

# On the overpass leading out of town is a baby stroller toppled on its side. Someone made it this far and then... Well, such stories have a lot of endings.

Besides, he's got a .40-caliber semiautomatic riding beside him in the door pocket.

Belle Chasse naval base sits just south of New Orleans, but it feels more like Sleepy Hollow, with soldiers milling around and waiting for some event to justify their existence. A huge line of buses sits on the runway, waiting to transport whoever might still be alive in New Orleans. Television crews frame and feed this scene to the nation.

A few blocks away, another nation toils. Halliburton subsidiary KBR has arrived and, for a rumored \$25 million, is trimming trees and building a tent city for the thousands of guardsmen currently bunking on cots in hangers. At a table in the Belle Chasse mess hall, military officers sit with two guys who have flown in from God knows where to get a piece of the action. The two men, one dressed like a cowboy and the other like a beach bum, peddle temporary labor. Everyone exchanges cards. The gold rush has arrived. Congress has just passed a \$10.5 billion relief bill, but this will be spent in three weeks, and there will be plenty more coming down the pike and into the paws of those ready to take it. A television plays in the corner and well-fed white people from Washington assure everyone that everything is fine or will be fine soon. The sound is off. No one looks up at the screen as the hours creep past.

Twenty miles to the north, New Orleans sits underwater, empty of all but the shadow of life. It is a blind eye staring out at the American landscape, a ghost town left standing to mock our illusions under a blue sky. Come to the naval base and look across the river and things in the city look normal. But there have been a few changes and I'll tick them off now:

The old political rule in Louisiana was that you could not win a statewide race without New Orleans. Well, you can now. New Orleans is gone. The evacuation pattern has a simple truth: Republicans have resettled in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, and other Louisiana cities. Democrats, the poor and black people of the city's below-sea-level wards, have been shipped out of state. Banks, oil companies, and other floors to the city's economy have relocated to the area and are likely to stay forever. Billions will be required to build up the levees and restore the city, and faint whispers are already surfacing that ask a simple question: Why bother? More big winds will come and this city, some say, is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Meanwhile, everyone cusses out the relief effort. Everyone plots a life without New Orleans. The president zooms in and

out like a Mad Hatter and says we'll make it better than ever. Little horrors pop up, tales of raped women, of the elderly dying in their wheelchairs, of cops committing suicide, of people drowned in attics.

And people sit at tables and carve up the pie of the coming gold rush. Forget this crap that New Orleans means blues and jazz, Mardi Gras, and Bourbon Street after midnight. Here's what it means now: risk assessment by bean counters in insurance companies. Now it means Business. And the big question Business asks is: Who will step up and insure homes in the future New Orleans?

The Big Easy, dead and waterlogged, has become the Big Money. And Big Money can rebuild the city or abandon the city. Big Money is about...money.

The place we called New Orleans is now about a thin white woman evacuated to Baton Rouge who sits with dead eyes and lips like a hard line, because she will not be able to wrap words around what she has seen for days or weeks or maybe ever. The city is about people sitting in motels for hundreds of miles in every direction and they watch television endlessly and strain for a glimpse of some flooded street that was their home and they say they're not going back or maybe they're going back or damn straight they're going back but



★ Armed rescuers in boats arrive to save people stranded on I-10 in Orleans Parish.

in all their hearts they wonder one thing: Will there ever *be* a New Orleans again? A stench rises off the drowned city and, there on the overpass leading out of town, is an abandoned baby stroller toppled on its side. Someone made it this far and then... Well, such stories have a lot of endings.

Biker Bob thinks the whole problem has been communication. Nobody, after the big wind hit, could talk to anyone else—the cops, the military, the civilians, were all marooned in their own private nightmares. He's hauled a fistful of new cell phones onto the base so the officers can finally call out. Maybe he's right, but I'm not so sure. I think everyone has gotten the message. Katrina talked loud.

New Orleans meant something and no one can quite put their finger on this something but they know the music, can feel the lust, savor the food. And my God, they miss it so bad, whatever the hell it was. >>>

## ★ SAVING MY FAMILY BY BRYANT MOORE, AT THE CONVENTION CENTER

My mom works in a hospital in New Orleans, so she and my sister Denise; my 24-year-old niece, Cydney; and her 2-year-old daughter, R'nae, all went there the day before the storm hit. I was up in Baton Rouge. Before long, the water rose. They were worried people would break in and steal drugs. The nurses armed a bunch of employees, including my mom, with syringes full of muscle relaxer. They said, "If anybody tries to attack, you stick 'em with this, and they'll be dead in three minutes." Eventually, the National Guard evacuated people on boats to the Convention Center. My family spent the first night outside, sleeping on the concrete. There were random screams through the night. They heard that a girl gave birth, and she and her baby died on the spot.

My niece knew some of the so-called "thugs" from the neighborhood, and they protected my family. People talk about the looting. These guys *were* stealing, but they were taking mattresses so that elderly people would have something to lie on. They got food and water. They were cracking jokes and lifting people's spirits all night long. These guys—who are feared in their own neighborhoods—were taking care of everybody.

On their second day there, Cydney got through on the phone. "I can't spend another night out here," she said. My sister Donna's boyfriend, Darryl, decided he was going down there to get them out. Normally, it takes eighty minutes to get from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. It took us five hours because of the roadblocks. Eventually, we got onto the Greater New Orleans Bridge, which is right near the Convention Center. It was lined with cops, and they all had shotguns. I had a gun tucked under my seat. I said to Darryl, "Slow down, but don't stop unless they ask." They didn't stop us, and we pulled up right in front of the Convention Center.

Thousands of people were lined up, and I started desperately looking for my family. Darryl went inside. I was clean-shaven and wearing fresh clothes, and one lady asked me if I was a doctor. I said no, and she said, "Don't fucking walk away from me, I know who you are." I just tucked my gun into my waist and kept moving.

It wasn't three minutes after that that I saw my sister Denise. When she went to give me a hug, I stopped her. I didn't want to draw any attention to us. Soon I found my mom and Cydney with her 2-year-old. "Be cool," I kept saying to them. "Be cool, keep calm, don't move." As we approached the car, I saw at least twenty people gathered around it. Some were trying to open the doors. Some were looking into the windows. Darryl had the keys, so I went into the building to look for him. It was pitch-black, and it smelled foul. I thought, I didn't come this far to not make it out, so I took my gun out and cocked it.

After an hour, Darryl emerged from the darkness. I said to everyone, "We're just gonna casually walk to the car, and if people start coming toward us, we'll pile in fast. I'm gonna do whatever I have to do to get us out of here." I knew at least twelve people were getting out of my way, because that's how many bullets I had. A police SUV pulled up and drew away a lot of the attention, and that's when we got into the car. I started the engine, and everybody turned back toward us. A few people started walking toward the car, shouting, and I was like, "Man, let's go." I had my gun cocked in my lap. I was hoping nobody would jump on the car or shoot at us. And nobody did. We got on the bridge and just took off.—AS TOLD TO HOWIE KAHN