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## **A City Neglected**

I arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees broke in 2005 and spent much of the following nine months here, writing about the disaster of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath for *The New Yorker*. Now I am back for four months, with Margaret, my wife and writing partner, to work on a book and to keep this online journal.

The drive from Colorado took us three days, with stops in Texas, to visit a former New Orleans cop, and at the old Louisiana statehouse, to finger the bullet-pocked marble from the assassination of Huey Long. Pulling into New Orleans on Wednesday, under a cold, iron-gray sky, I was surprised, first at how much had changed, and then at how little. The French Quarter, the Garden District, and the yuppie-trendy Magazine Street neighborhood locally known as the Isle of Denial did not flood during Katrina, and when I last visited, in May, they were up and running. But now big swatches of Mid-City, where the depth finder in the bass boat I'd ridden in during the flood had registered ten feet of water, had come to life. The razor-straight lines of black filth that slashed the façades of the houses along Carrollton Avenue from Interstate 10 to City Park had mostly been scrubbed away. Stores and restaurants were open, blue tarps were gone from rooftops, children played on stoops. The barbecued-shrimp po'boy at Liuzza's by the Track was as fiery and briny as ever. Traffic was positively annoying.

Beyond the Industrial Canal, the Lower Ninth Ward seemed frozen in time, ruined and vacant, as it was more than a year ago. I revisited two iconic Lower Nine houses that stand within sight of each other. One, knifed in half by a fallen tree and rotted from within by eighteen months of rainwater, still had spray-painted across its front: "4 Sale As Is: \$30,000." The other: "Not for Sale at Any Price. I'm Staying Put." Neither house looked as though it had attracted much attention from buyers or owners since I was last here. No surprise, really, that the Lower Nine languishes; the recent, thoroughly televised Senatorial visit was a fine reminder.

When I got out of the car and walked through the "functioning" parts of the city, I saw how beaten down they are. Beside a bustling restaurant on Carrollton Avenue lay a field of rubble. Flanking a rebuilt apartment were townhouses that resembled skulls with plywood eyes. Most buildings needed paint. Street lights and traffic signals still dangled uselessly. Many houses stood vacant—peeling and splintered, with shattered windows. Worse, the people on the street had acquired the worn-out, hollow-eyed look of figures in a Walker Evans photograph—their shoulders hunched, their faces sallow and puffy, their voices flat. Within a couple of hours, two strangers separately told us that they were "over" New Orleans and scheming to leave.

New Orleans's acute crisis seems to have lapsed into a chronic crisis; the vibe is one of siege. I felt the same sense of wonder we all felt in the days after Katrina: that the United States, with its wealth, its generosity, and its professed affection for the culture of this idiosyncratic little city, would stand aside and let New Orleans suffer alone. At first glance, there are improvements, but the overwhelming sense, this first day, was of a city neglected. You might say that the sky is still empty of helicopters.

We're staying in a neighborhood about a mile east of, and just across

the tracks from, the French Quarter. The Bywater is what locals call it, unless it serves them to say "Ninth Ward." "Recovery is not a sprint, it's a marathon," a sign in the neighborhood admonishes, and it's clear that not everyone will make it to the finish line. But even now, in as dark an hour as the city has ever faced, yellow, green, and purple decorations flutter everywhere as Mardi Gras season enters its fifth week. "The City That Care Forgot" may have become, as locals like to say, "The City That Bush Forgot," but, regardless of what happens in Washington, it hasn't yet decided to die.

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