

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
“The New Colossus,” Emma Lazarus

“And we sang dirges in the dark, the day the music died.”
“American Pie,” Don McLean

August Thirtieth

I'll never forget the look on Margeaux's face that morning. Her mouth hung slightly open, as if she was trying to say something, or maybe even just breathe. Her eyes were closed, but that only made the fact that I'd never see them so bright and alive again more unbearable. Water lapped around the edges of the bed like a Dalí painting. A shimmering pool of salty light by the window told me the sun was out.

She made it thirty six hours after Katrina. That was twelve longer than she should have without her insulin.

I knew immediately what happened. Most people would have gone for help as quickly as possible, but help wasn't listening much those days. Instead I just laid there. I couldn't tell you for how long, but in the time I was there I revisited a lot of our relationship in my mind. It was an immediate and necessary funeral of sorts. God knew I might not be able to give her a proper one.

She loved Louis Armstrong. When we wandered through the Quarter she insisted that we stop and listen to the buskers if they were playing an Armstrong tune. I'd give her a few dollars and she became the trumpet player's best friend for a few moments. If it was a particularly somber tune—covers of "La Vie En Rose" always stole her—she sat on the curb and listened sweetly. Then, and this is the part that always got

me, she'd cry.

It was as if I fell in love with a woman like I hadn't known existed before her. To give a slightly different but similarly ambiguous description, the thing she was most guilty of, that defined her in my eyes, was that she only wanted to love every person she ever met in her entire life.

She cried even more when we fought. Most of the time I thought our fights were over simplicities; I made an inopportune joke that she took out of hand, or some seemingly ordinary remark I made to the waitress was questioned late into the evening. Her conviction of my misconduct made me question even myself sometimes.

I wondered how long it might be. I wasn't even sure what it was. Help? What if this was it? What if neither of us left here? I found myself circling slowly back around toward the thought as an hour passed by. At first I dismissed it, giving it a wide berth in favor of focusing on my memory of life with Margeaux, before its persistence grew in the forefront of my mind. The doubt grew louder until I was consumed by it, I was sure we would both lie there long after the waters receded. But that wasn't any way for her to end. An epiphany announced itself with absolute simplicity and unyielding certainty: I would get us out of the house, or I was going to try until it killed me.

Right before my phone went my brother in Tuscaloosa told me he saw footage of helicopters flying over houses in a nearby neighborhood. We hadn't heard any. Some of them had baskets, he said, that they wheeled down on ropes to carry up survivors in. If I could get their attention, they might not know Margeaux was dead until we were in the

cabin. What would they do then?

I rolled off the bed into the water, a pool of stagnant urine. The stairs were twenty long feet away, I started towards them. Once I got past the smell, the first thing I noticed while wading through the floodwater was what floated in it. They were pieces of things that shouldn't have been there. An empty pickle jar, a tree branch, bright orange flyers advertising an auto-detailing service for neighborhood residents—now all the owners of underwater curb ornaments. This was the ruins of a civilization being flushed down God's toilet, my city. I wouldn't let Margeaux go the same way. I had to bury her.

Once on the rooftop I crawled past the shingles snaked in white spray paint. From the sky the letters called out:

“MARGEAUX AND ROB ARE ALIVE”

I started to run out of paint at the end, the letters were faded on the last two words. Instead of a call for help it probably looked more like a dying love letter to the rest of the world. Maybe if I hadn't spelled out her entire name we'd have had enough, but I always loved every letter of it. I loved the way it was going to sound as part of my own name. Margeaux Picot. Sometimes I made her say it just so I could hear it. If the sight of her didn't, the sound of her voice would break your heart, so gently you didn't even notice until all its little pieces were gone from you.

The scene was worse on the roof than it was inside. I saw smoke rising from the roofs of buildings otherwise submerged in a sea of water. They dotted the horizon like the flaming obelisks of a city under siege, offering up its distress call before evaporating unheard into the haze of a late sum-

mer sky. In the far distance an inflatable raft slowly trolled by the top of a row of homes. The day was silent except for the passing of water in and out of our building. There were no helicopters.

Part of me wanted to go back inside and lay next to Margaux, knowing I would never make it out of the city alive. But then I remembered what she said to me the day before. We were sitting by the window, drinking out last bottle of water, when she stopped near the end and looked at me.

“Baby...”

“Hmm?”

“If I go...”

“Don’t talk like that. We got the sign up there, help’s comin.”

“I’m just sayin’, if it doesn’t come soon enough—”

“It will.”

She put her hand on my knee.

“I love you. And I know why you’re saying that. But if something happens to me—your father will need you.”

“My father never needed anything he didn’t allow himself to.”

“He’ll need you.”

I last spoke with my father the night before the storm. He was a fast talker and proud man who I feared as a child. He never let the second love of his life, boxing, get in the way of his first: a good drunk. One brought on the other; he saw himself as destined for success in a sport that his wingspan just wasn’t tailored for. It was a cruel joke God played on him. He had the build and stamina like the best of them, and his arms were strong for what they were, but they stuck out

like nubs against his powerful frame. When he finally accepted this flaw as fatal he turned to managing other boxers and the bottle. Both of them did a sufficient job of keeping him out of the house, which was fine by me as a child.

I once remember an occasion of several months during which he was gone when I was about twelve. At the time my mother said he was out touring (it turns out boxers don't tour, but that explanation satisfied me then). I later learned he was imprisoned for those months after nearly beating a boxer to death with his bare hands in a drunken spar. The boxer reacted poorly to my father jiving his haircut. Depending on which old barber you ask at the shop where my father waits out his hangovers, the boxer never stepped in the ring again. I should say here that he never laid a hand on any of us, probably for fear he would actually hurt someone. But considering some of the things he said to us, he never had to.

When he wouldn't accept my offer to ride out the storm in our second story walkup, I didn't offer much opposition. He told me instead he would go to the Superdome, like several of his neighbors, and that he would watch the news on the Jumbotron during the storm. We planned for me to pick him up the day after it blew over and take him home.

She was too sick to move. It would have killed her. I know that seems strange to interject now but it's a battle I've fought with myself at least twice an hour every day since. Should I have stayed with her and waited for help or left her alone and went to find it? The nearest pharmacy was a dozen blocks anyway, and as much as I tried to swim, the truth was I couldn't. I could barely tread water. Drowning I wasn't afraid of, but leaving her to die alone I was.

I couldn't fail both of them. I decided that somehow I'd get to the Superdome and search for him. I didn't know how, or what we'd do afterward, but I knew I would get there. I'd come back when the water receded and give her a place to rest more fitting of the life she showed me.

But then there was that water. That wretched water, teeming with debris and subterranean waste bubbling up from the sewers, and worse. I had to find a way other than to swim or I'd certainly drown. I saw a giant stained-glass front door float by the day before. It looked out of place here, like it belonged in the untouched Garden District more than my own neighborhood. Most of our doors were torn off their hinges, but I found one still holding on next to the closet we used to store Margeaux's unfinished canvases. She loved to paint.

I opened up the door of the closet and looked inside. The water was a few feet deep, but the tops of some of the paintings escaped unscathed. Their bright colors tinted the water around them with a carnival of odd and desperately charming hues, like the cadre of elegantly doomed vagabonds who populated various corners of the city before the storm, and who dissolved in the water's wake just the same. I set to work on the door and tried to rip it off with brute force. It announced its sturdiness with my quick and repeated failure. To look for a tool as simple as a screwdriver in this contorted wasteland seemed like an ironic and fruitless pursuit, but after a few moments I recalled a bottom cabinet in the rear of the kitchen where we kept a toolbox.

When I got to the kitchen the smell from the refrigerator was insufferable. I inched by, treading against half-finished

yellow paint of the dining room wall, and made it to the area of the counter where I thought the cabinet would be. In the corner by the broken window a soft current was slowly carrying the contents of our pantry out into the expanding Gulf of Mexico. I felt around under the water with my hands, catching the identical handles of several cabinet doors. I opened a few and after feeling around came up with nothing. This was going to have to be a more involved process. I closed my eyes and went down.

Groping blindly through the darkness of the floodwater, I felt everything except the box. I opened my eyes to the brackish darkness and looked around. Nothing. I stuck my hand into what had to be the last cabinet when I hit the outline of its shape. As I lifted it up something brushed my arm.

“The fuck!”

I didn't realize I was out of the water until I was upright and dropped the box back below. In waist-deep water with unknown company, I wasn't sure whether to stand still or run. Both seemed like equally pathetic attempts. After a frozen moment I decided to continue and hope it didn't happen again.

This time I found the box easily and came back up even quicker. I started to walk towards the room when I was assaulted again, and then I knew what it was. It had been over twenty years since I last went fishing with my father, but I still remember the catfish sting that ended our infrequent trips to Lake Pontchartrain. It burned just as much the second time. I pulled my leg out of the water to see a few small barbs in my shin. I waded over to the bathroom while dragging the surprising weight of the box with me, standing on

the toilet while I rifled through its contents. At the bottom of the box finally, mercifully, lay the screwdriver. Eureka.

After a half hour of work I opened up the empty window frame in our bedroom and slid the unhinged door through it. It floated. I tied one end of a rope to my wrist and the other to the door handle in order to keep close if things got rough. I fashioned a paddle out of a broom, and crawled out onto the door, only letting go after a wave of trepidation passed.

It sank immediately and I was stricken at the idea of going down with it. Fortunately I quickly discovered that by laying on my stomach, my weight was evenly distributed so that the door only sagged a few inches underwater. I began my journey paddling facedown like this, advancing through the waters like an infantryman working his way up a hill under enemy fire.

I won't speak of many of the things I saw on the way to the nearest road above water. They would quickly become a redundant expression of the tragedy I detailed in personal terms and impress upon you its much grander scale. That is a kind of despair I have no desire for anyone to share with me. I will however express without reservation the occurrence of two things during my horizontal journey to the highway.

First, at one point I must have appeared to be laying dead on the door. As I floated down one of many streets, a rock the size of a golf ball landed directly in front of my face with a startling splash. I'm not sure what prehistoric monstrosity I thought was coming to relieve me of my troubles, but I was up and alert in half a breath. Another rock followed, and then the laughter of children. I looked around to see a group of young boys, six in total of almost identical

age and height, sitting on the balcony of an old public housing apartment which was abandoned except for them. As I looked at them they pointed up to the sky, I followed their gesture. Circling above me high in the sky was a group of vultures, eventually scattering upon their recognition of my motility. I called out to them.

“Are you alone?”

The tallest replied,

“Yea.”

“Y’need help?”

“You gonna rescue us w’dat door-boat?”

Their laughter was the first I heard in days.

“Helicopters are comin’ back,” he said.

He disappeared inside for a moment, and after reappearing lobbed a large rectangle in my direction. The yellow foil of a Mr. Goodbar landed limply in the water twenty yards from me, my first contact with the outside world. It began moving in the opposite direction slowly and I waved back to the boys.

“Thank you.”

They laughed and disappeared, a mirage of benevolent hope in a sea of squalor.

Secondly, I passed a church and decided to stop for rest after the midway point. I beached the door onto the shingles of its roof before quickly moving to the highest point, my only company a giant cross as big as the door. I leaned against it and put my head in my arms, my body already aching. Moments later the cross went crashing down into the water, its strength weakened by the storm. I nearly toppled off with it, but righted myself just in time to avoid falling into

the abyss some twenty-odd feet below. When it hit the water it lingered there, I watched for a minute while it treaded the current listlessly.

Inspiration struck me. If I lashed the cross to the center of the door, it would provide an extra measure of stability; I could sit across its intersection and my weight would be evenly distributed by its extremities. I hurried down from my post and waded out to it before it drifted away. Carrying it back to the roof of the church I carefully positioned it in the center of the door, and then used the rope from my hand to fasten it in place. I feared it was too heavy, but found after an initial flirtation with disaster that careful posture allowed it to work just as I hoped. For the rest of my rowing I was sitting upright.

After most of the afternoon, I caught site of the highway rising from the water. There didn't look to be any cars, but there was a substantial amount of debris. As I drifted up to the highway I noticed that most of it was garbage left by others who made similar journeys. Abandoned rafts, a mattress, empty wrappers of food, excrement, all that remained of the day. The tip of the cross ran aground with the satisfying sound of contact with gravel, and I was off.

As I walked up the suspended highway it continued to rise out of the water, to a height of first ten, and then almost twenty feet. I had a better view of my surroundings than before; if better were an appropriate word for it. In the interest of brevity and saving the vocabulary of disaster for the greatest spectacle yet to come—it confirmed my earlier sentiments.

I walked for a mile or so before seeing anything living.

Laying limply on the far left side of the road was a giant mastiff at least ten long years old. It was mangy and dehydrated and near its end, the only thing worse than the sight of it was my inability to affect its situation by either easing its pain or putting it out of misery. I continued to walk into the dying sun.

By the time it set I was extremely thirsty. Although I was confident I could make it the entire way without food, I knew that without water I'd be lucky to make it another day. In the distance the Superdome loomed in pale twilight, a vaulted refuge where I'd soon find food, water, and my father. It was probably half a day's walk away, but the road led right to it. I stopped and prepared to turn in for the night, laying down on the edge of the gravel with my face next to the guard rail. I slept much faster than a man in those circumstances would expect.

...

It was a startling sensation, waking up to brilliant lights in the sky. They cast an incredulous illumination down on the water logged city below. For a moment they made the town look enviously beautiful, like an accidental Venice on the fourth of July. But it was a lie. The propagator of the lie was whirring its helicopter blades less than a hundred yards away, which I leapt up to greet in the humid darkness. At first it was obscured by the flares falling to the water below. What they were doing I wasn't sure, probably looking for survivors in the surrounding neighborhood. When the first set of flares died out, they lit another, and that's when I saw it. A small local news helicopter, using its spotlight and flares

to survey the surrounding devastation.

I danced and screamed like a madman to get their attention. I needed something to hoist high in the air, but I had nothing. They circled around my location and I thought I was lost as they completed their loop, till finally a light shined down on me. I threw my arms in the air in an open embrace of its blinding heat. A mechanical voice called out as the bird hovered.

“ARE YOU ALONE?”

“Yes!” I nodded up and down furiously.

“DO YOU HAVE FOOD? WATER?”

“NO!” I yelled still louder, shaking my head and waiting for a response weightier than words. The light was moved off me to a spot twenty yards away in the dust of the highway. A white sack hit the pavement and I ran to it. The bird was beginning to turn around now, and I yelled my disapproval as it left.

“WE’RE FULL. SORRY, THIS ISN’T A RESCUE CHOPPER”

The bullhorn clicked.

“WALK TO THE CONVENTION CENTER, THEY’RE EVACUATING”

Another click.

“THE SUPERDOME IS OVERRUN”

Overrun. What did that word mean? Overrun was a word for prison riots, or from history class, used to describe the storming of the Bastille or the siege of the Alamo. This was the Superdome, home of the Saints and the Sugar Bowl. What the hell happened? I turned the words over in my mind as the helicopter disappeared. I walked up to the bag and

opened it.

If Moses were alive today, manna from heaven would be an MRE--cheese, crackers, coffee, matches, gum, and meatballs with marinara, complemented by a flameless heater. Then there was water, three bottles of it. I was surrounded by it, but this was the first time I drank any in over twenty four hours. Included in the package were three individually perforated moist towelettes—an admirable attempt. After feasting I laid back down on the highway, filled with a more hopeful sense of solitude. The night air was alive with the increasing sound of police sirens in the distance. The city smoldered quietly.

This time when I slept there was Margeaux. In our home we had one of those giant old white baths with clawed feet at the bottom. When you laid down in it fully filled the water came up to your chin. I was coming in one afternoon from work, the wind drifting in ever so slightly on the kind of day where you could feel the spike of fall crawl down the collar of your shirt. She loved fall. I stopped as I walked in the door of our bedroom and saw her laying in the overflowing tub with her eyes closed. We had a fight the night before and were in that strange place where the matter of argument wasn't important, but the argument itself ended poorly enough so that neither of us was quite ready to be warm toward the other.

“It's cold. You shouldn't have the window open.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at me.

“Well don't you think you should close it?” I reiterated.

She lifted one of her legs out of the water and caught the edge of the windowpane with her toes. She pulled it down while she kept looking at me.

“Is that better?”

“Don’t mock me. You could get sick.”

She faked a cough.

“Full of jokes today.”

I emptied my pockets onto the bureau she found for us at a consignment shop. I say found, but the more appropriate word is probably discovered, once she admitted to you how excited she was to find it.

“Are you still mad at me for talking to Cassandra?” she asked as I put my wallet down.

I cringed.

“Why would I care about that?”

“I dunno. Maybe because I think you were sleeping with her when we first got back together.”

“I told you that ain’t true.”

“I know. I hope it isn’t.”

“Then why are you so convinced?”

“I can see it in the way you look at her sometimes. Like you’re torn between two feelings—being attracted to her on the one hand, and begging her for secrecy on the other.”

I sat there and looked at her.

“Or maybe I’m just crazy,” she said and disappeared under the water. I stood in the doorway waiting for her to come back up. When she did there were suds in her eyes that she batted away. She pulled her hair back to wring the water out of it.

“If you’re so sure, why are you still with me? Wouldn’t you leave?”

She looked at me and thought about it for a moment.

“I don’t think I would. But it would definitely hurt...”

She was lost in her thoughts now, looking out the window and punishing herself with apparitions of my infidelity.

“What would make you stay?”

“All these questions make you sound guilty,” she said in mock accusation. She always went for levity when she was close to tears.

“I just don’t get it, that’s all.”

She laughed into the bathwater to herself.

“Maybe I don’t either.”

“I wish I understood the parts of you that don’t make sense to me.”

I started toward the kitchen but her voice called me back.

“Robert...baby.”

I ducked my head back into the bathroom.

“When has forgiveness ever failed us?”

Very suddenly I had the sensation of not remembering anything of our fight, or the evening, or the whole of my prior existence—it was all washed away in my perfect and renewed acquaintance with the breach formed between soft lips parting to show her beautiful smile underneath. How could a man worship anything else?

I walked over to her wordlessly and stood at the edge of the tub. She took my hand and held it to those lips like they could breathe love and life right into me. She looked up at me.

“Most of us are living just one chance away from redemption.”

She took my hand and dipped it in the water, pulling me toward her. I started to get in with all my clothes on. Only

the water wasn't cold at all. It was warm. More than that, it wasn't just water. There were things floating in it. Something hit my leg.

A plank of wood.

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-Matthew