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Proposal:

The Neutral Ground

By Dan Baum

The Neutral Ground is about New Orleans before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina, as told through the lives of a small cast of characters – rich and poor, black and white, men and women, famous and obscure. These are lives that could be lived nowhere but in New Orleans: the subversive, jazz-playing coroner; the baronial Cajun shipyard owner; the jubilant retired streetcar-track repairman with a culture museum in his garage. Some of their stories emphasize the absurdity of catastrophe: the crippled, nine-fingered cop who spends a day chauffeuring a corpse around the city; the emergency-room doctor who commandeers a hearse to dispense looted medicine; the

motherly transvestite bar owner stalled in her quest for a sex change. To many, the very effort of endurance brings enlightenment: the alcoholic black-sheep son of a founding family to whom the storm gives a mission; the third-generation police captain exorcising the ghost of his murdered father as he patrols in a stolen boat; the six-year-old girl who integrated the schools in 1960 and is trying to reclaim her myth, as she chases the lost records of a murdered son; a pair of Damon Runyan-style streetcorner bums, as eloquent and charming as they are useless, evacuated to immaculate Knoxville, Tennessee, and scheming their way home. Each of these characters is loveable, and, in his or her own fallible way, heroic.

The Neutral Ground is about New Orleans as much as it is about the storm. Katrina didn't inundate Houston or Kansas City or Detroit. It devastated the only corner of the United States where efficiency and maximized profit are not the civic religion, where people have more time than money and like it that way. Paramount in New Orleans – even more than the food or the music -- is that *this moment, right now*, be as pleasant as possible. Sit a spell. Let me freshen your drink and tell you a story that may or may not be true but that is guaranteed to make you laugh. This is not a worldview conducive to getting things done. Long before the storm, New Orleans's infrastructure was decrepit; the schools a shambles;

poverty, corruption, and violence rampant. But few who had tasted life in New Orleans willingly gave it up. (Right before the storm, a Gallup poll found more than sixty percent of New Orleanians “extremely satisfied” with their lives, a much higher percentage than in any other city.) New Orleanians tend to be perfectly satisfied if today is just like yesterday, and tomorrow is just like today. This isn’t laziness or fecklessness; in New Orleans, it bespeaks a commitment to enjoying life instead of merely achieving. In the speedy, future-oriented, hyper-productive, and globalized twenty-first century, New Orleans’s refusal to sacrifice the pleasures of today amounts to a lifestyle of civil disobedience. A whole Catholic, Creole city, stuck like a barnacle on the keel of our Protestant nation, opted out of the work ethic and went funky -- or, looked at another way, became the salvation of the compromised American soul.

Of all people to be driven from their homes! New Orleanians were, statistically, the most rooted of American people. Until Katrina, many lived on the street where they were born, and rarely left their neighborhoods; an old woman I met in the Ninth Ward hadn’t been to the French Quarter – two miles away -- since the nineteen-fifties. This is partly why so many resisted evacuating, even after the city flooded. They knew nothing of the world outside New Orleans, had no friends

or family elsewhere. To leave New Orleans was to be spun off the face of the earth.

The very qualities that make New Orleans irreplaceable are the same ones that make it so hard for the city to recover. Its government and police dissolved at the first touch of floodwater because they barely existed in the first place. New Orleans couldn't plan its recovery because planning is an ant's business, and New Orleans is a grasshopper town. New Orleans reelected the entertainingly inept Ray Nagin over the competent but colorless Mitch Landrieu because to have done otherwise would have been to concede the loss of something greater than ninety square miles of neighborhoods: the city's essential character. Katrina unfolded in the context of a delightfully bizarre city whose strengths are precisely its weaknesses.

There is no understanding Katrina without understanding New Orleans, and there is no understanding New Orleans without slowing to the city's pace and examining its denizens in the intimacy that is the city's hallmark. Hurricane Katrina is neither the beginning nor the end of these characters' stories; they went rushing into the crisis with their own troubles bubbling, and their personal journeys out of it reflect the city's struggle to survive.

The Katrina saga – the crisis itself and the hallucinogenic months following – unfolded in phases. Each chapter of *The Neutral Ground* focuses on a few characters whose experiences illustrate a phase. *The Neutral Ground* doesn't try to tell the whole story of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans's fitful attempts at recovery. Instead, by probing the souls of these thoroughly New Orleanian characters, the reader experiences the fall and rise of New Orleans: how it looked, smelled, sounded, and felt.

Each character's story is threaded through several chapters. Many are introduced during the flood, and work out their problems through various stages of the fitful recovery. Police Captain Edwin Hosli, for example, is not only a hero of the storm; he's a guy earning fifty-seven thousand dollars a year with no flood insurance, locked in a death-struggle with Allstate. JoAnn Guidos keeps her neighborhood bar open during the crisis so that her regulars won't have to endure the storm alone; she also gets stuck, doctorless, halfway through a sex-change procedure. The coroner spends three hideous weeks at a makeshift tent morgue examining waterlogged and heat-bloated corpses; he also copes, in his own subversive way, with an eerily high number of weekly deaths a year after the storm. As the characters' stories advance, they intertwine: Captain Hosli lends authority to a doctor, dispensing emergency care from a stolen hearse, who in turn

loots pharmacies to find pills for the lieutenant of another major character, N.O.P.D. Captain Anthony Cannatella. Dr. Anna Maria Pou, tending critically ill patients in a stifling hospital, trapped without electricity or water, makes Hobson's choices during the storm, and Captain Hosli's patrolmen find the makeshift morgue that will lead to her arrest, many months later, on charges of mercy-killing. The characters also comment on and gossip about each other, as well as the powers above them who are struggling to resuscitate the city. They are street-level witnesses to botched plans, squandered sympathies, and federal miserliness, and they dig deep for courage and stoicism to survive the crisis of public health and public order that is New Orleans after the flood.

The Neutral Ground is divided into two parts. Part One takes place in the ten days immediately following the flood. Part Two begins a few months later, and goes until the following spring. At the moment, I have more complete material for Part One because I met those characters earlier, holed up with them during the flood, and interviewed them about their backgrounds. But I am on good terms with everybody. Fleshing out the characters of Part Two will be easy to do; New Orleanians love to tell their life stories. Selections from several Part One chapters are below, followed by brief descriptions of each chapter. The selections focus on several of the characters whom

I met during the flood and whose voices will carry through the months thereafter. I will also work backwards, inserting into the early part of the book characters I don't yet know but who will be easy to find, whose stories are essential to later dramatic episodes. For example, I will trace the story of a person, as yet unidentified, who drowns during the flood, is recovered by Cannatella's officers, and ends up on the coroner's slab in the make-shift morgue. I'll also identify and tell the story of someone who dies of stress months after the flood, and follow him or her to the parish lab, as the coroner marks down the death as "storm-related" so that the family can receive federal benefits.

Here are selections from early chapters of *The Neutral Ground*. The italicized passages are shorthand descriptions of scenes not yet written:

Prologue: White Buffalo Day

Anthony Cannatella's boyhood was full of blue uniforms. Every important man in his life was a cop – his father, his uncles, all his friends' dads. Two icons overhang his childhood memories: the full-color wooden crucifix nailed to the wall over his bed and the downturned star and crescent of the N.O.P.D. badge. When

Cannatella entered the kitchen with a new girlfriend one afternoon in high school, she let out a yip and her eyes went wide. On the back of a chair hung his father's duty belt, the walnut handle of the revolver erect in the afternoon light. Until then, it had never occurred to Cannatella that guns hanging on the backs of kitchen chairs were unusual.

Cannatella was born in 1948 into a mostly white New Orleans. When he was twelve, the courts ordered public schools in the city to integrate. Six-year-old Ruby Bridges, in her little starched white dress, walked into William Frantz Elementary School over in the Ninth Ward, and the New Orleans Cannatella knew began to unravel. By the time he finished high school, the only whites left in the city were those in the graceful mansions uptown who sent their children to private schools, and the artsy-jazzy types downtown who thought integration was just fine. Most blue-collar whites -- the "yats," named for the greeting, "where y'at?" -- moved out, to Jefferson or St. Bernard Parishes. About the only yats who didn't leave were the cops; a new, majority-black city council saw to that, decreeing in 1971 that N.O.P.D. officers had to live within city limits.

The force that Cannatella joined a month after his graduation from high school was one learning, by fits and starts, to cope with a lopsided population in which lots of poor blacks struggled to survive

beside a few rich whites. Cannatella quickly acquired a reputation for being “old school.” In the positive sense, that meant dogged, difficult to rattle, and incorruptible – no small achievement in the New Orleans Police Department. The N.O.P.D. had a reputation for being trigger-happy, and was usually fighting off at least one wrongful-death lawsuit. Cannatella was not what cops call a gun-guy. He touched his pistol so seldom that he used to say he could do without it altogether. In the negative sense, “old school” meant too quick with the fists and less sensitive to the longstanding grievances of the American Negro than the department’s race-relations counselors might have liked.

N.O.P.D. officers can retire after thirty years and receive one hundred percent of their salary as pension. Cannatella was only forty-eight when he hit that mark in 1996. He couldn’t imagine filling his time with anything but police work, so he stayed on, working for the same amount of money he’d have made if he’d stayed home. By 2004, he was a captain, in charge of Sixth District. Years of muscling New Orleans into a rough semblance of order had given him the physique of a streetcorner mailbox, with a fringe of hair around a neckless bald head, a thick slab of muscular torso, and short, bowed legs. He spoke in the meaty New Orleans accent that is more “Sopranos” than “Gone With the Wind” -- a good accent for a cop — authoritative, contemptuous, and discouraging of backtalk.

The Mardi Gras Indians are generally among the more pleasant of the public-order challenges that New Orleans Police officers handle. These "tribes" of working-class black men spend all year fashioning wildly elaborate feathered costumes to wear on a few occasions. The tradition goes back to slave times, when blacks were forbidden from participating in Mardi Gras and "masked Indian" as a ruse. Masking Indian also honors the Native American tribes of southern Louisiana that harbored escaped slaves. Mardi Gras Indians never get police permits ahead of time; their celebrations are all about spontaneity. But they've contributed to the peace in New Orleans by ritualizing combat among poor and working-class blacks, self-consciously substituting costume competition for knife fights. Cannatella never could understand why Bertrand Butler, an ex-con who headed the Mardi Gras Indian's Association, was so belligerent. From the first call Butler paid on the Sixth District captain, Cannatella felt disrespected. The respect due a police officer was missing. Butler acted as though he was the one laying down the law, and that rankled. Their relationship simmered along until Cannatella's first Saint Joseph's night as captain, when he decided to teach Butler a lesson. As anybody who has grown up in New Orleans knows, the Indians parade not only on Mardi Gras, but on Saint Joseph's night, March 27 – the culmination of

a weeklong celebration in which the city's Italians pile food on homemade altars. Under the guise of "not knowing" that the Indians were planning to parade, Cannatella sent officers to bust up a gathering at Shakespeare Park. They were rougher than necessary, and so outraged the black community that the City Council called a special session in July to air grievances.

Cannatella, in his white dress-uniform shirt, sat in a witness chair facing the council, hands on knees, chin raised. Behind him, across a low railing, stood the public microphone. Staring at the back of his fireplug head was a full house of neighborhood activists, reporters, and the chiefs of the tribes -- the Wild Magnolias, the Golden Eagles, the Young Sons of Geronimo, Fi-Yi-Yi, the Wild Tchopitoulas. Cannatella heard his name in the buzz of low voices as people waited; he didn't turn around. First to speak was eighty-two-year-old Allison "Tootie" Montana, the "Chief of Chiefs," the most celebrated craftsman of Indian costumes, and the man credited with convincing Indians, in the nineteen-seventies, to compete through the splendor of their outfits instead of with knives. Cannatella glanced over his shoulder; Montana, painfully thin, dressed in khakis and a light jacket, leaned on his son, Darryl, as he walked to the microphone. He gripped the podium, nodded to Darryl to leave him, and without preamble, launched into a longwinded reminiscence of forty years of N.O.P.D. mistreatment of

Indians. "I remember," Montana said, "when the officers used to line up on either side of the street and club us as we walked past."

Cannatella, who had been expecting to be pilloried from start to finish, relaxed; it sounded to him as though Montana was getting ready to say how much relations between the Indians and police had improved. He stared straight ahead as Montana took a long pause, inhaled, and coughed. Then came the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the floor, and a wave of screams. Cannatella jerked around, and with one swift movement vaulted the railing.

Montana lay flat on his back, eyes open. Cannatella could see at a glance that he was dead. But with the entire Indian community looking on in horror, he pressed his mouth to the old man's blue, cooling lips, and blew. Somebody yelled for an ambulance. Cannatella kept breathing into Montana's mouth, and beat his palms on the bony, unresponsive chest. The minutes dragged by. Distraught Indians pressed close to Cannatella's hunched, exposed back. Where was the ambulance? After what felt like an hour, paramedics hustled up the aisle and loaded Montana onto a stretcher. A woman cried "Maudi kudi fiyo!" and the crowd began chanting the slow, eerie, prayer-cum-anthem, "Indian Red." "Here comes the Big Chief of the Nation, the whole wild creation," they sang as Montana was wheeled toward the door. The hair on Cannatella's arms stood up; no matter how long he lived in New Orleans, the spooky, spiritual side to black people still got to

him. They had a whole, complicated inner life he'd never understand, a community over which his badge and nightstick had no authority at all. It made him uneasy, as a policeman, whenever he encountered it. "He won't bow down, not on that ground," the crowd sang as Montana's body passed through the door. "You know I love you hear you call, my Indian Red." The ambulance roared off and the crowd dissolved. Cannatella stood alone on the City Hall steps.

It was as though the Chief of Chiefs had died in battle, harassed to death by the police. I will shift into Bertrand Butler's point of view as the Indians plan a political assault against Cannatella and the N.O.P.D.

Montana's massive coronary, and the hostility it engendered, seemed to knock the N.O.P.D. under an unlucky star. Deputy Chief Warren Riley sent his district captains a stern memo ordering them to reduce violent crime or risk losing their commands, and during the next three days, as though the city was mocking them, street fights and domestic disputes left nine people wounded and six people dead. Then Chief Eddie Compass glumly announced that the department had arrested two of its own officers, one for writing bad checks, the other for rape.

August 27th was White Buffalo Day, another important ritual on the Indian calendar. It fell on a Saturday, and the Indians dedicated ceremonies

in Congo Square to the memory of Tootie Montana. They gathered on a wide disk of stones at the edge of Armstrong Park, a site where blacks have been drumming since a century before the Civil War. As the Fi-Yi-Yi danced, the National Weather Service reported that Hurricane Katrina, in the Gulf of Mexico, was making an unexpected right turn. The storm was no longer headed toward the Texas coast but toward the city of New Orleans.

Chapter One: The City Disarmed

Tim Bruneau discovered New Orleans in 1997, when, as a twenty-three-year-old soldier at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he was close enough to the city to hit Bourbon Street on weekends. He'd spent two years in Panama as a military policeman, and New Orleans reminded him, in a good way, of Central America—hot, sensual, and easygoing. Rather than go home to Texas after leaving the Army, he joined the New Orleans Police Department. The streets of New Orleans were mean, but Bruneau had been a cross-country runner in high school and had thrived in basic training: he was young, strong, and full of the immortality of youth.

One April night in 2002, Bruneau took off on foot after a drug suspect, and was just hitting his long-distance stride when a speeding car smashed into him and dragged him half a block. He lay in a coma for six weeks. When he awoke he was unable to move his

left side. He wished he'd died. He assumed that his career was finished, but the N.O.P.D. stood by him. It kept him on the payroll and paid for a dozen operations, including the amputation of the little finger of his left hand.

Bruneau is tall and thin, with a big Adam's apple in a long neck, and he ended up walking like a marionette, lurching along with his knees slightly bent and his feet dragging. When it became clear that he would never be fit to return to patrol, the department made him a detective. At the beginning of 2005, he began working homicide cases under Captain Cannatella of Sixth District.

To investigate a murder is to become intimate with the human body in a state of hideous ruin. Bruneau found himself well-suited to the work. He would kneel beside a corpse, look straight into its shocked-open eyes, and inspect it as carefully as a nurse sponge-bathing a patient. He'd lean in and inhale its aroma -- Alcohol? Crack? Poison? Perfume? He'd gently push back the hair and clothing, searching for evidence, imagining himself lying broken and bloody on the street; takes one to know one, he'd think. He would work slowly, absorbing the sacredness of the corporeal human, until the coroner's men arrived to zip the body into a bag and haul it away.

Bruneau volunteered to work the night Hurricane Katrina hit the city. He and a few other bachelor cops sat awake in the tall Sixth

District station, drinking bad coffee, listening to the wind beat against the walls. Shortly before dawn, a call came in about a body lying in the middle of the nineteen hundred block of Jackson Avenue.

Bruneau checked out an unmarked white Crown Victoria from the basement garage and drove over. The wind still pushed restlessly through the oaks overhead, and a light rain was falling. The city looked like a logging camp, with massive boughs strewn everywhere. Bruneau had to zig-zag around them. A brick church steeple on St. Charles Avenue had collapsed in a pile, and power lines, torn free by the winds, snaked menacingly along the pavement. For the most part, though, Bruneau was relieved. Given the dire predictions of “the big one,” it looked like New Orleans had gotten off easy.

A patrolman in a yellow slicker stood in the middle of Jackson Avenue, moving a flashlight back and forth to guide Bruneau in. As he parked, the police radio came on and a dispatcher said that the levee holding back the Industrial Canal had broken, and that water was pouring into the Lower Ninth Ward. That’s going to be a mess, he thought: those poor people. But that’s Fifth District’s problem. Bruneau climbed out and limped toward the patrolman; it was Russell Filibert, a hard-charging tough-guy type whom Bruneau didn’t especially like. “Looks like the street light got her,” Filibert said.

Bruneau turned up the collar of his raincoat. The woman lay belly down on the pavement, with a trickle of blood seeping from her head. She was young, heavy-set, black, in tight jeans and a black spaghetti-strap shirt. Bruneau bent low; the woman's head was flattened, slightly, and a big, oval streetlight, torn from its pole by the wind, lay smashed on the pavement beside her. Bruneau looked around. All up and down Jackson Avenue, people were emerging from unkempt shotgun houses, gingerly stepping over fallen oak boughs as they moved into the street to eyeball their houses and roofs. A young woman walked up, looked at the corpse, put her hand on her mouth, and shook her head. Bruneau asked if she knew the dead woman. "Brenda Harris," she said. "She went out during the storm to buy them drugs."

Bruneau radioed for the coroner to come collect the body. Then he fished out Harris's I.D., and seeing she'd lived a few houses up, loped along the wet pavement and knocked on the door of a splintery wooden cottage. A flat-faced young woman answered the door, and when she saw Bruneau, she didn't even ask to see his badge; she simply stood aside. He stepped into a tiny room jammed with oversized furniture, a television set the size of a dishwasher, glass knick-knacks, and many framed school photos. On the couch, barely visible in the gloom, sat a spindly old woman. The girl who'd opened

the door sat beside her and took her hand.

Bruneau never knew exactly what to expect when meeting a murder victim's family. Usually, he delivered the news, and stood, mute and still, while a mother or wife wailed and beat the walls. He never grew inured to it. But this was worse. Both women sat looking at him, expressionless. He had the sense they'd already been given the news, but even so, it was spooky. They seemed so sodden with despair, so exhausted by years of living with an addict, that they could hardly dredge up answers to his questions. He set his card on top of the television, beside a framed photo of a fresh-faced high school graduate whom he recognized as the dead woman, and stepped back into the blustery dawn.

The body was still lying on the pavement. It was taking way too long for the coroner's van to arrive. That wasn't right. A body shouldn't lie so long in the rain. He radioed the dispatcher, and she told him the levees holding back the Seventeenth Street and London Avenue canals had just collapsed. Lake Pontchartrain was pouring into northern New Orleans, she said. Bruneau couldn't picture what she was talking about.

"How about an ambulance, if we can't get a van?" he said.

"We can't get an ambulance," she said. "We moved most of them out of the city before the storm."

“Try the coroner again, then.” Minutes passed. The morning began to brighten. The dispatcher called back.

“The coroner’s office is flooded out!” she shouted. “Everything’s flooded!”

Bruneau had never heard a dispatcher shout. It was unnerving, unprofessional. “Let’s try again for an ambulance, then,” he said.

“We’re trying!” she shouted, and signed off. Bruneau waited by the body for two hours. He knew how water could pool in the streets after a big rain; he’d parked his own car on the Napoleon Avenue neutral ground to give it those five crucial inches of elevation. The coroner’s office, in the basement of the courthouse, always took a little water in storms. But flooded out? That sounded like Frank Minyard making excuses for running late. Minyard was high on entertainment value, Bruneau thought – showing up at clubs in a gleaming white suit to play trumpet as Doctor Jazz – but as chief custodian of the dead, he was sloppy. All those lawsuits alleging that he’d fudged evidence reflected badly on the cops.

The wind died and the wet streets steamed in the rising heat. Sixth District called to tell Bruneau about a shooting several blocks away, and he drove over, grateful for something to do. The scene was a horror. Six people were hit. Bullet holes, blood, and shell casings were strewn everywhere, but all the victims were alive. It

wasn't a homicide.

When Bruneau got back to Jackson Avenue in the early afternoon, Brenda Harris still lay uncovered on the hot pavement. Her open eyes had grown crusty and the flies were on her. Filibert paced around her, his raincoat over his arm, his sleeves rolled up, furious. "This is crazy," Bruneau agreed. It wasn't respectful. It wasn't even sanitary. Protocols were everything; they were how a cop showed respect for the dead. What a weird morning – the Harrises' flat reaction, the dispatcher freaking out, the missing coroner. Action had to be taken. In some nearby storm wreckage, Bruneau found a deflated water-bed mattress. Filibert helped him drag it out and roll the remains of Brenda Harris into it. The neighbors watched; they knew as well as Bruneau and Filibert that this wasn't normal procedure.

Bruneau strode over to the girl who had first identified the body. "We're going to deliver Miss Harris to the morgue," he said. She shrugged. White cops had their ways.

They hoisted the body into the back seat of the Crown Victoria. Bruneau climbed in behind the wheel and radioed the dispatcher. "I have a twenty-nine-U" -- victim of an unclassified death – "in the back seat. I'm going to the morgue."

"No way," the dispatcher said. "You can't drive to the morgue."

There's deep water down as far as Broad Street."

"How deep?" he asked. "Deeper than the hubcaps of a Crown Vic?"

"Deep!" she said. "To the rooftops!" Bruneau tried to picture it. The dispatcher signed off.

He drove out Tulane Avenue toward the morgue, but stopped at Claiborne Avenue because the street was full of water. Bruneau's mouth fell open. The tableau through his windshield looked like a double exposure of Lake Pontchartrain and Mid-City. The farther down Tulane he looked, the deeper the water stood. Three blocks out, it was over the doors of storefronts. He realized with a start that his own house, in Broadmoor, was almost certainly under water, and that parking his car on the neutral ground had been, in retrospect, a pretty pathetic gesture. He backed up, made a U-turn, and drove to Charity Hospital. Water was creeping up the building's steps. A doctor and some orderlies were carrying boxes to a van. The heat was already crushing. A nurse came out, and Bruneau explained his problem. "Our generators are flooded," she said. "We aren't taking anybody." The doctor came over and nodded agreement. "We're getting out."

Bruneau drove down the street to Tulane Hospital, and buttonholed an emergency-room doctor, who looked at him in horror.

"We're not responsible for the city's trash," he said.

Bruneau drove west and parked a few blocks from the Superdome. He sat staring through the windshield at the huge structure rising incongruously from lapping water. He felt dizzy, strangely disconnected from the nightmare unfolding around him. How could three levees have failed? All he had was the clothes on his back, the gun on his hip, a little cash in his wallet, and a corpse in the back seat. He sat gazing at the Superdome for two hours. He had never felt so alone. Finally, the dispatcher barked his call number, and he snapped back to life. "Undo what you did," she said.

"You mean dump the body?"

"Undo what you did." The dispatcher signed off. Bruneau drove back to Jackson Avenue. Filibert had left, but another patrolman met him there with a body bag. With the neighbors watching, they pulled Brenda Harris out of the car and dropped her heavily onto a strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street. They unrolled her from the water bed and zipped her into the bag. Bruneau didn't know what to say to the neighbors, and he certainly wasn't going to announce her return to the family, so he drove away, his face hot with shame. During the days that followed, he drove back toward Jackson Avenue every now and then. The nineteen-hundred block eventually lay four blocks into the flood zone, and he stood at the water's edge and

peered through binoculars. Brenda Harris floated this way and that as the days passed, and came to rest about half a block from where he'd first found her.

Chapter Two: The Thousand

Joe Guidos fought a lot as a kid, and whenever the school called his parents in for a talk, his father would smack him on the back of the head in front of the principal, and then, on the way home, say, "I hope the other kid looks worse." Joe was a big kid, with a cube-shaped head and a blocky build. He played football in high school, and spent a lot of time on the bench for unnecessary roughness. While his friends pressed their girlfriends to go farther, Joe held back. Sex didn't interest him much until he saw the movie "The Night Porter" and discovered that there were women out there who had the same dark thoughts as he had. He tied up and whipped a lot of them before arriving at the awareness that no matter how he went at it, he wasn't aroused by women; he envied them. It took some doing to cross over, on a path that felt something like spiritual enlightenment. This was the early eighties, so he wasn't walking the path alone. He became a fixture at the Anvil, a cinderblock bar on Elysian Fields Boulevard in the Fauberg-Marigny neighborhood, statuesque in a

black leather vest and peaked cap. Years passed in a rough and steamy blur, and then the nagging dissatisfaction crept back.

Guidos was president of the Fauberg-Marigny Leather Association, a pillar of the rough-gay scene in New Orleans, during the years that AIDS was taking the steam out of such – but that wasn't all that was bothering him. He was pushing forty, and the anonymous, grasping, brutal showmanship of leather-bar nightlife no longer fit him. He embarked again on an inner journey, and this time he found what he realized had been his destination all along. He wasn't a gay man. Beneath a hairy, muscular exterior, Guidos was a woman.

Off came the leather and the hobnail boots. Guidos put himself in the hands of Dr. Patel, an elegantly mannered hormone therapist on Louisiana Avenue, who started him on a yearlong course of intensive estrogen, and in the hands of Ceil, a foul-mouthed saleswoman at Jane's Big and Tall Ladies outlet on Almonaster Boulevard, who looked upon the transformation of Joe to JoAnn as the oeuvre of a lifetime. Thank God I was born in the city of New Orleans, Guidos said to himself more than once, as he wrapped himself in chignon blouses and waited for his breasts to grow. Guidos's social circle was not one to recoil from sexual creativity, and his friends celebrated as he metamorphosed. Within three months,

Guidos was filling a B cup and by nine months out, he was a radiant double-D, with long hair falling from a razor-sharp widow's peak, and red-scalpel fingernails. He tried to flounce, and quickly came to understand that flouncing made him look ridiculous, that not all women flounce. As he waited for his surgery, and taped back his penis so that it wouldn't show under tight clothing, he gave himself fully to a woman's identity. He came to accept that even after he was cut, he'd still have his linebacker's legs and shoulders. The raw material was big and blocky, so a big and blocky woman he would be. As a man, the width of his brawn and the depth of his voice had given him a natural authority among men. It would work among women, too.

Guidos never had a problem over-indulging in alcohol or drugs, even during the fast years when her friends were trying everything. She had a friendly, open approach to people in trouble, a way of putting her arms around them as though to keep them physically anchored to the earth. All of that made her a natural bartender, and early in the summer of 2005, when a low, ugly biker's bar on St. Claude Avenue came up for sale, Guidos bought it. She spent little on its tough concrete interior, but changed the name to Kajun's, and put out the word that it was a safe place for women. "Ladies are Respected in Here," says a sign above the bar, "like your Mother."

Guidos didn't discourage old friends from the Anvil from coming, but she didn't let them make Kajun's their exclusive haunt. She wanted a neighborhood place, where you could get a can of cold Pabst for a dollar, toss back a jello shot or four, and siphon your life savings in peace from the ATM beside the bar into the video poker machines at the back.

As Hurricane Katrina wheeled across the Gulf and the mayor appeared on the television above the bar to urge evacuation, Guidos's regulars took their usual seats. Many had never been out of New Orleans. The idea of evacuating was as frightening as riding a rocket to Jupiter. The winds picked up, and Guidos turned the music louder. When the power failed; Guidos fired up a generator, which roared out back in the alley and kept the beer cold. With no air conditioning, she hauled a huge, unshielded warehouse fan inside, propped it up at the end of the bar, and plugged it in to the generator. The best seat in the house was close enough to keep cool, but not so close as to risk falling in and being chopped to bits. On the television, Katrina pinwheeled across the Gulf, traffic choked the causeways across Lake Pontchartrain, and a string of officials at podiums -- the governor, a senator, Mayor Nagin again -- warned everybody to get out. Guidos promised to keep Kajun's open, come what may, so that her people wouldn't have to choose between

fleeing the known universe and facing the storm alone. "We're family, right?" she hollered. "Right?" Louis the dog, lying atop the pool table, sat up and howled.

Also from Chapter Two:

Michael Johnson, a dialysis technician from the west side of New Orleans, dodged in the wrong direction. From the way the Weather Channel talked, he'd guessed Katrina would pass west of the city. So he went east, to the home of his friend David Bell, in the Lower Ninth Ward. Bell's house flooded to the second floor. Bell and Johnson salvaged three floating refrigerators, took the doors off, lashed them together as a raft, and put Bell's five- and six-year-old daughters inside. They launched the raft from a second-story window, and held on, frog-kicking slowly out of the neighborhood. After a hot, terrifying night on an overpass with hundreds of other people, they continued on, wading and pushing the raft, until they came ashore at Canal Street. They abandoned the raft and walked four miles across town to Johnson's unflooded neighborhood. His bungalow, surrounded by fallen oak limbs, was undamaged.

Johnson knew the electricity wouldn't be working, but it was odd to find the gas and water shut off, too; that hadn't even happened during Camille or Betsy. The girls were whining with heat, hunger, and thirst, and Johnson found them some Goldfish crackers, half a six-pack of Diet Pepsi, and a couple of cans of soup, which they ate cold. He turned on a battery-powered radio, and for the first time in his life heard New Orleans broadcasting without music. Only one station was on the air, from Baton Rouge, something that called itself United Broadcasters of Louisiana, with hosts from several New Orleans stations. It was all talk – emergency information, warnings to avoid power lines, choked-up callers looking for family members. Johnson, Bell, and the girls sat on the front stoop, hoping for a breeze and listening with their mouths open. "This is the end of the damned world," Johnson whispered. Garland Robinette, long New Orleans's most suave and witty radio host, sounded distraught as he read one piece of news after another: All of New Orleans East flooded. Every hospital in the city gone. Fires rising incongruously from the floodwater. Thirty thousand people packed into the Superdome. The Murphy Oil Refinery spilling crude into St. Bernard Parish. The Convention Center overflowing. "Where's the Army?" Robinette asked, his voice cracking. "Why hasn't anyone come? Where's FEMA?" The superintendent of the Houston schools came on by phone and said

she would find a desk and a teacher for any child evacuated from New Orleans.

Johnson turned off the radio. Stink from the toilets was wafting out of the house, his skin itched from the oily floodwaters: he longed for a bath. He went into the kitchen, got a wastebasket, and dumped the trash into the street. In some tall grass behind the house, he found a couple of buckets. He told the girls to wait on the stoop and asked Bell and me to walk with him to the Mississippi River, a few blocks away.

The wide grassy park along the riverbank, usually alive with joggers, Frisbee players, and mothers with strollers, was deathly still. We followed him down the slope to the river, which slid along smooth and slow, untroubled by the chaos on its banks. "Them people ain't coming back," Johnson said, disgustedly. "You get your kids into school in Houston, get yourself a little job, you ain't coming back." He dipped a bucket into the khaki-colored water and poured it into the wastebasket. "I'm not saying they planned this as a way to empty New Orleans of poor black people," he said. "But it's sure going to work out that way." Bell cocked an eye at his friend. They had no food or drinking water, and no way out of the ruined city, and Johnson was worrying about a racial plot?

On River Road, sloshing water from the full wastebasket, we passed a white man standing by himself, staring angrily around him. Johnson and Bell circled wide around him, glancing over their shoulders, and disappeared around a corner. The white man was bald on top, with a fringe of longish hair above his ears and a mustache the size of a croissant. He said his name was Jimmy Delery and as he stuck out his right hand to shake, he lifted his blue workshirt with his left to show a .45 automatic stuffed into his waistband – a new kind of greeting for a new kind of world. It was both threatening and strangely comforting. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said in a kind of faraway voice. “That’s the thing. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.” Delery had stayed put through the storm out of stubbornness. His house, around the corner from Johnson’s, hadn’t flooded. “I can’t . . . I can’t figure out what’s going on here,” he said, his eyes swimming around in their sockets, flicking from the river to the gray sky, to the empty street, to me. “What the fuck is happening?”

I told him I wanted to go the Convention Center. I glanced down at his gun and said I was afraid to go alone. Delery’s eyes gained a purchase on mine.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “Yeah. I’ll go.” He took a deep, shuddering breath and squared his shoulders. He ran a hand over his pate, chewed his mustache determinedly, and bobbed his big head

several times – physically struggling his way to a mental connection with the situation. “Fuck yes,” he said at long last. He laughed and clapped me on the upper arm. “Let’s do it.”

And, again from Chapter Two:

The streets were empty during the flood. Most people who owned cars had long since evacuated – or did not want to be seen driving around, for fear of getting jacked by those desperate to flee. But a long, low, odd-looking white car kept cruising downtown, past the statue of Robert E. Lee in Lee Circle, past the shuttered mansions along St. Charles Avenue, through the battered streets of Fauberg-Marigny. Before I could get a good look at it, the ghostly car would turn a corner and be gone. Then one evening as I pedaled a bike up St. Charles Avenue, I heard a low rumble behind me. The long white car pulled up alongside. It was an old-fashioned Cadillac hearse. Someone had painted crude red crosses on its hood and doors. The passenger window was smashed and the driver, a young white man with dark curly hair, yelled, “You okay? You need anything?”

His name was Jeffrey Brumberger, and he wouldn’t shake hands. “Too many infectious diseases going around. You shouldn’t shake anybody’s hand, either. I mean, I don’t want to tell you what to do,

but dumb is dumb." In the back seat, he had boxes of bandages, bottles of disinfectant, big jars of pills. The storage space in the far back – where a coffin would go – was similarly stuffed. He cocked an eyebrow. "I loot," he said. "I go into the pharmacies. I go into the hospitals. Do you think they'll ever be able to use anything that's in Touro ever again? After the filth and the dead bodies lying in there? They're going to have to throw away everything anyway, so why shouldn't I go in there and get it?" His dark eyebrows lowered. "And in the pharmacies, the people don't know what that stuff is, and it's better off with me anyway, so people don't use these things incorrectly. So yes, I'm a looter. You got me. Fine. But I have things even the ambulances don't have. They come to *me*. You go to a first aid station or an ambulance and ask for Diavan, they'll say what the fuck is that. Ambulances don't have that kind of stuff. I'm just about the only one in the city who does. To get what I've got, you'd have to put yourself in the system to be evacuated, and a lot of people don't want to do that. So this is the choice they give you; you want to get the medicine you need, you have to leave the city."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Of course I'm a doctor. What the fuck do you think? You think I'm just some wack, driving around handing out drugs?" He gripped the wheel with both hands as though to twist it off its stalk. "You got

people all over this city hurt, and sick, can't get their medicines. You got diabetics. You got schizophrenics. You got, you got. . . ." His eyes were wet; he looked like he hadn't slept in days. He slapped the top of the steering wheel and slumped back in his seat. "I used to work for Touro, and then I just, you know, got tired of the politics and the insurance fraud: ordering more bloodwork than necessary, ordering more chest X-rays than necessary, just to pump up the bills, you know? So now I work for Correct Care, and the Schumacher Group; I work for them, and they place me in ERs around the area. I work in Hood Memorial now. All I want to do is practice fucking medicine and be left the fuck alone. You'd think that wouldn't be too much to ask. After the storm I was riding around with the N.O.P.D. and a woman came running out and said, 'can you help me fix a flat on this car a friend left me?' It was this hearse. She said a friend had left it with her. I said, 'I'll fix the flat if you let me use it.' So I drive around, giving care. The cops don't fuck with me." He took a business card out of his pocket and handed it through the window, back side up. It read: "Jeff Brumberger is helping the N.O.P.D. during this time of need. Any assistance would be appreciated." I turned the card over: Captain Edwin Hosli, Second District commander.

Chapter Three: Gunfight at Race and Religious

Captain Edwin Hosli, commander of N.O.P.D.'s Second District, sloshed through filthy knee-deep water at the corner of Napoleon Avenue and Carondelet Street and climbed aboard a sleek white speedboat. It was late afternoon on the fourth day of the flood and the heat was dense and still. The smell of rot and gasoline that blanketed the city was strongest here at water's edge, where sewage and garbage gathered in foamy skeins. Hosli carried an M-16 and wore the same squishy wet shoes and uniform he'd had on since the storm. He lowered himself heavily into a vinyl seat beside a ropy Cajun who was fumbling with a screwdriver at the speedboat's ignition, trying to hot-wire it: Lieutenant Darryl Albert. Aft of Hosli and Albert, Eddie Selby, a brisk and compact lieutenant, thumbed through handwritten notes that agitated citizens kept pressing on them, scribbled with addresses of people who needed rescue. "Thirty-one-fifty Louisiana Parkway," Selby said to Jimmy Delery, who stood over him with his shoulders hunched and head forward, as though huddling for a punt. Delery had stuck a big white masking-tape cross on the back of his work shirt as a kind of rescue-volunteer uniform. "What do you think," Selby said. "Take Napoleon to Claiborne?"

"Naw," Delery said. "I'd take Freret."

"No way," Selby said. "You're better off going straight to Claiborne." They sounded like two cabbies debating rush-hour strategy, but the obstacles were fallen branches and submerged cars. Delery was glowering, tense, endlessly adjusting the fanny pack that bulged with his .45. He'd eaten nothing all day and was wired tight as a strung bow. As Delery and Selby bickered, Hosli leaned against the barrel of his rifle and closed his eyes. Like Anthony Cannatella, Hosli was old N.O.P.D. His father Edwin Hosli Sr., used to line up Eddie and his five brothers and sisters, like little soldiers, to say goodbye before buckling on his duty belt and driving to work. New Year's Eve of 1972 was the same as any other day. "Take good care of your mother," he told Eddie, who was twelve. Six hours later, a Black Panther named Mark Essex shot Eddie Sr. in the back with a .44 Magnum rifle. When Hosli's fellow cops opened his coat, the bullet fell out, followed by most of Hosli's internal organs. Essex, meanwhile, fled to the top of an eleven-story Howard Johnson's Hotel and kept the police at bay for days, killing three more officers and a deputy chief, and wounding a dozen others. Hosli writhed in a hospital bed for sixty-five days and died while young Eddie was at school, a week after Mardi Gras. Hosli's grieving colleagues closed ranks around the youngster, and brought him onto the force as soon as he was graduated from high school.

Hosli quickly learned the skills that an honest policeman must acquire in New Orleans—how to stay alive on the most dangerous urban streets in America, how to supplement low wages with private security details, how to employ a kind of selective blindness about the department’s periodic spasms of corruption and criminal violence. His job was to protect and serve, no matter who else – above or below him – flubbed, quit, or cheated. At forty-five, Hosli was short and muscular, with spiky hair and a wide forehead narrowing to a pointed chin. He had already lived longer than his dad, and he felt grateful, and a little bewildered, about that. The day before Katrina, he’d said goodbye to his wife and two daughters. They’d put themselves into the traffic jam heading across the Lake Pontchartrain causeway, expecting to be gone two days. Now, their home in the Gentilly neighborhood, around the corner from the house in which Hosli grew up, was flooded to the roofline. Half of the hundred and twenty-three officers under Hosli’s command were missing. Those remaining were low on food, water, and gasoline. They had no way of knowing what was going on in the city outside their half-flooded uptown district, or what the police chief might want them to be doing. The city of New Orleans had ceased to exist as a functioning organism. So like everyone else, Hosli and his officers were winging it. They rescued people by day and ran limited anti-looting patrols by

night. The jail was under water, so they could only take down looters' names, photograph them with their booty, and let them go – excruciating for Hosli -- in the hope that they could arrest them some day on a warrant. They had no beds. Hosli had tried to catch a few hours' sleep one night on the floor next to his big wooden desk in the station house, and a rat had bitten him on the knee. Days and nights were running together in a sleepless fog.

The speedboat's motor came to life and Hosli sat up, blinking. A wiry man in cut-off shorts and no shirt was bounding toward them through the oily water, shouting, "Wait!" He introduced himself around as Ryan Asmussen, forty-one years old. "I'm a recovering alcoholic," he said proudly. "I was living in the Volunteers of America halfway house over there. When the storm hit, I stayed behind to help. I'm a fifteen year Navy vet. A diver. I had to be here." Hosli stared at Asmussen blearily, and shook his head in wonder at the man's energy. With Albert at the wheel, and Delery in the bow barking "left!" and "right!" as the boat approached sunken cars, they pattered slowly up Napoleon Avenue, pulling a little tin pirogue. They ducked a street sign as they rounded the corner onto commercial Claiborne Avenue, and even Delery fell silent as their view widened to a panorama. A body floated face down in a used-car lot. The rounded shoulders of another bobbed near a funeral home. The giant root-beer

mug that announced Frostop Burgers was upside down and half-submerged. On the horizon rose a thick spiral of heavy smoke. Outside the Walgreen's drug store, a young woman sunbathed on top of boxed toasters, blenders, and other kitchenware piled into in a speedboat. She waved nervously and yelled to someone inside the store; the cops cruised past. At the corner of Louisiana Parkway, the boat's depth meter registered ten feet. A Navy Seahawk helicopter lowered itself onto a nearby house; its rotor wash pushed the boat hard against a building, and showered the officers with debris, roof shingles, and floodwater. They waved and shouted, "you're killing us!" until the pilot spotted them and veered away.

Between two houses, a toothless old man floundered in the water, clinging to a black plastic pickup-truck toolbox. He rolled over and over, kicking and thrashing, trying both to hold onto the box and stay upright. "I'm all right!" he shouted. "Leave me alone! I've got to take my sister her medicine!"

"Get in the boat!" the cops yelled. Delery, peering down into the box, said, "it's full of liquor."

"Liquor!" shouted Hosli. "Get him in the boat."

"No!" the man shouted. "I got to get to my sister's." He rolled under again, came up gasping, his clothes wafting around him in the water.

"We'll take you to your sister's," Hosli said. His heart was racing; people who needed help and wouldn't take it were dangerous. It's the wife with the black eye and the bread knife who is most likely to get you, not a Black Panther. This was only an old man, helpless in the water, but it was the same unnatural vibe. Hosli forced himself to lower his voice. "Come on, old man," he said kindly. "You're going to drown out here."

The man angrily heaved an armful of water over the front of Hosli's shirt. Hosli closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as though physically willing himself not to raise his rifle and shoot the man.

Suddenly the box rolled over, filled with water, and sank. "There it goes," yelled Hosli. "Like the Titanic. It's gone. Now get in the boat."

The man wept in fury. "I was fine before you got here! You ruined me! Leave me alone!"

"You want to drown?" Hosli shouted, then to Albert, at the wheel: "Come on. We're going. Let him drown if that's what he wants." Selby and Albert looked at each other, then each of them bent and grabbed ahold of the man's clothes. They couldn't get a purchase. He kept batting them away, clutching to his chest a blue zippered bag that bulged with two bottles.

"Give me the bag," said Albert.

"That's my medicine!"

Asmussen cocked his head, clucked his tongue, and said with genuine admiration, "That's a real alcoholic."

"Okay," shouted Hosli to the old man. "Grab the pirogue. We'll drag you out of here." The man obeyed, and the boat started up Claiborne in the sunset. Hosli and Selby stood quietly at the bow, watching something big burn off to the north. All the while the old man cursed them from the water. "You want my sister to die! You're letting her die! I was fine until you come along!" As the boat passed Memorial Hospital, the man let go. "I dropped my medicine!" He dove again and stayed gone for a long minute.

"That's it," said Albert in awe. "He's gone." But the man popped back up.

"My medicine! I lost my medicine!"

Albert laboriously wheeled the boat back in the fading light. Hosli sighed and hung his head. This time, Selby and Albert grabbed the old man roughly, hoisted him up, and flopped him noisily onto the deck like a fish. Hosli put a hand on his holstered gun and yelled "handle!" He reached and pulled a hammer from the man's belt. "I know you got a knife too!" he screamed. "You lay there quiet!"

“Don’t shoot him in the boat,” said Albert, a passionate weekend fisherman, in an attempt at levity. “Classic rookie mistake.”

“I got to get to my sister’s! You want my sister to die! I got to get to my sister’s!”

Hosli picked up a paddle and stuck it into the water. It was about waist deep. “Okay,” he said, grabbing the man by the shoulder of his shirt and hauling him up. “Out. Go. Go ahead. Go to your sister’s.” He shoved him out of the boat. The old man looked stunned. He stood in the water and beat his fists on the surface.

“I was fine until you came along! You want my sister to die!” He was still shouting as he disappeared behind the speedboat.

Hosli’s police radio, which had been silent all afternoon, crackled to life and a man’s voice said, “Ah, we just got a report that a police officer has taken his own life.”

No one spoke. No one reached for the radio to ask who it was. They didn’t even speculate. The boat chugged on through the darkness.

The people boarding the evacuation buses at the Morial Convention Center on Thursday, September 8, were the holdouts -- too poor to leave before the storm and too stubborn or frightened to leave afterwards. They were either brought to the Center forcibly by police, or they dragged themselves in, defeated by thirst, hunger, and heat. Either way, it was a moment of bottomless despair. They stood dazed as soldiers of the California National Guard searched them for weapons, confiscating everything down to ball-point pens. They shuffled underneath a big tent filled with rows of folding chairs. Some of them dragged sick-looking dogs on leashes. A wizened man in a wicker-basket-hat painted red, black, and green held a basket of kittens no bigger than mice. A chubby white college-age boy clutched a hedgehog.

Pretty young Navy nurses in fatigues, some wearing the word "Counselor" and their name scrawled on strips of masking tape on their chests, sat beside stunned-looking old men and women, cradling them in their arms, stroking their hair, whispering, coaxing them to take sips of ice-cold bottled water. The soldiers did not shout as they moved people about; when they spoke, they too did so softly, with exaggerated tenderness. After a while, a soldier came through the crowd and gently invited everybody to begin boarding the gleaming Harrah's Casino buses that were idling in the parking lot. Dragging

garbage bags full of belongings, pulling their dogs, the people hoisted themselves aboard. The buses were only slightly cooler than the air outside, but the people moaned with relief as they settled into soft, clean seats. On a monitor at the front of the bus, a slasher movie was playing: "The Wrong Turn." A thrown axe decapitated a pretty young woman hiding in a tree, and the camera followed her headless body flopping down through the branches. "Why are they showing us this?" a woman at the back of the bus cried, while a wild-eyed man sitting toward the front shouted an approving, "Damn!"

His name was Roger Wells, and all things considered, this was turning into a pretty good day for him. In all his forty-eight years, Roger had never been on so nice a bus. He had a cold bottle of water in his lap, pockets bulging with candy bars, and the lingering sensation of a goodbye hug from a sweet little nurse. He smiled broadly, revealing two missing front teeth. Across the aisle from him, his fifty-three year-old brother, Anthony, eyed him sideways. Anthony had a dignified, ash-colored, bristle mustache. He wore a snappy stingy brim hat tilted rakishly on his head. He looked at Roger for a long minute, then shook his head and gave a laugh. Roger could be happy anywhere.

Anthony stretched his long legs and, as the bus idled in the parking lot, rolled a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

Now what? This bus was shiny and nice, but where would it take them? He and Roger had lived together on America Street their whole lives. Everybody they knew lived there -- Mr. Youngblood with his azaleas across the street, Miss Mae and her piano on the corner, the Benteen boys and their yard full of car projects down the block. When would he see Mr. Youngblood, Miss Mae and the Benteen boys? Neighbors were always willing to set Anthony and Roger up with a plate of red beans when they needed it, or spot them a few dollars, because the Wells brothers were somebody on America Street. They were Marvin and Shirley's' boys. Wherever this bus was going, it was surely to a place where nobody gave a damn about Marvin and Shirley's' boys.

Anthony didn't know much about the world outside of New Orleans, but he knew it wouldn't be an easy place for two getting-old black men. Neither he nor Roger had any skills or experience; they'd lurched from temp job to temp job their whole lives, and in between, collected aluminum cans from trash baskets. Hell, with the Iraq war on and the price of aluminum up, you could make forty, fifty dollars a day gathering cans. In New Orleans, a man could get by on that. No rent to pay, no need for a car. But for Roger's little problem with the tweak, they were getting by just fine.

Anthony looked out the window. Motherfucker; that's Dick Cheney. The Vice President was walking, head down, across the vast parking lot toward a green-and-white helicopter, a swarm of aides and television cameras buzzing around him. Cheney climbed into the helicopter and it lifted off in a cloud of dust and blowing trash.

"The Wrong Turn" ended and "Ray" came on as the bus lurched to a start. Anthony felt his eyes misting at the scenes of Ray Charles's childhood in rural Mississippi. It wasn't New Orleans, but those loving scenes of poor black families and jazz counterculture reminded him of his own childhood around Miss Mae's piano. He looked around. Everybody on the bus had gone quiet. Tear-streaked faces gazed up at the monitor. The bus rolled through streets Anthony knew well and had never seen empty. It stirred a frightened rumbling in his chest; he wondered if he'd ever see them again.

The bus pulled into Louis Armstrong Airport, and a man in back shouted to nobody in particular, "I ain't no refugee! I ain't no evacuee! I'm a motherfucking evictee!" The bus stopped, and a state trooper in a Smokey Bear hat stepped aboard. "I am Sergeant Anderson of the Louisiana State Police, and I'd like to welcome you to the New Orleans International Airport. We're going to get you inside now, get you into the air conditioning, and we hope you have a smooth journey."

The water had come fast to America Street. One minute, there were puddles on the asphalt, the next, it was pouring under the door of the little wooden bungalow that Anthony's father had built after the Korean War. Roger and Anthony slithered up to the attic, which was too hot to bear, then hoisted each other onto the roof. A white man they'd never seen before took them in a pirogue to Medgar Evers Elementary School, where, along with about fifty other people, they sweltered for five hungry and thirsty days using uncovered tin wastebaskets for toilets. Then some big high-riding National Guard trucks swished up to the steps in great filthy roostertails of water, and the next thing they knew, Roger and Anthony were on this bus, with nothing but the clothes they stood up in.

Anthony stepped through the airport doors as though passing through the gates of heaven. His body sagged with relief as the air conditioning hit him and his arms flew over his head in silent thanks to Jesus. "God said he wouldn't destroy the world by water," he blurted to the first person he saw, a white state trooper. "That's why there's rainbows: God's promise to the world." "

"Yes indeed," the trooper said. "God bless."

Flanking the doors, as Anthony entered, were two lines of Red Cross volunteers in orange vests. They looked like creatures from another planet – spotless, well rested, and vigorous. They reached

out to pat Anthony's arms and stroke his hands as he passed. "Hello! I'm so glad you're safe!" they said over and over. "Do you need anything? Water? Some snacks? How about toothpaste?" Packages of chips were pressed into Anthony's hands. He passed tables heaped with packets of Doritos and candy bars and cold bottles of water. Plump, scrubbed faces and blond pony tails swam before his eyes. "Welcome! I'm so glad to see you here! Welcome!"

A frighteningly ragged man, toothless and foul-smelling, ran up to a volunteer and began shouting furiously. Uh oh, Anthony thought, casting a nervous eye back at a state trooper; don't be jumping up on white ladies like that. "My brother needs his medicine!" the ragged man yelled. "I haven't seen him his name is Alphonse he's younger than me got the sugar and high blood pressure I haven't seen him since the storm. . . ." On and on he went, waving his arms, stamping his feet, and wiping tears from his eyes with a filthy palm. The volunteer, a blonde girl of about nineteen, took a pad from her pocket and, frowning earnestly, wrote down as many details as the man could muster. The man moved around alongside her, reading as she wrote, touching the pad, slowly calming himself. When she was finished, he pressed his hands together, bowed, and shuffled back into line behind Anthony.

Maroon-bereted paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division circulated with cardboard boxes full of individually wrapped homemade sandwiches and bottles of Gatorade, their empty rifles hanging from their backs. The man in the wicker-basket hat fell into line at the metal detectors, bottle-feeding one of the kittens. "Six days old," he told Anthony. "She was born during the storm. Her mama dropped five; this and two others lived. I think they drop their litter in storms, you know, to make it easier for them to survive. You know what I got to name her. Katrina; that's right."

On the far side of security, soldiers broke the crowd into groups of about fifty, and showed each to a gate: Anthony, Roger, and the man with the kittens walked together past backlit billboards advertising financial services, internet routers and business-class travel. Anthony gawped; he'd never been in an airport before.

They settled into chairs at Gate C-5, and the foul-smelling man took a seat nearby, facing the floor-to-ceiling window. "Sir! Sir!" A high, thin voice cut through the noise. The young blonde volunteer from the front of the terminal was rushing across the floor toward the foul-smelling man. "We found your brother!" she said. "He's in a shelter in Houston!" The man looked up at her uncomprehendingly, his toothless mouth hanging open. "He's fine," the volunteer said, shouting now as though the man were at the bottom of a well. "He's

gotten his medicine." She tore a page out of her notebook and put it in his hand. "This is a number that you can call him at. Do you understand?" He nodded. "Do you need a phone card?" He looked at her blankly. She took him by the hand and pulled him to his feet. "You know what?" she said brightly. "I think we can get you a phone card. Let's get you to a phone right away." They walked off toward the terminal. Anthony shook his head in wonder. "I'll be go to hell," he said.

The night grew long. Roger took a quarter from his pocket, put a dab of wet tissue on the back of it, and walked around the gate area showing bleary children that he could make George Washington cry. His missing teeth, jumpy manner, and what Anthony called his highbeams -- the way his eyes seemed to roll in different directions -- made the children recoil. After a while he came back, and Anthony pulled out a deck of cards. Sitting sideways in their seats the brothers played "war" as they always had, holding cards high above their heads and slapping them down. "Got you!" Anthony said. "Got you!" Roger answered. "Shut up." "You shut up." Roger dozed off around midnight. Anthony, unable to sleep, looked around the gate at the mostly black crowd, with their dogs and their babies and their garbage bags full of stuff. "Won't be anybody left in New Orleans to sing the blues no more and you need the blues," he said softly.

“Living like we do is one long struggle against the heebie-jeebies, and the heebie-jeebies will kill you straight out. When you got the blues, you shake them heebie-jeebies off. That’s why you sing the blues, to get rid of the heebie-jeebies.”

At about two in the morning, paratroopers came around, tapping the sleeping people on their shoulders, asking them please to get up and file out onto the tarmac. The people rose stiffly and looked around for their belongings. “Where are we going?” someone asked. A soldier shook his head.

Roger, Anthony, and the others walked into the hot night and across a rain-damp runway. Ahead of them yawned the belly ramp of an Air Force C-130, a windowless tube with long canvas benches down each side. “I’m not getting in that,” a young woman said. “That’s all right, Miss, come on in now,” a soldier crooned. “Where are we going?” someone asked again, but the airman who filed down the fuselage checking each passenger’s seat belt kept silent. The plane took off with a roar; the evacuees slumped, terrified, on the canvas benches. For two hours, they rattled in darkness. Then they felt themselves dropping, and with a hard, squeaking lurch, the tires touched down. The plane jiggled to a halt, and the belly ramp opened. Dawn was breaking. A sandy-haired white man in a necktie walked up

the ramp. "My name is Bill Haslam," the man said. "I'm the mayor of Knoxville, Tennessee, and I'd like to welcome you to my city."

Following are descriptions of each chapter of *The Neutral Ground*:

Part One:

Prologue: White Buffalo Day

The New Orleans Police Department went into Hurricane Katrina alienated from the city's black majority because of a drama involving Captain Anthony Cannatella and the Mardi Gras Indians. (See Prologue fragment above.) Prologue is told almost entirely from Cannatella's point of view, though it ends in Cut Off, Louisiana, as an oil rig worker and a shrimper note with foreboding the eerie warmth and calmness of the Gulf of Mexico. "Slick," the rig worker says. "Never seen it so *slick*."

Chapter One: The City Disarmed

What made the flooding of New Orleans so remarkable, and so dispiriting, was that the city instantly lost its ability to defend itself. Chapter One is about this first phase of the crisis, when the police department fell apart. It opens in the point of view of Detective Tim Bruneau, who spends most of the first, incomprehensible day

chauffeur a corpse around the city. (See Chapter One fragment above.) Then we shift to a person whom I have not yet identified, who dies that first day for want of rescue and will end up later in the tent morgue hastily assembled by the coroner. We also meet Doug Stead, president of Sewell Cadillac, as he learns – in the first hours of the crisis -- that N.O.P.D. cops are taking dozens of seventy-thousand-dollar Cadillac Escalades out of his dealership. He doesn't know if they're stealing them or borrowing them to replace their flooded cruisers; all he knows is that they're taking them without his permission. Finally, we enter the head of N.O.P.D. Captain Tim Bayard, who, with the headquarters, armory, radio room, motor pool, and jail flooded out, finds himself running the entire police department from a card table in the valet-parking driveway of Harrah's Casino.

Chapter Two: The Thousand

The first week of the crisis is personified by a small group, sometimes called, "The Thousand," who were too poor, too addled, too arrogant, or too foolish to evacuate. First among them is JoAnn Guidos, the transsexual who keeps Kajun's bar open through the worst of the crisis as a kind of mission for her family of neighborhood drunks. (See Chapter Two fragment above.)

The bitter, altruistic, and arrogant Dr. Jeffrey Brumberger turns a stolen hearse into a rolling dispensary. (See Chapter Two fragment above.)

Bob Rue and his uptown sidekick Juan Parke represent that small coterie of middle-class holdouts who were endlessly amused by the disaster and by their own wittiness and elegance in the face of it. Holed up in an unflooded mansion with an aging pole dancer with breasts like croquet balls, they preside over rapidly deteriorating caches of seafood, French cheeses, and fine wines – and party the crisis away.

The racial divide that ultimately helps derail New Orleans's recovery is foreshadowed in an encounter with Michael Johnson, a dialysis technician who in the first days of the flood sees a plot "to empty New Orleans of black people." (see Chapter Two fragment, above.)

Jimmy Delery, the black-sheep of one of New Orleans's founding families, has spent a lifetime looking for a way to serve the city he loves. Found wandering the riverbank, numb with grief, he is jarred from his melancholy and springs into action with a singleminded zeal that lasts the length of the book. (See Chapter Two fragment above.)

Chapter Three: Gunfight at Race and Religious

Once the initial shock passes toward the end of the first week, the stalwarts of the New Orleans Police Department settle into odd new routines, doing their best to serve and protect. Captain Edwin Hosli, with Jimmy Delery aboard, takes a sunset cruise up Claiborne Avenue, on a surreal rescue mission. (See Chapter Three fragment above.) Captain Cannatella and his officers are forced to abandon the flooded Sixth District station and set up headquarters in the parking lot of a big-box store: "Fort Wal-Mart." They are cut off from the rest of the police department, struggling to survive, until one morning, a message gets through: Cannatella must appear at the makeshift headquarters outside Harrah's Casino to salute Vice President Dick Cheney – an order that almost makes him turn in his badge. Tim Bruneau, haunted by the corpse he has abandoned, finds himself in a gunfight at the corner of Race and Religious streets, and is chilled to realize that, in the absence of police protocols, his participation will never be investigated. That same evening, as the glow of a burning shopping mall lights the unnaturally dark sky, Bruneau's partner abruptly deserts, another underpaid cop joining the vast exodus.

Chapter Four: The Darkest Hour

For all the levity at Kajun's and Bob Rue's, and despite the dogged bravery of cops who stay on the job, New Orleans sinks into a pit of misery. Few people's experiences illustrate the Dickensian horror of the flood days better than those of Anna Maria Pou, a fifty-year-old ear, nose, and throat specialist with a swank practice on Napoleon Avenue and a graceful Italianate mansion on St. Charles Avenue. She is tall and graceful, with stylish short hair and a fit body from regular workouts with a personal trainer. Her husband, an attorney, wants to leave the city before the storm but she insists on staying; several of her patients at Memorial Hospital are too ill to evacuate. She needs to be at the hospital in case electricity fails.

The hospital, on Napoleon Avenue, floods to its second floor and its emergency generators drown. In the ninety-plus-degree heat and dank humidity, the building becomes a reeking oven. Running water fails. The toilets don't flush. Drinking water runs short. Food is scarce. Working by flashlight and candles, Pou and her nurses try desperately to keep their patients – one of whom weighs six hundred pounds – comfortable. As the days grind by without rescue or relief, the struggle becomes keeping them alive. Without oxygen, with medicines running out, Pou's four critically ill patients are on the verge of death. With nothing else to do for them, she and her nurses reach for powerful

sedatives to relieve them of their hot, stinking misery. In all, thirty-one people die in Memorial Hospital – including Pou’s four -- before it is evacuated, five days after the storm. Pou and the nurses line up the bodies in the hospital chapel, and tape a hand-written sign to the door: Keep Out. When Capt. Hosli, Jimmy Delery, and the others boat up Napoleon Avenue the next day, they have no idea what horrors lie inside.

We experience the “darkest hour” also through the eyes of Frank Minyard, the Orleans Parish Coroner. Minyard, a vigorous, white-haired seventy-four-year-old, grew up in a poor white family in the mostly black Lower Ninth Ward. Doubling, on the club circuit, as the white-suited and trumpet-blowing Dr. Jazz, he has reeled for thirty years from one scandalous lawsuit to another – allegations of botched autopsies and police brutality cover-ups, lurid leaks from celebrity deaths. During the crisis, Minyard rises above his reputation. He is taken from his flooded office by boat, and makes his way north, to a fairgrounds outside of Baton Rouge, where FEMA helps him set up an emergency morgue in unairconditioned tents. The bloated, decayed, crawfish-nibbled bodies pour in, among them the as-yet-to-be-identified person we watched die in Chapter One. In the course of conducting eight hundred and fifty autopsies, Minyard makes a

spooky discovery; hardly any have drowned. Most people killed by Katrina, he concludes, died of desperation, horror, and heartbreak.

Chapter Five: Motherfucking Evictees

The curtain falls on the flood as the most stubborn of The Thousand are forced to leave. The police make increasingly threatening visits to the roaring party at Kajun's. Guidos becomes more and more agitated, stationing herself on a barstool out front with a glass of Southern Comfort in one hand and a semi-automatic shotgun in the other, screaming into the darkness about her "God-given Constitutional rights." (See accompanying photo.) Ultimately, she and her "family" of barflies surrender the cause, assembling a rattletrap fleet of vehicles and a homemade trailer and heading off, in convoy, into the wilds of Mississippi. As Guidos is tearfully shutting down Kajun's, federal agents enter and grab Chris Jungles, her best friend, and haul him away on an ancient weapons charge.

Roger and Anthony Wells, middle-aged brothers who have hardly ever left the street on which they were born, begin a great adventure, flowing into the evacuation stream and out of New Orleans through Louis Armstrong International Airport. (See Chapter Five fragment above.)

Part Two:

Chapter One: Baby Steps

New Orleans's agony is protracted. Three weeks after Katrina, Hurricane Rita blows through, reflooding those areas where the waters had just started to recede. It takes another month for the city's gigantic network of pumps and canals to blow the floodwaters back into Lake Pontchartrain. As the immediate life-or-death crisis ends, a surge of grass-roots optimism washes over New Orleans. Ordinary citizens race around the city, declaring it alive. The emblematic character of this period is Keith Goode, a hapless small-time landlord. When his father died and left an archipelago of rental properties across New Orleans, Keith's older brother, Kevin, inherited the equivalent of Boardwalk and Park Place, while Keith got Mediterranean Place and Baltic Avenue. The city is still full of water when we meet Goode driving around in a filthy t-shirt and shorts, pouring sweat and checking on his properties. Some of his bungalows rented for as little as two hundred twenty-five dollars a month and probably didn't look much different before the storm. Goode is limping from a staph infection that has rotted both feet to the bone, and he is hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt from the surgery. He lacks flood insurance. Every few minutes his dashboard beeps and he has to

breathe into a hose attached to a breathalyzer under the hood – a keepsake of a D.U.I. charge months earlier. If he doesn't obey the beep, or if the machine detects alcohol, the car will switch off. The record of his D.U.I. conviction has been lost, along with the rest of New Orleans's judicial archives, so he figures he'll be huffing and puffing into his dashboard for all eternity. A couple of Goode's houses are red-tagged for demolition – they've twisted off their foundations – and one has a badly decomposed dog lying on the porch. "Man, this city has had a coronary and a stroke at the same time," he says. "There's nothing to do but rebuild it." Goode is a living metaphor for New Orleans in the fall of 2005 – broke, wounded, haunted by a partying past, and either bravely optimistic or tragically deluded.

Also illustrative of this buoyant moment is Ronald Lewis, who is fifty-four but moves like a man of ninety, hunched and stiff from a lifetime of swinging sledgehammers and wrenching prybars as a streetcar track repairman. "Just wear and tear," he says. A lifelong resident of the Lower Ninth Ward, Lewis is determined to return "even if I'm the only person living on my block." Lewis guts and rebuilds his house, showing us the Lower Nine not as a ghetto of poverty and crime, but as an extraordinarily close community, the neighborhood with the highest rate of homeownership, and the taproot of black New Orleans history. Standing on his dead lawn, he speaks of crawfish boils

and fish fries, of bringing meals to Miss Catherine on the corner, and of the kinship ties among people who looked out for each other's children – life in the Lower Nine as painted by Norman Rockwell. "People weren't as poor as all that. At least it didn't feel like that. People got by. Everybody knew everybody. The criming wasn't everywhere; it was like this corner was bad, or that parking lot." He winks. "We're able to hold more than one thought in our head," he says.

Finally, we return to Captain Cannatella, the crippled Tim Bruneau, and the rest of the officers remaining in Sixth District – among them the cop who found the as-yet-unidentified drowning victim from Chapters One and Four. The cops hang out pretty much full time in the parking garage under the stationhouse because the city has no electric power, and this is the coolest place in the building. Few people have returned to New Orleans, so there isn't much police work to be done. The cops spend a lot of time sitting around a collection of folding tables, cleaning rusted guns. Most of them wear purple cards around their necks that say "Ecstasy" – the name of the cruise ship, moored behind the Convention Center, that has been turned into a floating dormitory for the cops and firefighters who lost their homes. Every now and then, a car pulls up and surprises the officers with aluminum-foil pans of wonderful food, donated with gratitude by the

chefs of the city's best – still unopened -- restaurants. (We spend a little time inside the head of Paul Prudhomme in this chapter.)

Cannatella is holding his unit together by force of will, trying to keep exhausted, disgruntled, underpaid officers from quitting. "Out of this tragedy will come a new city," he tells them. "And there is no new city without cops."

Chapter Two: Bigger and Better

Some four hundred and eighty thousand people lived in New Orleans before Katrina; by late autumn of 2005, fewer than a hundred thousand have returned. (The figure is now up to about a hundred and ninety thousand.) Already, some in uptown New Orleans are talking of Katrina as a welcome "cleansing:" now that the drug dealers, welfare addicts, and gangbangers are gone, New Orleans has a better chance of making it as a port and tourist destination. The Lower Ninth Ward, in particular -- "the murder capital of the murder capital" – is a place that a lot of mostly white New Orleanians would like to see bulldozed.

The interlude of reconstruction based on individual effort gives way to a different kind of optimism: New Orleans is convinced it can reengineer itself as a "bigger and better" city. President Bush promises to do "whatever it takes" to rebuild, and Mayor Ray Nagin, believing that as much as a hundred billion federal dollars will rain

down upon New Orleans, forms a committee of powerful and wealthy business leaders to write the plan the president requires. Keith Goode reappears, striding briskly through the Sheraton lobby in a snappy blue suit, a newly named member of the Land Use Sub-Committee of the mayor's commission. He's pulled it off just by showing up.

"Hustling. Saying, 'here I am, I want to help.'" JoAnn Guidos, the transsexual bar owner, lands a day job as an auditor for the Army Corps of Engineers. Not only that, her friend Chris Jungles -- whom we last saw being arrested on a weapons charge -- is released from jail and also goes to work for the Corps. "From the federal lockup to the federal payroll in a single day!" he crows.

The person who most thoroughly embodies the new era is Donald "Boysie" Bollinger, who serves on both the city and state reconstruction committees. A Cajun from Lockport, Louisiana, Bollinger is broad chested and jowly, with a big mane of gray hair, bushy expressive eyebrows, and the carriage of a viceroy. He owns seven shipyards in and around the city and until Katrina, employed about a thousand people. He has been a friend of Bush's for a quarter century. We follow him from the ballrooms of the downtown Sheraton Hotel, where Bollinger and other barons are reimagining the city, to his noisy shipyard -- one of the few islands of industrial activity in an otherwise silent New Orleans. By word and deed, Bollinger articulates the view

that poverty and crime can be eradicated in the recovery effort.

Through him and his like-minded potentates on the commissions, the reader watches thrilling plans evolve for an “Afro-Caribbean Paris” of mixed-income neighborhoods, crisscrossed by twenty-first century light rail. But the seeds of the city’s undoing are being sown without Bollinger knowing it. His counterweight in this chapter is Oliver Thomas, the lumbering, emotional president of the city council.

Thomas, who was raised in the Lower Ninth Ward, has figured out that it is a stand-in for black New Orleans. When Bollinger talks of engineering the Lower Nine off the map – coded as “eliminating pockets of poverty” – Oliver hears plans for a whiter New Orleans. It turns out that Michael Johnson, the dialysis technician dipping Mississippi River water in Chapter Two of Part One, was not altogether paranoid – or at least not the only one. The more Bollinger & Co. spin their grand plans under the crystal chandeliers of the Sheraton’s ballrooms, the more raucous, fist-waving meetings Thomas holds in the city council chamber. Jimmy Delery, whom we last saw aboard Captain Hosli’s rescue boat, organizes equally emotional weekly “Town Hall” meetings as a counterweight to the mayor’s commission. By planning a new city without consulting the mostly black and poor citizens of the old one, Bollinger & Co. are thoroughly alienating the

majority of New Orleanians. Ultimately their visionary schemes will come to naught.

Chapter Three: Collapse

While the first two chapters of Part Two show New Orleans rising, this chapter watches the air go out of the recovery. President Bush announces that he will not, after all, do “whatever it takes.” Suddenly, all of Bollinger & Co.’s marvelous plans – the vast mixed-income neighborhoods, the light rail – are smoke. Strange as it seems, word that federal largesse will not be forthcoming is received in many quarters as bittersweet news. Joe Braun, the rubber-faced sax player of the Jazz Vipers, says “Thank God” when he hears the news. “Otherwise, it would have been ‘there goes the neighborhood.’” On Mardi Gras Day, February 28, Ronald Lewis, of the Lower Ninth Ward, pronounces himself happy that Bush has pulled the plug. “All that waiting around for the big federal money hurt us,” he says, sweating through the greasepaint of a bones-man costume. “They dangle resources, and everybody waits to get them instead of just starting in.” Lewis moves back into his house, a grimly ambiguous victory since he is all alone in a vast neighborhood of ruin and decay.

One afternoon, as he struggles to rebuild his Cadillac dealership in the face of massive losses, Doug Stead walks out to the sidewalk in front of the lot to get some air. A young policewoman sidles up, and, avoiding his eyes,

mumbles that “a bunch” of his cars are out behind the Convention Center. Stead finds several acres of muddy, dented, ruined Cadillac Escalades, and CTS-V’s; a million dollars’ worth of ruined cars. He is dumbstruck. Obviously, these were gathered by the police, who were probably the ones who took them in the first place. But why no official notice from the police department? Why no apology? Why no offer of restitution? Stead’s Quixotic, ultimately fruitless attempt to obtain restitution – at least an apology – is a heartbreaking illustration of New Orleans’s crippled public life.

Captain Hosli, who like almost everybody else in New Orleans lacked flood insurance on his house, spends hours every day on hold with Allstate Insurance. Tim Bruneau, the limping cop, is falling apart physically, financially, and emotionally. The cruise ship on which he has been living is growing increasingly foul-smelling and dirty. Everybody on board is coming unglued. Asleep in his berth one night, Bruneau hears someone sneaking into his cabin. He leaps up with his pistol in his fist. It turns out to be nothing but a mix-up in room assignments, but the “assault” gets Bruneau thrown off the ship. Bruneau quits the department that has been his family for years, and goes off to study emergency management in Texas.

Louisiana Attorney General Charles Foti orders the arrest of Dr Pou and two of her nurses, and accuses them of having murdered four patients at Memorial Hospital during the flood -- a case of mercy killing, he says, and mercy killing is homicide. (So far, he has stopped short of formally charging

them with murder. Whether there is a trial, or Dr. Pou pleads guilty, or the matter is dropped, I'll follow the story to the end.)

Jimmy Delery stumbles up one evening drunk, disillusioned with his Town Hall meetings, and later, in a long, wandering phone call, confesses that he's thinking of leaving New Orleans altogether, to take a job as a harbormaster in a tiny bayou town.

The reek of death that hangs over New Orleans in this chapter is most vividly personified by the coroner, Dr. Frank Minyard. He is back in his morgue in the city, but he has no equipment, no power, and no staff. He is performing autopsies in a refrigerated trailer parked under a freeway overpass. He is more alarmed by the aftermath of the storm, some eight months later, than by the crisis itself. Many more people are dying than is normal. The obituaries in the Times Picayune have quadrupled their usual column-space. Many of the dead are young. As during the flood, Minyard's autopsies reveal no clear cause of death. "They might have a little heart disease or mild cirrhosis, but nothing that would kill them." He believes they are dying of stress, and of grief. The federal government has offered five thousand dollars to the family of anyone killed by Katrina, and many life insurance policies pay double when a policyholder dies in a hurricane. Minyard begins recording the mysterious deaths as hurricane-related so that the families can collect benefits. "I am seventy-four years old and I

expect to spend the rest of my life in court," he says. "But these are my people; this is the least I can do for them."

Chapter Four: Exile

The defining condition of most New Orleanians is that they are someplace else. Two hundred and ninety thousand of the city's pre-flood residents – almost two thirds – are still displaced. We return to the Wells brothers, whom we last saw arriving in Knoxville, Tennessee, in Part One, Chapter Five. After a lifetime on noisy, vibrant America Street in the Ninth Ward, they are stranded in a kind of sensory-deprivation experiment -- a sterile public-housing apartment far from the center of Knoxville. With no phone and no car, they couldn't find work even if they wanted to. Roger, talented at flowery calligraphy and drawings of big-eyed puppies, tries without success to sell handmade greeting cards. Mostly, though, the brothers live on food stamps, and pass the time getting on each other's nerves. When Mardi Gras comes on February 28, Roger makes a couple of paper masks to cheer them up, but he "can't get no glitter." They have one strand of red plastic beads between them. Roger reminisces that he used to walk around the corner every day to cook breakfast for his eighty-seven-year-old Uncle Bud. "He had lots of children, but all his sons got killed, all three of them blown away."

Over lunch at a nearby buffet, the Wells brothers talk loudly about how happy they are in Knoxville. "I thought New Orleans women were something, but they got some Tennessee women, mmm-mm! Treat you like a king." They keep up their cheerful banter all the way back to their apartment. But eastern Tennessee is the antithesis of New Orleans – as white, Baptist, and conservative as New Orleans was black, Catholic, and wild. Anthony, sprawled in a chair, reaches up to shake my hand, and holds it tightly. His face is drawn, his eyes wet. "It ain't home, man," he whispers.

A week later, a letter arrives at my home. In a shaky hand, Anthony has written, "I didn't really want to say a lot about living here, but really I don't like it. Roger has fell for this girl and lost focus on things Yes I want to go back home to New Orleans you know. But things are not fix yet."

The Wells brothers represent a big portion of the New Orleans diaspora. They don't have the drive or the skills to return home and help rebuild New Orleans. They'll let themselves be cared for in Tennessee until they start hearing that enough people have returned to their neighborhood to take care of them. At some point the two lines on the graph will intersect: New Orleans will have revived enough to make it possible for them to return, and the world outside will start making demands on them – like work -- to which they've never really

risen. It will happen at different times for different people, but sooner or later, the indigent of New Orleans, like the Wells brothers, will have to return. Those with skills and resources may have enjoyed living in New Orleans, but New Orleans was never essential to their survival. They can relocate; the Wells brothers cannot. Knoxville is offering them a one-way ticket back to New Orleans whenever they want to take it. I imagine that day will come before I've finished writing *The Neutral Ground*, and their poignant homecoming will be the book's conclusion.

The Neutral Ground might best be compared to *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Though John Berendt's 1994 classic had a murder at its center, the offbeat characters inhabiting Savannah carried it. *The Neutral Ground* has Katrina at its center, but it is about an essential piece of the beating American heart, and the hole a hurricane tore in it. It also resembles John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and William Langewiesche's *American Ground*, in that it follows several fully-developed characters through an unimaginable catastrophe and its aftermath.

The title refers to New Orleanians' term for the grassy medians that run down the center of the wide boulevards; neighborhood identity was so strong in the early days that they needed a neutral

ground -- not just a conceptual line -- to define their boundaries and leave room for palavers. The title also points to a common element in the stories. Though some of the characters are sworn enemies, all meet on the neutral ground of their common love for a unique city.

I arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees ruptured to report on the disaster for *The New Yorker*. I stayed for the first three weeks of the crisis, went back to witness the arrival of Hurricane Rita, and spent the following year flying in and out of New Orleans to chronicle its attempt to recover, in two long articles and five "Talk of the Town" pieces. Prior to Katrina, I covered the military for the magazine. Before joining *The New Yorker* staff in 2004, I wrote for *Rolling Stone*, *Wired*, *Playboy*, *The New York Times Magazine* and others, living in and reporting from Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. (All of my work from the past five years can be seen at www.knoxandbaum.com.) I am the author of *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure* (Little, Brown; 1996) and *Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty* (Morrow; 2000), which was named by Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* one of the ten best books of the year.

The Neutral Ground will run a hundred thousand words. I can deliver it in one year.