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DOWN in NEW ORLEANS
REFLECTIONS FROM A DROWNED CITY

BILLY SOTHERN

“A soulful and eloquent tribute—part paean and part eulogy—to a place that Sothern loves deeply. It’s essential reading.” —DAVE EGGERS
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CHAPTER I

A Man Leaves Home

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Boarded Up for the Storm, Carondelet Street
we drove north into Mississippi as the late-summer Sabbath sun rose over New Orleans. I was passed out in the backseat of our old gray Volvo, competing for space with Max and Mabel, our two dogs. I was dirty and sticky after a night on top of a twenty-eight-foot ladder boarding up the windows of my home and was made all the more uncomfortable by the heat—we were unable to use the air conditioning for fear that the car might stall, as it often did with the toxic combination of staggering heat, traffic, and air conditioning. Through my half-sleep, I could tell from the quiet conversation between my wife, Nikki Page, and my old friend from New York, Mike Lenore, that we had not made it far in our hours on the road in the bumper-to-bumper traffic fleeing the city. The sound of increasing panic was evident in the voices of public officials and announcers on AM radio. It was the end of a very long day and the beginning of a long and life-altering year for the residents of New Orleans and for our country.

My first hint of the coming storm that was to shape my life, take the lives of neighbors, and alter the face of my city, had come in an e-mail the previous Friday afternoon from one of my colleagues, Joe, who announced with significant incredulity that another colleague was evacuating to a little house in Lake Charles, Louisiana, that the office owned: “Steve Singer is evacuating—yes evacuating—because the hurricane is apparently coming our way.” I remember thinking, “Ah Steve, prone
to panic,” and completely dismissing the coming storm from my thoughts.

Thoughts of the coming storm became harder to avoid the following day, as people began calling us from around the country. My dad told me that CNN was reporting that Mayor Ray Nagin had ordered thirty thousand body bags. I studiously avoided having evacuation conversations with my wife, who I knew was eager to leave. She would ask what I thought about leaving, and I would delay answering, knowing that postponing the decision was itself a decision, a decision to stay in the 1850s home that we had restored from the ground up, the only home that either of us had ever really known. She made me make tentative plans to stay with college friends, Will Gorham and Siobhan Boyer, who lived in Oxford, Mississippi.

Mike, Nikki, and I had moved from New York about four years earlier to live in New Orleans and do social justice work in the cracks of the edifice erected in the wake of the civil rights movement. Mike and I came to New Orleans to represent poor people on death row, he as an investigator, I as an attorney. Nikki, an artist and teacher by disposition, came to teach art to children in the city’s crumbling public school system. None of us, however, were martyred saints of New Orleans, a city that does not tolerate too much false asceticism.

I first came to New Orleans in 1999, while I was in law school at New York University, to work for a nonprofit agency specializing in death penalty defense run by a charismatic British lawyer and self-perceived radical, Clive Stafford Smith, and staffed by young lawyers and activists from around the world. They had come from faraway countries, some of them among the richest countries in the world, to work on behalf of men facing the death
penalty in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and other states in what they called the “death belt.” Many of them had never been to New York or San Francisco, or any place north of the Mason-Dixon Line, for that matter, and they were shocked by the racism and poverty they saw on a daily basis. Many of them had traveled to other parts of the world on human rights missions and had come to the American South because they regarded the human rights crisis at Angola State Penitentiary, which houses Louisiana’s death row, as at least as significant as the human rights crisis in Louanda, the capital city of Angola.

And what they see here is shocking. They visit homes in rural communities where cracks in the floors make visible the stinking raw sewage that drips from homemade plumbing. They see our clients’ families, all of whom have a son facing the death penalty and are unable to feed their other children or provide them with medical care. They see school systems failing to identify or treat mentally ill children. They see prisons where mentally retarded inmates are expected to represent themselves in their complex court appeals because there are no public defenders. They see prison inmates suffer and die at the hands of the state for unimaginably horrifying acts committed against innocents. It is the soup-to-nuts tour of human misery and, for our visitors from overseas, it is distinctly American.

I tried to explain to these colleagues that Louisiana was not America, that although things were not perfect up north, there was at least a show of tolerance and social justice. But they had driven as much as fifteen hours north, twelve hours east, and twenty hours west while working on various cases and they had never seen anything contrary to what they witnessed in and around New Orleans. If an expanse of territory in which you
could fit nearly all of Europe did not represent America, then what country was it? They were right, and the answer was obvious. What they had seen was at least as American as the multi-ethnic high school in New York City where I once stared out the window at the Statue of Liberty.

Although, for me, this part of the country had been consigned to history lessons about the civil rights era, and for my parents’ generation it was the location of a triumph-through-struggle story, the clearer perspective of these guests in our country allowed me to see my own homeland with fresh eyes. Just as it had taken reading Alexis de Tocqueville’s words for nineteenth-century Americans to be able to see their young country without their built-in biases, I had to travel to the South and spend time with young Europeans and Australians to see my country as a whole and realize that the way we do things is not the only way that they can (or should) be done.

Inspired by their examples, I came back to New Orleans following my graduation from law school with the promise of meaningful work, though not much in the way of compensation. The money did not matter, in large measure because the cost of living in New Orleans was so much lower than in New York, and because I had never perceived my law degree as a tool for acquiring wealth.

The apartment I left in Brooklyn, a charmless basement unit beneath an ugly brick house built in the 1960s, was forty minutes by train from Manhattan, and we paid twelve hundred dollars a month for it. My wife, who had preceded me to New Orleans to find a place for us to live, had rented a house, which she assured me I would love, for hundreds of dollars a month less. When I arrived in my U-Haul truck, after a twenty-two-hour drive from
New York, I could not believe that I could possibly live in that house. It was an elegant old center-hall Creole cottage with a large gaslit yoke hanging in front of a transom above an eight-foot cypress front door. The house was about a fifteen-minute walk from my office downtown. When I walked through the front door into the center hallway, it was clear that our entire New York apartment could easily have fit within the hall, which itself was used merely as a pass-through to the rest of the house. Then I was shown the courtyard, in the center of which a purple angel's trumpet tree grew and where satsuma and fig trees bore fruit. Someone pointed out the “slave quarters,” a narrow frame building extending from the main house, in which there were two other apartments. I asked whether the house predated the Emancipation Proclamation and was told that it did so by several years. As if to comfort me, it was then explained that the house had been built by free men of color rather than whites, and it was they who owned the slaves here. I chewed on this puzzling fact about our country’s racial history and did not feel at all easier about living in a house where people had been compelled against their will to work and live. Attempting to understand this tangible evidence of New Orleans’s troubled past, I began my life in New Orleans.

We lived in that house for two years and were married there, in an event that I believe may have exorcized at least some of the place’s demons. I had an office in the back corner of one of the rooms and would sit working on my death penalty cases with my back to a fifty-foot expanse in which grand parties must have been attended by slave owners, to whom slaves served the city’s classic Creole cuisine. I occupied a speck of space and time in a home and a city where the difficult aspects of American history spread out in every direction.
With several thousand dollars that we had saved from our wedding, we eventually bought our own home in the Central City neighborhood, a part of town that many New Orleanians were afraid of, and into which they ventured only for the divine pleasures of the neighborhood’s many churches or for the food at Uglesich’s Restaurant, a classic Croatian seafood restaurant opened in 1920.

Central City was one of the neighborhoods in which jazz was born, and it was where Buddy Bolden, a pioneering trumpet player who was never recorded, grew up. It had been a center of Jewish life in the city until New Orleans fell apart in the 1960s. By the time we moved there, all but one of the synagogues either were boarded up or had been reinvented as full gospel ministries, but our old pine door frames still bore the marks of mezuzahs from residents in generations past. Those holes, in fact, were some of the very few historic relics of the 1850s townhouse that remained. All of the interior walls had collapsed. The moldings had been stripped. The interior cypress doors were long gone, likely sold to “historic salvage” stores for food or drugs. When my friend Alfredo first entered the house before we bought it, he said that there were pots full of raw sewage on the floor; apparently, the plumbing had stopped working long before. The house was listing heavily to one side. Someone had to buy it and fix it up or it would fall over.

We resurrected the house between long days spent working at our regular jobs. Eventually, except for a bit of missing paint here and there, it became a proper home. My wife, who had never lived anywhere she could be proud of, and I, who had never lived anywhere with a sense of permanence, finally had a home of our own—a beautiful place that we had made ourselves in a city we
loved, all the while struggling to make the city better for the people who had not had a choice about living here. Maybe this is why I was so reluctant to leave when I heard of coming storms.

Though I had prevailed on Nikki in summers past to stay for hurricanes in spite of pleas from our local apocalyptic meteorologists, she had definite plans to leave by the time I woke up on Saturday morning. I made no effort to prevent her from leaving, but explained that I wanted to stay, that I did not think the storm would be a big deal. Conveniently, we had an appointment with our couples counselor that afternoon, a pony-tailed man in his fifties whom we had been seeing in an effort to disentangle some nascent marital strife. As the storm barreled toward our city, a storm that ultimately killed more than a thousand people, my wife and I had a mediated conversation about my sense of manhood in light of my powerlessness against a giant storm and Nikki’s desire to be safe in a world that often spun out of control. I cannot remember whether it was Nikki or I, but one of us invoked Job as a metaphor for our feelings. By the end of the appointment, I resolved that evacuating was something that I needed to do for Nikki, that a few days off up in Oxford would be a nice vacation, and that the very slight possibility that the worst could happen—that the city would flood, leaving me and Nikki in our attic in rising water with our dogs and cat—could not be risked in light of how punishing each “I told you we should leave” would be. Each time I have thought of that appointment subsequently, I have cringed with embarrassment at our privilege and the absurdity that our decision to leave was not only facilitated by the fact that we had two running cars, plenty of credit to buy gas, and a place to stay in Oxford, Mississippi, but also by our access to a person whom we pay to tell us, two adults, how to make the right deci-
sions in life. Hurricane Katrina left plenty of Jobs in its wake, but we are not among them. At least this time, neither of us had to have it out, face-to-face, with the whirlwind.

Still uneasy with the decision to leave, I set out with extra vigor to convince others that they should leave as well—if I wasn’t going to brave the storm, no one should. I took this message to the Circle Bar, my local, where Mike was working, and asked him what his plans were. He had none, but people coming into the bar—both those who were planning to stay in town and those who were planning to leave—were increasingly anxious, and he was beginning to get scared. As I was telling him that he could come with us, we were interrupted by Lefty Parker, the bar’s manager, who derided us for our concerns and declared, with post-punk nonchalance, that nothing could get him to leave. As I was particularly vulnerable to his pose, and almost certainly would have shared it if not for my wife’s resistance, I barked back with special vehemence, “I hope you think of this moment as your smug mouth slips beneath the poopy water.”

We all paused, and then laughed uncomfortably, as that was a genuine fear. To avoid that imagined fate, people were abandoning their city and homes.

Mike told me that he would be getting off work at midnight and would make his decision by then. I told him that we were planning to leave around that time to avoid the ridiculous daylight traffic out of the city. It was heartening that Mike, a cool character not prone to panic, without pressure from a partner, appeared likely to make the same decision I had.

I returned home to the arduous task of boarding up the windows, with generous help from my neighbor Nick Suhor, who rented the other side of our double. Although neither of us is an
incompetent bumbler, neither are we particularly adroit at 10:30 at night on a twenty-eight-foot ladder with a drill strapped on, while struggling with heavy, awkward pieces of plywood. During the hours it took us to board up the windows, it occurred to me numerous times that the chances of wind damage to the house were far outweighed by the very real likelihood of our sustaining serious injury while boarding it up. With my sense of self more tattered than usual and with the help of someone whose financial stake in the home was far less than my own, I persisted until every board was hung and Nick and I were shaking with exhaustion. It was 1:30 in the morning. The air was humid and still.

Mike arrived while we were finishing up. He had decided to come along. He thanked us again and again for taking him with us, noting that otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to leave at all and wouldn’t know where to go. Without a car or friends in the surrounding area, Mike did indeed have few options, but far more than many of the people he had left behind at the bar or back in his Ninth Ward neighborhood did.

Exhausted by stress and hard work, I took a brief nap on the couch. I was awakened by Nikki, in a panic that I could not comprehend about her cat, Bitch, a little tortoise-shell that she had named with characteristic third-wave feminist flair. It was not until I was upstairs that I could see Bitch’s predicament. She had squeezed her little body halfway through a small plastic window in her cat carrier and was wedged so that she could go neither out nor in, compressing her torso so that she had difficulty breathing. Nikki was panicking as all of her anxiety about the coming storm and our precarious lives became focused on the cat. With a bracing order, “Calm down,” I told her to get her super-sharp sewing scissors so we could cut through the plastic. Once we got down to
business, it became clear that cutting the cat free would be more difficult than I’d anticipated because the plastic ring that bound her was so tight against her flesh and buried so deeply in her fur that I worried I would cut her if I tried to cut the ring. Nikki comforted the cat while pressing her side away from the ring as I cut, and suddenly she was free. Nikki and I hugged as though we had beaten death, even though this was merely one of its little sideshows.

I told Nikki that I thought that we should leave the cat behind rather than force her to spend hours back in the little plastic cage; she would be happier romping around the dog-free house for a few days. But Nikki insisted that we take the cat with us to Oxford. I had already convinced her that it was unnecessary for her to take her computer and her art supplies for our three-day trip, and I lost the will to argue about the cat.

It was nearly four in the morning by the time the car was packed and we were ready to go. Our neighbors, Nick and his girlfriend Tiffany Cotlar, were on a similar schedule and had just finished packing their little Mini Cooper with a hamper containing a big, white Moluccan cockatoo and were locking the door to the other side of our house. We had all been listening to the news that the hurricane was coming right at us, so saying goodbye in front of the house seemed awfully permanent after the countless greetings we had exchanged in passing over the previous year.

Nikki and I drove our Volvo and our Jeep in caravan over to a high-rise parking lot downtown, where the Jeep wouldn’t be vulnerable to flooding. I left it on the fourth floor, wondering about a world where that might not be high enough. I took the elevator down, got into the backseat of the Volvo with Max and Mabel, and fell asleep before we hit the interstate.