

# THE NEW YORKER

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**February 28, 2007**

### **Two Open Caskets**

On Saturday, the community of St. Augustine Catholic Church of New Orleans buried Damon and Ivan Brooks, brothers, ages sixteen and seventeen, who were murdered two days earlier. New Orleans has seen a lot of its young men shot dead in recent months, but this killing really hurt. Damon and Ivan were beloved, clean-cut kids who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They had been riding in the car of a nineteen-year-old friend, who stopped to give another guy a lift. That guy, for reasons still unclear, shot all three of them; only the driver survived, having been shot anywhere from six to ten times, depending upon whom you choose to believe. This killing was so shocking that Mayor Ray Nagin, who has been maddeningly invisible on the streets of the city, appeared at the crime scene. The Times-Picayune took the opportunity to call that “uncharacteristic.”

When Margaret and I got to St. Augustine, in the historically black neighborhood of Treme, two identical gray pasteboard caskets lay open on stainless-steel rollers. The boys were so young—their faces so round and full, their hands so plump—that it was hard to believe they were dead. Both wore new Coogi pullovers, their hair in neat short dreadlocks. Little by little, the church filled with their classmates from Joseph S. Clark Senior High School; most wore T-shirts emblazoned with photographs of the boys, along with legends such as “Young Fellaz” and “I Love My Niggaz,” and the numeral 6, for the Sixth Ward. Of the boys from Clark, two sobbed unabashedly, while the rest carried themselves with an impassive swagger. Many of the girls cried, a couple so hysterically that they had to be half-carried from the church.

Just before the service began, a car pulled up in front, and the young driver quickly hustled a walker around to the passenger side. A very thin young man with big eyes and long dreadlocks rose slowly and painfully, leaning heavily on the walker, panting—the victim who’d survived. He made his way up the aisle, nodding this way and that. He wore jeans gathered around his calves, the crotch at his knees—that outsized street fashion that seems only to diminish the man inside. Bent double over the walker, he stood before one

casket, then the other. From behind, it looked as if he were talking to the dead boys, thrusting his arms downward, head and shoulders bobbing. When he turned to find a pew, his eyes were dry.

St. Augustine is a special church—New Orleans’s first for free blacks, dedicated in 1841. Outside stands an anchor chain welded into the shape of a cross and draped with rusty shackles: the memorial to the unknown slave. Inside, the church is painted pink and white, and the words “Si Tu Savais le Don le Dieu”—“If you knew the gift of God”—are printed above the altar in gold. There’s something about the conditional mood of that statement which speaks to the long-standing non-doctrinaire quality of this Catholic congregation. The pulpit is a huge polished chunk of twisted tree trunk, the Bible stands on an easel fashioned from another piece of tree trunk, and little pennants hang from the balcony translating the principles of Kwanzaa into Swahili: Faith (Imani), Unity (Umoja), Purpose (Nia).

The dead boys had lived with their father and their grandmother, Marion Colbert, known to everyone in the neighborhood as Miss Marion and as close to royalty as can be found in Treme. Miss Marion stood erect as a soldier, her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun and her hands folded as though she were about to sing an aria. For the past thirty years, she has worked as a powder-room attendant at Brennan’s, a famous restaurant in the French Quarter. Margaret and I had never met her before, but she walked up to us, shook our hands, and thanked us in a soft voice for being there. The boys were supposed to pick her up at work at ten o’clock on Thursday, she said. “At ten-twenty I say, ‘I don’t see these children.’ The chef brought me home. As soon as I turn on the TV, huh! I see the car. So then my neighbor around the corner says, ‘Miss Marion, I got something to tell you.’ I say, ‘I feel something is wrong.’ She says, ‘They killed both.’” The police never did make it to her house to tell her about it, she said.

Margaret and I stood there, poleaxed with amazement that an elderly woman who’d suffered such a loss could speak about it to two strangers with such calm resolve. Miss Marion went on to tell us how the young man who’d survived the shooting came to visit her a few days later. “Oh, Jesus,” she said. “He come to my house, stitches here, stitches there, and it was so cold but he wanted to come and tell me he was so sorry. I said, ‘Son, it’s not your fault that you were shot.’ I said, ‘You’re lucky to be here,’ because, ten times! He was shot ten times. He said, ‘I had to come and knock on your house. You treated me like I was your own.’” She sighed. “Everybody around here knowed the children,” she said. “All the children grow up all around. They’d be coming from school, and I’d say, ‘Here they come from school laughing and singing with the other.’” She looked into the middle distance for a moment, but remained dry-eyed and matter-of-fact. “Lord, give me strength,” she said. “As I said yesterday, when they laid them out at the funeral home and I looked, I said, ‘I know you’re all going to Heaven, and peace all over the world for all children.’ Dear Lord Jesus. Just peace, Heaven, everybody peace—even the gunman, you know?” She went a little pale and put one hand on the back of the pew. “I’m going to sit down now,” she said, and returned to her seat.

Afterward, Margaret and I followed the two white hearses out to Holt Cemetery. It is an odd-shaped patch of weedy ground behind Delgado Community College—a rare belowground cemetery in New Orleans, for people who cannot afford aboveground interment. Many of the grave markers are made of hand-lettered wood. About fifty people gathered around the double grave, which, assuming it was six feet deep, contained three feet of muddy water. The priest said a short prayer. Then a woman from the funeral home firmly instructed everybody to “please return to your vehicles now,” and we all complied quickly. Nobody wanted to hear the sound of the water sloshing as the caskets were lowered. The boys’ grave lies beneath the spreading branches of a gigantic oak, liberally dripping with Spanish moss. It is a lovely spot.

Permalink

**February 27, 2007**

## **The Blood**

A while ago, I met a mechanic in the America Street neighborhood. When I left his shop that day, he pressed a slip of paper with his phone number into my hand and told me to call him. I waited a day before I called. I was after two things: a friendly contact in a part of town that can be tough to crack, and stories from the lives of the Stingy-Brim brothers, about whom I intend to write in my book.

The mechanic invited me to his house that evening. “I’m making a pot of gumbo,” he said. It was after dark when I set out, and, I’ll admit, I was a little scared. America Street is among the most blighted parts of New Orleans. Street lights are few. Tough-looking young men rule the corners. (In several days of cruising around, I’d yet to see a woman or child anywhere around there.) After my run-ins with the young men at the mechanic’s curbside shop and with his son, I didn’t know what to expect.

The mechanic lived on a dead end of pleasant brick duplexes—very different from the splintery wooden house parked beside his fema trailer, on the street where he ran his open-air shop. His house appeared to be the only one occupied on the block; the rest looked flood-hollowed and ruined.

A man I didn’t recognize opened the door, took one look at me, and rocked back. I could see him thinking,

Cop. The mechanic came forward, laughing, and invited me in. Inside, it was obvious that the mechanic and his family had worked hard on the house—the Sheetrock and the paint were new, the kitchen appliances shiny. An LCD television screen as big as a bedsheet stood against one wall, and four fancy glass place settings and a smoked-glass vase of dried flowers rested on the glass dining table. The friend who'd opened the door sat on the couch and ignored me. The mechanic yelled upstairs for his wife to come down and serve me some gumbo, but when she appeared, stout and handsome, he didn't introduce her. Without a word, she ladled a huge portion of gumbo into a plastic bowl and gave it to me with a plastic spoon. It was hard finding room on the table with all those oversized glass plates.

The mechanic didn't want to tell me any stories about the Stingy-Brims. "I don't do that," he said. "You ask them their own stories." A silence lengthened, during which I concentrated on the gumbo, which contained what appeared to be bits of everything that had been prepared in that kitchen for the past week: shrimp, broken crabs, pieces of fried fish, chicken bones, and long stringy strips of brisket; okra, corn, and great skeins of boiled greens. The spices played on my tongue like a ten-fingered organ chord. I was perfectly content to work on it in silence.

After the mechanic and I finished eating, we sat back with our tallboys of Bud Light, and looked at each other. I hated to let the mechanic get away; it's hard for a bald, stoop-shouldered white guy to make friends on and around America Street. And I couldn't just eat and run. So I threw out a conversational anchor: I told him I didn't believe in God.

His eyebrows practically bounced off the ceiling. Even when he was smoking crack all those twenty-eight years, he said, he believed in God. Who guided the hand of the surgeon who rebuilt his heart? When I replied, "Education," he was ready for me: "Who gave the surgeon a brain that could be educated?" He took me all the way back to the Big Bang, and then asked me, "What came before and who made it happen?" I wriggled free by asking the mechanic where he went to church. "Ray Avenue Baptist, right around the corner," he said. "You come Sunday and hear Reverend Brown." I left soon afterward. He stood in the doorway until I was safely in my car.

The flossy vestibule of Ray Avenue Baptist Church has a frame full of photos from the flooding: mud and mold to the ceiling, ravaged pews, the works. Without those pictures, though, one would have thought the church untouched by Katrina. It gleamed. The Reverend Robert Brown is in his forties and fit and energetic. He took my hand in both of his and told me, in a way that let me know he'd expected me, that I was

welcome. A young man with long dreadlocks played a synthesizer; he was every bit as good as other musicians I've heard perform in New Orleans. About thirty people filtered in, including several families with small, scrubbed children.

We sang, we filed up the center aisle to put dollar bills in a silver bucket, we applauded when a sobbing young woman came forward to turn her back on sin and accept Christ as her personal savior. In his sermon, Brown, who has been active in the fight to pressure the city to reopen the public-housing projects, got in a lick at the city leaders, who, he said, "got together to make plans for this city and left the poor out. They were not even on the agenda. You can't abuse the poor and expect to prosper." His voice rising, Brown invoked Proverbs 21:13: "He that ignores the cry of the poor, he shall cry himself and not be heard!"

Then Brown plunged into the passage from Exodus in which God orders the Jews to smear sheep's blood on their doorposts to ward off the slaying of their firstborn. "The awesome sword that protects your life is called the blood of Jesus!" Brown said. "Can somebody help me praise God for the blood of Jesus?" He was on a roll. "It still has power to save and heal and set free and deliver," he yelled. "Somebody ought to shout, 'I'm covered by the blood! Yes, I am! My house is covered. My son is covered. Everything I have is covered!'"

Two days earlier, New Orleanians had awakened to a particularly upsetting incident of bloodshed: two brothers, ages sixteen and seventeen, had been shot dead, and a friend critically wounded; the suspect had just received a ride in their car. Knowing how distraught Brown's congregation was over the recent violence—a killing every couple of days—I found it radical, daring, and ingenious for him to exhort them to imagine themselves drenched in blood. Doing so transformed the most distressing images of the past few months into a balm of redemption. Brown stomped across the stage, pumping his arms and shouting hoarsely, "By the blood! By the blood! The blood! The blood! The blood! The blood!" All that blood, after all that bloodshed, made me, the unbeliever, queasy. But the people around me rose to their feet, lifted their palms to the ceiling, and shouted praise.

Afterward, the mechanic buttonholed me in the parking lot and said, "What now?"

I replied, "We have to talk." To my delight, he agreed.

Permalink

**February 26, 2007**

## **Draft 'Em**

I was riding toward the French Quarter the other day, looking forward to a lunch date. A shrimp po'boy, I was thinking (or, as the locals sometimes call it, shrimp-on-French), "dressed"—which means it comes with lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, and whatever else the cook has at hand. (I always order what my spiritual sister-in-law calls the Zen special: one with everything.) The only problem was, the person I had the lunch date with wasn't calling me back. Canal Street is usually, for me, just a big avenue to get across. The stores there are full of either tourist trinkets or polyester discount clothes, and the eating opportunities don't extend much beyond Starbucks and Wendy's. Canal Street forms the upriver border of the French Quarter, so really spectacular eating is just steps away. Near the corner of Basin Street, however, I spotted a little hole-in-the-wall diner called the Box Bar and Grill that had a sign out front: "Red Beans & Rice: \$2.95." A little plate of red beans would make a nice base on which to lay my shrimp-on-French, I thought—and it would get me out of the wind.

The Box is a long, loud, none-too-clean establishment, with a counter along one side and a little red shelf at which a few patrons were sitting on bar stools, staring at the wall and eating. The jukebox was turned up to speaker-buzzing volume. A hand-lettered sign offered pool tables at fifty cents a game up a flight of grimy stairs. Behind the counter, a cheerful man was banging big blackened pots around, a row of liquor bottles stood on a dusty shelf, and a coffee-colored woman with orange hair and fiery nails stood waiting for my order. "For here or to go?" she asked, and I said, "For here." After a few minutes she handed me a warm, heavy, plastic-foam to-go box. I noticed that everybody in the place was eating from to-go boxes. I wondered what they packed to-go orders in. The Box is apparently not a big-tipping kind of place; when I tried to leave an extra dollar on the counter, the woman called me back and handed it to me.

"This ain't cold," a man at a little round table by the window said. "I like it like this. But I like it better when I'm out hunting whitetail in Mississippi." Instead of perching at the shelf, I sat at his table. His name was Jeffrey Wright, and he looked younger than his forty-eight years. He had very close-cropped hair and a clipped, clear manner of speaking that made me think he was either a longtime military veteran or a church deacon. Wright was one of ten children reared by a cook and a longshoreman in a two-bedroom apartment in the Desire housing project, back when working-class jobs paid well enough to raise a big family decently. We played the post-Katrina conversational Ping-Pong two people play when meeting each other for the first time: Did you lose your house? Where did you evacuate to? Where are you living now? (He had

spent three days alone on his roof in the Seventh Ward during Katrina, and was now living across the river and working as a furniture builder.) Once we got that out of the way, we fell into the usual gloomy litany: how dumb it was for the city to replace the big palm trees on Canal Street while so many people still didn't have a place to live, how hurtful it was that the rest of the country seemed to have turned its back on New Orleans, and, of course, crime. "Never was like this before," Wright said. "Never seen it this bad." I had to ask him to repeat that, because at my first taste of the red beans—shot through with rounds of andouille, bits of chicken (and chicken bone), and as smooth as pudding—a chorus of angels had burst into song.

We talked about the young men who stand around on so many street corners, and how many of them have been either murdered or arrested in the past few months. "They're lost," Wright said. "I come from a very big family, and we got some of them right in the family. The system tells them they're nothing but hoodlums, so they act that way. Thing is, they don't have men to raise them." He delivered a fine piece of pulpit poetry: "If you aren't raised to be a man by a man, you'll never be a man."

He gestured with his plastic spoon. "Those are the best red beans in the city you're eating right there. Little bitty place like this. None better."

He leaned on an elbow and pointed out the smeared window. "These boys you see walking around? I say draft 'em. Give them some responsibility. Give them men to look up to. Make a man of the boy."

I asked if he was a veteran. "No," he said. "I wish I was." This would be a hard time to be drafted, I said. With a war on, they could get killed.

"They're getting killed right here," he said. "What else are you going to do? Lock 'em up? We're already doing that. Got the prisons so full, pretty soon you're going to have to store them underground."

He put his empty box in the trash and scrubbed the tabletop with his napkin. "Call me sometime," he said. "I'll show you things in this city you otherwise wouldn't see."

Permalink

**February 23, 2007**

## **The Idea of Doing That**

She was tall and long-legged, with a wide smile, a buttermilk complexion, big, bright eyes, and a warm, lingering handshake. She was born in 1921; she worked that into the conversation early. Then she told this story:

“This must have been two years before the storm. I’d driven over to the Walgreen’s on Carrollton to buy something, and as I pulled into the parking lot I saw there were no other cars. I thought, Well, that’s good. It will be easy to park. I had a thousand dollars in cash in my purse. I never walk around with that kind of money, but I’d hired some movers, and the men wanted to be paid in cash.

“Well, as I opened the door I thought there was a woman standing there next to me. I didn’t pay her any attention. It turned out to be this nice-looking, young, uh, black man. I wasn’t the least bit afraid; he was so nice-looking. We looked right into each other’s eyes. And he said, ‘I’m going to have to have your purse.’

“I’d been working for the probation office for four years; I knew perfectly well that when someone says, ‘Give me your money,’ you give it to them. I don’t know what came over me. I looked right at him and said, ‘I’m afraid I can’t do that.’ And, do you know, we both just froze, looking right at each other. I don’t know which of us was more surprised.

“He said, ‘I’ll shoot you.’

“Well, he was wearing such nice, tight-fitting clothes, if he had a gun it must have been a derringer in his sock. But I could see he didn’t have a gun. It was like it came down from Mt. Sinai to me: he doesn’t have a gun. I said again, ‘I can’t give you my purse.’ He turned around and walked away. And me, with my big mouth, I called after him, ‘The idea of doing that!’ And, do you know, he came running back, grabbed my

purse, and ran off.

“I felt so terrible—I’d made him steal my purse, you see—that I prayed for him every day for a year.”

Permalink

**February 22, 2007**

## **Big Chiefs**

“Good news!” people were shouting at each other late Tuesday afternoon. “Mardi Gras is almost over!” It was a beautiful day—cool and sunny, marred only by a stabbing death and three shootings—but, when you’ve been drinking since breakfast and trying to be everywhere at once while wearing a ridiculous costume, and your brain is bruised from the incessant music and shouting, at a certain point your cry morphs from “Laissez les bon temps rouler!” to “Enough already!” We slunk home in the late afternoon, silenced the radio, ate some brown rice and steamed broccoli, went to bed at ten, and slept in. Which is why this Mardi Gras missive is late.

At nine on the morning of the great day itself, Margaret and I were milling around in the St. Anne parade, the unofficial, unsanctioned, uninsured, unpermitted street happening in our neighborhood, Bywater. Bywater lies about a half-mile east of the French Quarter and has a homey, bohemian flavor that, people tell me, is much like the French Quarter’s in the fifties. There must have been four hundred people in magnificent and hilarious costumes—towering pink flamingos, faux-Aztec kings, psychedelic royalty—at the intersection of Clouet and Burgundy Streets. Many were drinking or already drunk, and nearly all were white. Not that blacks would be unwelcome in Bywater, but rents and housing prices have shot skyward in the parts of New Orleans that weren’t devastated by flooding, Bywater among them. Prices are segregating the city, friends tell us, in ways that it wasn’t segregated before.

My cell phone rang. “Dan!” my friend Mary shouted over a din in the background. “Second and Daneel!” A minute later, Étienne called to say that the Indians were “coming out” all over the Seventh Ward. We ran back to the house for our bicycles.

Where Bywater is dense with cute gingerbread houses and lush trees, the houses in the Seventh Ward tend to be simpler, and more of them have been burned or abandoned; the businesses tend to be burglar-barred convenience stores instead of gaily painted latte bars. Still, Seventh Ward pride runs strong: a few weeks ago, residents woke to find cardboard posters nailed to telephone poles and trees all over the neighborhood, bearing the likenesses of famous Seventh Warders: Mahalia Jackson, A. P. Tureaud, Leah Chase, Dorothy Mae Taylor, and others. Nobody seemed to know where the posters came from.

Margaret and I rounded the corner of Urquhart and St. Anthony Streets, and there, amid the litter and the beat-up cars, stood a vision from a storybook—or an acid trip. It was a man, but all we could see of him was his round face. The rest was a sunburst of neon-bright turquoise. His limbs were covered in artificial fur and feathers, his torso in dense, swirling patterns of tiny beads, and radiating out from his body were an enormous headdress and a bustle of artificial feathers that made him look eight feet tall and four feet wide. He was the Big Chief of the East Cherokee, one of many tribes of Mardi Gras Indians. (The East Cherokee do not appear on the list of the forty known tribes of the Mardi Gras Indian Nation; they may be new.) He seemed barely able to move. Standing near him was a young man in a yellow outfit that was less garish only because he had no headdress or bustle.

A small crowd of uncostumed people stood around, taking pictures and waiting for something to happen. “There!” someone cried. A block away, we could see the swaying headdress of another chief, whose feathers were black. The Big Chief in blue began lumbering in that direction, but an uncostumed older man with a shiny bald head snapped at him from the curb. “You stand there and let your spy boy run!” The Big Chief looked sheepish. “The Big Chief don’t go running all over!” the shiny-headed man went on. “You stand your ground, let the spy boy bring them to you.” Then, to me, the man said, “They got to learn the ways.”

The tradition of Mardi Gras Indians is said to go back to the nineteenth century, when blacks were not invited to the mainstream Mardi Gras celebrations and began dressing up on their own. Some say that “masking Indian” was a way to honor the Native Americans who took in escaped slaves in the bad old days, but nobody’s really sure. Unlike the Mardi Gras krewes that run sanctioned and scheduled parades, the Indians never say where they’re going to “come out” on Mardi Gras days. Also secret is the color in which each chief will appear. Chiefs will spend an entire year, and many thousands of dollars, making their suits, remortgaging the house if necessary. Then they’ll wear them on Mardi Gras, and sometimes again on St. Joseph’s Night, which falls on March 19th.

The kid in yellow was the Big Chief's spy boy; his job was to roam the streets looking for other chiefs to battle. (This chief didn't seem to have a flag boy, who traditionally would carry the tribe's flag and relay the spy boy's information back to the Big Chief.) Until the nineteen-sixties, battles were just that—often fought with knives and broken bottles. The legendary Chief of Chiefs Allison (Tootie) Montana, who died right before Katrina, put an end to that by persuading the chiefs to “battle” with the beauty of their suits.

A cacophony of drumming and chanting arose behind us, and we all swivelled to see a chief in brilliant chartreuse coming toward us, with a spy boy and a large crowd of uncostumed supporters chanting, “Nuthin’ but trouble! Nuthin’ but trouble.” The Ninth Ward Hunters were arriving to do battle. Surrounded by cheering, drumming, chanting people, the two chiefs postured and danced in place. Then, in a solemn ritual that was part courtly jousting and part cockfight, they danced toward each other until they were face to face, their headdresses and bustles coming together and all but hiding the two men inside.

They screamed in each other's face, raising their arms in mock ferocity. And then, as though responding to a signal that they alone could hear, they dropped the mock aggression and put their arms stiffly around each other, laughing. The chanting and drumming stopped; the two chiefs and their respective crowds drifted in opposite directions.

The clock struck ten. It was time for some beer.

Permalink

**February 21, 2007**

## **Two Workers**

Here's a worthwhile discovery: King Rogers Seafood and Deli has a nearly two-for-one deal that is hard to beat. King Rogers is a cinderblock po'boy shop at the busy, smoky place where St. Claude Avenue, North Rampart Street, and St. Bernard Street meet. It's simplicity itself: a counter, a white board announcing the menu and prices, a drinks cooler. The menu, however, is extensive, running from fried sea-trout po'boys, at \$3.99, to a crawfish étouffée plate served with two sides in a plastic-foam clamshell box, for \$5.99. "Be patient," a hand-lettered sign commands. "Everything is cooked to order." The food is spectacular. And if you order two items exactly the same, down to the fixings, the second costs only a dollar. Not surprisingly, it's a popular spot for pairs of workmen at lunchtime.

Two Hispanic guys were being patient the other day, waiting for their lunch. One was tall, ropy, and bearded; the other was short and moon-faced. Both were Jackson Pollocked with Sheetrock mud. Always eager to use what little Spanish I have, I struck up a conversation with the taller one, whose name was Jesús Raymundo Avalos. He is from Guadalajara, but has been living in Michigan for the past few years. He eagerly produced his permanent-resident, or green, card (it's really white) from a stuffed and disorderly wallet. It didn't take long for him to launch into a story nearly identical to one we had heard from the five Hondurans who live across the street from us, and from any number of other Spanish speakers who had flocked to New Orleans after the storm to do badly needed reconstruction work. "We did three weeks of work for a contractor—Sheetrock—and then he didn't pay us," Avalos said. "He owes us fifty-two hundred dollars. Look, we're reporting him." He produced a tattered folder and a copy of a letter to the Louisiana State Licensing Board for Contractors, reporting the contractor and asking the state to intervene.

His moon-faced friend finally spoke up, in thoroughly American, Chicago-accented English. His name is Facundo Gonzales, Jr. "I'm a citizen, born and raised in Chicago Heights, Illinois," he said. "I don't know who they think they're fucking with. I always hang back and say nothing. They think, We can rip these fucking Mexicans off—what are they going to do? This isn't the first time this has happened, and it's pissing me off."

(I later called the contractor who they said had cheated them. I'll withhold his name, because I don't know the veracity of their claim. "I don't like to discuss my business with someone I don't even know," the contractor said, and hung up.)

Avalos and Gonzales received identical smoked-sausage po'boys, wrapped in long torpedoes of white butcher paper, and said that, for all the work that needs to be done in New Orleans, actual paying jobs are in short supply. Until the state figures out how to get the billions in federal housing dollars into the hands of the hundred-thousand-plus families that have applied for aid, nobody can afford to hire. "You got all this work, and all these people to do it," Avalos said, making the pinching gesture with curved thumb and forefingers that Mexicans use to connote money. "And there's all that money waiting to be spent, and nobody can get it."

But the cheating of Hispanic workers is becoming "epidemic," Gonzales said, and that alone could hobble the city's recovery. "People are going to hear about it and stop coming to New Orleans to work," he said. "We don't want that to happen."

Permalink

**February 20, 2007**

## **I'm with the Band**

New Orleans's high-school marching bands are the real heroes of Mardi Gras; several march with each krewe. I've been spending time with the band of O. Perry Walker Senior High School and its director, Wilbert Rawlins, Jr.

I sought Rawlins out because I'd heard that before Katrina he was a legendary bandleader at George Washington Carver High School, in the Lower Ninth Ward, a famously neglected part of town, where many of his students came from blown-apart families. Rawlins had evacuated to Beaumont, Texas, the story went, where the school board offered him a bandleader's job at a well-funded high school. But Rawlins wanted to come home, and, when Carver didn't reopen, he accepted a job at O. Perry Walker, in Algiers, the part of

New Orleans on what's called the West Bank of the Mississippi River, which didn't flood. Walker had been performing below state standards before Katrina, and new state rules had enabled the Algiers community to turn O. Perry Walker into a charter school. O. Perry Walker now admits kids from all over New Orleans, and parent comments have gone from "There are too many teachers at this school with an 'I don't care' attitude," in 2004, to "I would not want my child to be anywhere else."

Having read about how Rawlins had molded a crackerjack band out of Lower Nine kids, I expected one of those upright, hard-jawed, necktied Coach Carter types who show up in Disney movies. But when Rawlins and I met in the principal's office, he turned out to be a big, shambling man of thirty-seven, with two gold teeth. He wore sweatpants and an orange O. Perry Walker T-shirt.

As we walked across the hall to the band room, Rawlins explained that the Walker band, the Chargers, had already marched in three Mardi Gras parades and had four more to go. Most of the kids had never touched an instrument before September, and several had joined the band only the week before. "Teaching the kid to play the horn is the easy part," he said. "These kids have grown up with music all their lives. It's in 'em. The hard part is you got to reprogram them." A young girl came up to him, extended her hand, and said, "Hey, best friend." Rawlins shook her hand, patted her on the arm, and turned back to me. "When we started this year, we had four kids. Now we got more than a hundred in the band, and another hundred in the auxiliary." The auxiliary includes the color guard, the twirlers, the dancers, the flag team, and the cheerleaders; each squad has its own uniform and coaches. The band and the auxiliary comprise two hundred kids, or a quarter of Walker's students—a veritable after-school Works Progress Administration. "The goal next year is four hundred!" Rawlins said. "Half the school! You got to maintain a two-point-five average to march, so that's half the school pulling themselves up because this is something you love!"

"This is the alternative to all that gangbanging and drugs and bull," he went on. "Band is a full-time job! You go to school all day, and then you got practice till long about seven o'clock. And you been holding yourself"—he squared his shoulders, arms up in erect, horn-blowing position. "Got to keep it right. So you're tired. You can't be hanging on no street corners."

We stepped into the band room, a swirl of horns, drums, and orange uniforms. The band and the auxiliary are a hundred per cent African-American. One of the first kids I met was Daniel Reed, who, at four in the afternoon, looked sleepy. Small wonder: he gets up at five-thirty every morning to get on the city bus and be at school by eight. He used to live in the Lower Ninth Ward, and marched in the Carver band under

Rawlins. The day before Katrina, he evacuated with his family to Austin, Texas, and got stuck there. “When I heard Mr. Rawlins was leading band here, I came home in June,” Reed said. “I lived by myself until November, when my family came home.” Reed turned nineteen yesterday. (Walker’s principal, Mary Laurie —“Mama Laurie,” the kids often call her—told me that since Katrina “a lot” of her students have been living alone, “roommating” with one another, or staying with friends.)

“Hey,” Rawlins said as he reached into the crowd to pull out a tall young man with short dreadlocks. Rawlins put his face close to the boy’s. “Your teacher talked to me.” He put his lips next to the boy’s ear. “Band. Does. Not. Supersede. Your. Education.” Rawlins reared back and looked into the boy’s eyes. The boy tried to look away, but Rawlins moved his head to keep their eyes locked. “O.K.,” the boy mumbled, and Rawlins let go of his sleeve.

A student at the front of the band room blew a whistle and shouted, “Too much happening! Grab your instrument and have a seat!” The room went instantly silent. The student led them through scales, as Rawlins walked around, gesturing at kids to keep their elbows up, their backs straight, their trombone slides at the proper angle.

The Chargers had already paraded four times across the river. On Wednesday, while riding the bus to the start of one parade, I watched the drum section get into the spirit:

On Saturday, when they finally got to parade in Algiers, it was a glorious day, sunny and warm, and they all looked terrific: the color guard in white helmets and orange puttees; the baton-twirling Chargerettes in spangled blue swimsuits with organ-pipe hairpieces and rhinestone tiaras; the five drum majors in high white fur hats, conducting with long white-and-silver maces; the band itself in resplendent orange-white-and-blue uniforms that the parents had held endless fund-raisers to buy; the dancing Walkerettes in sparkly orange swimsuits and orange gloves; the flag team; and, finally, the cheerleaders, with their blue pom-poms. I'd marched alongside the band a couple of nights earlier, but Saturday was special because it was on home turf; many people in the crowd knew the kids and shouted encouragement.

Mardi Gras parades start and stop abruptly. During one break in the action, a man in a black-and-purple windbreaker raced in among the band members and feverishly began handing out brochures and forms. "My name is Jeffery Herbert and I am director of bands at Texas College, in Tyler, Texas!" he shouted. A whistle sounded, the musicians began marching away, and a cloud of forms went up in a gust of wind. "I was band director here in New Orleans, at St. Mary's Academy and John McDonogh High School," Herbert told me as he frantically gathered his papers. "And then assistant band director at Southern"—Southern University, in Baton Rouge. "That's where they got me and took me to Texas!" he said, as though he'd been kidnapped. "I need these New Orleans kids! I need their flavor!" His voice began rising. "I need that filé in my gumbo!" He bellowed at the receding backs of the Walker kids, "S.A.T., A.C.T., we don't care! We take 'em!" Herbert excused himself and ran after the band.

At that moment, a powerful aroma grabbed me like a fishhook in the nostril. A large family were clustered around the open tailgate of a black pickup truck, eating a heap of scarlet boiled crawfish off it. “Have some!” a big man in sunglasses said, waving me over to the pile. I explained that I had to keep up with the Chargers. “That’s my band,” the man said. “I went to that school, played tuba. We were nowhere near that good back then.” He stared after them, then bopped me on the upper arm. “Look,” he said, taking off his sunglasses. His cheeks were wet with tears.

Permalink

**February 16, 2007**

## **Bánh Quai Vac Thit**

At the far end of New Orleans East—as far as you can get from downtown and still be in the Parish—is a neighborhood called Versailles. It is almost entirely Vietnamese. As many as twenty thousand Vietnamese live there.

Three months after the storm, when more than half of New Orleans had no pulse, Little Vietnam was rocking. Largely owing to the Rev. Nguyen The Vien, pastor of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, the neighborhood, which had flooded as badly as any, was alive with construction and commerce. Two-thirds of the church’s families had returned within three weeks of the storm. By getting four hundred signatures on a petition, neighborhood organizers were able to get the power turned on in Versailles in November, long before other parts of the city. When the city wanted to create a huge landfill for demolition debris nearby, Versailles organized to stop it. If New Orleans—or, for that matter, the rest of the nation—could bottle and distribute Versailles’s organizational energy, we’d all be better off.

But, as Arlo Guthrie once sang, “That’s not what I came to tell you about.”

Off to the side of Chef Menteur Highway in Versailles is the Dong Phuong Oriental Bakery and Restaurant. In the back, the restaurant will serve you excellent, if familiar, basins of steaming pho, as well as fish with noodles, pungent with fish sauce, and rice-paper spring rolls so fresh they squeak on your teeth. Sitting behind me at the next table the other day were eight teen-age boys. Most of the conversation was in Vietnamese, but every now and then I heard “You still kickin’ with Spooky?” or “You ain’t guh eat nuthin’?” When I looked over, I saw that all of them were Vietnamese. When they chose to speak English, it was black street English.

The real culinary excitement was in the little bakery up front, where every few minutes a grim-looking, rail-thin man in an apron emerged and angrily banged down a tray of blazing-hot half-moon-shaped bánh quai vac thit, interpreted on the sign as “Meat Pie, pork and jicama, \$1.25.” I have been a sucker for the union of the words “meat” and “pie” ever since my mother baked twenty-five-cent Swanson pot pies for my brothers and me on nights she and my father were going out. I’ve eaten Cornish pasties in Montana, steak pies in Zimbabwe, and patí in Costa Rica. If there’s a bad way to wrap meat in pastry, I haven’t found it.

The bánh quai vac thit at Dong Phuong, though, are transcendent. The pork is gingery and soy saucy, and shot through with crunchy little dice of jicama. (Dong Phuong also makes something called bánh bao núng, a hat-shaped pastry filled with pork, pink sausage, and hard-boiled egg, and thit va hành, a circular pork-and-onion pastry, but neither of those rise to the Platonic ideal of the bánh quai vac thit.) I found myself a little surprised to be enjoying a cuisine so far removed from the stupendous boudin, gumbo, étouffée, and other southern-Louisiana fare that shrieks from every street corner. But the day after meeting the Vietnamese boys, as I waited in line for my second dozen bánh quai vac thit, I recalled Groucho Marx, who, as the story goes, when confronted with a contestant on his television show who explained having nineteen children by saying, “I love my husband,” fired back, “I love my cigar, but I take it out of my mouth once in a while.” I’ve developed an unseemly fondness for fried oyster po’boys, but I take them out of my mouth once in a while.

Driving back downtown, with my mouth full of bánh quai vac thit, my steering wheel greasy, and WWOZ, New Orleans’s listener-supported roots-music station, howling, I puzzled over the flaky, faintly sweet elegance of Dong Phuong’s Vietnamese puff pastry. I’ve long said: You want dessert, go to Budapest. And then I remembered—France colonized Vietnam in 1858 and didn’t let it go until 1954. Bánh quai vac thit turns out to be a New Orleans treat after all; yet another glorious gift from the French.

Permalink

**February 15, 2007**

## **America Street**

Ever since the storm, the country has heard a lot about the Lower Ninth Ward, a small, overwhelmingly African-American neighborhood downriver of the city’s center. I wrote an article about it myself for *The New Yorker*. The Lower Nine, as it’s sometimes called, is paradoxically one of the poorest sections of New

Orleans and a neighborhood with an uncommonly high rate of home ownership. Many black New Orleanians, it seems, either lived in the Lower Ninth Ward or grew up visiting relatives there. The Lower Nine also endured some of the worst flooding during the crisis, was the only neighborhood to be cordoned off by the National Guard in the weeks afterward, and was among the last places in the city to have water and power restored. To many New Orleanians of all colors, this was evidence of a plot to rid New Orleans of poor people, particularly poor black people. In the weeks and months after Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward became the Gaza Strip of New Orleans, a small piece of earth at the vortex of superheated emotion. Demonstrators marched through the Lower Nine. Community organizations hung defiant placards—no bulldozing! no land grab! Senators and television cameras made pilgrimages there.

Hardly any attention has been paid to another area that was flooded as thoroughly as the Lower Nine and was as poverty-stricken before the storm: America Street, in New Orleans East. My connection to America Street is through a couple of middle-aged brothers whom I'd met during the evacuation. I followed them to Knoxville, Tennessee, and have been back to visit them there. One of them wears a sharp stingy-brim hat, and for the moment I'll call them the Stingy-Brim Brothers. I'll write more about the brothers another time. Last week, I drove out to America Street to see where they'd come from.

New Orleans East, which includes half of the area of the city, is long and narrow, and bisected lengthwise by Chef Menteur Highway. Before parts of it were covered by eight feet of floodwater, Chef Highway, as most people call it, was never fancy—grille-fronted liquor stores, used-tire stands, check-cashing businesses, and one or two discount-shopping centers. America Street crosses Chef Highway about a third of the way out from the main part of New Orleans. I turned left and found the brothers' boyhood home, a tiny brick house with a torn tarpaper roof and blind windows, and the paved lot next door where, until it burned down long before the storm, a second family house stood. Up the street, there is a little white shotgun house that was once the home of the Anchor of Hope Church and, next door to that, the brick Greater Little Rock Baptist Church. Both were derelict. From the look of things, the floodwater here had reached the eaves.

Down at the end of the block stood a few young African-American men. I parked and climbed out of my car, and they watched me cross the street toward them. What they saw was a balding fifty-year-old Jewish guy from New Jersey wearing glasses and pleated pants. I walked up and introduced myself. They stood in a semicircle. They wore long white T-shirts and low-slung jeans. Two had snaky tattoos around the neck, in the style that bespeaks work done with a sewing needle and ballpoint-pen ink in a jail cell. Two wore do-rags. Their arms were folded. It was like talking to Mt. Rushmore.

I didn't stop talking. I explained that I'd been in the city for the flood—always the wisest opening card in New Orleans these days. I mentioned the Stingy-Brim Brothers' names and how I'd met them. I said that I'd flown twice to Knoxville to see them and that we speak on the phone. I said I was a reporter, writing a book. And I mentioned the name of a cousin the Stingy-Brim Brothers had told me about, who also lived on America Street.

Then it was their turn: "Who are you?" "You know them how?" "You evacuated with 'em when?" That I knew the cousin's name seemed only to make them angry. "How'd you get that name?" "Who give you that name?" "Who'd you say you are?" Finally, one of them extended a muscular arm and pointed. He told me to go a few blocks in that direction. "He's got an auto shop there."

There was indeed an auto shop, of sorts. A white FEMA trailer, one of the few in the neighborhood, sat in the yard of a muddy white house. A dented white pickup parked in the street had its hood up. An old black Dodge was up on blocks in the yard next door. Across the street sat a Pontiac with a badly crumpled hood. Lying in the gutter were half a dozen simple tools—a socket wrench, a few screwdrivers, a claw hammer. A stocky man with very dark skin and hair just starting to gray, dressed in a greasy white T-shirt, leaned into the gaping maw of the pickup.

I carried a twelve-pack of Budweiser, and led with that. The man looked at the beer, looked at me, heard my jabbering about the brothers from America Street, and his rough-skinned, knotty face split into a wide smile. "You want one?" he said, opening the twelve-pack. "I'll put the rest in the freezer. Sit down." He pulled a metal folding chair over near the pickup.

After I told him how homesick the Stingy-Brim Brothers were, he said, "Look, they're better off where they are. I know what they miss, and that won't do them no good. I used to smoke crack. I smoked crack for twenty-eight years. I stopped. Just stopped."

Out of place among the old vehicles was a brand-new, fancy gray car that a young man with cornrows was carefully waxing. The trunk was open toward the mechanic, and two pairs of orange-and-yellow Nike Air

Max basketball shoes sat inside, elevated on a box, as though on display. The Altima had a terrific sound system; the sweet, sexy voice of Beyoncé Knowles, singing “Irreplaceable,” filled the street. The cornrowed young man turned out to be the mechanic’s son. He was using a cloth to clean every intricate opening in his hubcaps. The ostentatious slowness with which he worked, and the shoe exhibit in the open trunk, suggested that he wanted that expensive car under his father’s nose for as long as possible. The juxtaposition was painful: the son’s twenty-eight-thousand-dollar car and hundred-and-fifty-dollar Nike shoes with the father earning pennies fixing old cars in the hot sun.

The mechanic turned and sharply ordered another man, a thin young white man, to bring him a vise grip. “I don’t even work for him,” the young man told me softly, with a wink. “I’m from Missouri. I’m just down here to help out for a few months.” I was dying to ask him how, with all the other needs in the city, he ended up helping a shade-tree mechanic on America Street, but he was already inside the house.

A late-model black Pontiac GTO screeched to a halt, and the handsome young driver leaned out to talk to the mechanic. As they talked, the driver revved the car with his foot on the brake, making the rear of the car rise and fall with an almost sexual energy. “I gotta brake,” he finally said, which apparently meant un-brake, because he started to roll away. “All right,” said the mechanic, and he sent him off with a farewell I’ve heard elsewhere in black New Orleans: “I’m gonna let you live.” The GTO threw up a screech and a cloud of vaporized rubber, and shot off for half a block, until it had to slow for a pothole.

The mechanic turned back to me. “I stopped smoking cigarettes, too. Jesus was part of it. But one night I was making love with my old lady and, just as we were really getting there, I couldn’t breathe. I had to go put my head in the refrigerator, get some cool air down in my lungs. Went back and started in, and the same thing happened. I went to the doctor, and he said I had two arteries a hundred per cent closed and one ninety per cent closed. I had me a heart attack. It was either quit smoking crack or quit making love, and I knew which.”

While he was talking, the group of young men I’d met a few blocks away appeared and stood behind me. The mechanic kept looking over my shoulder at them. One of the young men finally stepped forward and jerked his head in my direction.

“Do you know this man?” the mechanic shouted at them. “Do you know this man? Then don’t be causing trouble. You can’t hang out here. Get gone. Go back over.” In a twinkling, they turned into chastened teenagers and dragged their feet around the corner.

“Am I causing you trouble?” I asked.

“No, you’re not doing anything,” he said furiously. “You want another beer?” I said I did, and he went inside for it. When he came back out, he started at his pickup’s engine again. “I’m going to have to take that whole damn distributor cap off again,” he said disgustedly.

The mechanic’s son stopped waxing and gestured toward his father: a sideways ripple of his body combined with a kind of lifting motion with his two arms.

The mechanic took a few quick steps toward him. “What?”

“Are you going to tell him to get the fuck?” the young man said, throwing a glance at me. “Are you going to tell him to get the fuck?” he said again. “Cause if not, I’m going to tell him...”

“You ain’t going to do nothing!” the mechanic snapped. “You’re disrespecting me! I ain’t going to let you show me no disrespect!”

The mechanic’s son backed away, swinging his shoulders angrily. The mechanic looked at the socket wrench in his hand and then threw it hard into the engine compartment of the pickup. “I am so sick of this!” he muttered. “I am ready to just say fuck this. These boys don’t know a goddamn thing. Not a goddamn thing. Don’t do a goddamn thing, neither. Shit, my chest hurts.”

He walked around the pickup and sat on the roof of a blue Ford. Not knowing what else to do, I sat beside him. Neither of us said anything for a while. “Look, man,” he finally said. He dug out a supermarket receipt and wrote his phone number on it. “I got to take care of some things. But I live right up there couple of blocks. You come back any time.” I said I would.

“I mean it,” he said. “Any time. You call me.”

We shook hands, and I walked toward my car. He didn’t tell me he was going to let me live.

Permalink

**February 14, 2007**

## **Trailer Hitch**

The National Guard is supposedly helping patrol the streets of New Orleans, but they’re mostly invisible. So when I was bicycling down Franklin Avenue and saw two parked desert-tan Humvees with blue police lights twirling on their roofs, I stopped. A black pickup truck was embedded in the flank of a white FEMA trailer, and the impact had mashed the trailer all over the side of a big white derelict house. A soldier with an M.P. armband, whose insignia identified him as Sergeant First Class Winship of the Louisiana National Guard, was taking pictures with a point-and-shoot digital camera. It took a moment to discover that nobody was hurt. An elderly man, driving with his wife, had apparently blacked out, put his weight on the accelerator, and piled into the trailer. Nobody was in the trailer at the time, which was a miracle. The elderly couple were shaken but unscratched.

The person who seemed to be suffering the most was June Ancar, who watched the accident happen. Ancar is a sturdy, buxom woman with a stylish helmet of streaked-gray hair, a broken front tooth, and large, elaborately decorated eyes. She was wearing a lilac-colored velour pants suit and carrying a large purse. I could hear her talking to a National Guard officer from half a block away. Her voice kept rising into the chalk-on-blackboard register, and I could see her purple arms flailing in the air. When the officer finished interviewing her, I walked over and got an earful of what might be called “Aria for New Orleans, 2007.”

“Oh, lordy Jesus, I saw him hit that trailer and all I could think of was my own granddaughters what got hit right up on St. Bernard Avenue last summer.” Her chest was heaving and her eyes seemed to roll in two different directions. “They were crossing and a woman come who was fighting with her man and looked like she was trying to run him down in the street. He jumped away and she got my two babies. Shandrica’s got three kids; she got knocked across the street. Tiffany went up under the car and got drug twenty-five feet!” She took a faltering step backward and her arm went out in search of support. I took her arm and righted her. “I was in Humble, Texas, when we got the call.”

“Did your house get flooded?”

“You know it did. I was in Humble since the storm. They said, ‘Take a plane, take a train, just get here fast.’ I got in the car and drove all night. They said, ‘We don’t think she’ll make it.’ Had Tiffany up in East Jefferson hospital two and a half months. She still has headaches. It messed up her mouth. We paid for that by me paying on my Geico insurance. Still got two or three teeth gone. But the lady that hit her had the minimum on her. We got a hundred-and-seventy-five-thousand-dollar hospital bill we got to pay and we can’t sue because that woman only had ten-twenty on her car. I got six people living in my house now. Got Tiffany and her baby, and Shandrica and her two, and oh, God, I paid a contractor sixty-five thousand dollars and my house is fixing to fall down on top of me. Oh, don’t talk to me about no Road Home.” Road Home is Louisiana’s program for distributing billions of federal dollars to homeowners who lost their houses in the flood. As of February 11th, 107,498 applications had been filed, and only six hundred and fifteen families had received help. The Louisiana Recovery Authority, which manages Road Home, has many explanations for the slow progress. New Orleanians, who tend to be past listening to explanations, call the program Road Block, or No Home, as well as some unprintable names. June Ancar’s rage is fairly typical.

“I got me the”—here she stepped back and made caustically sarcastic quote marks in the air—“‘Gold Letter.’ I’m going to get a low-interest loan of fifty thousand dollars and a twenty-four-thousand-dollar grant. What can I do with that?”

She took a long, shuddering breath and her eyes went wet. “It don’t stop,” she said. “Lord, I was so excited when I saw that truck hit—I don’t know how that man is—going to give me a heart attack.” She stopped talking and looked at me, focussing her eyes finally, as though seeing me for the first time. Without another

word, she threw her arms wide, wrapped me in a long, warm hug, and walked away.

Permalink

**February 13, 2007**

## **Hearing, Not Believing**

Just when New Orleanians thought crime couldn't get any worse, they awoke last Friday to this headline in the *Times-Picayune*: "TEEN SOUGHT IN SLAYING GOT GUN FROM HIS MOM ." According to the police, two seventeen-year-old boys had a fistfight, and when the loser went home his mother handed him a loaded gun and told him to get revenge. He did, killing a kid who, only four hours before, had come home for the first time since the evacuation. New Orleanians are pretty jaded by violence, but this killing struck them dumb. "Usually, I have something wise, or political, to say about crime," a woman I know, who helps run one of several small anti-violence advocacy groups which have appeared here recently, said. "But this one, I don't know—I find myself with absolutely nothing to say."

If Friday's story was a roundhouse right, on Monday, the *Times-Picayune* followed with an uppercut—a long, carefully researched story about so-called "misdemeanor murders." Article 701 of the Louisiana Code of Criminal Procedure states that police have to set free anybody they've held for more than sixty days without filing formal charges. Apparently, New Orleans police officers write such dreadful reports, evidence is so hard to process and keep track of, and the two agencies work so poorly together that, in the eight months leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the city released more than seven hundred people. In 2006, the number of "701 releases" (from jail as well as from bonds) jumped to more than three thousand, and in the past month alone two hundred and twenty suspected felons were released from jail after the city failed to indict them. Even when the police manage to catch bad guys, in other words, they're often forced to let them go.

E-mail and phone trees spread the word Monday morning that the City Council was going to be publicly questioning Warren Riley, the police chief, and Eddie Jordan, the district attorney, later that day. "They're going to turn like chicken on a spit!" a friend who called to alert me to the show exulted. (Her optimism did not seem to be shared by the community at large. The *Times-Picayune's* online edition offered an interactive poll: "Do you think the council meeting with D.A. Jordan and Supt. Riley about N.O. crime problems will spark drastic changes in either department?" When I checked the results late on Monday, ninety-three per cent of respondents had said no.)

The first thing I noticed upon entering the City Council chamber—which looks like a junior-high-school auditorium, with rows of stadium seats and blue velour drapes hanging over the stage—was how many police officers of rank had turned up. So many lieutenants, captains, majors, and deputy chiefs filled the seats that it would have been a good day to stick up a bank. I wondered if they were there in solidarity with their beleaguered chief or because he'd ordered them to show up.

The hearings were a bust. The City Council members, with few exceptions, seemed ill-prepared for anything other than self-congratulatory speechmaking. Riley may have been looking for sympathy when he told the council his department has lost more than four hundred officers in the past two years. (Twenty-five have left since the beginning of 2007.) And Jordan, his usually commanding voice sounding high and wheezy, offered the bleak news that all evidence obtained before Hurricane Katrina is still in a basement storeroom that flooded during the storm. “Even though it’s been remediated,” he said, “there’s a rodent problem that’s very serious at this time.”

Judging from the angry murmuring, the restive shifting in seats, and the occasional commentary from the audience (“Ask him the question!”), what the citizens who filled the auditorium really wanted was for someone to knock Riley’s and Jordan’s heads together and tell them to start acting like law-enforcement officers. Ninety minutes into the proceeding, all the council had accomplished was getting Riley and Jordan to agree to cooperate on report-writing training for officers—something the two of them have been cooperating on for years.

At three o’clock sharp, the mystery of the police brass was solved; half of them stood and walked out. To me, it seemed obvious that their presence had not been a show of support—that the order must have come down that Riley that the officers were expected to stay until three. Among those headed for the exit was a genuine hero of the flood, an officer who had held the department together during those early dark days with his own wet hands. I was surprised to see the same rank insignia on his shoulders as before; I figured he of all people would have been promoted. I followed him out and buttonholed him in the lobby. “I’m so glad you’re still in that uniform,” I said, thinking of all the officers who had quit since the storm.

“Not for long,” he replied. “I’m outta here. Fuck ’em. They got me in a hole.” He described his new job; to call it Mickey Mouse would be to insult the cartoon rodent. “I don’t have a desk, I don’t have a phone. I don’t even have a chair. I stand around all day.” This officer had made his contempt for the department’s

leadership known, and this, apparently, was the result. He's young, and a hero of Katrina; he'll do fine. It's New Orleans that will suffer.

Permalink

**February 12, 2007**

## **Pickle Meat**

I was standing in the meat aisle of the Winn-Dixie. In my left hand was a package of hog jowl, in my right a package of smoked turkey necks. I must have looked puzzled, because up walked a short, fat African-American man with a curly gray beard that was a perfect extension of his longish gray hair. "You don't have any idea what you're doing," he said with a wide smile. Even more than the food and the music, what I love about New Orleans is that nobody here would ever think of saying, "That's none of your business." Everything is everybody's business.

"Truth is I don't," I said to the man. "I'm new to this part of the country."

"Where you from?"

"Moved here from Colorado," I said. "But I'm from New Jersey." "Look," he said, taking the hog jowl from my hand. "You can slice this up like side bacon. It's your seasoning meat."

"Cook it in the greens?" I asked. His face brightened the way Annie Sullivan's must have when Helen Keller said "wa-wa."

"That's right! But you got to fry it up a little first. I dice it up, cook it in the pan, get the fat out of it a little bit."

“Pour the fat off?” I asked. He shrugged.

“Well, you can, I guess. I don’t. That’s the best part!”

Toto, I said to myself, we’re not in Boulder anymore, where pig fat is only slightly more socially acceptable than crack cocaine or plutonium, or cigarettes.

“What part of the pig is this?” I asked.

He palpated his own fleshy jaw. “Right here,” he said. Then he took the turkey necks from my hand, tossed them back in the case, and pulled me by the sleeve toward another case. “Then you got to get some pickle meat.” He rooted out a plastic package that looked like bacon. “You take and boil this separate,” he said. “Then you cut this up, too, and put it in the greens.”

A new voice cut into our conversation: “That’s not how I do.” A short elderly woman in a violet overcoat and matching church hat, with pointy mother-of-pearl glasses, put a plastic-wrapped package in my hands. In it were four tubular beige curls, each about six inches long. The label said, “Pig tails : \$1.27.” “I take and boil these,” she said. “I put a little of the water in with the greens.”

“Not the tails?”

“They’re too salty. These are pickled. You use the water, and that’s your salt.” “Why don’t you just put salt in the greens?” I asked. She reared back, as though I’d invited her to a dance on Sunday.

The old man intervened. “I like the pickle meat right in the greens. You get that up alongside them smoked hog jowls, and mmm!”

Up walked a reedy young white man in overalls, with a goat beard and a Confederate flag on his cap. “I never knew no pickle meat till I came to New Orleans,” he said. “We don’t have that in Mississippi. My mama boiled greens with ham, but my wife uses that pickle meat, too, and they’re right—it’s good.”

The churchy lady turned to him. “Does she put the meat right up in the greens or just the water?”

The young man smiled sheepishly. “Ma’am, I don’t know. I just eat ’em. But I think what she uses is this.” He crossed the aisle and came back with a jar filled with chunks of something in an alarmingly red fluid: Farm Fresh Food Suppliers Pickled Pig Lips. “She likes the color it gives,” he said. The color, according to the label, is Red No. 40. The old man and woman looked at the jar of pig lips, at each other, and then politely looked at the floor. The young goat-bearded man drifted away.

“Look,” the old man said with Solomonic wisdom, putting the pickle meat and the pig tails in my hands. “Why don’t you try it both ways, see how you like it.”

“He’s not doing the cooking,” the old woman snapped. Then she turned to me and said in a way that brooked no disagreement, “You’re married.”

“I’m married, Ma’am,” I said. “But I do most of the cooking.” Finally the old man and the old woman had something to agree on. They both clapped their hands together, smiled, and said, “Good for you!”

Permalink

**February 7, 2007**

## **Things That Go Bump**

Early this morning, in the pre-dawn gloom, I heard some odd bumping noises coming from the front of the house and I thought, Uh-oh. Twenty-three people have been murdered in New Orleans since the year began. People tell us to lock our car even if we're leaving it for only a minute, not to walk home late at night from the French Quarter (about twelve blocks), and to make sure we're carrying enough money to satisfy a mugger. This last admonition reminds me of being careful to eat dinner before going to fraternity parties when I was nineteen, so I would have something in my stomach in case I had to vomit.

In truth, our house is secure. It is probably a hundred or more years old—Mark, our landlord, has no idea. In front are two narrow windows that extend from the floor about ten feet high. (The ceiling is about two feet above that; our living room is essentially a cube.) Both windows are covered with full-length wooden shutters, as is the front door. From the outside, the house looks like it has three doors to choose from, like the set of "Let's Make a Deal." A burglar would have to get through the shutters, then the locked windows or door. We're safe, I told myself, and went back to sleep.

In the morning, we stepped outside into the first warm sunshine in a week, and also to a remarkable discovery. Sitting in front of our door was a greenish-black object, chest-high, with wheels on the bottom. It smelled of new plastic. I realized as I gazed at it that I hadn't seen something that new and shiny since arriving in New Orleans last week. All up and down Dauphine Street, neighbors were emerging from their houses to find one of these stupendously gleaming things before their door. We looked like the proto-humans in the first reel of "2001: A Space Odyssey," marvelling at the inexplicable monolith. "Oh my gawd, what da hell is dat?" one witchy old lady up the street called out in the New Orleans accent that is more Hoboken than Dixie. Across the street, the five skinny Hondurans who share a shamefully dilapidated and overpriced one-bedroom house tumbled out and surrounded the one in front of their door without touching it, as they mumbled to each other in Spanish.

The mysterious things were trash cans, of course, the type designed to be hoisted automatically over the top of a huge truck and emptied like a drunk downing a shot. Nowhere else in the United States would they have seemed extraordinary. But nearly eighteen months after Katrina the city is still awash in garbage. Heaps of demolition and construction debris lie everywhere, attracting bags of garbage and loose trash. Gutted houses spill their guts on the street, and they seem to lie there forever. The hundreds of flood-killed cars that sat under the I-10 overpass at North Claiborne Avenue—and almost cost Mayor C. Ray Nagin

another term—are long gone, and the duct-taped refrigerators that stood on curbs everywhere and made the city feel like one big cemetery have mostly been picked up. But the streets are still full of litter. And until now people put their trash on the curb in bags that piled up in great pyramids. The arrival of the trash cans is a big event. It is progress you can touch with your hand.

Back in Boulder, which has come to feel like the distant Immaculate Planet, we have three trash bins beside our house: a little one for trash, and two big ones for recyclable containers and paper. The thought of us fastidiously sorting our waste feels, here in storm-blighted New Orleans, like an incredible luxury. Mark the landlord can't bring himself to throw away recyclables, so the yard beside our elegant townhouse has a tower of white trash bags filled with bottles and newspaper, waiting for the glorious day that curbside recycling returns to New Orleans. Somehow, he finds it more comforting to live in a midden than to throw his yogurt containers and beer bottles in the trash and have them added to the landfill. Margaret and I are going to figure this city out, but probably not in the first month.

Permalink

**February 6, 2007**

## **After-School Conference**

A huge dreadlocked boy shouldered past the security guard at Frederick A. Douglass High School on St. Claude Avenue and growled, "Thanks for getting me in trouble."

"You got your own self in trouble!" the uniformed guard, an African-American woman with a lacquered wraparound hairdo and long multicolored nails, shouted at his retreating back. "Go to your classes! You a basketball player! You're supposed to be an example!"

Past the security guard, in a Frederick Douglass computer lab, the principal, three teachers, and eight interested citizens sat on plastic chairs under fluorescent lights and talked, straight through the dinner hour on Tuesday night, about ways to make the lives of the school's students a little better.

The principal, Allen T. Woods, a large, light-skinned African-American with a gentle voice, laid out the

context: “The truth of the matter is, there is a vast population of kids in our school with no parental involvement. They’re back living on their own. Living with relatives. Living with boyfriends or girlfriends. We have one or two students taking the bus from Baton Rouge every morning.” (That’s at least ninety minutes each way.) “Most of them are seventeen, eighteen, nineteen,” Woods continued. “They have missed a year of being in school. Some are on target. Some are two years behind.”

Robert George, a middle-aged white man with glasses and a graying mustache who teaches English at Frederick Douglass, said, “For our first open house, I had one parent show up. I have eighty-five kids. I’ve had maybe five parents call since then. Usually, they say, ‘I’m the aunt, I’m the grandmother, I don’t really have time.’” He paused, and his voice dropped. “I have one young lady I’m really sorry for,” he said quietly. “Both parents are dead. And the grandmother says, ‘I don’t really have time for this.’” George sat back and his voice grew suddenly louder. “You need to have one adult somewhere who has the time to worry about your problems.”

The school’s choir teacher, Marie deYoung, added, “The only thing different between New Orleans and Philadelphia, or Detroit, or Oakland, or any other urban district? The federal government is putting in resources now, since Katrina, that they should have put in twenty years ago. We had a band teacher who was murdered. It’s hard to keep teachers because of the violence.” After Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Education created a new state-run Recovery School District for New Orleans schools that had been performing below state standards. The state also allowed local public schools to become charter schools.

More than half of the fifty-six New Orleans schools that have reopened since Katrina are charter schools. They tend to be in the wealthier parts of town. Frederick Douglass High School sits in a part of the Ninth Ward known as the Bywater, where abandoned houses and shady characters lie one street over from the kind of bohemian grace that is often described as “the way the French Quarter was in the nineteen-fifties.” The Frederick Douglass Community Coalition decided not to seek charter status for the school, which reopened in September. But Monday night, Woods said, “I’m asking the state lawyers how I can set up a Friends of Frederick Douglass.” He’s been waiting for an answer for a month. One possible source of income would involve turning the school’s auditorium, a neglected Art Deco hall that seats sixteen hundred, into a community theatre.

Principal Woods stepped into the hall to scold a uniformed cheerleader who had cartwheeled past the open

door. DeYoung, the choir teacher, said, “I’m a little appalled at the food that’s served to the kids.”

“Leave that one alone,” Woods said, returning heavily to his seat. “Go to the next one.”

“What about the physical ambience of this building?” deYoung asked. “Leave that alone, too. That’s way above us,” Woods said. “It’s not perfect. The last time the building was repainted was 1988, and it took ten months.” Sitting in on the meeting were two representatives of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation, who were applying for a grant. “We are looking for a building, and for someone willing to hire someone who can teach theatre or television or music. We’re looking for a principal who’d be interested in that,” one of them said.

Woods made a come-hither motion with his hand. “No problem there,” he said. “I’m open for anything. We’re trying to revitalize the culinary arts program, get that kitchen fixed up. There are chefs in the area who say they’d like to be a part of that.” He sat back in his seat and raised his palms. “I keep throwing out my cane pole and see what I can pull in,” he said.

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**February 5, 2007**

## **Bicycle-Friendly**

New Orleans doesn’t have any fancy accommodations for bicycles—no dedicated underpasses, no footbridges over busy streets, virtually no bike paths. Yet New Orleans has become, in its typically idiosyncratic way, a great bicycling town.

The week of the storm, the only safe way to get around the unflooded sliver of the city was by bicycle. Two days after the levees broke, when everyone was desperate to leave, I drove a seven-passenger Windstar I’d rented into downtown. It seemed to be the only vehicle moving, and I could easily imagine being relieved of it the first time I slowed for a stop sign. So I drove far uptown, hid it in a tangle of fallen oak branches between two mansions, and hiked back to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. Many of the thousands of people inside had got there by bicycle. I found a serviceable-looking one and asked its young owner to

sell it to me. “Hundred dollars!” he yelled. It was worth maybe thirty. “Sold,” I said. “Hundred and twenty!” he said. “Sold,” I said, again. I handed him the money, grabbed the bike, and ran.

During the flood, New Orleans was once again a crescent city—a strip barely a mile wide from the Mississippi River levee to the start of the floodwater, about a block lakeside of St. Charles Avenue. My rusty, bent bike could take me between any two points in less than an hour. Car traffic wasn’t a problem. The fallen power lines had no electricity in them. Smashed tree boughs were easily snaked through. The bicycle made me invisible; I was just another sweaty guy wandering about aimlessly. When the bike got stolen halfway through my first day, I went back to the Convention Center and bought another. (Memo to *The New Yorker’s* expense lady: thank you for understanding my lack of receipts.)

After the floodwater receded, bicycling got harder. The streets were strewn with broken glass, shards of metal, and screws. When I was riding out to an interview near the gothic Firemen’s Monument in Greenwood Cemetery one night, my rear tire picked up a nail so big it pierced not only the tire and tube but the aluminum wheel, too. It was a long walk back to the hotel.

Car traffic has returned to New Orleans with a vengeance. The city is still a lot smaller than it was. Even though the flood-blighted neighborhoods are officially still part of it, almost all of its life is crammed into the unflooded crescent. New Orleans’s population is less than half the size it was at the last census, according to a door-to-door survey conducted last summer, but that’s still a hundred and ninety thousand people. Post-Katrina euphoria—We’re alive! We’ll be back!—long ago dissolved into the post-post-Katrina where’s-my-insurance-check blues, which may help to explain the blaring horns, screeching brakes, ignored red lights, and upturned middle fingers. The wretched state of the city’s traffic signals doesn’t help.

Strangely, though, New Orleans’s drivers seem incredibly solicitous of bicycle riders. Margaret and I try to stick to the narrow back roads, which are lined with parked cars. Often, cars have to follow us for a block or more before being able to pass. The drivers hardly ever blow their horns or recklessly gun past us. Being from Boulder, a town of Teutonic orderliness, we tend to travel in the proper direction down one-way streets, and we brake at stop signs. Most New Orleanian bike riders display no such pretensions, rocketing across intersections at will, darting out from between parked cars, and zipping the wrong way. Amazingly, drivers accommodate them, too, with infinite patience and even a kind of tenderness.

Margaret and I knew enough not to bring fancy bicycles to New Orleans—mine is a mountain bike from the nineteen-nineties that is no heavier than a grand piano—but we are still somewhat out of place. In a city of sartorial outlandishness, one way truly to draw attention is to go achingly straight. We look pretty silly in our reflective windbreakers and squarely adjusted helmets. I haven't seen a working light on any other bicycle in New Orleans, and as for helmets, the closest thing I've seen is a four-color jester's hat with little bells at the tips.

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**February 2, 2007**

## **Uniform Blues**

We stopped to see a couple of police officers I'd met during the nightmare weeks immediately after the storm. A lot of the New Orleans Police Department deserted then, but not these two; indeed, most of the officers in their Uptown district stayed on the job. Most had lost their homes and were sleeping in their cars with their guns in their hands, or in tiny staterooms aboard an increasingly fetid cruise ship docked behind the Convention Center. They were lucky if they had one uniform. They ate what they could scrounge.

Eighteen months after Katrina, the department still hasn't moved back into its headquarters, and these two cops now work out of a group of trailers near a tire outlet and some boarded-up restaurants. And, like the rest of New Orleans's working poor, they are nowhere near returning to their ruined homes. "We live in trailers, we work in trailers, the people we police are living in trailers—we're trailer trash," one of the cops, a gray-haired raconteur, said. "And we feel like it."

I won't mention his name or his district because the N.O.P.D., scorched by bad public relations during the storm, still has the energy to punish any cop who speaks to reporters without permission. The last time I saw him, this officer was wearing a stained light-blue uniform shirt and had the panda look of the grievously sleep-deprived. Now he seemed fit, filled out, and well rested, and was wearing one of the new, sharp black uniforms the department acquired after Katrina. He hates the new suit; it's hot, wrinkles easily, shows dirt, makes him look too much like a security guard at a Family Dollar store, and renders him invisible at night.

But the uniform is the least of his concerns. A hundred and sixty-one people were murdered on the streets

of New Orleans last year, yet the police were able to bring only thirty-seven of those cases to the district attorney, Eddie Jordan. And Jordan successfully charged only twenty of those. Four went to trial, and three were found guilty. In other words, almost ninety per cent of New Orleans's killers got away with murder last year.

It doesn't help, the cop said, that at least seven law-enforcement agencies operate within New Orleans. He counted them on his blunt fingers: "You got the N.O.P.D., the criminal sheriff, the civil sheriff, I don't know how many levee police forces, the bridge police. Oh, yeah, the harbor police, too," he said. He spread his hands in a classic whaddaya-gonna-do gesture. "It's a bunch of sacred cows, little fiefdoms, little opportunities for patronage. Been that way for decades." He figures he'll be able to stand it for another two and a half years, and then he'll retire.

In the next room of the double-wide sat a policewoman legendary for her ability to befriend the women in her district and thus learn what the men were up to. She's a beauty in her forties, with bleached hair and huge blue eyes, red-rimmed with exhaustion. "I stayed all through the storm and stayed on after because I love this city," she said. "Now I'm thinking only about what working here can do for me." In another couple of years, she'll have served long enough to earn a respectable pension. "I grew up in coastal Mississippi and I went through Camille," she said. "It took twenty years for the area to recover. I got to ask myself, how many twenty-year periods like that can I take in one lifetime?"

The most an N.O.P.D. patrolman can earn these days is three thousand two hundred dollars a month, before taxes. You can make more gutting houses.

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**February 1, 2007**

## **Café Culture**

New Orleans is full of down-at-the-heels single-room cafés that look as if they'd opened yesterday on someone's fifty-dollar investment. Invariably dominated by a chalkboard menu and crammed with mismatched thrift-store furniture, they are ineffably cozy refuges from the city's harsh streets. A dollar will buy you a cup of coffee and an afternoon of wireless Internet access, so they constitute an archipelago of de-facto offices for the myriad nonprofit and advocacy groups that have coalesced here since Katrina. At all hours, men and women sit scowling at laptops, their cell phones resting on cigarette-scarred tables beside

cold cups of cappuccino, plotting how to get low-cost building materials to poor homeowners, start a Lower Ninth farmer's market, sue the police, or bring the city's musicians back from exile. Thursday was cold and wet; the people at the Sound Café, on Chartres Street in the Marigny, wore scarves and hats indoors and kept their hands in their armpits. The street outside, its storm drains clogged with uncollected garbage, ran with six inches of rainwater for more than a block. "Lake Nagin," a friend, who wants to be called Étienne, said.

Étienne, who seems to do everything and nothing for a living, was simultaneously working his laptop and his BlackBerry, and nursing a cup of weapons-grade Louisiana coffee. We asked what he was working on; he launched into a forty-minute monologue that encompassed the needless delays in distributing federal housing money, the firing of a public-library official who had helped to raise millions, the plot to discourage the return of the poor by razing the public hospital Huey Long built, and a demonstration he was organizing that very evening at the Housing Authority of New Orleans. Spread across the table were flyers announcing a "Psychedelic Fringe" party at One-Eyed Jacks, on Toulouse Street, on Friday night, the Krewe du Vieux parade on Saturday, the Krewe du Jieux's crowning of Andrei Codrescu as "King of the Jieux" at its own event, and a meeting of Frederick Douglass High School parents on Tuesday.

A pudgy black man in his fifties came in. He solemnly shook Étienne's hand and doffed his cap. Étienne greeted him as "doctor" and I figured he was Étienne's ophthalmologist. "That's Dr. Michael White," Étienne said. "He may be the best jazz musician in New Orleans. And he had, in his house, one of the world's best jazz collections—sheet music by Jelly Roll Morton, part of a clarinet played by Sidney Bechet. It went on and on. All of it was lost."

White moved some plastic chairs into a line. The door kept banging open, and bulky young black men in Saints jackets and hoodies entered and gave each other complicated handshakes. They sat in the chairs, raised a battery of brass, and became, as one, the Hot 8 Brass Band: three trombones, three trumpets, a bass drum, a snare, Dr. White's clarinet, and a sousaphone, whose roar I could feel in my marrow. (Anyone who thinks a tuba has two notes—*oom* and *pah*—needs to hear Bennie Pete riffle notes from the giant as though playing the flute.) The ten musicians filled half the room; maybe twice that many people stood around the other half, with coffee or cups of cheap red wine in their hands, clapping and swivelling their hips. Half a dozen small children climbed around the musicians.

The Hot 8, one of New Orleans's favorite bands and one that has performed all over the world, is star-

crossed. The year before the flood, one of its trombone players died. Then police killed another trombone player—he was unarmed at the time—in an incident that has never been investigated to the community’s satisfaction. And in January the Hot 8’s snare-drum player, Dinerral Shavers, was shot dead in his car in front of his wife, apparently by someone trying to kill Shavers’s stepson. “Since the schools all closed, the uptown kids are sent to the downtown high school, where their musicians and athletes get more attention from the girls,” Étienne shouted in my ear, over the trombone din.

The Hot 8 played songs that have been around New Orleans since time began: “Margie,” “By and By,” and even “When the Saints Go Marching In.” (“We fell one game short, y’all, but this one is for the boys!” the three-hundred-pound trumpeter, Terrell “Burger” Batiste, shouted.) You hear these songs over and over in New Orleans, just about every time a jazz band gets together. They’re so old and such standards that, in any other city, wearing them out this way would be cornball—like rock-and-rollers endlessly covering “Great Balls of Fire” and “Tutti Frutti.” Here, though, they seem new, and freshly appreciated by the crowd, every time a band fires them up. “We got to play these songs,” the trumpeter Raymond (Dr. Rackle) Williams told me during a break. “This is who we are.” Driven away by the storm, Dr. Rackle returned to New Orleans for good on Monday; he seemed overwhelmed with emotion to be playing with the Hot 8 again. The band shuffled back into their plastic chairs and blew the buttons off “Darktown Strutters Ball.” Just another Thursday night in January, on a low-rent street in the city.

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