

Something Resembling Normal

By Jay Todd

I wasn't ready for any of it. The hurricane snuck up on me the way it did most people, so by the weekend, we knew it was on its way and could do nothing but ride it out, wait and see what would happen. Having spent my first thirty years in Chicago, I'd never given hurricanes much thought. They were someone else's problems, things I might hear about on the news and feel bad about, but I didn't care about them. Then I moved to Mississippi for reasons that no longer matter, and during my first two years there, I experienced nothing worse than heavy rains, the remnants of hurricanes that had fallen apart before making landfall. Here though—suddenly, it seemed—we had a Cat Five sitting in the Gulf gaining strength enough to threaten even those of us seventy miles inland, and a part of me wanted to be part of it for no reason other than to say I'd been part of it.

By the time I woke up Monday morning, the sky, I saw through the kitchen window as I stood at the sink waiting on my last pot of coffee, was a sickly green. The rain came down in small bursts like someone splashing bucket after bucket against the back door. I didn't feel like rushing, although I'd promised Dana I'd be at her house by seven. I'd wanted this to happen, and now that it was happening, I didn't know how to deal with it. I didn't know what to do. Only now was I realizing this thing could kill me. I turned on the radio and poured a cup of coffee. The hurricane was making landfall east of New Orleans.

After a quick shower, I drove to Dana's with five used candles, a book I'd been meaning to read, two jugs of water, a roll of duct tape, and all my perishables, which didn't amount to much. She lived six blocks from me, and I usually walked, but the rain and the wind had picked up; trees were bending; dead branches were falling. I didn't want to become the guy who died before the hurricane.

Becky opened the door for me, her little hands wrapped around the doorknob. She had on a Kermit the Frog tank top that, when worn by her mother, looked very sexy. "Mama says

Writing Raw

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we're all going to die," she told me. Dana, standing behind her and talking on the phone, pointed at the phone and shrugged her shoulders. She could do so to most anything, I was learning, shrug it off, smile her big smile, and move on to the next thing. She didn't waste time worrying about what might happen or what she might have done. We handled things differently.

I stepped inside with my box of useless supplies and kicked the door shut. "Then who will eat all these pickles?" I asked. I'd never felt comfortable around kids: I couldn't make them giggle with a simple look or a silly story, so I settled for confusing them.

When I first fell for her, I didn't know about Dana's marriage or her separation or her four year old. I knew nothing except that she had wonderfully angular shoulders and curvy hips and a lovely wide mouth that became even wider when she smiled. It was a Friday night; we were both looking for videos to rent; instead, we went across the street for coffee. Half an hour later, when she told me everything she thought I should know, I was too busy enjoying the sound of her mellow, twangy voice and the way she, more often than not, used insults as terms of endearment to care about any of it. She and her husband Gary had separated a month before that night. A month after it, the divorce was final and she was talking about long range plans. And two months after that, I was standing in her kitchen watching the pine trees in her yard sway more than any tree should be allowed to sway.

"Mama says hello," she said when she hung up the phone. I started to load my supplies into her overstocked refrigerator; she, to fill hurricane lamps with oil. I hadn't yet met her mother but only because I'd begged out of going to Baton Rouge for the Fourth of July. While inviting me, Dana had explained that no less than thirty family members would attend, so I, overwhelmed, had told her I had too much work to do, then spent the day working in my yard to validate the excuse. "She's glad you're with us."

I turned while leaning into the refrigerator. Dana wiped up spilled oil with a paper towel. I couldn't tell if she'd taken a shower. She always wore her short hair messy. When Dana wanted to look beautiful, she looked gorgeous. The rest of the time, even just out of bed, she

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settled for pretty. I didn't care either way, which had surprised me and made me think something had happened, that this was something more than a few months of fun like my previous relationships. I didn't care if her hair stuck out in random directions or if a sleep crease ran across her face or if the lids of her dark eyes were puffy. I didn't care that she was divorced or that she came with forty pounds of baggage. I just liked looking at her whenever I could.

She caught me staring, the refrigerator door hanging open, and tossed the oily paper towel wad at me. "You're wasting my electricity, dum dum."

No good at snappy comebacks, I said, "You look tired."

"I stayed up talking to Julie and Claire." Her sisters lived in Metairie, outside New Orleans. The whole family lived within a radius of a hundred and fifty miles, but they talked to one another every day. "I'll make up for it when we go to bed at eight."

"That bad?" We had the radio on to some statewide coverage only covering the coast. No one knew what was happening down there, but the reporters made it sound as if the world's longest manmade beach no longer existed. Having achieved apparent coastal erasure, the storm was heading up the Pearl River. I knew only enough local geography to know that the thrill-seeking side of me was getting what it wanted: bad news for us. The Pearl River was a few miles west.

Dana topped off the last lamp. "Burning oil doesn't set much of a romantic mood."

Usually, we didn't see each other during the week when she had Becky. Friday night through Monday morning, when Becky was with her father, Dana and I would cram together a week's worth of dating, locking ourselves away from the rest of the world and moving much too quickly. It was something I was still learning to deal with. I was crazy about Dana and never wanted to be far from her, yet to be near her, to spend time with her, I had to give up spending time with her. To see her, I had to accept not seeing her. I had to satisfy myself with weekends. For this weekend, though, they'd made special arrangements because of the storm, because Gary lived in Gulfport. I was trying not to think about Gary obliterated with the rest of the coast. Despite never having met me, he had pegged me as the source of all his problems: I was

why he and Dana hadn't reconciled; I was why Becky liked Hattiesburg more than Gulfport. I knew this because Gary had been sending me threatening emails for the past four months. They were always from fake accounts and never signed, but who else would tell me if I didn't stay away from his family he'd smash my skull with a tire iron? When I first told Dana about the messages, she told me he was venting, that he was harmless. When I asked if he owned a gun, she said, "Several, but he's a terrible shot."

The power went out at nine as Becky and I were eating our second bowls of Cap'n Crunch. The phone failed soon thereafter. Becky and I became obsessed with the windows—she with staring out at the waving trees and flying garbage, me with the thought of a thousand shards of glass bursting in her face. Since I couldn't persuade her to stay away, I covered the windows with so much duct tape we couldn't see out anymore. Rain slapped against the vinyl siding, and the wind made the silver coated windows flex in and out. Entire limbs tore off the pine trees and crashed down around us. There are few sounds as terrible as that much pine cracking: high-pitched, almost metallic, ten times louder than it should be.

After three hours, I felt useless and restless. The house was sealed up; we were sealed in. Had we electricity, I thought, this would have been the perfect time to clean the house. Upon a cursory glance, Dana's place always looked clean enough; however, if you spent over five minutes in it, you noticed the dust along the baseboards, the grimy damp of the sofa, the dirt ground into the carpet. I'd never mentioned this to Dana even though she always commented upon the cleanliness of my house. At the moment, she and Becky were sprawled out on the dirty floor amid a scattering of drawing paper and colored pencils.

"Do you have bleach?" I asked. "Ammonia?"

Dana looked up at me. "You're not."

"Just a thought."

She patted the carpet between her and Becky. "Think again."

I did and joined them on the floor, where Becky had been drawing the pictures you'd expect from a four year old, I guessed, faintly geometric and disproportionate, the people one

step beyond stick figures, their arms and legs sticks, their bodies globular, almost ovate. Dana's drawings weren't much better. I picked up one Becky had finished and tossed aside. Two figures, one ten times bigger than the other and taking up most of the page, held hands.

"That's me and my daddy," she said while covering a blank sheet with a thick layer of lilac.

I set the drawing back on the floor. "It looks just like him," I said and left it at that, contenting myself with watching them draw.

For lunch, Becky said Mac and Cheese, but when I set a giant bowl of the gooey stuff on the table she pushed it away and growled at me. Whether in fun or anger, I couldn't tell. I slid the bowl back in place, stuck her spoon in to start her, and growled back louder. She looked at me with her mother's big almond eyes and shoved the bowl halfway across the table as something outside exploded. We all ran to the front window, forgetting the duct tape.

"This is it, isn't it?"

Dana picked up Becky and carried her to the kitchen table, replaced the bowl, and handed her the spoon. "Don't be so naive," she said. "This is nothing."

She was right, but by four it was all over, this part of it was, for us, at least. Hurricanes don't begin or end: they will happen, they are happening, they have happened. The rain still came down and the wind still blew it in all directions, but Dana told me that, at last, the worst was over, and I could get outside briefly, just so I could know I could. The house had no damage beyond some lost shingles. The yard was covered with so many pieces of tree I couldn't see the grass. The street was covered and sealed off. A telephone pole lay from the corner of Dana's property to the corner of the property opposite. In the other direction, two trees had collapsed, splitting one house in two and making a wall of pine in the street. With the rain and the early darkness, I couldn't see farther than that. Getting out of the neighborhood would be difficult; getting back to my house—if it still existed—would be impossible. I had to spend the night. I'd done so dozens of times but never with Becky there. Dana had planned on this, I knew; I'd hoped to avoid it. Gary, were he to find out, would be furious. He'd done some lousy things

while married to Dana, things she had hinted at but never elucidated, but now he seemed to see himself, as a father, on some higher moral ground. Dana and I were sinners; he was righteous.

Becky had been too fascinated all day by the storm to be scared and too overwhelmed with adult attentions to really misbehave. She didn't want it all to end and let us know so by throwing an hour-long tantrum when Dana tried to put her to bed. I lay on the couch, trying in vain to read by candlelight, as Becky screeched a four year old's conception of insults at her mother. I'd never understood how parents did it, how a mother stood in the doorway looking stern, arms crossed and head tilted slightly to the left, as her daughter told her in a raspy voice that she didn't like her and would never play with her again. I never could understand how that mother kept from crumbling and giving in or from snapping and doing something awful.

When things had gone quiet again, Dana came out and lay on the couch with me, squeezing me between her long body and the back of the couch. I'd given up on the candlelit reading, wondering simultaneously how people in previous centuries had kept from going blind and when Round Two would start.

"You're very brave," she said while combing my hair with her fingertips.

"Because I didn't run from the storm?"

"Because you haven't run at all."

"I'm stubborn."

"Stubborn I can deal with."

"Obviously."

Positioned as we were, I wanted nothing more than to stick my hand up her shirt, to pull her out of her bra and rub her nipple with my thumb. She must have had a similar thought, because she rolled off the couch and bounced into the middle of the room. "Okay," she said looking back at Becky's bedroom, "we should sleep. Chicken Little crows with the sun."

Weather-wise, Tuesday was like any August day in Mississippi, hot and sticky and windless. Opening the windows and doors did little good. The house was already stuffy by midmorning when the water lines dried up and by lunchtime we were sweating despite moving little. Becky and Dana sat at the table drawing more pictures of people and their tiny little houses while I made lunch, edgy from the forced confinement and the feeling I was trespassing on Gary's life. Even ignoring his emails, I felt guilt for moving in too quickly, for taking Dana out of his hands and keeping her out. What if I hadn't come along? What if I had enjoyed flirting in front of the new releases wall at Blockbuster and left it at that? How different would all our lives be? I wasn't now the guy fucking his ex-wife—I was taking his place, filling up the space left when Dana kicked him out—I was the guy cutting the crusts off his kid's peanut butter and jelly sandwich, slicing up an apple for her.

By the time I set out the food, we were too hot to eat it.

"I need to go check on my place," I said while Becky picked at her sandwich.

"Now you're running."

I said, "Only for an hour."

The polyphony of chainsaws filling the thick air didn't ease my nerves as I walked through the rubble. I might have been trapped at Dana's for the past twenty four hours, but prison walls are as good at keeping people out as they are at keeping people in. I was exposed now, out in the wilderness under a bright and revealing sun. Climbing over downed trees and ducking under sagging power lines was only half the trouble of walking around town. I focused on the small details so as not to think about the bigger picture. Pine trees weren't designed to survive a hurricane. Their wide but shallow root systems pull out of the ground too easily, taking half the lawn with them, leaving your neighbors with giant lids of sod gaping open in their yards. A block from my house, a Methodist church, the building itself all brick, was fine; it took several seconds for me to register that the steeple now sat at a hundred and twenty degree angle. A Sunday school teacher once told me steeples point to heaven. This one pointed into someone's bedroom and looked as if it might break free at any moment, even while I

couldn't figure how it was possibly attached. This then was the new logic of my world. Everything was at an angle, leaning one way or another, any way except up and down. Nothing looked as it should, not even the houses like Dana's and mine that hadn't been damaged. We were the lucky ones, inconvenienced but intact, still standing. Even so, you couldn't get your bearings. I couldn't. One angle led into another into another, and things were connected in ways they shouldn't have been. I was lost even while standing in front of my own house, and to make matters worse, the dumpster belonging to the Japanese restaurant behind my place had flipped over, spilling a great pile of uneaten sushi remnants in my tiny backyard. The flies were already swarming around the stench. There was nothing to do but put on clean clothes, grab my rake and shovel, and head back.

The girls were sitting on their front porch. No one seemed to be doing any cleanup work on Dana's block. The less damaged streets were beginning to clear, neighbors cutting away the smaller trees and debris. Here, though, looked as it did the night before. Dana wore short shorts and the Kermit the Frog tank top. Becky wore nothing but a pair of baggy pink panties, which, while it made sense, had never seemed proper. "It's cooler out here," Dana said.

"Your neighbors don't think so."

"They all fled," she said, "or will soon. Civilization resumes an hour west, I hear."

"Your parents must be going crazy." Our cell phones had been flashing No Network since the storm. Had Baton Rouge been spared, then, without having to worry about herself, Dana's mother had nothing to do but worry about Dana and Becky.

"Everyone's probably going crazy," she said, emphasizing everyone by looking at Becky, who wasn't listening.

I let the shovel and rake drop and sat next to Dana on the steps. Becky was playing with one of those things that let you draw hair on a bald guy by dragging metal shavings around with a magnetic wand. Her bald guy had only a large curlicue coming out of his forehead.

"You think he made it out?"

"If it had been all three of us down there, he'd have gotten us out Saturday. On his own,

I don't know." He would have done the smart thing, she meant, would have taken them to Baton Rouge while the storm was nothing but a possibility. Unlike stupid me. I looked back over my shoulder at the barricaded street.

Dana and I spent an hour dragging branches into a big pile at the front of her lawn as Becky played hopscotch on a cleared off section of sidewalk. We were all dripping, Becky worst of all, but she wouldn't sit still. She would jump, hop, leap, turn, and repeat, the whole time her tongue poking out of the side of her mouth and her left hand cinching the panties that kept slipping off her skinny rump. It was an image, I supposed, a father would remember for the rest of his life, and I wondered how long it might stay in my jumbled brain. Finally, Dana took her in for a cold sponge bath, and I spent another hour raking up an infinite number of pine needles.

Inside, I told Dana I was going back to my place after dinner. She was chopping up random vegetables for a hodgepodge salad. Becky, still wrapped in a towel, sat on the counter and gnawed on a thin carrot.

"You are running away." Dana stopped chopping and turned toward me, the paring knife balanced on her fingertips.

"I'm making Becky uncomfortable."

Turning back to the chopping, Dana asked in a high-pitched, childish voice, "You're not uncomfortable, are you, baby?" She enunciated every syllable of uncomfortable to where it stopped being a word.

"No, Mama."

I felt certain Becky didn't know what uncomfortable meant. I well knew what it meant. It meant I'd overstayed. I'd spent the last thirty hours crossing and recrossing a line neither Gary nor I were ready for me to cross. If I said this to Dana, though, she would find some way to make me forget it.

"Okay," she said, her back to me, "how about this? Looters ransacked the Winn-Dixie last night. What's to stop them from turning on defenseless women and children tonight?"

So I spent another night on the couch, because Dana had told me that was what Gary

would have done. She wanted me there; I stayed there. None of us slept, I don't think. It was too hot, too still, too unnatural.

I woke up early the next morning to loud chainsawing, opening my eyes and leaping off the couch when the ripping began.

Next door, Dana's neighbor was cutting his way out of his driveway. The man, who must have been seventy, was slowly and unsteadily moving the sawblade through a three-foot thick tree. He wore a sleeveless undershirt, baggy blue shorts, and black socks, and the skin on his thin arms shook with the pulse of the motor. He looked about to drop the saw. His wife, similarly dressed, stood ten feet away, watching and shaking her head. With her help, I convinced him—Mr. Johannsson—to let me do the cutting. Once they got out of the driveway, if they got out of the driveway and the neighborhood and the city, the county, the state, they would stay with their son in Houston. I got through the tree, despite my lack of experience, with no injuries. Dragging it out of the driveway was another matter, but it finally gave way and eased into the yard, which had once been what you might expect from a retired couple, an outdoor greenhouse, more foliage and flowers than grass. Now, aside from a few very durable plants, the yard looked like a massive compost heap. As for the street, it looked like, if they took things slow and zigzagged a lot of, they could get the car out to the highway. They'd loaded their new Buick with their long lives, but we freed up some space in the back seat.

Back at Dana's, the girls were curled together on the floor of Becky's bedroom. Stuffed animals and dolls lay scattered around the floor as if one or both had dumped the toy box over. Dana's eyes were open, almost glazed over. "We had another hurricane in here last night," she said to the ceiling. "Sorry."

Honestly, I hadn't heard a thing.

Dana sat up, leaving Becky as she lay. "We need cereal."

"You need to pack," I told her. She and Becky were going with the Johannssons, to Baton

Rouge if possible, to Houston if not, I told her, and went across the hall into Dana's room to look for a suitcase. Dana followed.

"You're coming too."

"I'm staying," I said, "to clean up."

"Dork."

"To keep an eye on the houses."

"Jerk."

"To see if things might ever get back to normal."

"Bastard."

I was seeing a pattern with Dana's method of counterargument, but it didn't bother me. We were having the closest thing we'd ever had to a fight. "You need to go," I told her. "Becky can't take this heat. You need to let your folks—you need to let everyone know you're okay."

Now she was listening, even if I wasn't making perfect sense.

We threw clothes into the suitcase, filled a paper bag with books and toys, and loaded a cooler with apples, Nutter Butters, and water. With the Johannssons' car packed full, I led it the five blocks to the highway like a parade marshal, pushing aside branches and lifting dead wires out of the way. Dana was a mixture of sad and mad, I could see through the dirty rear window. Actually, all I could see was the back of her head, but that she wouldn't turn to look at me said plenty. Becky, in her lap, waved goodbye.

I was tying up garbage bags in Dana's backyard when he jumped me. I'd spent the rest of the morning in the warmth of the kitchen cleaning out the refrigerator that, even before the hurricane, had been a disaster. In the bottom of the produce bin, beneath wilting celery, soft peaches, and black lettuce, I'd found a year-old package of Oscar Mayer wieners; behind the pots and pitchers full of water we hadn't gotten around to drinking, two half-empty cartons of milk and a bowl of chili covered with a cottony layer of mold. I was stalling, not knowing what

else to do, wondering what the hell I should have been doing, what the hell I should do.

Cleaning made me feel useful, if nothing else.

Jumped doesn't best describe what he did. I was bending over the six full garbage bags, trying to tie up the last one, the one with the thawing meat, without inhaling the stench, when he put his foot into my back and knocked me forward, onto the rotting food and the grass that hadn't been mowed in weeks. Before I could stand up, before I could turn around, before I saw him, I knew it was Gary. When you spend months wondering when something will happen, you may well recognize it right away, but that doesn't make you ready for it. He wore a beard he didn't have in the pictures I'd seen of him, a thick red mountain man bristle that didn't fit with his short brown hair.

"Where's my daughter?"

I was standing, finally, on the opposite side of the garbage bags. I could only assume that Dana and Becky had made it to Baton Rouge. My cell phone was still as worthless as the landlines. On a normal day, the trip would take three hours, with bad weather or traffic maybe four. I'd sent them to make them safe and had no way of knowing if they were safe. What a stupid man I was.

"Where are they?"

We were both, I thought, acutely aware of the *they* in his sentence.

"I don't know," I told him, because it was more or less the truth.

I'd always been described as tall and lanky, ropey even, and Gary was more of the same. He lunged over the garbage bags and knocked me over and sent me rolling into the side of the house. He was still crouching a few feet away as I stood again and grabbed the rake I'd left by the back door. The shovel, still lying in the front yard, would have been preferable. As I poked the rake in his direction, I understood that he didn't know what he was doing any more than I did. We were making it up as we went along and not doing much of a job at it. We both should have been in Baton Rouge by this point, not fooling around in the middle of nowhere. More like a fan on the end of a stick than anything else, the rake wasn't much of a weapon, but it kept

him at a distance when he stepped forward and I jabbed him in the chest.

Gary stepped back, keeping his eyes on my hands. I kept the rake in position. "We're all alone out here," he said. "If I killed you, no one would find you for weeks." He came at me again, and I made another jab at him, but he ducked to the side as I extended my arms, then grabbed the rake and pulled it from my grip. Tossing it aside, he really came at me, and I moved to the side this time. Instead of hitting my face, Gary's fist hit the dining room window. Inches from my ear I heard the glass and the bones in Gary's hand break. He reeled back, looking like he wanted to scream. My first thought was that I had no ice to put on it. I said nothing, now having given him two more reasons to hate me. I stayed where I was, under the shattered window. I hadn't yet taken down the duct tape. The glass had broken into dozens of random pieces but still held together.

An hour later, I was on the road, hoping I had enough gas. To free my car, I drove across Dana's front yard and cut over to the Johannssons' driveway, crushing what remained of their aspidistras.

Even if they had been broadcasting, I couldn't pick up any stations, since something had fallen on the car and taken the antenna with it. I was headed west with a Randy Newman CD blasting and was surprised at how quickly things seemed to clear up. I knew things weren't as good as they appeared from the highway, but aside from the blank traffic lights, the highway looked as a highway should: open and inviting. No trees, no potholes. Nothing to hinder my progress. I could go anywhere I wanted, north or west, and free myself from all of it: no hurricanes, no crazy ex-husbands, no huge family gatherings, no intimidating little girls. I drove fast because I could.

Forty miles out of town, my cell phone signal returned with a cosmic riff announcing twelve new voicemails and eight unread text messages. I didn't bother with them, but dialed Dana's number only to hear a message telling me there had been a hurricane. All channels busy. Everyone picking up that cell signal must have been trying to use it just then, to tell people they were alive, to tell people they were homeless, a million people trying to connect

with another million.

On my nineteenth attempt, Dana answered on the first ring, but between the static on my end and what sounded like a schoolroom full of kids on hers, I could barely hear her.

"You're safe," I shouted.

"And sound," she said. "Where are you?" She was shouting too.

"On my way."

"You're breaking up."

"On. My. Way."

"I can't hear you. We're at Mama's. All of us. Kids and grandkids. Nieces. Nephews." The static—and maybe the kids—were getting louder. She was talking just for the sake of talking and I was only comprehending fragments. "Reunion," she said. "Sleep. Floor. Zoo."

I shouted, "We're never going to be alone again, are we," knowing she wouldn't hear the question. My cell phone beeped twice and went silent. "Yes," I said to no one, "I'm a stupid, stupid man."

I was driving through Tylertown, Mississippi, which, although it had been on the western and safer side of the hurricane's eye wall, was now something of a ghost town. I was the only one on the road, the only car in sight. I had another hundred and fifty miles to go before Baton Rouge. I was taking the longer but easier route—due west on 98 then south on 569—to avoid the hurricane traffic, if there were any. I figured I would drive through many places looking like Tylertown. At some point, though, life would return to something resembling normal. It had to, didn't it, I asked myself and shrugged my shoulders in response. As I did so, I drove past an elementary school and saw the fence around its playground sagging dejectedly inward and realized all I knew about Mama was that she lived in Baton Rouge. I didn't know her address. I didn't even know her name.

The End

Writing Raw

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Jay Todd bio: Jay Todd studied writing with Frederick and Steven Barthelme and Mary Robison at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi and now teaches at Xavier University of Louisiana. His fiction has appeared in journals such as the Southern California Review, the Chicago Quarterly Review, Fiction Weekly, and 971 Magazine.