

## Calling

Her nearly black eyes seemed to cloud over. I don't think I'd ever seen my mother like this. There was a realization stuck in the corners of her tightening scowl, the aging scarlet lipstick clinging to the deep-set cracks in her lips. She looked up at me, a question poised, trapped in her lungs, the words ready to cascade over me with her next breath. But she paused, holding her hand up against the dimple above her breastbone—a second, a gap that felt like an eternity. Then finally, “So, when do you think we can go home?” A watery spot appeared at the corner of her eye, magnified by her thick designer-frame glasses. She was farsighted, but in that moment, I felt none of us could see very well.

“I have no idea,” was all I could say. I'd just downloaded a satellite image from Google that was so detailed I was able to zoom in on the exact location of my parents' home. Its roof was one of a myriad of tiny brown rectangular islands surrounded by Katrina's muddy floodwaters. The hurricane's storm surge had cascaded over the levees that formed a boundary between Eastern New Orleans and the swampland to the south known as the Rigolets. In the image that boundary had disappeared. I scratched at the three-day-old beard on my chin.

“Dad?” My scarecrow-like father was sitting in a dim corner of the hotel room, his eyes glued to the TV. It was clear nothing I’d just told my mother had registered.

Perhaps nothing at all was registering.

“Dad?” I said, louder than before.

He looked over toward me as I stood there in the doorway between our adjoining rooms. I tried not to broadcast the distress welling in my gut. “I just told Mom I heard New Orleans East is under 14 feet of water.”

I thought he might do something, stand and sigh, shake his knobby head, gasp, but he just looked at me with the same eyes as my mother’s. He stared at me until I needed to turn away. In a low voice he said, “Thank God for the flood insurance.”

This place in which we’d taken refuge was about 150 miles north and west of New Orleans, not really a hotel so much as a resort. Just about every name-brand hotel within 250 miles of the city was booked solid, but by chance a friend of my mother’s had asked her if her extended family needed a place to evacuate to. The friend had a brother who managed a vacation getaway next to a golf course in Franklinton and they’d be glad to reserve us a couple of rooms if we could arrive by Saturday night. My father had always been an early evacuator for hurricanes, so it was an easy call. I drove my parents. My wife had followed along with the kids in our minivan. The roads were a mess, but we managed to get out before the worst of it.

We’d evacuated the city half a dozen times in the past. Leaving temporarily had become an exercise—hurricane training. You pack up, drive a hundred miles away, let the storm run its course and then you return to clean up and continue on with your life.

That's how it worked. None of us had a plan for what to do when the storm wiped your home off the map.

But now here we all were, miles from home, everything we'd left behind a memory. We were stuck. The place we now inhabited wasn't meant to be a shelter. It was a temporary refuge, nothing more.

There was a blank spot in my mind. I kept adding up all the pieces, fitting together this event and that, this move and that consequence, but all my thinking, all my logical meanderings wound up in the same bleak spot. There was nothing there at the end of my flood of concentration. Just a void where "what to do" had always lived.

I wasn't doing a very good job of looking like an anchor for my parents, so I retreated back into my own room where Anne and my daughter were playing crazy eights on the bed. My son was tinkering with a toy car that looked a lot like our little family compact, the one we'd left in our driveway, the one that was probably sitting about ten feet under the water right now. Anne looked up at me. I looked over at each of my kids. For the first time I felt a charge of guilt sweep through me, a feeling like somehow I had not done enough for my family to have avoided this disaster. I was supposed to provide a home for them, a place safe from the chaos of this world. I frowned. I felt I needed to get out of there.

"I'm going to take a walk," I announced to no one in particular. I turned and headed for the door without checking whether anyone heard me.

The resort was situated on a broad flat plain, not unusual for this part of Louisiana. The land here had little character, a low mounded hill grew from the grassy monotony every now and again, like the yoke of a giant brown egg someone had cracked

over a broad countertop. The sun was behind the horizon, but the light still crept around the creases in the billowy clouds and purred in the milky haze between me and the blue sky. I felt small, insignificant. Disaster had come and gone, leaving me and my family in its wake, yet the birds still swooped and cawed above, and the bugs buzzed around me in circles, the breeze still ruffling what was left of my hair. I passed my fingers through my thinning curls trying to tamp down the untamable mess and strolled down the cement walkway that led to a chain-link gate. I opened it and walked out toward the little starter shack that guarded the tee box next to the resort golf course's first hole. There was a tall lean man in a red T-shirt leaning against the counter smoking a cigarette. He eyed me from beneath the brim of his New Orleans Saints ball cap as I approached.

“Kind of a shitty day,” I called out.

He smirked. “You must be from New Orleans too,” he said, gazing at the gorgeous weather conditions.

“Yeah.”

“What part?” he asked.

I kept walking toward him. “Mid-city, right around the Fairgrounds.”

“Yeah? Me too. Wherabouts?”

“Right off Esplanade near the Whole Foods.”

“We're right off Broad, 'bout a half mile down. Hell, we're almost neighbors.”

He beamed, his bright teeth shining out in stark contrast to his dark black skin, his cheeks puffed into a cheerful bunch that made his face look much heavier than his frame implied. When I reached where he was standing he stuck out a wiry hand. “Gabriel Blouin,” he said. “Call me Gabe.”

I shook. “Irv Smith. Good to meet you.”

“Not under the best of circumstances though,” he said. It was as if the comment chased the smile from his face.

“Yeah. I just saw where our area’s probably under at least ten feet of water.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” said Gabe, wagging his head. “I’d uh never thought this could happen. I mean, you live your whole life knowin’ it *could* happen. But you dodge so many bullets you come to think it’s never *gonna* happen.” He paused, and then he stared straight into my eyes. His once friendly looking face sagged into a frank stare. He rolled his eyes. “And then it’s day before yesterday and you’re packin’ everything you can into your car and hoping against all hope this ain’t the one.”

I put my hands on my hips. “I thought we were good, you know? I thought we were gonna make it. But then those levies busted.” I shook my head along with him. “Man, I had all kinds of musical equipment in our apartment. We live on the second floor and I bet we still got water in our place.”

“You play music?” he asked, brightening up again.

“Yeah. Keys mostly, but when we evacuated, I only took my acoustic guitar.”

“No shit. I play sax, man.” He tossed down his cigarette, burnt up to the filter, and mashed it against the pavement with the toe of his Adidas sneakers. “You play out?”

“I used to. Not so much anymore. Got a wife and family to support so my day job takes up most of my time. How ‘bout you?”

“Impressions, down in the Quarter. Jazz. Been playin’ there for about four years.”

Now I was smiling. “That’s great, man. You make enough money to make a living there?”

“It’s not bad. My wife works too so, you know, we get by.”

“I tried for years, but I only came close when I was playing country music down in Chalmette, you know, back in the eighties, when the Urban Cowboy thing was popular. Most of the pop and rock gigs weren’t regular, so I always had to have a day-job to pay the bills. But shit, you’re a pro, man. That’s awesome.”

“Not like I had a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a calling, you know? Like, you don’t know why you want it, or if you can do it or nothin’, but you still try, like you hear something, but you can’t quite make it out.” Gabe put an index finger to his ear and smiled. “I’m still listenin’ for it though.”

I searched my memory trying to figure if I ever felt the need to play music in the same way as Gabe had described. I’d always enjoyed it, and the gigs were mostly good fun, but I don’t ever think I felt called to play, at least not the way Gabe did. This guy felt drawn to his craft the way a priest probably feels about his calling to the priesthood.

“You don’t mean you really hear anything, right?”

“Of course I do. You didn’t never feel those notes comin’ off your keys were touchin’ something bigger than just your fingers?”

The look on my face must’ve answered Gabe’s question.

“Man,” he told me, leaning his head down and swaying back and forth, “sometimes when the music is just right, I feel like I got a direct line to the Almighty. And it’s like it’s flowin’ through every musician that’s playin’ it. It’s like that piece of music—something that’s just a whiff of nothin’—has got a soul. It’s like it’s a living thing that were bringing into this world.”

“Makes me wish I could play with y’all. I’d wanna feel something like that just once,” I said, like the pure desire for that kind of serenity had welled up from my toes and danced off my tongue.

“We gotta make that happen sometime,” he said, smiling again. His face beamed with contentment, like a hurricane’s fury could never upset the joy inside him when he thought about his art. I smiled too, not knowing how happy feelings could still have been alive inside my aching psyche.

I bathed a bit in the silence of Gabe’s invitation, but then I realized the evening news would be on soon. I didn’t want my wife or my parents to be watching without me. “Hey. It was good to meet you, but I think I have to get back to the room. News is about to start.”

“Sure. Guess I’ll see you around sometime. You all take care,” Gabe told me.

“You too,” I said. I tipped up a goodbye with my chin and then turned to walk back to our rooms.

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Time had begun to turn the resort into a prison. My parents had taken the kids out for a treat so my wife took the opportunity to lay into me, knowing my folks weren’t there to enjoy the spectacle.

“It’s going on two weeks!” she half-yelled. We’d learned to keep all our strong emotions down to a dull roar. We were still in a resort with the storm’s refugees in rooms on either side.

“They won’t let us back in the city, honey. I can’t change the damn rules.”

“The kids are gonna need all new clothes. *We’re* gonna need new clothes!” Her volume tailed down a bit. “We’re gonna need new lives.” She said it like she was saying it to herself as much as me.

“I think the hospital is open, but I don’t think they want us back yet.” I worked in the I.T. department for a university hospital downtown. It had been the setting for two news stories during the aftermath of the hurricane. Once, for staying open throughout the height of the flooding, and once for letting about half a dozen patients on life support die when they’d lost electricity from both the city and their back-up generators. I didn’t think optimizing their business software was at the top of the staff’s priority list right now.

“So, where are we gonna get the money...” Anne’s chin dropped. The next few words came out in a near whisper. “...for anything?”

“I don’t know.” I raised my voice. “I don’t know anything, OK? I’m doing my best, but I just don’t have any answers right now.” I shrugged, realized I wasn’t so much mad as just tired and frustrated. “Maybe I can ask my folks for something, just to tide us over.”

That lit the fire again. “I’m NOT taking any money from your father!” she shot back.

“I know, I know. I just thought that, under the circumstances...”

“Well, you can just think again.” Anne was rubbing her hands together, like she was some villain plotting a coup in a superhero flick.

“I need some air. I’m gonna take a walk,” I said, and turned to leave.

“You’re just gonna run away?” she fired at my back.



“I’ll be right back. Just give me a few minutes, will ya?”

I hit the door and walked out toward the golf course. The air was damp, heavy, like maybe we were in line for some afternoon thunder. I stormed through the gate and out to the starter’s shack. There was Gabe again, smoking. It had been nearly two weeks since we’d met. We’d made this spot our sort of de facto refuge from responsibility. His face brightened, and as I walked toward him he raised his chin at me to say hey.

“What’s up, cap?” he asked.

“Just taking a stroll. My wife’s on me to figure what to do next. Needed to clear the air a bit, you know?”

“Not pretty.” Gabe sucked in some smoke and puffed out his cheeks as he released it into the humid afternoon air. “They not lettin’ anyone back yet.”

“Yeah. Well, that doesn’t stop my wife from expecting me to come up with some answers.”

“We gonna all be lookin’ for answers if they don’t drain off the floodwaters soon.” He flicked the ash off his cigarette. “French Quarter’s comin’ back to life. For my part, I just gotta find a way to get back and join in.”

“Yeah. Good luck. There’s literally a State Police road block on I-10.”

“Well, that ain’t the only way back into town.”

I wasn’t planning on figuring out ways to return yet. No electricity, no police and fire, no open grocery stores, even the emergency rooms were shut down, flooded out. I wished I’d left when I had the chance. A feeling of intense guilt had taken residence in my heart of late. Two years back I’d had a job offer. I could have moved halfway across

the country before the storm ever hit. But the whole time I was in Seattle interviewing I kept feeling something calling me back home.

Turned out I'd gotten the job. I could've moved my whole family half a country away from here, but I stayed. The university offered me a big raise—so I stayed. We wouldn't have lost everything if I would've just taken that job.

"I could've avoided all this." I didn't know if I was really speaking to Gabe or if I was just torturing myself by speaking the poison thoughts aloud.

"How's that?" Gabe asked.

"Someone offered me a job in Seattle a few years back. Me and my family could've been living half a country away when this storm hit. I keep thinking it's my fault I'm putting 'em through all this."

"Can't none of us see the future."

"Yeah, but my whole life I feel like I've been making moves that turn out wrong somehow. I just can't ever tell what's right."

Gabe stood up straighter, his eyes focused on mine. "There's this guy I heard about in Alabama. Some cracker lived his whole life in Mobile sellin' tires. He lived to be 109 years old."

I opened my eyes a little wider. "So what?" I blurted out.

"So, I heard about him 'cause his whole life, from the time he was a little kid till the day he passed away he'd walk to this old corner store at lunchtime and buy himself a Pepsi and a hot dog. Every day, rain or shine, he'd get himself goin' and then at 11:30 or so he'd trudge on up to that store and git himself a Pepsi and a hot dog."

"I don't get it. What's your point?"

“Point is, ain’t a doctor on this planet’d tell folks they ought to eat a hot dog and drink a Pepsi every day for their health. Shit, all that sugar and preservatives in soft drinks, and who knows what the hell they put in those cheap-ass hot dogs they sell at some po-dunk cracker grocery in Mobile.”

It almost felt as though Gabe was slapping my face or something, like he was talking gibberish trying to make me snap out of my funk. I laughed. “Man, I’m still not following you in the least.”

“Can’t nobody in this world really know what’s best for ‘em till they try it and see. And even then, you might not ever find if you’re right till you’re 109! Hell, you or I eat that shit for lunch every day we probably come down with some kinda cancer or somethin’ before we turn 40. But for that guy, turns out that choice wasn’t half bad. You just never know. You did what you did for a reason. And next time you gotta make a big choice you just gotta listen, cap, see if you hear anything callin’ after you, maybe takin’ you somewhere you never knew you really wanted to go.”

“I still think I maybe should’ve taken that job.”

Gabe smiled again. “But, how you gonna ever know that, cap? When you made that decision, you had to be listenin’ to something, right?” A minute or so of silence fell between us, then Gabe broke it. “Maybe they’s somethin’ out there still tryin’ to tell you somethin’. Story ain’t over till the last Pepsi, cap. Things have a way of turning out the only way they can turn out. John Lennon had it right. ‘No where you can be that wasn’t where you were meant to be.’ And that’s the God’s truth.”

That just about sunk me. I felt like I might have lived my whole life submerged under ten feet of water. Like maybe I’d made choices, real important life choices, without

ever knowing why. Maybe I could've played music, could've tried to catch on somewhere like Gabe had. Something must've told me I really didn't have the talent for it. And who knows, maybe that job in Seattle would have been all wrong after all—wrong for my family, for our lives. I might not have been here to help my parents get through this hurricane. Maybe it would have been worse seeing it all play out from long distance than living through it firsthand. Who knows?

“Thanks, Gabe. I maybe don't know half of what you're saying, but it's got me thinking anyway.”

“Maybe you should talk to my wife, tell her how wise I can be.”

We both laughed at that one and walked off back toward the resort rooms.

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My father acted like a skittish fawn, a manner I'd never witnessed before now. My mother seemed peevish, more put out than annoyed.

“How long are we going to have to suffer through Sally's cooking?” she asked.

“As long as they'll have you, I guess. They said they'd be glad to put you up— indefinitely.” My cousin, Rick, and his wife Sally were good eggs. They lived in East Texas near Texarkana, about a five-hour drive from here. Everything was decided, a plan in place.

“I haven't been up there for 10 years, at least,” my father said. It was his way of letting me know how uncomfortable he felt about our arrangement. I'd just finished walking the last of the luggage out to the car.

“We’ll be right behind you.”

My mother took a tissue from her rumpled purse and wiped her nose. “I just can’t get over not going back.”

I looked at my watch. “There was no way, ma. We can see in a few weeks. For now, we just have to get out of this resort.”

My wife herded the kids toward the car. “You coming?”

I nodded a ‘yes,’ but I still wasn’t sure about this future I’d chosen, no path, no job, no notion of where I’d be a week, a month, even a year from now. I got my folks situated while Anne settled in for the long ride. She looked troubled, a look that hadn’t changed in three weeks now. When everything was stowed away, I closed the car door and motioned to my dad to roll down the window.

“Just keep on till we get to Shreveport. We can stop there for dinner,” I told him.

He nodded.

As I edged around the bumper and walked toward our vehicle I heard a sound. The doleful sweet tone of a lone saxophone wafted in from the resort courtyard. I had to cock my head to hear it, but it was there, calling out to me.

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