands blared among them, and the Lady Buckjumpers, a social aid and pleasure club of big women in gray suits, danced wildly along the way. All this was just a warm-up for Monday, which was St. Joseph's Night, an Italian festival that the Indians, for reasons nobody can explain, long ago adopted as the big event of the year.

Everything is politically charged in New Orleans these days, but especially St. Joseph's Night. In 2005, Sixth District police officers swooped in on the St. Joseph's Night celebration in A. L. Davis Park, across from the C. J. Peete housing project, and broke it up. Anthony Cannatella, the Sixth District captain at the time, told me that the Indians didn't have a permit to parade that night and that his station had received nervous calls from citizens. But, traditionally, the Indians don't request a parading permit for St. Joseph's Night; it's their way of declaring themselves, for one evening, as being outside the structure of modern society. The Indians and the many New Orleanians who cherish them were so outraged at the police that the City Council called a special session, essentially to let the Indians castigate the cops. First to speak was Allison (Tootie) Montana, the legendary Chief of Chiefs who, through his artistry and character, had purged Indian culture of the violence that used to characterize it and elevated the Indian suit to a dazzling art form. As Montana began speaking to the council about generations of police repression against Indians, he suffered a heart attack and collapsed dead on the council floor. To the Indians, it was as though the Chief of Chiefs had died in combat for the rights of the Indians. They dedicated that year's White Buffalo Day to Tootie Montana. It was the same day that Hurricane Katrina took its unexpected right turn and headed straight for New Orleans.

Last year, St. Joseph's Night passed uneventfully, but this year nobody was taking any chances. At Sunday's parade, Captain Bob Bardy, the Sixth District's new commander, was in attendance, trying to make sure that Monday night's festivities went smoothly. Bardy has a wide smile, a hard gut, half-glasses, and long, wispy white hair covering his balding head; put him in an apron and he could be your favorite Irish bartender. He was running around with a list of tribes and a ballpoint pen, trying to buttonhole the howling chiefs as they

passed. “This parade has a permit,” he told me, “but tomorrow’s doesn’t, and I’m trying to get coordinated with them now. They’re planning to rally at Second and Dryades, which is tough, because I’ll have to put a dozen foot patrolmen in there. You can’t get in, can’t get out. What I want to do is put three cars behind them. Excuse me.” And off he ran after the chief of the Yellow Pocahontas.

On St. Joseph’s Night, Margaret and I went first to Tootie Montana’s house, in the Seventh Ward, where his widow, Joyce (or Miss Joyce, as everybody calls her), still lives. At the stroke of six, the door opened and her son Darryl stepped out in a radiant gold-and-silver suit. The small crowd waiting outside gasped and cheered. They agreed that Darryl, who is fifty-one, has taken the Mardi Gras Indian suit “to the next level.” Darryl appeared to stand ten feet tall and five feet wide. His suit included eleven “umbrella crowns” made of quail and pheasant feathers—Tootie had never envisioned more than one—and its front was coated with a portrait of Tootie fashioned out of thousands of tiny sequins and beads. When the sun’s low, reddish rays struck the hundreds of glass jewels sewn onto the suit, Darryl seemed to explode.



A few minutes later, Darryl’s cousin David Montana came lumbering up North Villere Street in a white suit, led by a white-suited queen and a small corps of drummers and supporters, and the two men danced and chanted together. Joyce Montana touched my arm and said, “David is the son of Tootie’s brother, Edward, and they look just like their fathers looked. Oh, I get so full I almost cry!”

Darryl celebrates St. Joseph's Night as Tootie did, walking the streets of his Seventh Ward neighborhood at dusk, showing off his resplendent suit to families sitting on their stoops. After enjoying this for a while, Margaret and I rode our bicycles home, got the car, and headed to A. L. Davis Park. The intersection of Washington Avenue and LaSalle Street was teeming with people—beer and soft-drink venders pulling gigantic coolers around on wagons; barbecuers; and a heavy police presence. “That’s good,” one old man told me. “I’m glad they’re here early instead of busting in late.” It also meant that Margaret and I could hang out in a rowdy, drunken, pot-hazy street party in a dodgy neighborhood and feel relatively safe. Also in the crowd were about a half-dozen people in bright yellow-green hats and armbands that said, “ACLU Legal Observer.”

Not long after night fell, tribes began drifting in from the darkened side streets, their spy boys and flag boys scouting ahead for the big chiefs. A few tribes had squads of tiny plumed warriors with them, some as young as six years old, and the crowd applauded and cheered. Masking Indian is a time-consuming enterprise; every suit is handmade and hardly ever reused. So every kid involved in masking Indian is one less kid likely to be out getting into potentially lethal trouble.

At one point, a downtown tribe, the Ninth Ward Hunters, roared in with maximum fanfare:



The Ninth Ward Hunters had a spectacular “battle” with the Red, White, and Blue tribe. First, the two spy boys danced and postured and whooped at each other, and then the two big chiefs danced toward each other like a couple of gigantic roosters. The crowd around them was thick, hot, and noisy, animated by feverish drumming, everybody chanting the name of his favorite tribe. “Big Chief!” each of the chiefs cried. “B-i-i-i-i-g Chief!” The pulsating, dancing, shrieking crowd grew more and more intense as the pace of the drumming picked up and the chiefs bobbed and weaved at each other. This was the moment, in the old days, when a knife would flash, a shot would pop, a broken bottle would fly. But the legacy of Tootie Montana and countless other chiefs who have striven to transform Indian culture from gang warfare to street art held firm. The drumming and chanting reached a crescendo, then burst and faded. The two chiefs laughed and embraced; the sweaty crowd applauded, took swigs from bottles of water and beer, and moved on down the avenue to find another battle.

“That’s how young men should fight!” a man next to me shouted to no one in particular. “With words! And with pretty!”

Permalink

March 16, 2007

The Clarinet, the Sax, and the Holy Ghost

Last week, Margaret and I dropped in on the weekly Wednesday-night music dinner at St. Anna’s Episcopal Church, on Esplanade Avenue, a post-Katrina phenomenon on a smaller scale than the New Orleans Musician’s Relief Fund, the New Orleans Musicians’ Clinic, the Tipitina’s Foundation, and the Musicians’ Village that Habitat for Humanity is helping to build in the Ninth Ward. The large numbers of young people walking along Esplanade Avenue made the church easy to find, and inside, it was standing room only as the Panorama Jazz Band, a tight and dynamic ensemble of clarinet, alto saxophone, accordion, drum set, and sousaphone, played klezmer. (Their banjo player and trombonist apparently had the night off.)



About fifty people sat expectantly at long tables, waiting for dinner to be served, while another seventy or so stood against the walls and milled about outside, clapping and dancing in place. Some were white-haired and bespectacled. Others were “circus punks,” a subset of youth street culture that we’re trying to learn more about (and we’ll let you know when we do). They seem to dress and pierce themselves in the harsh style of punk rockers, but they also do things like juggle while riding unicycles. They’re all over New Orleans, don’t panhandle, and are often seen in couples, with fat and happy-looking rag-wrapped babies.

One poster in the big church room read, “People used to solve their problems by turning to Matthew and John, not Smith and Wesson.” Another showed an arm holding up a guitar dripping with water and slime from the flood. The large print said, “We’ll be right back after this brief intermission.” The small print asked for donations to Music Rising to help Gulf Coast musicians replace their lost instruments.

When the band took a break, the Reverend William Terry, who has a long gray ponytail and a beard and wore a clerical collar, took the floor to deliver a heartfelt, if somewhat disjointed, harangue that wrapped together gun violence, gas-guzzling cars, and caustic detergent. He ended with this appeal: “Musicians are subject to one of the most heinous forms of economic injustice. All over the city, we plaster billboards saying, ‘Come to the city of jazz,’ but we won’t pay musicians a living wage or provide them with health insurance, because they’re independent contractors.” The audience applauded, then queued up for plastic bowls of thin but spicy shrimp-and-crab gumbo and a scoop of yellow potato salad. Musicians were invited to eat free of charge; everybody else was asked to donate five dollars. A glance into the donation box revealed that a lot of people considered themselves musicians.

The parish house is a three-story mansion that has seen better days. Around the base of the grand staircase was another of the life-during-wartime scenes spawned by Katrina. An array of makeshift social services was running full-bore: a registered nurse took blood pressure, checked blood-sugar levels, and examined sores; a legal-aid lawyer answered questions about squatting, eviction, and vagrancy laws; two chair-massage therapists pummelled groaning, hunched-over figures; and two acupuncturists poked shiny needles into the joints, eyebrows, and ears of beaming patients. The Reverend Terry told us he had been a comfortably well-off marine underwriter in New Orleans until he was fifty years old. Then his teen-age daughter committed suicide, and he turned to the church in which he was raised for a more meaningful career. St. Anna's, his first church, represents what he called "a part of the Episcopal Church that is known as the Anglo-Catholic." He said it has "all the spooky stuff"—incense, bells, and the Eucharist. It's a working-class church with endless needs. Two-thirds of the congregation has not returned since Katrina; on Sundays, he's lucky to have forty people in the pews. Church time on Sunday is still, in many parts of the country, the most segregated hour of the week, and we asked the Reverend Terry if his congregation was mostly black or white. His eyebrows shot up as though this were a question that he'd never considered. "Oh, it's pretty mixed," he said. "If it's predominantly anything, it's probably predominantly gay."

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March 15, 2007

The Zone

As I explained before, grocery shopping in downtown New Orleans is a problem. Since Robért's Fresh Market has failed to reopen its St. Claude Avenue store, we who live below Canal Street have to get in the car if we want to lay in major supplies. But if it's the middle of the night and all we need is, say, a quart of milk, some Hanukkah candles, and a feather boa, we can go to Mardi Gras Zone, a kind of supermarket-cum-novelty shop, at the corner of Royal and Port Streets. According to the sign out front, it's open "48 hours a day, 8 days a week." Mardi Gras Zone is a cavernous, poorly lit barn of a place, built into an old brick warehouse. Its cheap steel shelves offer a selection of food that reflects the changing ethnic nature of the Marigny neighborhood. Here is a small sampling of items, in the order in which I found them: Famous House Instant ching poo luong, Rice-a-Roni, Ziyad foule mudammas, Manischewitz whitefish-and-pike gefilte fish, Alafin grape leaves, Khamphouk fish sauce, Trappey's canned cut okra and tomatoes, Blue Runner Creole cream-style navy beans, Zapp's Spicy Cajun Crawtators and Cajun Dill Gator Tators, Community coffee with chicory, Dr. Tichenor's toothpaste, and, in the freezer case, Blanc's shrimp pistolettes, made by Tony's Cajun Delights, of Lafayette, Louisiana. Pistolettes are what New Orleanians call dinner rolls.

All this would make the Zone a pleasant, if idiosyncratic, neighborhood grocery. But, in addition, draped from the walls and the ceiling is everything one might need on short notice to disguise oneself as a raving lunatic: sequined Aladdin masks, foundation makeup, hula skirts, illuminated purple-and-black dragon-tail hats, six-color boas, climaxing-penis beads, glowing marijuana leaves, “Girls Gone Wild” hurricane shirts, leis, Santa beards. The Zone’s clientele ranges from prim elderly ladies in cardigans to youthful circus punks so heavily pierced they look like shrapnel victims.

I was in there late the other night, looking to satisfy a wee-hours craving for sardines in mustard sauce or gingered beets, and as I explored the shelves I thought it marvellous, and emblematic of New Orleans, that such a downscale store should have such a great sound system. Quiet jazz was playing: a couple of guitars, the soft heartbeat of a drum, and the rich lowing of a tenor saxophone filled the store with a sweet sadness. I could have lingered among the cereal boxes for hours, just enjoying the music. I headed for the counter to ask about the CD, thinking to buy it for home. There, sitting around a cheap little table, were four men.



Next time I’m in a Safeway somewhere, assaulted by Muzak, I’ll probably burst into tears.

Permalink

March 14, 2007

Potluck

Not long after Hurricane Katrina, a couple of smart women we know founded the Huddled Masses Social Aid and Pleasure Club. They came up with the name after watching “March of the Penguins.” “We realized the only way this city is going to survive is if we act like penguins,” one of them explained. “We have to stay close together and keep moving.”

The other night, Margaret and I attended a Huddled Masses potluck at which, we were told, representatives of the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority would make a presentation about the government’s plan for saving Louisiana’s coastline and protecting against hurricanes. The famous south Louisiana levee system turns out to be a good-news-bad-news joke: it protects New Orleans and other downstream settlements, but prevents the Mississippi River from depositing sediment in the delta and other wetlands. Instead, the mud slides past and tumbles off the continental shelf. Add to that the effects of cypress logging and of canals dug by the oil-and-gas industry and you end up with a net loss of about four hundred and fifty square miles of land during the past two decades. Anyone who fishes or spends time in the marshes can describe islands they once knew that are now underwater. What makes this so scary is that the wetlands, especially the cypress forests, serve as a buffer against storms. As the land disappears, the city of New Orleans effectively inches closer to the open water of the Gulf.

The potluck was well timed. The same day, the *Times-Picayune* started a three-part series on wetlands loss that, on the paper’s Web site, included a terrifying interactive animation illustrating how depleted the delta is. In that story, a coastal expert from Louisiana State University compared the state’s efforts at reversing the land loss to “putting makeup on a corpse.”

About eighty people wearing “Hello My Name Is” stickers filled an elegant uptown house that had been lent for the occasion, and shared chicken, lasagna, and salads. After we’d eaten, one of the organizers gathered everybody around a portable screen and formally apologized to the two representatives of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. “This isn’t a setup,” she said. “We didn’t plan to have you come the day the *Times-Pic* story appeared. Honest.”

The state officials began grinding through a PowerPoint presentation that was shocking in its pointlessness. Instead of addressing the loss of wetlands, they spent forty-five minutes taking us on a tour of the bureaucracy—every subcommittee and district office, the date of every public meeting, the name of every interim report. At one point, they put up a slide showing how the plan, which their department will submit to the legislature in April, has been received so far. “On the pro side, people tell us they really like the cover,” one of them said, and the audience, politely silent up to this point, groaned.

Finally, the ordeal was over, and the evening’s organizers asked Ivor van Heerden to comment. Van Heerden helps run the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center and is widely regarded as the most authoritative expert on Louisiana’s wetlands loss. Ten months before Katrina, he declared, “A slow-moving category-three hurricane or larger will flood the city. There will be between seventeen and twenty feet of standing water, and New Orleans as we now know it will no longer exist.”

Van Heerden cleared his throat, and, after politely thanking the state’s two representatives, began eviscerating them. What little we had learned about the state plan seemed to involve the building of more levees, and van Heerden was quietly apoplectic. “That will only make things worse!” he said in a tone of genuine exasperation. (In fairness to the hapless representatives from the state authority, levees are a concept that the public understands. Signs all over New Orleans say things like “Category 5 Levees Now!” and “Make Levees, Not War.”) Another scientist with longstanding credentials on the issue, who doesn’t want to be identified, also took a bite out of the state’s two emissaries. “I’d hoped, after Katrina, that, finally, we’d get serious about this,” he said. “I’m sad to say that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Then the Tulane environmental-law professor Oliver Houck, another veteran of the long battle to save the wetlands, took his turn. “You say you’re going to give the scientists a chance to review the plan,” he said. “But maybe you should have had the scientists in on the plan in the first place. Now those who wrote it will be bunkered in, defending it.”

“Wait a minute,” a woman from the back of the crowd said. “Are you saying that none of you three were involved in the writing of the state’s plan to save the wetlands?” It seemed a crazy thought, like going to war without consulting the Joint Chiefs. Incredibly, Van Heerden, Houck, and the third wetlands expert all said they’d been excluded from the process. The woman who’d shouted from the back was incensed. She turned to the representatives from the state. “If you don’t have these guys working on your plan, then who is?” she asked. “Who do you have that’s better than these guys?”

One of the two state employees opened and closed her mouth, but very little sound came out. It was time to go.

Permalink

March 13, 2007

A Boatload of Money

The federal government has spent a boatload of money on something called New Orleans. It happened without much public debate—and, when it turned out that doing a good job would cost nearly twice as much as originally planned, Congress shrugged and wrote a check.

The New Orleans in question is the U.S.S. New Orleans, a \$1.3-billion Landing Platform Dock—half troopship, half aircraft carrier—designed to transport about six hundred marines along with their helicopters, landing craft, and weapons. The New Orleans is part of a new naval strategy known as “seabasing,” which calls for American forces to roam constantly in international waters, like police cars on the beat. The Navy got serious about seabasing after Turkey refused to grant access to its territory for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As an admiral once put it to me, the United States doesn’t want to be in the position of having to ask allies for a “permission slip” when it decides to go to war.

The current New Orleans is the fourth U.S. Navy ship to carry that name. (The Confederates had one, too.) Last week, it was docked here, in its namesake city, tied up on the Mississippi River between the paddlewheel riverboat Natchez and the Algiers ferry. Two Swift boats, with heavy machine guns mounted and loaded, buzzed around in the river. (Looking down from the riverbank, I could see brass cartridges sparkling in their magazines.) Modern warships can have a certain elegance and grace, but this one is a twelve-story dull-gray slab with all the sweep and glamour of a rhinoceros.

As a weapon, the New Orleans will doubtless be stellar. Its stern opens to release hovercraft; its sides are specially angled to make the ship smaller to radar; and it has all manner of guns and missile launchers visible on its decks. If the United States ever again gets into the kind of war that requires marines to storm

beaches under fire (the last time was Inchon, in 1950), the New Orleans will no doubt justify its billion-dollar price tag.

It's hard not to juxtapose that figure with the great need in the city for which the warship is named. The day before the New Orleans was scheduled to be commissioned here, a twenty-something woman with a big silver nose ring handed me a flyer for a Picnic Protest. It invited me to bring a "small prepared dish or beverage that you can share with at least one other person, a small blanket/tablecloth, genteel picnic attire, and the gracious community spirit for which New Orleans is renowned." In my day, when we wanted to protest against the military we brought wet cloths to keep the tear gas out of our eyes and prepared to do things like levitate the Pentagon. This new way seemed a lot less stressful.

The next day was sunny and warm, and the New Orleans was bedecked in pennants and bunting. Sailors in gleaming dress whites strolled around smiling; others, in combat gear, with rifles, stood unsmiling. Dignitaries passed through barricades and sat and listened to speeches by Mayor Ray Nagin and Secretary of the Navy Donald Winter. Outside the barricades, people making their way from the aquarium toward the whooping calliope atop the Natchez paused. At one point, a detachment of Marines fired a battery of 105-millimetre howitzers in salute. Expecting twenty-one blasts, people began asking one another, "Why only nineteen?" A tough-looking old veteran—square face, hard gut, red U.S.M.C. cap—growled, "Only the bonehead gets twenty-one guns, and he ain't here."

A dozen yards away, a few casually dressed young people sat on blankets/tablecloths, sharing small prepared dishes and beverages with at least one other person. The protest struck me as small. A young redhead wearing an old man's watch held up a thin, freckled arm. It was noon. "It's a little early for New Orleanians," she said, and offered me a devilled egg.

Louisiana's Republican Senator, David Vitter, gave a stirring speech that redefined the "war on terror" as "a worldwide war against Islamic extremism." I turned back to the picnickers to ask them why they weren't more rowdy. They had brought a hand-painted bedsheet that said, "How 'bout \$1.3 b for the REAL New Orleans?" But why weren't they waving signs and heckling and disrupting the proceedings in a way guaranteed to get them on CNN? The commissioning of the New Orleans was a political organizer's dream, a twofer that tied together the war and the abandonment of New Orleans.

Next to me stood a thin, handsome man who looked as if he'd stepped off a poster advertising New Orleans jazz—pale-green stingy-brim, oval shades, sleeveless white T-shirt, pleated pants with suspenders. He shot me a withering look. I'd never felt so New Jersey in my life. In New Orleans, just about every bar and restaurant has a sign that says, "Be Nice or Leave." People here don't go out of their way to make other people feel bad. People here don't hit each other with negative waves. Manners matter—maybe even more so since Katrina, because everybody's nerves are so raw. The young man tipped up his sunglasses, extended a tattooed arm toward the blue sky and the sparkling Mississippi, and said, "Man, it's such a nice day."

[Permalink](#)

March 12, 2007

Doughnut Pie

New Orleans is full of Cajun this and Cajun that, but it isn't a Cajun city any more than it's a Creole, black, Italian, or Baptist city. Cajun country, strictly speaking, lies to the west and north, in a rough triangle that covers the south-central portion of Louisiana. Margaret and I took our first trip up there last weekend.

We went with our friends Malcolm and Ann, who live in Baton Rouge. Neither is Cajun, but both are Louisianans. Here's how you can tell: when I asked Malcolm about the racial makeup of Lafayette, he answered, "When my sister was going to university in Lafayette.... Wait, before I tell you that story I have to tell you two more." Ten minutes into the second story, which involved some cousins, two dogs, and a friend from Shreveport, I said, "Malcolm, my question called for a numerical answer." He drew himself up as though I'd spit on the carpet. "I'm gettin' to it," he said huffily, and continued with his storytelling. Forty minutes later, I still didn't know anything about the demographics of Lafayette.

In truth, asking about racial makeup in Louisiana is, on its face, an ignorant question, since it implies that blacks and whites are distinct groups. The reality is that hardly anybody down here is entirely one or the other. Louisiana folklore has it that Huey Long enjoyed tweaking uptown society by joking that he could "buy every white person in New Orleans lunch for a quarter." Which isn't to say that all kinds of conflict and mistrust don't exist between those who identify themselves as white and those who identify themselves as black. It's just to say that this friction is even more pointless and tragic here than in the rest of the United States.

Of course, Malcolm could have said, “Well, that’s a hard question to answer, for this reason....” But, again, Malcolm is from Louisiana. Truths are imparted and ideas communicated not in abstractions but in stories. The long-winded yarn, replete with begats—“she’s the daughter of my auntie’s second husband’s brother”—is the currency of conversation here, and, though time-consuming, it serves very well. Later, when I thought over Malcolm’s stories, which climaxed in his sister’s returning to Shreveport to establish a Head Start program, I realized he’d actually given me a very good answer.

The other way you can tell that Malcolm and Ann are from Louisiana is that their idea of a balanced meal is one that includes something from all the major cholesterol groups: butterfat, shellfish, and pig fat. When we sat down to dinner, Malcolm insisted we begin with about fifty shucked oysters, each carefully wrapped in bacon, brushed with garlic vinaigrette, and then grilled. The only way to stop eating these is to run out of them, which we did, rapidly, before plunging into Ann’s crawfish elegante, a creamy, peppery wonder, served over pasta, that back home on the Immaculate Planet would have constituted one’s saturated-fat consumption for a month. Elegante. Some neighbors brought over a dish of mirlitons, a pear-shaped vegetable the Mexicans call chayote, stuffed with shrimp, bread crumbs, and what seemed to be Denmark’s entire production of butter for 2006. “Oh, no, please, I couldn’t possibly,” I said with a full mouth, as I helped myself to the last of them.

I was a complete stranger to Malcolm and Ann when I showed up at their house eighteen months ago, intending to spend the night. The levees in New Orleans had broken twenty-four hours earlier, and I was on my way in to cover the disaster for *The New Yorker*. I’d found Ann through her sister, a friend of ours in Boulder, and when I arrived in Baton Rouge Malcolm and Ann already had a house full of friends who’d fled New Orleans. Malcolm and Ann hugged me as though they’d known me for years, handed me a beer, and invited me to dig into the communal heap of boiled crawfish. At one that morning, Malcolm drove me to a nearby Wal-Mart so I could stock up on food, first-aid supplies, gasoline cans, and water. The radio was full of terrifying reports of violence in New Orleans—mostly exaggerations, as it turned out—and Malcolm and I discussed whether I should also take a gun. He listed the relative merits of a shotgun versus a pistol, but ultimately decided it was a bad idea. “They may have lost everything down there,” he said, “but they *will* find a jail cell for a Yankee reporter carrying a gun.” He and Ann have generously let me make their house a base of operations ever since.

The morning after our oysters-and-elegante dinner, the four of us took Interstate 10 west toward Lafayette. About eighteen miles of that road is elevated across the Atchafalaya basin, a dark and spooky swamp of cypress that we’re eager to explore by canoe. Our destination was the zydeco breakfast at Café des Amis, in Breaux Bridge, a little town of old wooden storefronts, in the center of Cajun country.

Cajun is a bastardization of “Acadian.” Today’s Cajuns are largely descendants of the French from Acadia—now Nova Scotia—whom the British, in a fit of Francophobe pique, began expelling in 1755. One still hears a lot of French in Cajun country, or, more accurately, one hears a mixture of English and French that’s hard to recognize as either. When we walked into Café des Amis, a six-piece band built around a button accordion and a corrugated steel rubboard—which hangs over the torso and is played with two bent spoons—was rocking out to songs in the distinctively slurred Cajun French.

Margaret and I didn’t have much appetite, so we ordered *couche couche*, an authentic Cajun breakfast of cornmeal and oil cooked down to a browned slurry in a heavy iron pan and served with cane syrup and milk. I was reminded of an old *National Lampoon* cartoon that showed a snooty French waiter presenting a garnished telephone directory to a surprised diner. “That’s right, a phone book,” the waiter says. “We gave it a fancy French name, and you ordered it.” That *couche couche* is authentic may be the best thing one can say about it. The music was swell, though, and easy to dance to. What we liked best about the scene was how thoroughly mixed it was. Teen-agers danced with old ladies. Elderly black men danced with young white girls. Fat, unshaven men in overalls danced with heavily made-up women in bouffants. Mimosas and Bloody Marys flowed at eight-thirty in the morning. Our waitress gave me a hug.

From Breaux Bridge, we wandered down to Avery Island, where Tabasco sauce is made. When they say “island,” they don’t mean an island in water but an island of firm ground in a vast region of swamp. Avery Island was formed by being the peak of an underground mountain of salt said to be bigger than Mt. Everest. We skipped the factory and spent time wandering the island’s vast gardens, enjoying azaleas, turtles, and alligators, and lying on our backs in the sun in a feverishly indolent attempt to digest the previous night’s meal.

On the way home, Ann took us a little out of our way to find a bakery she’d heard about. It was called T-Sue’s, “T” being a shortening of *petit*, or, in this case, *petite*; T-Sue means “little Sue.” When we got inside, we discovered a monstrously high pastry in the case that the girl behind the counter called “Washington pie.” We asked what was in it, and because of her accent I thought I heard her say, “Pineapple, doughnuts, and spices.” Margaret must have had the same reaction, because she asked, “What was that middle ingredient?” The young woman, realizing that she was dealing with aliens, pronounced the word with extreme clarity: “Doughnuts.”

Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys used to sing a song that included these lyrics:

Corn bread and turnip greens,

Ham hocks and butter beans!

Mardi Gras down in New Orleans

Yeah, that's what I like about the South.

For me, you can add that the South is a place where the list of acceptable pie ingredients includes doughnuts.

[Permalink](#)

March 9, 2007

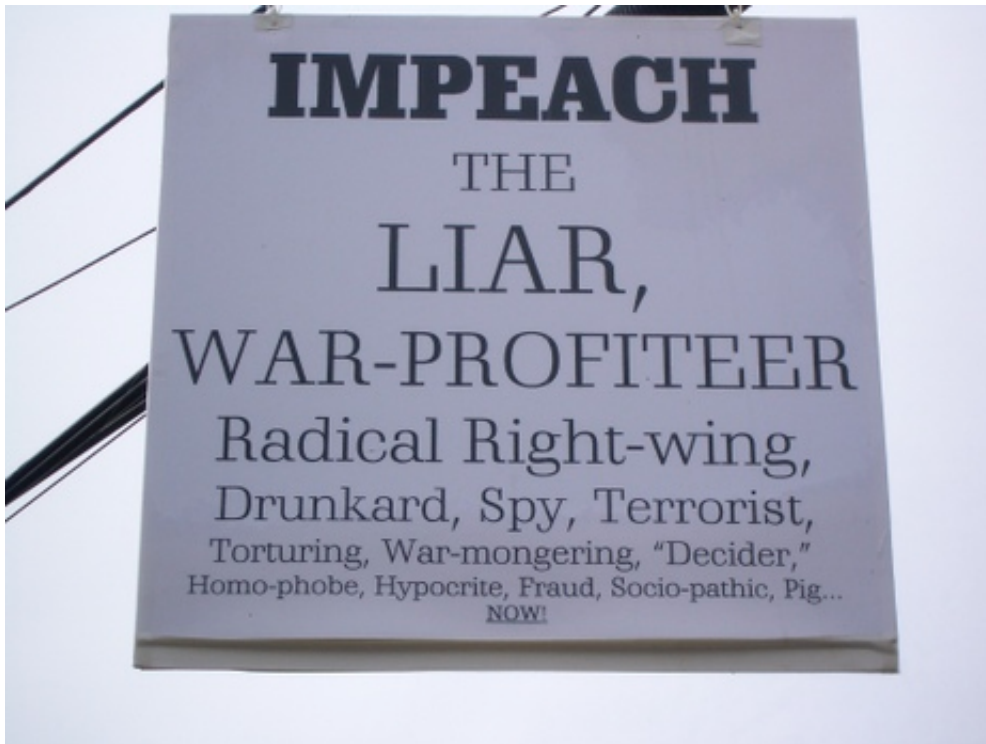
Healing Thyself

On our corner stands a long-closed restaurant called Two Sisters. Painted on its wooden exterior wall are three green 7Up bottles, a Falstaff beer logo that says "6 for \$1.20 to go," and the ineffably attractive words "HOT BOUDIN."



When we first moved in, I thought the place just happened to be closed whenever I tried the door. But, judging from the price of those beers, it must have been abandoned for decades; for some reason, the building's owner keeps the outside freshly painted, signs and all.

High above one corner, hanging from the building's eaves, is a wooden sign printed in old-fashioned block lettering. It took me a while to focus on it; I figured it was an old sign for Two Sisters. But this is what it says:



The word “decider” tells me that the sign isn’t as old as Two Sisters.

Even coming from a town as ardently Democratic as Boulder, Colorado, I find the level of disgust with George W. Bush in New Orleans stunning. Except for a wealthy shipbuilder I know, who has been friends with Bush for a quarter-century, I haven’t come across a single person here who doesn’t revile the President with a deep and abiding passion. In the checkout line at the supermarket, at a café, or at a gas station, one sure way to get a New Orleanian talking is to mention Bush. On being presented with the bill at a store or restaurant back home, I used to think it clever to say, “Charge this to the White House,” or, “Charge this to the Republican Party—and put a big tip on there for yourself.” New Orleanians are famously able to take a joke, but the first time I tried that one at a nearby hardware store the woman behind the counter growled, “You’d better be kidding,” as a small group of hostile customers gathered behind me, arms folded. I haven’t been back.

The President was in town last week to drop in on a charter school and eat lunch at Li’l Dizzy’s Café, a great Creole restaurant in Treme. (It will be interesting to see how the community reacts to Li’l Dizzy having invited the President in.) Local activists told me that they would essentially ignore the President’s visit. “The Bush Administration’s reading of the First Amendment’s right ‘peaceably to assemble’ is that we

can protest anywhere the President can't see us," one said. "We'd never get anywhere near that school or Li'l Dizzy's." But a few days before, as news of Bush's impending visit was making the rounds, an official-looking green-and-white helicopter—presumably a Presidential advance team—roared overhead as I was walking through the French Quarter. Two young men with multiple facial piercings cupped their hands around their mouths and yelled, "Fuck you!" while a white-haired man in a business suit solemnly raised a middle finger to the sky. It's safe to say that the Republicans can write off New Orleans for a while.

Given the Administration's initial and ongoing response to Hurricane Katrina, that's hardly a surprise. What I'm coming to love about New Orleans is how this city is able to maintain a vigorous loathing of the Bush Administration without giving up, and also able to preserve a homegrown determination to rescue itself regardless of how it's treated by the outside world. Yes, the state-run Road Home program to get housing money into homeowners' hands is a disaster. Yes, legislators from the city council to Congress have fumbled the ball. That can make it appear that "nothing is happening" in New Orleans. But, all over the city, people are working on extraordinary projects to make life better. They don't invite the cameras or put out press releases. They just work.

The Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association, or NENA, operates out of an old storefront on Lamanche Street, in an otherwise desolate neighborhood. Inside is a long table full of pamphlets: a series called "Build It Back Right," with tips on how to build a "cathedralized attic" that ventilates and insulates well and "radiant barriers" that prevent solar heat from roasting the interior; instructions on how to fill out Road Home applications; what to do if friends or family are in jail too long because of evidence lost or damaged when the police department's evidence room flooded; invitations to join the Unified New Orleans Plan; instructions on applying for a no-interest loan from the city; and doorknob hangers from the Louisiana State Licensing Board for Contractors that say, "Before You Hire a Contractor, Check with Us." (Unscrupulous contractors have descended upon New Orleans like the carpetbaggers of yore.)

A few people sat at antique-looking computers, and one young man was helping an elderly couple fill out a Road Home application. On an easel stood a map of the Lower Ninth Ward, dotted with push-pins. A hand-lettered sign asked, "Where's Your House on the Road Home?," and invited people to use green pins if they were rebuilding, yellow if they were unsure, and red if they were selling out. Almost all the pins were green.



I'd stopped by NENA because I'd heard that it was arranging to have photovoltaic solar collectors installed that day, free of charge, on the roofs of ten newly remodelled Lower Ninth houses. Arthur Rudin, from Los Angeles, stood out front in a red golf shirt with the Sharp Electronics Corporation's logo on it, waiting for the hardware. Volunteers were milling around him, wearing T-shirts that read "Sola' in NOLA 2007" and eating doughnuts donated by a local bakery. Rudin ate no doughnuts. The director of engineering for Sharp, he is short and fit, with dark hair and glasses. He told me that Sharp originally planned to have its annual customers' meeting in Hawaii but decided instead to hold it in New Orleans. Sharp had donated the ten solar panels to NENA, and the labor to install them had been donated by Sharp customers from around the country. Each panel is ten feet by fifteen, and will generate one and a half kilowatts per month—about a quarter of a household's monthly consumption. Ordinarily, to have such a panel installed would cost a homeowner about fifteen thousand dollars, Rudin said.

I asked Rudin what the payback is on such a photovoltaic array. He lifted his chin and said, "About twenty years." But then he stepped closer and pointed a finger at my chest. "But let's ask why you even ask me that," he said. "Look at a five-thousand-dollar big-screen TV. Nobody ever asks, 'What's the payback on that?' Or on an S.U.V. In those cases, we think of different ways to justify the purchase. Maybe we should do that with solar, too. Yeah, it saves you money. But maybe we should be thinking about other good reasons to go solar."

I took a step back and asked what the technological roadblock to truly affordable solar power was. What mystery has to be solved before the price drops enough to make solar power universal? “There are always going to be improvements, but it’s already pretty good,” he said. “The problem is scale. Sharp knows how to make consumer electronics in large volume. The problem is, there isn’t enough demand to justify producing photovoltaics on a scale big enough to bring the price down. And there isn’t enough demand, because people like you keep asking about payback.”

The panel trucks finally arrived; Rudin excused himself and hurried off. Next door, in the parking lot of a flooded and shuttered church, people were rummaging through bales of donated clothing and helping themselves to paper towels, disposable diapers, and toilet paper from open boxes trucked in by an Episcopal charity—a reminder that New Orleans’s needs run from the very high-tech to the very low.

Permalink

March 8, 2007

You Haven’t Done Nothing

We’re still astonished that we can walk into a club like d.b.a., on Frenchmen Street, at seven in the evening and hear, for free, the likes of John Boutté. Boutté is a short, bronze-skinned native of the Seventh Ward, the heart of Creole New Orleans. He chooses to portray himself on his posters and CD covers as a little tough guy, but he’s not kidding anybody; his act is all sweetness. He sings in a high, scratchy, heartfelt tenor, and though he hasn’t yet recorded it, he has re-created Randy Newman’s “Louisiana 1927” as an anthem of post-Katrina New Orleans.

“Yeah, I thought it was all good,” Boutté told a packed house as he prepared to sing. “Until they didn’t put us in the State of the Union and I realized, no, it ain’t so good.” Even the white-haired retirees who came off a cruise ship moored behind the Convention Center stood and cheered.

Newman’s song tells of the 1927 flood, of how “the river has busted through clear down to Plaquemines,” of “six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline,” and of President Coolidge coming down in his railroad train and saying to an aide, “Little fat man, isn’t it a shame what the river has done to poor crackers’ land.”

Boutté sings it through once as Newman wrote it, but on the second pass sings of how the “levees busted like they planned them to,” of “six feet of water in the streets of the Lower Nine,” and “twelve feet of water in your house and mine.” Here the New Orleans crowd invariably starts to clap and whistle. “President Bush, y’all, flew over in his airplane, with a couple of bald men and”—here Boutté really spits it out, laying into Condoleezza Rice—“a sister, a sister!” As Boutté has it, Bush says, “Look at what the river has done to poor Creoles’ land.” By this time it’s hard to hear Boutté, because everybody is stomping and hooting and wiping away tears.

Hurricane Katrina has made a lot of songs I’d long forgotten sit up in their coffins. What could have been more timely, as the city withers away for lack of leadership and housing money and on and on, than Boutté driving his fist forward and singing Stevie Wonder’s “You Haven’t Done Nothing”?

We are amazed but not amused
 By all the things you say that you’ll do
 Though much concerned but not involved
 With decisions that are made by you
 But we are sick and tired of hearing your song
 Telling how you are gonna change right from wrong
 ’Cause if you really want to hear our views
 “You haven’t done nothing”!

Boutté was accompanied by Leroy Jones, who can play an unmuted trumpet softly enough to back a singer in a tiny club and simultaneously fill your every pore with its sound. Peter Harris worked his big standup bass so hard I swear I saw it writhe and giggle. And guitarist Todd Duke played loopy electric-guitar riffs that sounded almost Hawaiian. All for the price of one Abita Amber beer for Margaret and a Drambuie mist for me. When the tip bucket passes, pasted with the inevitable “I [fleur de lis] NOLA” bumper sticker, it’s all you can do not to throw your wallet, your watch, and your shoes in it.

Permalink

March 7, 2007

Hog Heaven

When I looked in the refrigerator this morning, this is what I found: Conecuh hickory-smoked sausage, Manda green-onion sausage (“The Flavor Says It All”), a package of Manda tasso (a type of spicy Cajun ham, as dense and lean as salmon jerky), a package of Jacob’s andouille, a chunk of boudin (pork-and-rice sausage) the size of a police baton, and a few garden-variety Winn Dixie hot Italian sausages as a kind of iron ration. Margaret has begun asking in the late afternoon, “What’s for pig fat tonight?”

In my defense, it ain’t all pig. I also found a package of Patton’s Hot Patties, a beef-grits-and-hot-pepper concoction that reports three hundred and ten calories per disk, two hundred and forty of them from fat. The patties start out five inches across, cook down to the size of poker chips, and still slide down the throat as though coated in Vaseline. They’re incredibly delicious.

Here’s the problem: grocery stores are hard to find in New Orleans these days. There’s a Sav-A-Center, a Winn Dixie, and even a Museum of Modern Food (Whole Foods, that is) uptown, in the minimally damaged and wealthier part of New Orleans that, in a kind of flood snobbery, some downtown folks call the “Isle of Denial.” The big grocery chains haven’t yet decided about downtown New Orleans, so we don’t have a single supermarket within a fifteen-minute drive, let alone bicycling distance. I’d rather do almost anything than drive a car around New Orleans, so I tend to do my grocery shopping (or “make groceries,” as people here say) on the rare occasions when I have to use the car. When I finally get inside a New Orleans supermarket, I become so enchanted that I lose control.

Back on the Immaculate Planet (Boulder, Colorado), produce aisles are grand, with riotous displays of fresh fruits and vegetables from the world over and substantial selections of organic produce. The cured-pig-fat department, if it exists at all, is tucked away in a little corner next to the Pillsbury “Poppin’ Fresh” crescent rolls. If the fit and trim Boulderites venture there at all, they do so furtively, eyes averted toward the bulk hazelnuts as they snag a package of Jimmy Dean sausage. I suspect the trend toward self-checkout originated in Boulder, so nobody would have to place their Braunschweiger liverwurst or Ball Park franks on the conveyor belt for everybody to see.

In New Orleans, the situation is delightfully reversed. The produce aisle is just big enough for collards; scallions, green bell peppers, and celery, which constitute the Holy Trinity of southern-Louisiana cuisine; and limes for cocktails. But the cured-pig-fat section is vast and varied. I figure I owe it to myself—I owe it to my readers!—to plunge in with a cultural anthropologist’s zeal and explore, during my brief sojourn here in Louisiana, all the excellent reasons to kill pigs. And since I never know when I’m going to be back in a

supermarket, I load up.

I am teaching myself not to think about the effect this is having on my health. I didn't get my cholesterol tested before I left Boulder, and I don't intend to do so when I get back. I'm sorry, truth be told, that I read the "Nutrition Facts" on that package of Patton's Hot Patties. Living in Boulder taught me some bad habits. Grocery shopping there is like a trip to the library; half the time is spent squinting at labels, hunting down diglycerides and partially hydrogenated whatever. New Orleans is not a place to read labels; people here eat parts I didn't know pigs had. In Boulder, I shop with my head. Here, I shop with my gut, which now rests comfortably atop my belt buckle. Thank heaven for presbyopia. I turned fifty-one last month, and can comfortably make groceries in New Orleans by leaving my reading glasses in the car.

Permalink

March 6, 2007

Pink Lid

I hardly ever go outside without a hat. Sometimes my bald head is cold in the wind; sometimes it is hot in the sun. But it is always horrifying in the mirror. My fair-weather hat has long been the Milan-braid straw porkpie, made by Biltmore, in a color called "cocoa" that is actually a warm pinkish-brown, which I, more honestly, call "liver." For something made out of dead grass, it's not cheap.

For years I bought my Milan-braid straw porkpies online from Shushan's—it's listed on the Shushan Web site under Blues, Jazz and Swing Hats—without paying attention to where the company was situated. Then, during the flood, I was drifting around the deserted French Quarter, which was lovely in a "Twilight Zone" kind of way, when I spotted a small wooden sign that said "Shushan's." Once the city came alive again, I walked in and had the pleasure of buying a liver-colored porkpie in person. Shushan was the city in ancient Persia where the story of Purim unfolds, and the mother of the hat store's cheery proprietor, Elliot Shushan, was named Esther, after the protagonist of the Jewish holiday. I got that story free of charge when I paid for my hat.

In February, I returned to Shushan's for the first time in more than a year. As I walked in, Elliot's assistant, a young woman named Michelle Kilroy, took one look at me and walked to a shelf of Milan-braid straw porkpies. "Seven and three-eighths," she said, holding it up.

So I feel a little guilty admitting that, a couple of weeks later, while I was riding my bike on St. Charles Avenue, I was seduced by the window of Meyer the Hatter. (President Kennedy is said to have murdered the American hat industry by going bareheaded to his inauguration, but, between the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs and Mardi Gras, hats are still a big business in New Orleans.) I'd always avoided Meyer. It claims to be the largest hat store in the South, and it does have a pleasingly overstocked mustiness, but I never got from it the warm vibe I get at Shushan's. Meyer seems to run on the principle of a New York delicatessen, that rudeness is charming: Buy the hat, don't buy the hat, what do I care?

There in Meyer's window was something I had to have: a Milan-braid straw porkpie—in soft pink. It glowed. I had ordered, just a few days earlier, a pink-and-white seersucker sports coat from Brooks Brothers—I'd always wanted one, but never had the nerve to buy one before living in New Orleans—and the pink hat seemed essential. "It's very nice," Margaret said with a straight but stern face, as she set it next to the rest of my growing collection. "But I intend to exercise oversight of future hat appropriations during the current budget cycle."

The cold and damp weather that had been bedeviling New Orleans for weeks had finally broken, and on Saturday the Treme Sidewalk Steppers, one of the city's many Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, held a second line that began at the African American Museum of Art, Culture, and History in Treme. A huge crowd filled Governor Nicholls Street as, precisely at noon, the Rebirth Brass Band began blowing. The Sidewalk Steppers—in matching gold linen shirts and pants, black-and-gold sashes, black alligator shoes, and black homburgs—came dancing down the museum's steps and out into the street. Rebirth followed, the trumpeter Derrick Shezbie inflating one cheek as big as a baseball and holding the other with his left hand as he blew, as though afraid it would pop. The crowd, with many babies on shoulders, fell in behind, thrashing and whirling and shimmying up the avenue. (As I write this, a very different kind of march is taking place outside my front door: about thirty marines are taking their regular morning jog down Dauphine Street, running in step and chanting, "My girl's a vege-ta-ble! She lives in the hos-pi-tal!")

Rebirth didn't stop playing for four hours, as the Sidewalk Steppers danced their way up to Broad Avenue and turned north. Sweating men pulled huge drinks coolers on children's wagons, selling sodas for a dollar and bottles of beer for two. Columns of fragrant smoke rose from the crowd, marking the spots where slabs of spicy-sauced pig meat and joints of blackened chicken were being slapped between slices of cheap white bread and handed over unwrapped for four bucks. We stopped before the boarded-up hulk of Joe's Cozy Corner, for decades a pivot of Treme culture and the scene of an inexplicable tragedy. The bar's beloved

owner, Papa Joe Glasper, had inveighed against gun violence his whole life, but, one night in January, 2004, he shot a legless man dead outside the bar for reasons nobody could explain. Glasper died in jail while awaiting sentencing, and his bar was shuttered, leaving a hole in the community. The Sidewalk Steppers and Rebirth spent ten minutes outside the vacant purple-and-yellow building in that counterintuitive, uproarious way in which New Orleanians grieve. Then, as always happens here in the face of disaster, the parade continued.

We ran into a thin, dapper man named Ezquisito, a popular local guitar player and composer, who had played at the funeral for Damon and Ivan Brooks at St. Augustine Church. “Nice pink lid,” he said, meaning my new hat. “But you don’t want to bring out your best shit too early before Easter. Man, this is only the first weekend of Lent!”

Not long after, Étienne appeared from out of the crowd. “That’s some hat,” he said. I told him I’d just ordered the pink-and-white seersucker jacket to go with it. Étienne stuck a finger under my nose and lowered his eyebrows severely. “Don’t wear it before Easter,” he snapped. You can block traffic for four hours in New Orleans parading through the street behind dancing men in matching gold suits. You can sell beer without a license and drink it openly on the street. You can paint your face and get howling drunk and throw beer bottles on people’s lawns. But no gentleman would think of wearing pink before Easter.

Permalink

March 2, 2007

Public Relations

Last week, there was a rare day of pushback by the poor black people of New Orleans. First came a small rally and press conference in front of Charity Hospital of Louisiana, a massive granite edifice downtown that features the name in Art Deco lettering and bas-reliefs of scientists peering into microscopes and holding beakers aloft to the light of the god Science. Huey Long gets credit for erecting the current incarnation of Charity Hospital, as part of his Share the Wealth program, though it wasn’t finished until 1939, four years after he was assassinated. Charity Hospital is cherished by the city’s underclass, not only because it has provided free care to generations of poor New Orleanians—to call yourself a “Charity baby” is a point of pride—but because the architecture proclaims an esteem for the common man that is lacking in the modern city.

Charity has not reopened since Katrina. Its management, backed by Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, has said that the building was too heavily damaged and that it would be better to build a new one. The plan is to spend more than a billion dollars in public funds on a new hospital complex, which would be up and running who knows when.

The small knot of people passing around a microphone outside Charity's façade on last Thursday argued that building a new hospital is absurd. Charity's basement flooded, they said, but the building itself is fine. Standing there, I found it hard to imagine that the building was significantly damaged; it looks as if it had been carved out of a mountain. Spending millions on a new hospital when New Orleans has so many other needs, and waiting years while so many poor people lack care now, is crazy to the point of criminal, the protesters argued. Among those who spoke was James Arey, the chief hostage negotiator for the New Orleans Police Department's SWAT team. The lack of psychiatric beds in New Orleans makes his job immeasurably harder, he said. "Right now Orleans parish has no place to take these people, and sometimes the other hospitals end up letting them go."

From Charity, I rode my bicycle through nearly deserted areas of the Sixth and Seventh Wards to Dillard University, a traditionally black college whose lovely campus, with its white-columned buildings, flooded but was cleaned up and reopened for the next school year. Representative Maxine Waters, of California, chair of the House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity, was holding a hearing about New Orleans's public housing in Dillard's elegant Lawless Memorial Chapel.

The fight over public housing sounds a lot like the struggle over Charity Hospital. The city boasts fifty-one hundred units of public housing in four huge projects. None of them flooded significantly during Katrina. The New York Times' architecture critic, Nicolai Ouroussoff, has twice declared them architectural treasures that could be rehabilitated. Yet the Housing Authority of New Orleans, which runs projects, locked their doors after Katrina and refused to let evacuees—who still have active leases—move back in. H.A.N.O. argues that the projects concentrated poverty, and that a more enlightened policy would be to place residents in subsidized units scattered among mixed-income neighborhoods.

The crowd that filled the Lawless Chapel begged to differ. Waters had brought along almost a quarter of her committee's twenty-six members, and had summoned Governor Blanco, Mayor Nagin, the chairman of the H.A.N.O. board, and a deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Nearly everyone who spoke got catcalls. Waters, whose caustic questioning indicated that she

was sympathetic to the public-housing residents, took a long time to lose her patience. More than an hour went by before she asked the crowd to hold it down.

Before Katrina, New Orleans public housing was undeniably wretched—so utterly mismanaged that H.U.D. took over the housing authority in 2002 and is now the driving force behind razing the projects. And although Charity, by all accounts, had one of the best trauma units in the country—it was the place to go if you had a sucking gunshot wound in the chest—it was meagrely funded, and not a place where you'd want to get long-term care. Ditto the public-school system, which was an embarrassment before Katrina, and has now been taken over by the state and largely broken into charter-school districts; funding for individual schools is—surprise!—dependent on the wealth of the districts in which they are situated.

Before the storm, the people who lived in the projects, who relied on Charity and were forced to send their kids to public schools, agitated long and hard for improvements. And, under different circumstances, they might well welcome the idea of a new public-housing paradigm, a new hospital, and a radical shakeup of the public schools. To see them clinging so passionately to the institutions they reviled is puzzling. But they argue, with considerable justification, that using Katrina to eliminate essential public services without offering immediate alternatives is a bum's rush.

From the earliest days of the crisis, many African-Americans have believed that the city's white élite would use Katrina to flush the city of its poor black people. The white élite has made it easy to think so. In well-publicized statements, a wealthy local named James Reiss told the Wall Street Journal that he wanted to see the city transformed “demographically” by rebuilding, and Richard Baker, a Republican congressman from Baton Rouge, was overheard telling lobbyists, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did.” Even if you take the housing authority, Charity Hospital's management, and the state Department of Education at their word—that all they want is better services for the poor of New Orleans—there's no denying that their immediate actions have made it immeasurably harder for the poor to return to the city. That the government is imposing its solutions with minimal or no input from the people it serves only deepens the hurt and the rage that make true recovery nearly impossible. There's a poster hanging in homes and businesses all over New Orleans: a stylized drawing of a black woman in a militant posture, beneath the words “Nothing About Us Without Us Is for Us.”

Permalink

March 1, 2007

Corporate Gras

One of the great unsung pleasures of New Orleans is the Algiers ferry. You can cross the Mississippi by driving over the huge Crescent City Connection Bridge, but it's immeasurably more enjoyable to drive or ride a bike to the foot of Canal Street and board the small steel ferry. It runs every half hour until about nine at night, and is free for bikes and pedestrians. (Cars are charged a buck.) The trip takes about ten minutes and affords a view of the French Quarter and the Central Business District skyline, as well as a close-up look at what remains of New Orleans's port traffic.

On Monday afternoon, Margaret and I took our bikes across the river to spend some more time with Wilbert Rawlins, Jr., and the O. Perry Walker High School band. We got Rawlins talking about his amazingly cinematic childhood. His father, Wilbert Rawlins, Sr., worked days in a coffee-roasting plant on the river, and, four nights a week, came home, showered, put on a tux, and went back out to gig for the soul singer Irma Thomas as a drummer. One morning, the middle and ring fingers of his right hand got caught in a grinder at work; both were shorn off at the second knuckle. That evening, he played the whole gig, changing his blood-soaked gauze dressing between sets. "Can you imagine how much it hurt to play?" Rawlins said. "But he had his eye on the big picture. Irma Thomas didn't have a backup drummer. If he didn't play, she didn't sing."

As we talked, all afternoon, I took notes on my laptop; I ended up with twelve single-spaced pages, and we'd barely begun. (Oh, how people in New Orleans love to talk! And they're so good at it!) At six-thirty, Rawlins had to cut the conversation off, because his band had a very New Orleans gig: a faux carnival parade at Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World.

Blaine Kern has been manufacturing Mardi Gras floats since 1947; he commonly goes by the sobriquet Mr. Mardi Gras. His studios are housed in a collection of vast warehouses across the river from downtown New Orleans, almost in the shadow of the bridge. If you're of a certain age, and wondering why you never got those acid flashbacks you were supposed to, go to Mardi Gras World. Pieces of floats past and future stand and lie everywhere; many are reconfigured and recycled year after year—George Washington becomes Zeus becomes Martin Luther King, Jr. This year's cannibal cauldron becomes next year's fishbowl. Kern and his small army of craftsmen are genuine magicians, and they're already at work on next year's floats.

Kern rents out studio space for parties, and Mardi Gras World is a popular spot for companies who come to town for conventions. For a price, Kern will throw a mini-Mardi Gras for them. Margaret and I rode our bikes down the levee—quite pleasant, with a wonderful view of New Orleans—and locked them up in Kern’s parking lot. When the Walker school bus showed up and the band members got out, we fell in behind them. A computer company was having a party; Margaret and I were graciously invited to hang blinking electronic medallions around our neck (access to the food and bar) and join in the fun. Inside, hundreds of square-looking corporadoes milled about, goggle-eyed, among the half-finished floats, and had their palms read by soothsayers—the kind I usually see at card tables in Jackson Square. Bottomless vats of etouffée, gumbo, and jambalaya were presided over by black-tied wait staff from Mother’s.



Suddenly, the thumping blare of the Walker band filled the warehouse and in the musicians marched, in full uniform and with a scaled-down corps of twirlers out front. Behind them, pushed by Kern’s workers, came three miniature Mardi Gras floats. Computer-company executives in costume waved from atop the floats, throwing little strands of beads here and there. Having endured the real thing less than a week before, I found it a meagre reproduction. Many of the executives seemed intent on their conversations, and paid little attention to the performance. And it was hard not to notice that just about the only black people in the room were either ladling gumbo, dragging floats, or playing music. The band and the floats circled the big room twice, the sound of the trombones and the bass drums racketing off the corrugated steel ceiling, and ten minutes later the Walker band was boarding the bus again and Rawlins had a five-hundred-dollar check—for uniforms, instruments, and sheet music—in his pocket. For an ambitious bandleader on a limited budget, these convention gigs are a godsend. The Walker band sometimes performs twice a week.

Margaret and I stayed on after the band left, fulfilling the journalist’s professional obligation to gorge oneself on free food at every opportunity. By the time we were ready to go, the ferry had stopped running. We left our bikes locked and boarded one of the computer company’s buses to go back across the river to the Sheraton on Canal Street. We were clutching brownies and slices of pecan pie; the video screens in the bus were airing a commercial for Weight Watchers. We studiously looked out the window. When we reached the Sheraton, we decided to walk the two miles to our house rather than take a taxi. It seemed prudent: consume twelve hundred calories, burn fifty. Next day, we had to cross back over to retrieve our bikes.

Permalink

