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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Storm That Blew New Orleans Apart

By SHEILA BOSWORTH

New Orleans

NEW Orleans in any season is not for the faint of heart, as the faint of heart will be the first to tell you on their way out of town. But the hurricane season of 2004, when Hurricane Ivan came within a few hundred miles of annihilating the place, shook up even the storm-hardened locals who'd slept through Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and secretly believed a hurricane was a good excuse for a bourbon party, even after Hurricane Camille wrecked the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969.

In 2005, the season began ominously, with a rare July hurricane called Cindy. The storm came at New Orleans overnight, before the television weathermen had time to look worried on the six o'clock news, and before the mayor could say "evacuation."

By August, the recollection of this storm and Hurricane Ivan the year before resulted in a combination of foreboding and indecision. Was it reckless or prudent to obey an evacuation order, perhaps only 24 hours ahead of a major storm — to attempt a gridlocked, Ivan-style escape during which you drove for 10 hours to reach Baton Rouge, only 80 miles away? Wise or foolish, to stay home and hope for another near-miss, to assume that whatever else happened, the levees would hold?

Among those who remained in New Orleans the night of Aug. 28, 2005, were the reckless, the foolish, the would-be prudent and wise, and those who lacked the means to escape; in many cases, these categories overlapped. Some of us waited up all that night for Hurricane Katrina to come in, thinking we might as well see firsthand what a Category 5 storm will do to this dear old sinking land.

It was still dark, at 4:30 a.m. Aug. 29, when Hurricane Katrina skipped off course and made landfall downriver from New Orleans at Buras, La., as a Category 4 storm. The hurricane obliterated the place. Buras was famous for its oranges, but I had remembered the little town for other sweet things: slow dances with fast-talking Plaquemines Parish boys on a holiday weekend when I was 14. Music with a "Baby, please" beat on a phonograph and the blues man Charles Brown begging, "Please come home for Christmas / If not for Christmas, by New Year's night."

It was daylight when the hurricane came into New Orleans. So in New Orleans, we got to see what Hurricane Katrina looked like, up close.

She was beautiful coming in, shoving a 10-foot storm surge out of Lake Borgne ahead of her, spinning a tornado's kaleidoscope of lavender, sage, yellow.

This was New Orleans going down. None of us were surprised that Hurricane Katrina showed up decked

out in the official colors of Carnival: purple, green and gold.

Working impressively fast for a slow-moving storm, Hurricane Katrina, in less than a day, re-made New Orleans. People and animals were dead in the water, or dying for lack of water, food, medicine, or breathable air. Cars were as desperately coveted as the “letters of transit” in “Casablanca” — the only means of escape, of immeasurable worth, and therefore as dangerous to possess as not to possess. The smash-and-grab men were working most of the streets that were dry.

Brian Williams of NBC News, in New Orleans to cover the post-storm catastrophe, planned to offer any would-be carjacker a can of Vienna sausage. People were starving; frankly, sadly, Mr. Williams’s sausage-for-car deal made pretty good sense.

On Aug. 31, a neighbor, a former Green Beret, moved the fallen pear tree that was blocking our driveway. He gave my husband and me and a friend who was leaving the city with us a double-barrel shotgun and a .45 revolver. Then he stood in the street and told us goodbye.

Hurricane Katrina was the agent not only of one of the greatest natural disasters in American history, but of a diaspora as well. The storm scattered the surviving population of New Orleans across the continent; one group of New Orleans evacuees who disembarked from a rescue plane in a Western state thought the mountains they saw in the distance were a painted cardboard backdrop. Hurricane Katrina denied us the usual consolation granted to those who have shared a catastrophe: the solace of “we’re all in this together.”

We were all in it together, only nobody knew where everybody else was.

Some of us were in Houston. On Sept. 3, I saw someone I knew from home, a New Orleans artist, in a Houston department store. He was clutching a paper cup of ice as if he were afraid someone would snatch it. The artist had spent the previous four days without electricity in the flood-marooned downtown hospital where his father had died. He had pushed his mother in a wheelchair through the hospital’s parking garage to the roof, where doctors and nurses were trying to keep their patients breathing with hand-pumped ventilators.

“There are people in this store buying trinkets,” he whispered.

The whereabouts of some others became known through telephone calls and Web sites. Wendy was in New York. Daniel, who had worked at her house for many years, was dead. He drowned in New Orleans, in his own kitchen, while talking to his daughter on a cellphone.

Sasha was, finally, in Memphis. She had been trapped in the attic of her flooded house for two days with two small children. Then a rescuer came, took all of them out of the attic, and left them at the Superdome.

Nobody knew where Bronwen and Will, who had been at Woodstock together, had gone. One day at the end of September, though, Will answered his cellphone. They were back in New Orleans from Lake Charles, moving into their apartment uptown. There was no one else around but the National Guard. A 7 p.m. curfew was in effect, but there was no place to go. They had no electricity, no tap water. At night, it was pitch-black and silent.

“I wish we were in New Orleans with you,” I said, homesick despite his description.

There was a moment of silence. “It’s over, man,” said Will. His voice echoed eerily through the cellphone.

ON Nov. 2, we came home to a largely abandoned city, garbage and ruins heaped on the medians and sidewalks, no electricity, no traffic lights, no mail delivery.

At our house on the high ground near the river, the fence lay on the sidewalk where the hurricane had left it. The yard was a fairy-tale tangle of fallen branches and broken shrubbery, home now to a take-charge raccoon, and maybe to the Queen’s woodsman out of “Snow White.”

The smallest of everyday tasks required energy, time, resourcefulness, money and luck. No one was complaining, though. To complain to your fellow New Orleanians would be like whining about sugar rationing to a Gold Star Mother in wartime.

On New Year’s Eve we went out for dinner with friends recently returned. The little French restaurant, one of only a handful open, was lighted by candles, and had black and white party balloons tied to each chair. None of us felt up to toasting the occasion with Champagne at midnight.

It’s hurricane season now; no one else will return to New Orleans until the danger is safely past. In autumn, then, those who are still away will come home. By December, surely.

If not for Christmas, by New Year’s night.

In “The Sun Also Rises,” Mike Campbell explains how he went bankrupt: “Two ways. Gradually, and then suddenly.” That’s one answer to the question of how New Orleans collapsed. There are those who say New Orleans must have seen Hurricane Katrina and its deadly aftermath coming, must have been expecting the worst, given the conditions — geological, structural, meteorological, political — that long preceded the storm.

But expecting it and being ready for it are two different things. You’re never ready to give up the people and the places you’ve loved.

The best you can do is to go on expecting the sad suddenness of the goodbye.

Sheila Bosworth is the author of “Slow Poison,” a novel.

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