

The Angst and the Blur

A Tale of Katrina

By Dris Horton

I remember riding on a train and it was very hot, a dry heat with wind like a huge hair drier blowing through my curly matted red hair, against my bearded sunburned face and my arms. I was on the front ledge of a reddish-brown boxcar and could see desert terrain, plateaus and sandy-colored mountains, some capped with small patches of snow. It was over a hundred degrees where I was, but I could see snow on a faraway mountain.

I was suffering from a bad case of DTs, alcoholic withdraws, so weak I could barely stand, so irritable I could hardly sit still, my whole body quivering, breathing erratic. Felt like bugs were crawling on me and I couldn't stop scratching at them. Perfectly grid-patterned across my vision was a scary overlay of hideous faces, grotesque and scowling at me, taunting me from over the desert sand, plateaus and mountains. And it got even worse if I closed my eyes.

Not only was I out of alcohol, I was out of water, so dehydrated I couldn't spit or piss. I'd jumped the train in El Paso with a handle of cheap vodka, a gallon of water, some tamales and plans of jumping off in Phoenix to resupply. Singing Hotel California in beat with the clacking drone of the rail, I vaguely recall seeing Phoenix as the train approached a westering sun, a few fingers still sloshing in the bottle. Next thing I knew it was dark, awakened by the want of a drink, clutching the empty bottle. I'd slept right through Phoenix and it was now fifteen hours since my last drink, that want having long since bent to a need. Scary thing, DTs, a physical and mental self-affliction rendering one terrified of the benign and utterly inept among the simple.

Suddenly I saw a small desert town flanked by a legion of wind turbines off in the distance. Clearly displayed in red letters on the side of a tiny white building was the word LIQUOR. While the DTs had haunted me, I was irked to no end by the fact that I had money, \$127 plus change. Every other time I'd had the bad-shakes was because I was broke, out of

money. Now it was because I was on a train hauling ass through the desert with no way of getting off.

Cursing myself for not buying more booze back in Texas, I glanced ahead noticing something where the tracks turned slightly skirting the base of a mountain. It was a bridge. The train was about to cross some kind of bridge, and bridges sometimes cross over water. In a spastic lurch, I turned and grabbed my rucksack, heavy and cumbersome as I pulled it to my chest, jerkily looping my arms through the straps to wear it reverse as a cushion. Shaking like a dog shitting peach pits, I grabbed hold of the railing and stepped up on the rung, leaned out and looked to my left, the direction the train was going at 60 plus. I could see the bridge clearly now from a five o'clock angle, twenty seconds away and counting. One of those low iron jobs that stretched 100-feet over a concrete river. But I could not yet see any water. It was late May and this wasn't Louisiana, it was the low desert of Southern California. What if there was no water? Finally I saw it, a forty-foot-wide strip of dirt-brown swill. But how deep? Was I about to die, about to commit suicide? I saw my time and jumped, the world spinning down and to the left, crashing belly first in a warm soup of slow-moving runoff.

My breath was knocked out as water was forced up my nose. A strange buzzing hum reverberated in my ears, the whining protest of hydraulics. A convulsion of agony shot through my body, desperately seeking some form of anchorage. Bubbles spilled upward from my mouth, my scream muffled by the hot, dirty water. Suddenly my feet found shoring on the bottom five feet below, thrusting my head up to puke water into the air. Struggling to free myself from the straps of my rucksack, I pitched sideways, then grabbed back at the pack as it nearly floated away. Coughing, hacking and choking, I found the cement bottom with my hands and pushed up. Working my legs, I moved toward the dry part of the slab, slanting upward, more shallow by the inch. Retching, coughing, and spitting up water, I pulled myself amphibious-like onto the sunbaked cement to gasp and moan. The stale smell suddenly took me back to where I'd been nine months earlier. The musty odor of havoc.

Writing Raw

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The Friday night before Katrina hit, I had to work running bicycle deliveries for a small 24-hour grocery store in the French Quarter, the kind with isles so narrow I had to walk sideways or I'd knock something off the shelf. I was supposed to be there at eleven to cover the graveyard shift, but as I poured the last of my vodka into a plastic travel bottle, I noticed it was 11:03. After a handful of ice I screwed on the lid, gave it a good shake and popped open the pour spout, squirting a generous shot in my mouth as I headed for the door.

John, my roommate, was on the sofa crouched over the coffee table, digging through an ashtray for roaches. Cigarette butts spilled onto a table littered with empty beer cans, whiskey bottles and an odd assortment of clutter, including a Taurus 9-millimeter handgun. I paused at the door hoping he'd find a roach big enough to share and glanced at the television. That was the first image I remember seeing of Katrina, churning up the gulf on the weather channel, spinning like a bogeyman in an 80's video game. I'd been through several hurricanes, and it was obvious we'd get some of her outer bands, but my guess was she'd make landfall somewhere around Mobile, sparing us the worst.

I used to wait tables and bartend for a living. Pretty good at it too, rarely making less than a cool grand in a forty-hour week. There was a time when I could carry four drinks in one hand without my fingers touching the rim of the glass. Tote plates all up and down my arm without getting my shirt dirty. Flip bottles in the air, doing a wide array of bar tricks, and take orders and remember names without writing down a single word. A silver-tongued devil I was, so good I was often recruited to other establishments, taking my regular customers with me. I was also quite handy in the kitchen. With ambidextrous, multi-tasking prowess, I simultaneously ruled the different stations like a mad liege lord. In short, I use to give a damn back when giving a damn wasn't as cool as it is now.

But back in '98, I went through a bad break up with a girl I'd lived with for three years. She got pregnant by another guy and I didn't handle it so well. Super-good-looking and white-trash-rich, the guy's family owned trailer parks, tow trucks, a lumber yard and the local roller

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skating rink. He was married and had two live-in girlfriends, seven kids between the three of them. One of those harem-guys. But my girl did not actually want to leave me, she simply wanted to have this guy's kid, and still stay with me. It was almost as if she thought I'd be impressed, her getting knocked up by the guy. Or that it might somehow enhance her status within the community, which, in a Jerry Springer-kind-of-way, it did.

I've since gotten over her, but I'd be lying if I said there was no bitterness over her having gotten the better of me. And I've also since learned that what doesn't kill you, does not always make you stronger. It was during this time that my alcoholism went from habitual to chronic, from a weekly ritual to a physical addiction of well over a fifth a day plus beer, rendering me incapable of giving a damn about anything but my next drink. I was also rendered incapable of working directly with the public, except of course as a bicycle delivery boy. And I was 40 years old.

I remember trying to hear what the weather guy was saying about the storm, but my other roommate, Booke, (pronounced book), was laughing out loud at something John said about the girl he'd had over the night before. John always had girls over, he was cute and cool like that. They weren't bad roommates, I guess. I've definitely had worse. They made me laugh a lot, their endless banter often being the stuff of comic legend, causing me at times to feel ten years younger, and I needed that.

John was a 24-year-old, rock-n-roll wannabe from Houston, Texas, who'd moved to New Orleans a couple of years earlier. He could play guitar quite well, had a good singing voice and knew my generation's music better than I did. (His dad was a real hippie.) But as it turned out, his funky band of grunge-punks, The Saurus, met with an unusual run of bad luck. The drummer shattered both his wrists skateboarding on the Riverwalk, pulling a Jackass down the back steps of the Jax Brewery. The bassist got caught red-handed by a cop in the back of a van with a fifteen-year-old runaway he thought was a girl, but turned out to be a boy. And the lead singer got so tweaked out on crack and ecstasy one night, he took off running stark-raving-naked down the Esplanade neutral ground, screaming at the top of his lungs, (second similar

offence), earning himself a one-way ticket to OPP's nuthouse ward.

Now John busses tables at a tourist trap on Bourbon Street and occasionally plays guitar singing for spange, (spare change), on Decatur or one of the other back streets of the Quarter. He was a pretty-boy with long, dirty-blond hair and always seemed to have a week's growth of beard on his face. He stood about 5'9", and had a lean, muscular frame with just the right amount of colorful, well-done tattoos. His purring voice and deep blue eyes made him a favorite with the hippie-chicks, holler-back-girls and even a few good girls going through their slumming phase. He knew all kinds of martial art moves; he could kick, punch and do flips like Jacky Chan, but couldn't fight a lick. He always called me "Chief," and Booke he called "The Maestro." Everyone liked him despite the fact he was totally irresponsible and lazy. One look, or ten seconds with the guy and anyone could tell he'd never had a single enemy in his life.

Booke was a 28-year-old, Ignatius Reilly-look-a-like from Baltimore, Maryland, who'd blown an academic scholarship at Tulane University. (Something about improper use of lab animals and excessive flatulence.) The Taurus was his, a gift from his father before he'd come to New Orleans. He too had long hair and a likeable personality, but was not as affable as John. He spoke his mind too much, lacking the filter most people have between their brain and their mouth. I never asked why, but sometimes Booke would call John "Moon Dog." At six-foot-tall he was an inch shorter than me, but at 320 pounds, he outweighed me by a hundred.

"Maestro, if you smoked the last roach, I swear....." John said as he continued to comb through the ashtray, not bothering to look up or finish his sentence.

"Swear?" Booke queried, before biting into a Hubig's lemon pie, tiny flakes of the frosted crust dangling in his beard, arcing from his mouth as he spoke, "To make a solemn statement or promise under legal oath. To curse or use profane language. I'll assume you are referring to the former definition."

"If I don't find a roach in here, Maestro," said John, "I do solemnly promise to hit ya so hard, when ya wake up, ya clothes are gonna be outta style."

"Trend setters aren't required to be in style, you moron," said Booke. "We create style."

Unlike yourself, a true baseborn dayboy, following the fashions of the moment. So do your worst, Moon Dog.”

“Hear that, Chief?” John asked in an attempt to draw me into their petty debate. “The Maestro thinks he’s fashionable.”

“Ah, there’s that wormy intellect of yours,” Booke sang, wagging his massive head. “So broad, yet so shallow. Fashions are set at the top by the wealth and celebrity classes, trickle-downs for tagalongs like you. Trends come from the bourgeoisie, we who have their own designs on life.”

“What’s the difference?” asked John, his attention back on the ashtray.

“Fashion is what’s being offered at the market, Moon Dog. Trends are what’s being worn, regardless of supply.”

“Gee, I’m sooo glad you enlightened me,” John mocked, acting bored with the subject because he really didn’t get it. Then he held up a roach the size of a cigar butt, glistening with dark, gooey resin. “Oh, yeah, baby! Look’ee here!”

I got one good hit, nodded my thanks and left.

After bitching me out for being late, my boss pointed at the first five deliveries of the night, one grocery and four hot-food. Most were to waiters and bartenders I’d known for years, off work and ordering from their favorite watering hole, often just around the block. I don’t remember how many orders I ran that night, maybe twenty. Made about fifty bucks plus my \$35 shift pay, pretty lame for a Friday. But summers were like that in New Orleans, especially with hurricanes roaming about.

My shift ended at 7am that Saturday. On my way home I stopped at Molly’s on Toulouse to drink and shoot pool, my morning ritual. The bartender switched the television to the news and suddenly the place got very quiet. Katrina had changed course a bit to the west, now looking as if she’d hit Biloxi dead-on. She was one big-ass storm, and we’d be getting a lot more than her outer bands.

Someone played Black Hole Sun on the jukebox and the entire bar joined in the sing-a-

long, acting out the lyrics as if it were theirs, lifting their drinks to Katrina as she spun away on the screen. “Won’t ya come? Won’t ya come?” A karaoke of dunces, beckoning catastrophe. I stayed at Molly’s until 10am, then went home and crashed, the last good sleep I’d get for a long while.

It wasn’t until the end of the train passed that I came back to where I was in the desert, its Doppler-effect reminding me that I was very much alone. I looked up by only lifting my head, still flat on my back, watching as it sped away growing smaller and smaller. I sat up and slowly stood, squinting in the sun. Checked my pocket for the cash I had there, fourteen wet dollar bills. Looked down at my rucksack, where I kept the rest, mostly ones and a few fives. My loose change I kept in a Crown Royal bag, nearly seventeen dollars in quarters, dimes and nickels, (once used as a cudgel upside the head of a numbskull in Albuquerque who tried to take it from me). My head swam as I bent to grab the straps of my pack, lifting slowly, working them over my shoulders as I quivered. I felt an odd sense of relief, having safely gotten off the train, pondering the lengths I’d go for a drink.

I walked for an hour through a maze of sage brush, sand and cactus before seeing the little town again, a bit panicked thinking it might have been a mirage. Waves of stifling heat conjured images of latent death, dormant and forsaken. Faraway brown mountains moved with the sky, a montage of gloating faces. Spinning wind turbines loomed in middle-distance, a team of gigantic white mantis on the prowl, exoskeletal, hungry and searching for me. In my sick mind I could picture what I might look like to them through compound eyes. No trace of romance whatsoever. Lonely, but no hero.

Eventually I came to an asphalt road that led straight to the store I’d seen from the train, store of the beckoning wall. To my left was a large one-story building that stretched a city block and ended right across the street from the little store. It had bricks that matched the sand, mirrored windows and was the only structure in sight that looked to have been built

within the last few decades. Everything else had a Depression-era feel. I was so out of it, I didn't even realize I was looking at my own reflection in the glass, until I stumbled and almost fell. A tall, scraggly, red-bearded tramp trudging up the road, hoping to give the appearance of a noble explorer returned from some intrepid adventure. Only to look like a tramp trudging up the road.

I gazed at my reflection as I walked, mesmerized at how unfamiliar I looked, staring at the image of a stranger. Suddenly my reflection shifted away as a mirrored door opened, a sheriff's deputy emerging from the building. Only then did I notice the words over the door and the five-pointed-star emblem on the door itself. San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office-West Sector Headquarters. The deputy, a large, fit-looking man about 50, glared at me with casual suspicion as he walked to his cruiser.

"Plan to make yourself useful 'round here?" he asked, pulling out his keys, eyeing me as if he knew exactly which boxcar I'd jumped from. "Or are ya gonna cause trouble?"

"Uh, yeah. I mean, no," I stammered, glancing at the store now ten paces away, then back at the deputy. He had a stern, handsome face that said his tolerance for bullshit was zero, but a glint in his eye that spoke of fairness. "'Bout how far is it to L.A.?" I managed.

"Eighty miles," he said, pointing back at an offsetting angle to the way I'd just come. "Bus stops every day at the truck stop at the casino. Five-fifteen pm. Take ya all the way into the city. Twelve bucks, one-way."

"Where am I?" I asked, looking around.

"Cabazon, California," he said with a slight laugh. "And there's not much here but trouble, if ya don't belong."

"Well, sir," I said. "If it's alright, I'm gonna get me something to drink and start making my way to that truck stop you just mentioned."

"Sounds like a good idea," he replied as he got in his cruiser.

The little store was run by a family of Koreans who looked at me with fear and disgust until they saw I had money. I purchased a handle of vodka, liter of juice, pack of cigarettes,

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lighter, two burritos and a big cup of ice. Noticing it was only 3pm, I asked the fatherly-looking Korean if I could sit outside his store to mix a drink and relax a short while.

“Round back,” he said with a nasally accent, nodding. “But only little while. No sleep.”

Behind the store, hidden by a cluster of sage brush, was a tiny clearing with one of those huge wooded spools used to wrap high-powered electric cable, turned on its side like a table. It was surrounded by milk crates, a few rickety looking chairs and an assortment of trash, garbage and debris, all scattered on a patch of sand. A tattered beach umbrella protruded from the center hole of the spool, giving the little setting a cool look, but provided only a small, pie-shaped portion of shade from the oven-like heat. Not trusting any of the chairs, I sat on a stack of crates already in the shade and began mixing my drink on the spool, hands trembling with anticipation. Soon I was sipping the potent, ice-cold concoction, half-vodka, half-juice, feeling its medicine as the bad-shakes ebbed into the finish.

I polished off the drink in minutes, then mixed another. After finishing my burritos, I took a trail that skirted around the other side of the store. As expected, the vodka energized me and my paced quickened, zigzagging through a neighborhood of double-wide trailers, a dreary, unwelcome place with old wooden fence posts bleached a grayish-white by the sun. A cow skull her and there, but no cows. Gravel front yards without grass. Wind chimes made of car parts clunked in the dry air, hovering over a pack of mangy dogs. Old people leered at me, grim walker-types flaunting stillborn eyes, like the opening scene to a B-grade horror flick. And not far off were the wind turbines, now looking more like wind turbines.

Kicking up dust that floated like a wavering blanket, a remembered effect of the earth, I noticed a few trailers that had been burned, gutted black by fire. Squatters still held court there, retail trappings draped over the charred remains, a vain attempt at subterfuge, shadowy figures ambling in the vestige.

When I finally saw it I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it, a ten-story neon marquee that read: Morongo Reservation Casino, its moving lights barely discernable through the sun's glare. At that moment I saw something else I hadn't noticed, something that ran right between the

little town and the casino. Interstate-10, its cross-country traffic slithered like a steely-gray serpent all the way to New Orleans and beyond. The desert seems to do that, it hides things in plain sight.

It took another half-hour to reach the spot. Crossing I-10, I had to walk through a cave-like underpass, emerging at the entrance of Kelly's Truck Stop, a massive, state-of-the-art outfit besieged by 18-wheelers. Another world from the dead town of Cabazon, everything on this side looked new, affluent and modern. Here, even the desert looked noble. Or was it simply less savage, trimmed back neatly from its hard scrabble?

As approached the truck stop, I noticed a scraggly-looking man sitting by the edge of the road. With pleading eyes, he gave me this rambling story that didn't make sense, asking if I could help him. Not feeling sociable, I gave him \$2, a swig of vodka and two cigarettes. He wandered off after trying to steal my lighter, mumbling something about money he'd lost, millions buried somewhere in the desert.

After buying my ticket, I went to the huge restroom to take a birdbath, wiping away the country grime, changing into some partially clean clothes. Playing the discretionary advocate, I poured some vodka into the juice bottle, my drink for the ride into downtown Los Angeles, a seething, crack-infested center of over 30,000 homeless. An aloof, madding crowd, ball-n-chained to the junk, pacing the City of Angels in its cardboard, pop-culture dusk. Reservoir walkers, immaculate, waiting for me.

"They're evacuating Grand Isle," said Boone as he sat on the sofa at my feet, waking me out of a dead sleep to watch television.

"I bet my career this storm's not gonna hit New Orleans," said the weather guy before going into a lengthy explanation why. Something about a high pressure system that would take Katrina west of the Mississippi, veering toward Morgan City.

It was 7pm Saturday. In the nine hours I'd been sleeping Katrina had not only changed

course a bit, but she'd grown considerably larger, now an ever-blooming category 4 with 145 mph winds. The Abyss on parade gazed back at me through an angry, leering eye, its beautifully-defined, continental presence splayed like a wondrous mare on the Gulf of Mexico. I suddenly felt stirred and frightened. As I propped myself up on my elbow, still half asleep, staring at the fluctuated image of Katrina on the television, I involuntarily uttered, "Oh, shit."

Booke and I were still watching television when John came in carrying his guitar. He told us he'd been playing down on Decatur, hadn't made much money, but met a group of hot college girls from Nebraska. They'd all gathered round him he said, listening to him sing and play, clapping, dancing and running their fingers through his hair as they sang along.

"They gimme ten bucks," he said, shrugging and raising his eyebrows, "an' I only played two songs for'm. Man, I really wanted to hook up with this one redhead, but she said they's catch'n a flight back home cause'a the storm. Boy, was she fine. Kissed me on the cheek an' grabbed my butt. Or was it the other way around?"

It was surprisingly busy that night, a constant, steady flow of deliveries as I tried to keep up with a pace the city itself had set, not unlike the prelude to some grand exhibition, or an execution perhaps. The finer shops were already boarded up, but every bar had some kind of hurricane-thing, last minute homage to a moniker. A moderate crowd milled about Bourbon Street, locals mainly, out to claim what they thought was theirs. It's easy to tell a local from a tourist here. Never do they gawk at the depravity. In this city people live their lives by the stars. And what you live by is what you die by.

The apartment was so close, I'd often stop by during my shift. John was working, but Booke sat at the far end of the sofa staring at the television tuned to the news. In his left hand was his favorite bong, a blue ceramic Buddha. In his right was a lighter, but there was no pot-smell in the air. Just as I noticed the strange posture of his arms, out slightly, not resting in his lap as if he'd suddenly been distracted from lighting the bong, he turned to me and said, "That fucking hurricane's coming right up the river."

I looked more closely at the television. It was 2:11am. The last four hours of Katrina's

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movements were being played in a loop. She would jump back to 10pm Saturday, her eye about 150 miles due south of the Biloxi, moving northwest at 45-degrees. If she'd stayed that course, Katrina would've missed us by a whole band width, hitting somewhere between the Atchafalaya Basin and the Texas line. But a little over an hour ago she jiggled some to the north, continuing on that path, aimed straight at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking back then, that I might somehow be discovered as a writer and an actor. That I might walk into one of those big studio offices and wow them with my brilliance, floor them with my dazzling persona. Then they would roll out the red carpet, showering me with exorbitant excesses and spoils, granting me leisure, status and first class passage on the gravy train.

After the Greyhound dropped me off, I was outside the terminal when a man attempted to steal my rucksack, grabbed it and tried to run like he was snatching a purse. I jerked back hard and flung him around in a circle before slamming him face-first into a large round piling, a cool smacking-sound from the impact. He staggered back, cursing me for not letting him steal from me, then ran off into a crowd of malingerers across the street. It was still daylight and two armed security guards stood watching not fifty feet away. Neither of them moved an inch, looking right at me, almost bored. One of them finally had the decency to nod and give me a thumbs-up.

Someone told me of a place called the Saint Julian Mission, where I could get a shower. I found a street named St. Julian, but couldn't find any mission or shelter there. The whole block was a huge throng of homeless people. At first I thought it was some kind of event, like a concert, but they were all just milling about in an eddying mass of drug-searchers, a gigantic, unrehearsed mummer's farce. This was Skid Row, the walker's lair. An open-air, come-as-you-are, no-cover-charge insane asylum. A corral of crazies. Crack whores in sundry. Glass pipes smoked out in the open like cigarettes. Syringes scattered everywhere, piled in the gutter. And

the smell, a tepid urine-stench that side of deranged. A guy in a wheelchair was shooting up, his tethered mutt-dog curled at foot. Another guy was walking around with an open hand full of little crack rocks uttering, "dimes and nickels." A large black man dressed in a dirty suit and tie was talking out loud to himself, gesturing boldly like he was practicing lines to a Shakespearean play. Suddenly, with his face turned upward, he vomited a long brown spew that swept sideways across the crowd like a lawn sprinkler. He then politely apologized, few in the crowd even noticing, wiped his mouth and continued on with his dramatic soliloquy, a billion worlds away.

Two police cruisers did a slow drive-thru and nobody, not a single soul stopped what they were doing. Everything just kept flowing in the hideous spontaneity of Skid Row. Then I saw why the cops were there; a team of Christians had come do to a quick alter call. One of them was actually toting a flimsy wooden cross with a little wheel rigged to its base. Jesus should've been so lucky. But a fight broke out, a couple of old blowhards tussling over a holy artifact, an unopened beer. As if it were time to eat the doughnuts, and since they might have to work, the cops left. The Christians left too, God-blessing everyone as they went. That's when I finally noticed the mission. It was right in the middle of the block, its entrance obscured by a crack team of crack dealers. I remember thinking to myself, 'Somebody should tell people about this.' I couldn't believe I was still in America. Then I remembered where I'd come from.

As darkness settled, a city bus pulled up to the corner with a lighted sign that read: Venice Beach. I ran over and got on, leaving behind a spectral image of buried talents, someday to be unearthed by the next man.

I soon got work at a sports bar, a great little joint facing the ocean. For \$25 and a big juicy cheeseburger with fries and a cold beer, I'd clean up the mess from the previous night's party crowd, making ready the patio and main dining area for the lunch customers. Sometimes I'd earn tips doing side-work for the servers, an extra buck or two rolling silverware, filling ice bins or stocking beer. When I was done, I would buy myself a big bottle of vodka and some sort of juice. Devoid of ambition, most of my day was spent bumming around the beach making

casual friends, nomads and other homeless folks like me, people who'd chosen to live life off the grid. In their huddled groups they'd smoke pot with me and I'd share with them my vodka. Sometimes they'd all listen to some crazy story I'd tell, a tale of Katrina perhaps. Usually I'd just sit and listen to them talk amongst themselves, glad to be in some sort of group. A quirky band of misfit peers.

But every evening about an hour before sunset, I'd find a spot to be alone on the endless stretch of beach. As a kind of devotional, I'd sit silently drinking and smoking the weed I'd scrounged from my different gypsy friends. I'd jot down notes, pondering the complexities of my memory, trying to decipher the real from the imagined. Mantras, watching the sun slip pinkish-orange into the ocean.

By late Sunday afternoon there was no way out of the city. Police had closed the interstate and all the highways. At dusk the power was still on but an ominous, dark-purple horizon loomed to the south. It wasn't long before the night's first gunshots were heard off in the distance, off in the hood, Katrina yet hours away. The gangster-cliques of New Orleans were jockeying for position, throwing off the gangster-cops, beating them to the spoils. In this city the good guys always win, and the cops are the mob.

"Let's go smoke pot at Congo Square," said John not long after the power went out. So the three of us put on raincoats and slick-boots, strapped ourselves with flashlights and the Taurus, (They both wanted me to carry the damn thing.), seeking some prankster's initiation rite as the preliminary winds whipped in warning. Resembling a trio of wasted aviators, we each wore a pair of safety goggles, the kind that look like scuba gear, protection for our eyes from all the shit blown around

Congo Square was a favorite hangout of ours on Rampart near Tremé, an open-air, motif sanctuary adjacent to Louie Armstrong Park, close to the apartment. But I should've known better, since Boone and John didn't. It was semi-sacred ground, once an auction block

for slaves. We were just inside when they attacked, jumped on us so fast I thought the trees had fallen. They were quick and black, a gang of teenage stompers, probably from the 4th Ward, doing what we'd come to do. John was beat to the ground and kicked, Boone pinned against the gate, mauled, flailing with his arms, trying to use his weight. I swung, landing punches and kicks, but still I was whipped, and I knew they'd kill us if we didn't get away. Then I remembered the Taurus and reached for it in my belt, fumbling with it through my raincoat before it discharged. I screamed, emptying the weapon at the fleeing shapes, running after them, but lost my balance and feel. Katrina had surely arrived, sweeping inland, her wind now gusting from the north through lairs of the forsaken.

I carried John back into the Quarter, slumped against me, half-conscious, the wind increasing by the moment, like toting a cart of bricks. His right arm was stretched over my shoulder, a deep gash running down the side of his head, his blood on my face. Boone staggered in front of me, my other hand clutched tightly to the back of his raincoat, guiding him down Conti. Suddenly a cop pulled up, his back seat occupied by a man handcuffed, screaming and kicking at the window. I helped John into the front seat, about to get in and ride double, not sure what to do about Boone. Then I remembered the just-fired Taurus tucked in my waist under my raincoat, hesitating, the cop shouting something over the roar of the storm. I looked at Boone, sitting on the curb, stunned and bleeding from the nose, battered by the winds. And as I watched the police car speed away taking my friend to the hospital, its disco lights illuminating the wicked, horizontal rain, I realized we didn't know John's last name.

"What just happened!?" cried Boone when we got inside. "What just happened!?"

After guzzling rum, I passed out and missed the peak of the storm. By mid-afternoon Katrina was gone, an eerie sky streaked with irony as word of the levees broke. I walked back down to Rampart, which was covered in a two-foot-deep rainbow-sheen of water. Stood there a moment, my eyes catching movement further down at Canal Street. Stores were being looted there in a plethora of flotsam. Sloshing down the neutral ground, my mind in a stupor, I turned to my right, eyes scanning the Iberville Projects. Under a palm tree was a fat black man, lying in

the water like he was sleeping. He was huge, and still there the next day, and the next.....

Booke wasn't hurt bad, a few bruises. But with no phone, electricity or Hubig's pies, he went to pieces worrying about John. We couldn't find out where he'd been taken. For over a week we stayed in the city as it fell apart and drowned, sacked by the elements, held loosely together by martial law.

Expensive booze free for the taking; Remy Martin brings such elegant spirits. MREs from the sky under the repetitious chop of helicopters in disharmony with the distant cracks of surplus gunfire. The occasional cadaver, a grim dose of reality. Name-day turmoil. Dystopia found.

The Louisiana National Guard was 72-hours tardy, but even in the midst of chaos there are schedules to be maintained. Iowa and Oregon State Troopers were the first to arrive, clad in fatigues, toting machineguns. "Open the door. Do you live here? We'll have to confiscate the Taurus."

We finally got a ride out with some strangers taking the Airline Highway, six hours to Baton Rouge 70 miles away. At a motel Booke asked me to kill him, crying and ringing his hands. I was able to contact his father in Baltimore, telling the man his son was alright but needed to come home. I barely knew him anymore. He asked me to please take Booke to the airport where he had a ticket home waiting.

With money from FEMA and the Red Cross my drinking skyrocketed, living alone in hotels, outside my means. I was soon broke, lost in a daze of random travel. I recall standing on a corner in Tallahassee, penniless and shaking, in need of a drink. Asked some college students if they could spare a buck or two, anything for some alcohol. It was about a month after the storm, and when I told them I was an evacuee from New Orleans, they didn't believe me. When I showed them my ID, they apologized and gave me \$23. A wet-brain bandage, through a bottle vaguely.

I drifted city to city using my license as a sympathy-hustle to get lodging, clothing and food, but mainly for booze. Jumped my first train in Atlanta. Wound up in Memphis, then woke

up in St. Louis with no recollection of how I got there. Hitched a ride to Kansas City with a rock band, earning a little cash as a roadie. Got lost, then ended up on another train, freezing, but fortified with vodka. A cold, obscure holiday. Denver. Albuquerque. El Paso, where I was beckoned even further west, turning my boots toward the setting sun I'd once chased as a child. Seeking a train yard for my vodka chronicles.

The October rains finally drove me from Los Angeles and back to New Orleans. My simple livelihood at the beach proved quite seasonal, gone with the nomads of summer. The angst and the blur easting its way into the rising sun of Interstate-10, suddenly stirred from a blackout by a hard Louisiana rain, wandering the French Market. Over a year since Katrina, Halloween summons me back to Bourbon Street, turning left on the Rue Dumaine to pick up where I'd left off.

Tentative existence, meanwhile. Requiem for a walker.

The End

Dris Horton bio: Dris Horton was born in California, raised in Louisiana and currently lives in Atlanta. He recently published his first novel, Pleasant Hill, a piece of historical fiction set in Civil War-era Louisiana. His second novel is due out next year, Sam's War, based on his late grandfather's experience as a B-17 pilot shot down in Nazi occupied Yugoslavia. Dris has also written several short stories and screenplays.