

She Came, and After A While, I Left and Will Never Be the Same

Aside from 5 years here in London, a stint in northern California and 1 1/2 years working on a cruise ship I lived in New Orleans (as a photographer). My family isn't originally from there; but most of them and some of my friends still live there. We had plenty of good times in New Orleans. The place has this strange, exotic current that runs through it; that's not typical of other southern cities. I think it's owed to the fact that so many different countries, besides the Native American nations had their hands in or wanted their hands on the city. First there was France, Spain and then Great Britain all in the fight for it. With the War of 1812/Battle of New Orleans (which is still re-enacted till today, at its actual location in Chalmette, Louisiana, only ½ hour's distance from the city) the British were the last foreigners to leave. But neither: France, Spain nor England has truly left New Orleans. In their wake they've all influenced its nature and culture in one way or another. New Orleans is the kind of place that you just simply have to enjoy. Ask any one that's been there, and they'll tell you the same; about the "Big Easy." Its diversity has something to offer everyone. It has its problems, but it's a place that you'll never forget, mostly for the better. And in many ways, it is totally different from the rest of the country and even more so from the rest of the south, although its right smack in the middle of it.

New Orleans is for one is a live music city. It's the driving force - the rhythm - it's lifeblood. And there's plenty of it no matter where you turn: on the streets, in the squares, along its walkways, day and night. It's out in the open, not hold-up in tiny clubs or tucked away in the basement (contrary to AHS/Season 3, they're no basements in New Orleans houses). In the 90s, I use to work as a commercial interior designer in this architectural studio on the first and second floors, just around the corner from the St. Louis Cathedral, in the French Quarter, on Royal Street. And every weekday afternoon (even on the weekends) at midday, the street is closed to vehicular traffic and different bands played all afternoon, till around 5:00, on the street below. Serenaded for free, by New Orleans musicians (playing; jazz, blues, folk, and blue grass) whilst at work 5 days a week - well it just didn't get any better than that, for a music lover, like myself. No matter what your age, or where you're from, or your musical taste; whether you drink, because there's loads of booze, or whether you don't, because there's loads of food, the

likes of which you've never had in your life. There's Creole, Cajun and traditional southern food, contemporary fusion, in one place. In the US, all that doesn't come easily. Restaurants compete for space the way cafes and saloons do, in other cities. So, what's not to like, in ol' New Orleans - the heat - not fun at all; I despise the endless summers. They are killer. I tell everyone that asks me,

"When should I visit New Orleans?"

"Never - from May (after Jazzfest) to November 1. Otherwise, you'll love it."

But some people relish the "wet sauna" that the city is, during its 8 months of summertime. I spent most of my summer days inside as a sort of reverse hibernation. That's what you'll do, if you're like me - spend your summer holiday, casing air-conditioning. That's the only way to cope in the daytime. Then come out at night for the evening breeze, which stirs up from 7 to 9, after that - it's hot, still and sticky, all over again so back inside to the AC. Believe me I've seen far too many visitors keel over with heatstroke, to tell you otherwise.

But, besides the fun in the sun, all the sweat and heat exhaustion New Orleans summers offer a special treat, in the way of a "caller" that comes by. This "caller" just can't get enough of the place, especially, with the warm weather. It shows up every summer, sometimes twice or even thrice. Talk about wearing out your welcome. Sometimes when it visits, it turns the entire place literally upside down. Other times it'll stay away for a long time and you think it's totally forgotten about the city. Like it's been offended or been mugged or something and will never return. But sooner or later it "gets over it" like. It forgives New Orleans and wants to kiss and makeup, so it finds its way back. It's always polite though, never shows up unannounced; it lets you know that it's coming and in plenty of time, so you can be prepared - as best you can. But there's never enough time to prepare for this sort of visitor and besides, you are never mentally ready for it, and that's what matters most. Sort of like a relative or a friend of a friend that works with someone, that just loves coming to New Orleans or always wanted to come for a visit. One you really don't care for and as soon as they come, you can't wait till they leave. And, if you're lucky they'll hire a car and leave you be. But, well after all they are family, or a friend or a friend's friend and you don't want to offend. Well otherwise, you

can just pack up, hit the road and leave them the key. Cause this visitor will do whatever it damn well pleases, no matter what.

Sometimes this visitor is a woman, called: Audrey, Betsy, Rita. And other times it's a man (Bob, Ike, Georges) all whom I've been graced by their presence. Sometimes when this visitor arrives it leaves in a big hurry and stirs things up a bit and other times its "hell on wheels" and everyone on the planet knows about it; as did the one that approached New Orleans on the evening of Sunday, 28th August 2005. And knocked on its front door in the wee hours of Monday the 29th, when 400 miles of full throttle wind, rain and storm surge terror, by the name of Katrina came by to visit and didn't leave entirely until Tuesday, the 30th, when it became a tropical depression. You know what they say, after three days you start to stink. And when she left my life and loads of other peoples' lives and the city literally did stink, to high heaven. Things would never smell or be the same again. In some ways, the entire experience, it's a very sad thing, in other ways, it's good thing.

I was in the French Quarter, the historic district, when hurricane Katrina was approaching the NO. The FQ, which by the way, is within the 50% of the city that is above sea level, at a whopping 3-8 feet. Establishing the city at that spot is about the only advice the French took from the indigenous people. The second bit of sage advice was, "Don't erect levees to hold the water back, you'll drown". I can just imagine those clever French engineers saying, in their lovely French accents; "Don't worry, we know what we're doing, after all we're French." Well so much for, good ol' European supremacy, technology and knowhow; cause it all came crashing down in New Orleans, after hurricane Katrina.

When Katrina, the worst urban natural disaster in the US, so far; was skirting NO, I was dashing down Bienville Street, on foot. Only one street down and one street over and I'd be inside, dry, safe and sound. My lightweight body frame struggling against the already persistent and steady 45 mph winds. Having just safely parked my car in a nearby parking garage at the extorted price of \$30, the attendant claiming there were no spaces, making a bit of graft on the side, capitalism. LOL. Even in the state of an emergency. It is the US after all. It was shortly before 6:00p, I'd just beat the mandatory curfew that evening. As the first bands of rain where defying gravity. The winds were blowing them sideways, so hard I felt more like I was having sand-blast facial, as I hurried to get to the condo hotel that I stayed in with my family through the storm. And as far as I was concerned

the hurricane would hit, the city would be out of power, water, gas and mainframe telephone service (but not to worry, we have mobile phones) for several days, at least. Well, it wouldn't be the Ritz, but things would be back to normal soon enough. I know what you're thinking; "Why didn't you just leave?" Well, there's more to it, when you think the entire thing through. And I will explain. And come to think of it - had I left; I wouldn't have had this story to tell. And if I had a dollar for every time, I've told it.

At the condo, we all stayed awake through the night. I was on the phone with one of my older brothers (who was stationed in a secure building, at his job, for a US government contractor) we were talking over a great deal of static, reassuring each other that we were all, OK; even though we had not long found out that the eye of Katrina had jogged more to the right and was passing just about 40 miles east of where he was located, which was very bad news. The winds are so much stronger near the eye of a hurricane. The electricity went out, around 3:00am, only radio left as our connection to the world. The winds blowing at a sustained speed of 130 and up to 170-190 mph gusts (reports vary) but they were just too strong for those massive overhead power lines. The first half of the worst of the winds and rain wouldn't be over with for quite some time. The massive 30 mile "eye" of the hurricane was passing over us offering a welcome respite by sunrise and afterward the less potent second half would pass through and by Monday afternoon, after about 30 or so hours had passed the worse of entire thing would be over, so we thought. But the winds didn't truly die off till Tuesday actually.

I went to get a bit of sleep, around 4:00 Monday morning. I was exhausted. There's so much to do, the few days before a hurricane hits. Some people were found dead, lying on their sofas and in their beds, no doubt they were as exhausted as I was, if not more so, they didn't even awaken from the noise and the water engulfing them. The floodwaters rushed in so fast, and in such a comatose state, they didn't stand a chance. This isn't water from the 16 inches of rain that Katrina brought along with it. For New Orleans, that kind of rainfall, well it isn't that unusual. And it wasn't water from the Mississippi River, either; if that river ever overruns its banks, New Orleans will be obliterated. No, this is water was pushed in, from the Gulf of Mexico, to the surrounding lakes, of which there are 4 major ones (Ponchartrain, Borgne, Catherine and Maurepas) countless bayous, bays, canals and tributaries. And due to the very low pressure that a hurricane creates, in the case of Katrina, one of the lowest on record, which causes the hurricane to make these bodies of water swell, increasing in volume. And to boot, the 100+mph winds blowing constantly for parts of 3 entire days - well that's nothing other than a recipe for disaster. With over 200,000 homes destroyed and over 600,000 residents, displaced. That's the scenario

of what New Orleans was up against. Bleak wasn't it. That's the way I felt when New Orleans, former Mayor C Ray Nagin announced that Sunday at 12:00, that the contra-flow plan of exiting traffic out of the city was successful and those left behind best hunker down and hope and pray for the best or a last minute change of course. Which we were luck actually did happen. Cause if New Orleans did get the direct hit, as forecasted by the National Weather Service, things would have been a lot worse, even so.

Before the hurricane hit, I had my 80 year old, mother's 3-bedroom house, which included: a front and back garden (and my mother loved plants) inside and outside, there were easily over 100 plants that's just the ones in pots, plus her personal effects and her at-home business, to tend to. After taking care of all of that I had my things, my flat and my at-home business, to tend to. My four brothers all had their homes and apartment, families and extended family to tend to. One of them (the one I was on the phone with) worked for a hazardous chemicals and air products company (contracted by NASA) that had to be manned the entire time of the storm, so he barely had time to go to his flat and get his clothes and give me a bit of a hand at our mother's house, before he had to get back to work. Where, thank goodness there were no leaks, the chemicals and products were all contained. He watched the entire event from 40 feet up, in a tower and stayed there until the company sent a private helicopter to evacuate them. So he got an aerial tour of the entire area affected by Katrina (the entire coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, suffered more than \$120b/USD, in damages). We don't have time to get into the horror at he saw, just days after Katrina. And I too, would soon see a lot more of the destruction than I bargained for.

But, as I lay in bed the night of Katrina's visit, all I could hear outside was the shattering of glass and the howling of the wind. It's a sound that I remember, as a child; when I was four, when another powerful and devastating hurricane hit New Orleans, in 1965, Betsy was her name. New Orleans seems to have the worst luck with women named hurricanes. Even now the sound of strong winds gives me anxiety. It's like, something is out there, and it's coming after you and there's nothing you can do about it. After sunrise, on Monday the winds started to get stronger, one-half of the hurricane was passing over New Orleans. When they travel over water there's no resistance and they move in direct paths, steered by the overriding high pressure systems skirting them, looking for a break in these systems, a weak spot to borrow through. Hurricanes hobble about once they reach land. The eye, which has a wall of clouds, just outside of it, that keeps the storm compact and intact as the vortex spins, until the wind currents carry them back out to sea, from whence they came or they totally dissipate over land, leaving rain and flooding in its wake.

At the condo, we had our cars (except for mine in the parking garage) and loads of food and drink, for at least a week, so we weren't in any sort of need, by any means. Late that afternoon, on Monday 27th, we got an "all clear" from the police, those that were brave enough to do their jobs to "serve and protect," the residents of New Orleans. So many police officers abandoned their posts (another malfunctioning bureaucracy - the police department - that's a subject I'll spare you from). So then, we could walk about outside, in the blistering heat. The cooling rain was gone, and the winds were down to only 20 mph. We strolled around, eyewitnesses of the aftermath. Most things were as expected; after a Category 5 hurricane, like Katrina blows through. They're were power lines down, trees uprooted broken glass everywhere and rubbish everywhere, roof failure, building *façade* collapse. The city centre looked like bombed out Beirut. So many storefront's with glass broken and busted; this is even before the looting. But there were a few exceptions to the "as expected" scenario. Small gangs of hoodlums (for lack of a better word) hanging about watching and waiting with their dogs, they seemed to have "schemes" on their minds. At least 40 police cruisers and probably the majority of the officer where stationed under the *porte cochere* protecting Harrah's Casino. I guess Harrah's must've had a shit load of money left in the joint. Hoping that things might not be as bad as they went, so they'd be the only casino is the entire area: ready, waiting and open for business the next day, those sorry and greedy bastards. And unfortunately, loads of stranded tourists left behind. Leaning over their hotel room balconies, trying their best to get fresh air, they just couldn't find a way out - in time. The strangest of all things was our mobile phones, that we thought would be our "ace in the hole", they would not connect with each other. We could dial long distance, but the city's communications were "DEAD". That was a sign, of how bad things actually were, and how much worse they were soon going to get. Think of the tsunami's aftermath in the film, *Impossible*. People so confused, displaced and wandering about lost and nowhere to go, as if they were more animal, than human and the wholesale looting, just picture that scene (minus the zombies) in *World War Z*, in that WalMart-esque store. Two totally different extremes of human existence, desperation and discord, all in area no bigger than a few streets square and there you have what happened on the Tuesday and the first few days and nights, after Katrina left, in the heart of New Orleans.

Our Monday afternoon, three-hour tour around the French Quarter ended at Sylvia's, a tiny local pub that was surprisingly open for business, next door to the condo hotel, with much welcomed; ice and cold drinks and booze, they had a generator. And so, we chatted for hours, with the owners; we all saw no real point in leaving, mind you the chaos had not yet commenced. Hurricanes are seasonal events in this part

of the US, lasting from June 1 - November 1, every year. For those of you that have never experienced one - and I hope you never do; you cannot imagine what it's like to evacuate and not know for how long you're going to stay wherever you plan or happen to go; be it in hotel (which you pay for out-of-pocket) or with relatives that you otherwise would never have bothered. And most of us all know what that's like, after 3 days that situation stinks. The safest, closest distance from Katrina damage, was just over an hour's drive NW, in Baton Rouge (the state Capital).

If you evacuated, you'd be driving to-and-fro, for as often as possible, working in 98° temperatures, 77% humidity, with no running water and no electricity, where your neighbourhood (that is any distance from town centre) was a ghost town, in order to tend to your property, home and belongings or whatever's left of them.

So after, Sylvia's, we went back to the condo and listened to the radio, thankful we made it through safe and sound, and then we all went to sleep. It truly wasn't all that bad, after all. But as I said we were all too presumptuous. Unknown to the public, the breeching of the levees (built at first, by the French) that New Orleans, relies on to stay dry (as the city has been sinking from day one) had already begun. And within 24 hours, the nature of things would take the majority of the city back to its origin. New Orleans would turn into the swamp, which it originally was, just like the native peoples said.

The next morning (that's now Tuesday morning around 8:00) my youngest brother, who had connections with the Harbour Police, via his position at the New Orleans Port Authority, at the cruise ship terminal knocked on my room door. He said, "We all have to get the hell out of here. There's going to be a mandatory evacuation called at midday today. All residents and non-essential personnel must leave."

My heart sunk, as I said, "For what?"

He said, "Get dressed. I'll show you."

We walked around the corner and two streets up, looking at remnants from all the looting that had taken place overnight, on the massive thoroughfare called: Canal Street, one of the widest streets in the world, three times wider than, Oxford Street. No grocery stores and shops filled with necessities are located on this boulevard; it's a crazy and mixed-up combination of: hole in the wall places: packaged liquor and duty-free camera shops, mobile phone vendors and street vendors, 4 and 5-star hotels and restaurants, bespoke retail shops (like Brooks Brothers and Michael Kors) and a posh shopping centre, low and high-rise office buildings. I used to work in an architectural studio on the 19th floor, overlooking, massive 115,000 sq ft, Harrah's

Casino, at the foot of this street, years before Katrina.

As my brother and I stood on the corner of Canal and Bourbon Streets, and looked toward the north, with 11 miles of street ahead of us, toward Lake Ponchartrain, with the Mississippi River to our backs. I just could not believe what I saw.

"No! This can't be happening. Is that what I think it is?" I said.

My brother said, "Oh yeah, it is."

What I saw in the distance, at first, I thought it must have been a mirage. Don't know if you've ever been on the road in a really hot climate. But in the distance, whilst you're driving, you can see the reflection of the sun's rays hitting the road. But this - wasn't, a mirage, I was actually looking at water on the streets. New Orleans was flooding, and with the amount of water that surrounds and is underneath it, that spelled total disaster. I felt such dread and a sinking feeling in my gut, running down to my knees to my feet; I don't know how I didn't collapse on the spot, there and then. The overwhelming thought that, this is it, New Orleans is in deep shit, and we are in danger, we need help desperately. And with what we all know as bureaucratic red tape that help would not be "Johnny on the spot". We all were on our own. As the day wore on, the disorder got worse. It's amazing that people could go from: one night, scarred, huddling, praying that the storm would spare us the worst, which it did, to seeing countless brazen and blatant people stealing, plundering, looting and destroying property' because they could get away with it. Not because they needed, water or food or even clothes. That would be understandable. But they took whatever they wanted loads of stuff, just because, they could. I witnessed people running about taking the most unthinkable and idiotic things by the arms and black bin liner full, stacked loads of boxes of things so high over their heads they couldn't even see where they were going. All this happened more than 10 feet from where I was stood, as if it were nothing. Looters didn't bother breaking the storefront glass' they took cars and vans (that I'm certain weren't even theirs) and ran them through. The aftermath of Katrina turned some looters into, enterprising hustlers. The highbrow ones were nicking entire cases (the ones on casters) of gold jewelry (to wear jewelry, where? who'd care at a time like this?) massive televisions (yet, there's no power) perfume (it's hot as hell, who needs perfume?) dozens of boxes of trainers (that was the item f choice). It was all unbelievable. The lowbrow looters were taking junk and stupid stuff; like window cleaner (for what windows?) and Coke, by the litre. These were the same people that were literally stuck in the city, with no means of transport, of their own, to get themselves out. These same ones would later be amongst the masses at the Superdome. Utter chaos and bedlam

on a scale of unreal proportions. Law enforcement, even with guns, was totally overwhelmed and outnumbered, of course there being so few of them, and without communication, also utterly dazed and confused. I don't know about anyone else, but I literally felt naked and exposed. It's something that I still feel, for the city, even 10 years on, at the end of August 2015. Considering the state that the place is still in and the discontent among its low-income population, of which there are still so many.

Anyway, the mandatory evacuation was announced, and it just was not safe to be in the heart of the city or anywhere else in the city any longer. So, we all packed up and left, in our cars (except for mine, in the \$30 garage) and left Tuesday, afternoon, destination - the Baton Rouge, which was too far inland to be physically affected by Katrina. With the exception of the inundation of New Orleanians, things would be more normal. The only way out the city was driving across the twin Mississippi River bridges, packed to the gills. Along the way, in the oppressive heat, there was a father, mother and their little kids walking; with only the clothes on their backs and a plastic gallon jug of water, over this bridge, headed for the west bank. This bridge is so high up, it has a 170-foot clearance underneath, so that massive container cargo and cruise ships can pass by each other with room to spare and spans 2 1/2 miles from end-to-end. Foot traffic is strictly prohibited it's just too dangerous, but not on that day. When I think about that family I wonder, what happened to them, how did they manage and where did they go? Later on, many residents did likewise. And reports say, that when New Orleans residents got to the end of the bridge, they were threatened by officials and had to turn back, only to wait with the masses that were herded into the by now infamous, makeshift evacuation shelter, otherwise known as the Superdome, and shipped mostly to - Houston, Texas or wherever. As we drove by the New Orleans skyline, I looked at the buildings with all the busted-out panes of glass. Many of which I had been involved in working on their interiors. Including the Superdome with its now patch-worked, plastic fabric covered roof (since when, can plastic covered metal mesh ever serve any lasting purpose as a roofing material) peeling off and flapping in the wind. I thought to myself, the Superdome's days of "golden" glory and brilliance has long gone, no matter what superficial are used to "dress" it up and with a massive hole in the roof, it was no better off than any ol' Creole cottage.

But let's get back on the road. In order to go northwest, this time we had to go: first south then west and then north to Baton Rouge which is 65 miles northwest of New Orleans, a 1 hour and 15 minutes easy as pie drive, all 3-lane Interstate motorway. But this time it took us three hours on two-way back roads, with NO traffic. I've driven to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, so many times

I can't even tell you. However, I wasn't driving, and it wasn't my car, it was my oldest brother's van. He had been so overly preoccupied with pre-hurricane preparation at the condo; he forgot to tank up. So, we did the first thing to conserve fuel - turn off the air conditioning. Mind you he and I have our 80 year old mother, that has a heart condition with a defibrillator implanted in her chest and I'm worried as hell, with all the stress she's been through and the heat, which is 97°F and don't forget the 77% humidity; that she'll go into cardiac arrest. And good thing I didn't go into cardiac arrest myself, because at this point, to say I was fuming mad, was an understatement. They're no hospitals on these back-country roads and no EMS to come to her aid, besides all these areas were evacuated. Since so many head to Baton Rouge from New Orleans for a hurricane, you can be sure that that city's emergency services and everything else were pushed to the limit and then some; as we found out after we got there and for the two weeks that followed. Good thing my brother had often travelled all that back-country area and knew those roads. It was his fault for getting us off road in the first place. But Mum made it through, no problem - I was so thankful and grateful she kept calm about the entire thing. She said she wasn't worried she had all of us looking after her. Now, back to our serious lack of petrol crisis, before a hurricane, that's the one thing you don't forget to do, fill-up your tank. In fact, after water - petrol is next commodity that gets stocked up on. Petrol stations are in such demand, they get extra tank refills (up to the last possible minute) to meet the demand and when they're out of fuel, they close up shop and get the hell out. When the, all clear is given, the first things you see on the roads are petrol tanks and electrical utility repair trucks. We got to a station, that had fuel, but their generator couldn't manage to operate the satellite dish they wanted for credit card transactions and the idiot that ran the shop wouldn't take cash, go figure. Maybe he was afraid of getting robbed, I don't know, a lot of stuff didn't make sense then, as you can tell already, I'm sure. Finally, we found another station fully operational, with petrol and taking cash; with a 2-hour queue, waiting in the stifling heat. But we were separated from our other relatives and without phone service. We got tanked up and back on the road. Then finally came across an operating traffic light about 10 miles away from Baton Rouge. That was a good sign, the further inland, the weaker a hurricane's winds blow and with that the likelihood that electricity is working and all the other utilities.

We carried on and by now, we were just inside the city limits. The question was, "Where do we go?" We left NO so hurriedly we didn't even discuss where in Baton Rouge we were going. It was all a shot in the dark any way. By now even the long-distance phone lines were jammed so we couldn't connect with hotels in BR to find out what was

available, and we didn't count on getting stranded for the rest of the group either. However, we were all familiar with this Holiday Inn hotel on Siegen Lane, just outside BR and had stayed there many times, whilst visiting. And something told me to tell my brother stop there, the rest of our family will be there, it was the most logical place for them to stop. And as we drove by, I saw my youngest brother and his wife stood talking outside the hotel. Thank goodness. What a relief. They told us, that there might be two double rooms that we could all bunk up in. And what they had to go through, just to find that out that much and hold on to them, till we arrived was nothing short of an action of Congress. Already, price hijacking and swindling was in full swing, even for a worldwide brand like Holiday Inn. My brother, the younger one deals with the logistics of the travel industry, so he was schmoozing his way through the entire ordeal. After we arrived and the hotel management sized people up, and with my mother's even ore brilliant ability to schmooze, my brother is a first-rate schmoozer, but our mother was Queen of Schmoozers (I unfortunately have never acquired the indispensable ability to schmooze, even in a dire situation, I use pity instead). Back to the front desk and to whom they thought was most likely to stay the longest, guarantying the graft they were looking for. Well, we fit the bill, so the two rooms were ours. The stipulations were: pay in cash only, by noon every day till departure; for rooms that were only worth about \$70 dollars a night, but where all of a sudden valued at \$150. But we were at their mercy, mentally worn down, exhausted and greatly desiring to stay as close to New Orleans as physically possible, since that would further cut down on the expense and wearing task of tending to home and property in the Katrina recovery. My sister-in-law reported to Holiday Inn's customer service about what was going on and they promised they would look into matters. Nothing happened in our favour for the two weeks we stayed there, but about a month later, there was an investigation into the entire grafting operation and arrests were made, as reported in the newspapers.

After two days at the thieving Holiday Inn, my oldest brother (with the gasoline fiasco) went back to work in New Orleans managing the condo/hotel, that accommodated the BBC News crew and other media outlets. The owner of the condo was making a killing (grafting is one of his strong suits, as I later found out). New Orleans routinely plays host to massive media events and public festivals. But after Katrina, with the lack of hotels open for business, any accommodation located in the city centre, that had at least an operable front door and a doorkeeper was open for grafting (via reimbursement from the federal government). The media people didn't care about the price gouging as long as their reporters had a place to stay. The New Orleans, hurricane Katrina story was and remained world headline news

for at least a solid month or so. And the journalists were glad just to be State-side, after spending most of their time in Iraq and Afghanistan covering the war that was already getting stale by 2005. And they adjusted quite well to the lack of everything, having a generator for a couple of hours a day, was just fine by them. But some of the A-list, US news people had these posh trailers and caravans, fully equipped, like on Hollywood film sets for the A-list actors. They came loaded and lacked for absolutely nothing.

After a couple more days, my youngest brother got news that, three Carnival Cruise Lines ships were returning to New Orleans to assist in the relief, as chartered by FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Authority) for the tune of over \$1mil per day for 6 months. By the way, all of them remained more than half empty, at any given time; one ship was plenty enough to do the job. But that's more taxpayer's money wasted and "business" as usual. My brother had permission to have any of his family members that were in need of accommodation, to stay onboard. So, we knew we were set for the next six months, it was just living as a displaced person that had to be dealt with. It wasn't like being a refugee, since there was no conflict involved; we weren't nomads, because we all knew where we were going; and not homeless because we had a home, although unlivable. I wish there was a term to describe it properly, but it is more of a state of mind than anything else.

Whilst at the hotel for those couple of weeks, I met and talked to all sorts of people, but one really stands out, a firefighter, with one of the New Orleans fire brigades, that was on a brief period of rest. Just after Katrina hit (and we were listening in, on the radio) and later on (via those news people, especially the ones in those posh caravans) we were hearing so much overwhelming news 24/7. Hearing the firefighter's stories, added to the list of some of what was truly going on in New Orleans and some of it was truly amazing, restoring faith in humanity. How people, whether civil servants or not, were rolling up their sleeves and helping each other, in the few days after Katrina hit and until the city was satisfactorily evacuated and the military took the reins. These were mostly people in dire need themselves with homes flooded and nothing much else. There was so much information and misinformation from the media, but we couldn't just turn away or not listen (like with 9/11) this was our city, our homes and our lives, that couldn't be switched off and on. In reflection, it's amazing how a person can become conditioned to hearing so much and seeing so much negativity and learns to function from day-to-day. At a strange level of existence; as long as you know there is going to be some sort of recovery or recompense, in future.

After two weeks most of my family and me, returned to New Orleans

to sort things out, but only by official permission, permit and identification. The police and the US military had the main motorway/highways and roads into the city monitored and two checkpoints upon entering the city from only the west. And they were only allowing people and/or residents in the city that had a certifiable reason to be there and safe accommodation arranged by a sanctioned agency, which I and all the rest of my family received by means of FEMA. Service, delivery and repair trucks, besides military vehicles to aid in the recovery were mostly all that you saw then. The I-10 highway that cuts across New Orleans wasn't fully opened to traffic as yet. Eastern parts of it (especially the spans over Lake Ponchartrain)) were completely destroyed, badly damaged or closed. And the stretches of it on ground level, within the city of New Orleans and were also underwater. Traffic into New Orleans, from the east had to be re-routed onto the Causeway another bridge, 27 miles long, running north-to-south at the middle of the lake. Looking back, that must have cause massive havoc on ground transportation across the lower half of the US, since I-10 runs from Atlanta to Los Angeles.

So, we got back to a sort of life, I guess you'd call it, under martial law for about 3 months. In the city centre, the feeling of eminent danger from the chaos was no longer there. It was surreal, knowing that so much was lost, and things were hanging on by a thread. Canal Street, where my brother and I had stood just 2 weeks prior, watching the floodwaters slowly rise in the distance, was crammed with every single news and media agency on the planet and then some. Parked on the median were the posh caravans, butt end-to-end and satellite dishes and generators the size of cargo containers, double stacked along the streets, too many to count and attached to them were, yards and yards of massive cables snaking their way along the pathways carrying the third precious commodity, electrical current; in order to bring us what was literally a 24/7 barrage of news report on the biggest news story the US had experienced since 9/11. Random news people wanted to talk to you, but I didn't feel like talking to anyone like that, at the time. Also, though reassuring and off putting at the same time was the presence of military personnel marching, patrolling, making their daily rounds and carrying AK47s. I did get to meet some of the troops from the 82nd Airborne, with their red berets and thanked them for their service, where our local police so miserably failed. For the Airborne, it was a welcomed change. Most of them coming directly from the end of tours-of-duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was a walk in the park assignment for them. They were also happy to be State-side. Without them and the entire military operation, I don't see how things would have gotten organised; because as it was, the military efforts were still hampered by the city government. This I found out from a guy I dated briefly, who

worked for Blackwater Security and was posted at the Julia Street Wharf, checkpoint where those of us that lived on the cruise ship, used to pass through every day. The military had implemented many programmes for the recovery, but the local officials never got word to the public, in New Orleans or in the greater metro area. Honestly, the entire situation was totally confusing. I felt like a stranger in the city that I called home, for most of my 44 years, at the time.

When I got to my car later the next day (with a window smashed in and two machetes in the back seat) I drove around the unrestricted areas that were farther than walking distance, and saw more damage, New Orleans was a ghost town for the most part. And at night it seemed haunted by a feeling of foreboding, especially with the fires burning, outing some of the larger ones just wasn't a priority. I and my siblings have this yen for adventurer/danger/thrill seeker to restricted places - our excuse, its genetic (our father came from a line of pirates of the western Caribbean). My brother served as a guide and host for the BBC, he took them to places without police escort by van and by boat, saw and heard things, he said he'd never forget; some I won't mention here, they're too morbid. But most disturbing was the gun fire at night, off in the distance. Whilst in complete darkness and near silence he said, people were randomly shooting off weapons for no real reason for the first couple of weeks. Like I said some crazy stuff was going on.

We walked around the city centre and drove around mostly every day to see how much the boundaries had been extended, according to how much the city had dried out and which roads were passable or not. Otherwise, they were blocked off and, in some cases, guarded, but sometimes not, so we took our chances. One time, at my youngest brother's house (the one that worked for the cruise line) some police came up and asked for ID and told us we had to leave the area and escorted us out, but they were very nice about it. On another occasion, when the area was unrestricted (around his house) the police went into a house around the corner from his and took out loads of rifles, I don't know whether that was legitimate or not. But a lot police were up to so much stuff, legal and otherwise. I'm sure you remember those officers casually "shopping" at Wal-Mart, captured on video.

I didn't lose anything in the storm. Except for a hammer, screwdriver (which I'm sure the FEMA search team helped themselves to) and a beloved limited-edition cookbook, given to me by my dad (who passed away in 1996) I hope whoever stole it, burns every single thing they cook. My mother's home was flooded up to six feet. She salvaged about 10% of what was left, after 42 years in that house, insurance paid

for the rest. Courtesy of the cruise lines that my younger brother worked out for us, we had accommodation, in crew cabins, on-board one of the ships. And just when we were getting use to the way things were going and we could begin again and carry on, less than one month later another "visitor" came to Louisiana. I think it took a look at New Orleans and everything east of it for 200 miles, saw how bad things were, took pity on us and decided to hit the SW Louisiana Coast instead. It was named: Rita (what did I tell you about, girl-named hurricanes). I had been coping so-so, up to that point and I'm a very level-headed person - a cool head amidst a crisis, I'm not easily panicked, but when I heard about the second hurricane, I lost it, I broke down and cried. But this time we were on-board, ship (Carnival Cruise Lines, M/S Sensation, docked at Poland Avenue Wharf) along with its sister ship (M/S Ecstasy, at Julia Street Wharf). So, both ships were going to disembark from the Port of New Orleans.

We weren't allowed to set sail until 9:00, in the morning. But the captain didn't get permission to put to sea, until 3 hours past the deadline, the deadline of feeling the effects of Rita, whilst at sea. Leaving at 12:00 put us in the Gulf of Mexico on the tail end of the storm. The Port Authority was yet another barely functioning government office, so many workers had evacuated, and to ask them to come and live onboard a ship, albeit a cruise ship for six months as not an easy choice to make. We had to wait three hours for a river pilot, as is standard regulation, in order to pilot the ship down river; it's a very treacherous river, the Mississippi. Besides the problems with the port, there were river hazards: although many random barges were towed and moored along the banks of the river, there were still others that had run aground and debris mangled iron (from Gods only knows where) and buoys to alert danger. The river had been closed to all traffic coming to-and-from NO to the Gulf before Katrina even hit the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River (at Port Fourchon) is the main artery for transporting crude oil from South America and the Middle East to the US and grain from the US to foreign ports. Our entire 8-hour journey from the Port of NO to the Mississippi Delta, into the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico was spent looking at more devastation from Katrina, along the route, as if we hadn't seen enough in the city. The frames of buildings and houses stood in their places with the ground floor completely washed away or collapsed entirely, countless fishing boats stacked like pick-up sticks and pushed aside like forgotten toys, acres and acres of citrus trees, with fruit still on them. As though they'd been burned from the ground to about 6 feet up, the infamous watermark of decay, that was absolutely everywhere that Katrina hit. And the most horrifying sight of all, horses and cows stranded now, for over month with their bellies swollen, that stood on bits of dry patches of levee banks. There wasn't any real hope for their immediate rescue.

The call had already gone out by Lieutenant General Honoré, US Army (the man in charge of the entire operation, called: Joint Task Force Katrina) for help. The USS Iwo Jima, aircraft carrier was docked at the Girod Street Wharf (adjacent to the Julia Street Wharf) for about a month, to assist with the recovery. From sunrise to sunset we saw helicopters flying back and forth, taking off and landing. The St Lawrence/Mississippi River is just as winding as the River Thames, as it cuts through New Orleans, separating the city from north-to-south and the entire country from east-to-west. Although the entire riverfront embankment, within the city is usually a very busy and heavily trafficked with millions of tonnes of cargo and grain, plus passenger ships which only make up a portion the Port of New Orleans. They're more wharves down river and more up river, plus the grain elevator, all within New Orleans city limits. But the activity onboard the: USS Iwo Jima, the M/S Ecstasy (nearest the city center) and the Sensation, where all the port activity that was, post Katrina. We, on the Sensation, were moored further downriver about 5 miles at the Poland Avenue Wharf, in peace and quiet, which we truly appreciated. Unlike the Ecstasy, where the NOPD was stationed, the police were very intense, to say the least.

But back to our "cruise to nowhere", down the Mississippi. These areas we were sailing by were very isolated. Only helicopters could reach them and they were already used for: rescuing the living, damming the over 50 levee collapses (especially the breaches along the eastern wall of the Industrial Canal, for the 9th Ward and the 17th Street Canal, for the Lakeview neighbourhood) and recovering dead bodies, within the city. As we finally got to the Mississippi Delta, where the muddy Mississippi meets the blue Gulf of Mexico and because of our belated departure; as warned we caught the tail end of Rita, a Category 3 storm, two levels less than Katrina, that lashed 70-foot waves onto the ship and in the direction we were headed (due east) it still packed 75 mph winds. Seasickness - was an understatement. Hurricane Rita hit the other areas along the western coast that Katrina missed. So within a matter of a month the entire Louisiana coastline and inland for about 60 miles, was a wreck. The captain of the Sensation didn't even know the extent of the damage that Rita caused his ship, until was put back into regular passenger service.

Finally, the ship dropped anchor off the coast of Mobile, Alabama sometime overnight. I lost all track of time. The nurse gave me an injection of promethazine. So, I was out for the count, until next morning, by 10:00. Although my stomach had calmed down, I was still so seasick I couldn't even look out of the windows as long as we were on the open water. That afternoon we hauled anchor and headed back for safe haven back at the Port of NO. The aircraft carrier was gone

it went to help out in the Rita recovery. So, this time the Ecstasy was docked in its place and we, on the Sensation were next to it, at the Girod Street Wharf. We stayed there for 4 1/2 months. No more hurricanes hit New Orleans that year. We had had more than enough. The 2005, hurricane season had the Louisiana coastline written all over it, we were done for.

Dealing with the way things were, of which the lack of telephone communication was by far the most difficult (the frustration of useless phones) and the total darkest at night, which extended from outside a quarter of a mile from the city's centre, in every direction, was second. On the observation deck of the ship I could look out and see into the darkness all around us. The city centre was like a protective bubble of sorts and the darkness beyond like the unknown. Where a higher than usual element of danger seemed to be lurking, causing a feeling of nightly anxiety and simultaneously, intrigue.

Canal Street, for nearly two miles was lit (all that area surrounding the posh campers) and a couple of the buildings near the wharves, where we were, had generator powered electricity. So, there were spots of light here and there, but overall, the environment was totally shrouded in darkness. Altogether power and mobile phone service didn't turn back on the city centre until early October. I remember the night clearly. In fact, I was talking to my oldest brother (the one with no gasoline) on my mobile and walking about on one of the upper decks and suddenly buildings and the lights on twin bridges (the Crescent City Connection) that span the Mississippi lit up like a Christmas tree, in the area that we call the Central Business District, at last, progress. But there was still mostly darkness beyond. Except for the lights on the motorway, in the distance; their salmon coloured glow cut through portions of the darkness beyond. Power didn't come to any those areas till late winter, with the infamous FEMA trailers that homeowners received in lieu of housing, until their houses were livable again. And thank goodness AT&T, the US major supplier of mobile communications, got calls rerouted so we could finally talk to each other on our mobile phones. My other brother works for AT&T, fibre optics division, from him we knew about the extensive damage to the communications system. All of the towers for mobile calls in the state were owned, at the time by AT&T. Two of the three phone towers that handle all these calls in the SE Louisiana were destroyed in the hurricane. The one tower couldn't manage all the local calls, long distance calls were handled via satellite. So, there was a major redirecting system that had to be undertaken. My brother got moved to Birmingham, Alabama (where there was absolutely no damage from Katrina whatsoever) as one of the crew to get started on the recovery of the telephone and internet communication collapse. After Katrina, so many businesses

left New Orleans and even major corporations, like AT&T moved their essential services to Baton Rouge, a much safer location, out of harm's way. Business these days just can't afford to be out of touch one day, much less for months on end. AT&T lost 60,000 individual small business subscribers in the greater New Orleans area, the bread and butter of their operations. The decision to move shop also affected my profession in the commercial interior design and architectural business. Fewer clients meant less if not very little work, so many of my colleagues relocated, for better opportunities.

Having power also meant we also had water, but we had to boil it before we used it, since it was likely there was contamination in the pipelines, and we were also warned about taking showers with it. On the ships, water was trucked in, by these massive container trucks, about 30 of them, every couple of days. That was part of the weekly routine watching the trucks come and go, seeing a ship agent test every single load and watching the driver connect the pipe to ship, disconnect and so on, till the loads were all done. Loads that contained our most treasured resource, drinkable water, which I never take water for granted ever since.

One of the US Army majors, stayed onboard our ship and on several occasions, I heard him on his 2-way radio, in one of the very public areas of the ship, reporting numbers that were followed by some sort of code or status. The tone of his speech just didn't sound very uplifting. One day my curiosity got the better of me and I finally asked him about what he was referring to. He told me they were the numbers for live recovery of people and the numbers for recovery of dead bodies and at this point in time there were more of the latter, than the former. It was shocking hear this, but to him it was just part of his job and the reality of things. The bodies that were found were of people that were drowned in the floodwaters or found dead otherwise. As the waters rushed in some people were very quick thinking and climbed into their attics. Others, I'm sure couldn't manage to move that quickly. But in some areas even the attic wasn't high enough, since the water level went past the roofline, becoming their graves. And the closer to the levee break, the worst-off people were and likely to drown. Others died of medical conditions suffered during the storm, non-existent emergency assistance could not reach them. On the next morning, after the storm there was one radio station, 870AM-WWL that was still on the air. We had tuned in, to listen in to reports about emergency calls (I don't even know how they called in, to the station, maybe it was b 2-way radio they called the station) there wasn't anything else to listen to on the airwaves, the calls were overwhelming in nature, one after the other, the level was beyond total distress. What could we have done from them, in the middle of this tempest?

There wasn't that much to do at night, it's hard to express the state of mind, during these times. You feel loss, confusion, worry, anger, frustration, helpless, even though you know you are doing all that you can with so little, it's exhausting and fatiguing. You've no choice but to take one day at a time. Sometimes we played table tennis and loads of card games. Being we were connected to the crew because of my brother, we had invites to the limited-amount of events they held: a couple of barbecues and karaoke nights (that was about the only live music going on, in New Orleans for quite some time). And being that my brother was also closely connected to ship security that ran the day-to-day activities, we knew about all that was going on onboard. And we had the added benefit to a limited amount of alcohol, which was totally off limits to all of the other residents. Although that didn't stop the majority of who were police from drinking in the massive parking area adjacent to the pier. All I have to say about all of that is this: the post-Katrina environment in New Orleans, alcohol of any sort and loaded guns, did not mix - there were incidents, which I won't go into here. But one of them, as I was told (via responsible ship personnel) was like the OK Corral; there was no corral. Have you ever seen the corridors on a ship; and I'm not talking about the ones on the film set of Titanic, either. And there was one suicide (by a city worker, waterworks department) not by gunshot - he chose poisons instead, guess he nicked them from the job. Years later, I worked onboard in the photo department and saw pictures of what a corpse looks like after chemical poisoning not as bad as the Katrina casualty - all-in-all, horrifying.

My family members would come onboard in the evening so tired with their feet covered in muck and these dark mossy green stains on their clothes, the oxidation of mold, that would not wash out, no matter what. It was just too hot to wear overalls and work inside or outside, cleaning up debris, tossing out debris, going through each and everything you possess to assess whether or not, it's worth keeping, sanitizing and packing away. And at the same time, writing a list of your home's contents and every item's market value, if you hadn't done so already, for the insurance claim adjusters. Who, by the way were some of the nicest people throughout the entire ordeal.

On the dock, they had hoses and showers for us to wash our shoes off, before boarding. The health department didn't know what kind of bio or chemical hazards were floating about in the floodwaters, are maybe they didn't want to tell us, fearing more public outcry. People had all sorts of rashes and skin irritations. One of the major petroleum processing plants is near NO and it had ruptures, so all of that contamination was in the water, too. There was so much pollution in the air, the moon shone red anytime it was out, and you

could smell it and feel it with every breath. I had chronic conjunctivitis and red eyes (most people thought I was crying all the time) the eye doctor told me to wash my eyes with a diluted water and baby shampoo rinse, every night for the entire time. I tried, but I couldn't get involved in the cleanup, for the threat of an infection that might've caused permanent damage.

My brother knew several harbour police officers, who also informed him of the continued wholesale looting going on at night by other officers, since they were the only residents that had unrestricted access to the city. So through my brother's colleagues, we got an unrestricted tour around the city, we even got to have a look at my mother's house, which we could see was severely damaged, it was wood framed and wood siding, as most of the houses built prior to 1950, in New Orleans. We also got to see my mother's other property, a duplex house where two of my other brothers lived; the waterline was on the roof, so that meant 100% damage. Where I lived near the edge of the city outside of the levee protection system, the streets were still impassable. But, after a couple of tries the water had receded a bit; to about one foot and we were able to get to my home (where first off, we were met by animal poop and pee all over the stairs). I guess it was the most safe place for it (I later found out there was a wild boar living in complex) to stay. We got some of my things, which were all intact and clean, not even mold as yet. During another visit to my apartment, which was a very sprawled out complex of one-storey buildings, we saw a couple of men walking about, very well dressed; not with the typical, worn-out I'm recovering from Katrina look or attire. The property management was aware and had telephoned ahead (via long distance) that there were looters about and for all residents to take away all possessions and vacate the premises as the entire property was to be demolished. Needless to say we got suspicious at seeing these well-dressed guys, so we and packed as much as we could and moved some of my things out. As soon as I got the van from my other brother and more hands to help and the area was passable and thankfully before the mold and mildew took over, we got everything else packed up and completely moved out. But the smell out in that part of town, I have only to close my eyes and remember that gut wrenching smell of carcasses decaying. Everything had to be washed or dry cleaned to get rid of it. I lived next to the Bayou Sauvage Wildlife Reserve; however, I was lucky to be living on the first floor, so no floodwater and even luckier having no roof damage. In general, after Katrina: with the combination of water-soaked carpet, clothing, furniture and any sort of fibres, a mostly boarded up house, with temperatures in excess of 95°F, mold and mildew infested the surface of absolutely every single thing. And whatever was organic and decomposing that didn't have mold and mildew on it, had massive flies covering it. That was the only

persistent sound you'd hear (anywhere outside the city centre) when you got close upon stuff lying around, you'd hear, the buzzing of myriads of these thick black flies. Which meant it was something that had life or was flesh and was now dead and rotting. Otherwise, there was the sound of complete and utter silence. You could hear anyone approaching for miles and our voices carried into the far distance. There was no other life or movement except for the flies and the mold, not even mosquitoes. On the outskirts of town, you'd see vultures flying in the sky and near where I lived a few feasting on carcasses, well that's their job, clean up. One afternoon we were all sitting on the upper deck, about 3 months after Katrina, and we saw a butterfly flitting about, it was amazing to see, everyone was shocked at seeing it, we starred at it for the longest time, as if it were lost and out of place, such a simple sign of life returning. On the ground, everywhere, there was about a 4-inch layer of mud, in some areas more and others less. But as the city continued to dry out, it became hard and cracked, as if we were in a desert. Betraying the fact, the same area was submerged in a flood, only months before. With the water running and the power back on, the cleanup began to make headway. There was a constant procession of rubbish and debris hauling trucks on the streets en route to the dumps and landfills. There were loads of money to be made in the housing and building demolition and hauling business, which was going 24/7. Most of the drivers were careless; they didn't bother with tarps to cover their loads. Plus, there are numerous high-rise flyovers and bridges in the area. With all that, we were dodging debris and all sorts of junk on the road, many near misses, roofing nails were everywhere, loads of flat tires and nails stuck in the soles of our shoes. We wore safety boots when we walked about in the affected, last thing you wanted was some kind infection. No hospitals were open in New Orleans. Lucky for us we had a US medical doctor on board to handle minor injuries, otherwise a trip to Baton Rouge, 90 miles away. Area doctor's offices (that didn't flood) were some of the first to get going as soon as the phones got turned back on.

The skeleton crew on-board ship also needed to keep their morale up; it wasn't a typical six-month contract for them either. Typically spent at some lovely exotic port of call and taking in the sights whilst on shore and enjoying a pint at the local boozer or clubbing till the last possible minute. Although they were getting paid for doing a very good job, I couldn't tell them enough how kind they were and genuinely interested in the city and its people and the recovery. They were all people that routinely travelled to the city and were fans of New Orleans, saddened and disheartened by its misfortune. Some of them had left NO on the Thursday before Katrina hit and because of the weather in the Gulf of Mexico got rerouted and ended up bidding their time in Galveston, Texas, till they got contracted by FEMA to

return, for the relief effort. Being that many of them had worked from the port of New Orleans before, they sorely missed not being able to get out into the city. The only time the senior officers were allowed ashore, was for a three-hour tour that the military took them on, to show them the devastation of the city's key areas. When crew members embark on the ship, they have to relinquish their passports with the paymaster until their contract is up and they leave the ship, heading for home. But during this time, the crew onboard either ship wasn't allowed but to walk past the gangway (only the ship's officers could walk the short distance of one ship to the other, including the captain) the reason being there were no immigration agents to check and stamp passports. Heaven forbid they'd go AWOL in a dead city with no way out and checkpoints and police guards all the ramps on the motorway, plus the military patrolling the streets. So, the combined, nearly one hundred crew members were essentially stuck on board both ships until further notice. So this is where I came in handy; I couldn't help with the cleanup; but since I was able to access anything the crew needed; that was available in the city or anywhere else accessible, since I had my own car and was free to travel about, outside the city. Under regular circumstances, routinely (via a port agent) the cruise line provide the crew with a shuttle to the main shopping centres or they can use public transportation, since neither of these services was functioning and it was quite some time, nearly till Christmas, before the first option was available. Even when the shuttle was available for the crew members; I enjoyed taking the crew about to places outside of the city that they had never seen before; as it also a brief distraction from dealing with the trauma of the event and the now daily grind of dealing with the recovery. Otherwise, I enjoyed receiving the shopping lists no matter how short or detailed, it gave me something to do other than focusing on just me and my family's needs. I was out of work for the time being. All New Orleans residents received unemployment for six months; post Katrina, a \$1200 one-off payment from FEMA and \$200 from the Red Cross. They also gave us clothing, care packages, boxes and packaged food, water and badly needed empty boxes. The head of Red Cross operations and his wife were living onboard the M/S Sensation, they were the loveliest people and very supportive, they had years of experience dealing with natural disasters and the people that were displaced by them, all over the world. After hurricane Rita hit, they left New Orleans and went to southwest Louisiana to head up operations there. The military gave us MREs (meals ready to eat) which came in handy whilst we were at our homes cleaning up. Especially since no cheap local restaurants were in open for quite a while, the few that did open were a far distance away from most everything. About halfway through, some of the really nice, 4-star restaurants open, it took them awhile to get their staff back. There weren't many places for them to live.

By November, one of my past clients, the condo/hotel where most of my family stayed when Katrina hit, got its check from FEMA. So, I went back to work. Any hotel that housed media personnel or other workers involved in the relief effort were compensated by the federal government. Plus, their insurance company paid them off for damages to the building. However, that business relationship ended in a great loss for me financially and otherwise, one from which I never fully recovered, I'll explain later.

Moving about on a large cruise ship, going up and downstairs and a gangway day-in-and-out was taking a toll on my mother who, at the time was 80-year-old. My mother left from ship and moved in with one of my other brothers (the one that worked with hazardous materials) and then later settled in a very spacious 3-bedroom house to rent from her nephew. And although it was more convenient for her than living on-board, it was a quite challenge. My parents had owned their own home since 1963, and paid their mortgage by 1993, my father had died in 1996, and it was now 2005; so paying rent was something that my mother hadn't done in ages; which wasn't at all a pleasant experience for her. But her house had been deemed 80% damaged and unlivable by the insurance company which paid her for 100% of the damages and the loss of all possessions. Now she faced the even more difficult task of demolition and deciding to rebuild in an area of 95% homeowners, but where so many nearly lifelong neighbours had relocated with other relatives and decided not to return. This was the neighbourhood where my brothers and I grew up and attended nearby schools, it was hard for us to deal with the outcome as well. I tried not to cry whenever I returned there with my mother, but when I drove through the area alone, I always did. So many wonderful memories happened at that house and loads of possessions were lost, including her most cherished photographs, years before Katrina. My father was a merchant marine for 40 years before he retired, so my mother's house was filled with hand-crafted artwork, furniture and objects d'art that were irreplaceable. And the loss of the pictures and 8mm home video - well the only thing to say about that was - heartbreaking; especially all those candid shots of us goofing off as kids, priceless. Scanning them was one of those things that I said I'd get around to, but with deep regret never did. Pictures are another thing I don't take for granted anymore. Good thing I nicked some of the copies that my mother had of the studio photographs. Back in my mother's home country of Honduras, her uncle was a professional photographer with his own studio and took some great photographs and my father also had some real good ones, too. Now they're all digitised, in safe keeping.

Time started to pass more rapidly when winter set in, we even had a bit of snow that year, and just enough spread a light dust over everything, which lasted only a few hours. Before we knew it, it was

Christmas and then New Year's passed, which was exactly midway through the six months contract that FEMA had with the cruise lines. So, we only had three more months of comfort and convenience on-board. For me, being on the ship was my best option. My first-floor apartment was located in a now uninhabitable complex of damaged buildings. But, it was such a nice quiet place, with spread-out and detached one-story quad-plexes, nicely landscaped, a tennis court, swimming pool, club house, off street parking, security check point, surrounded by woods where we were regularly visited by families possums, raccoons took up residence in the dumpster near my quad-plex. One cold winter morning, I was sat in my car and lo-and-behold, I saw less than a stone's throw away, a massive buck, around 7 feet tall with about 12 or 14 points, he was stunning. I loved living there it was my own little world. With a spacious living room, with a nice wood burning fireplace, a galley kitchen, walls fully covered with cupboards and full-sized appliances including a dishwasher, then a small utility room complete with full-size washing machine and clothes drier, a full bath, including a shower/tub and another closet, and my bedroom, massive big enough for a double bed, triple dresser, high dresser, cupboard for a 32" television, drawer and hanger storage, then a massive cozy chair and ottoman in the corner by the window, and yet loads of room to move about; and a clothes storage 6 feet deep by 5 feet wide and 8 feet tall, on one side stuff for spring and summer and on the other autumn and winter. Plus, I had two other closets for other clothes and junk and a small screened in balcony for barbeque cooker and a table and chairs, all the sweet song of \$500 per month. Although living on the ship was a combination of hotel and basically a dormitory (that's what crew accommodation is like, below deck). The typical crew cabins are: 9 foot wide, by 12 foot long, by 6.5 foot ceiling, bunk beds, a tiny desk with a TV, and bathroom with a shower, toilet and sink that was only large enough to turn around in, but for one person it was manageable. When my mother and I shared one, it was intolerable.

One mundane and totally taken for granted service that was in utter shambles; but got sorted out after about 3 months, was the Post Office. Trips to the temporary postal office, which looked more like a barracks than anything was also part of the daily or every other day routine, collecting mail for my brothers, my mother and myself, then after the service got caught up with the backlog of mail for the over 600,000 residents of the county of Orleans, they urged residents to fill out a change of address to move things forward. Especially since there would be a drastic reduction in postal service system post Katrina, since so many residents wouldn't be returning. There was so much mail coming from everywhere besides the normal stuff, bills and junk mail. There was correspondence and forms from the insurance companies, the local, state and federal government

agencies. Again, living on the ship, we lucked out, because we could have our mail forwarded to the port agent, she received all of it and hand delivered it to us at the ship.

The holidays just flew by like a blur, without much memory or recollection and by then the recovery, demolition and hauling debris was in full swing. The local network television stations were still not broadcasting. One local station diverted its reporting to Baton Rouge, and we could get it via radio. We got most local information via the radio or word of mouth and relayed notices to each other as we heard them. My brother and his family finally got their FEMA trailer, shortly after the New Year, so left the ship; but I stayed on until the last day, 1st of March; which was also a holiday - Ash Wednesday, the day after Mardi Gras; which that year, was sparsely attended and for me, bitter-sweet. Filled with tears I said good-bye to the handful of crew members that I'd become very attached to. Most of my friends and colleagues were temporarily relocated and it was very costly for them to make regular trips to New Orleans. Some other friends lived on the Westbank, so we'd get together often. Things were so different for them, than for me, they had their homes. The only thing that was disrupted temporarily for them was work. And most of them worked for offices that temporarily relocated to Baton Rouge, so it was just a matter of a long commute for them, until things returned to normal. While others that evacuated started fresh, found jobs elsewhere, moved away and didn't return. So, my new shipments quickly became their replacements. They were from so many faraway places: Croatia, India, The Philippines, India as well as Brazil, Italy and France. We endeavoured to stay in touch with each other, but sadly did lose track of each other. All of this was prior to Facebook and Twitter. But I do think about them every now and then.

After leaving the ship, I moved in with my mother and oldest brother that 3-bedroom, rented house. This was such a challenge for me, after living completely independent for 6 years; I found it extremely stressful. Since my mother suffered so much loss, not only of her possessions but her network of friends and neighbours, which she still kept in touch most of them on long distance telephone. But it just wasn't the same for her and she wasn't the same. She truly missed her house and amazing garden. However, she still had her lovebirds and did keep herself busy by re-establishing her at-home drapery business, and a bit of garden, but nothing like the one she had. However, she became more and more co-dependent and depressed. And unable to come to a decision about what to do with her house, to rebuild or buy another, move to another state. At the age of 80, it was not an easy one to make. My brother carried on as if nothing happened and remained buried in his job. I carried on with my work on hotel/condo project. My mother helped me, by working on some of the guest room furnishings.

Although I carried on, day-to-day; I couldn't get my head around the entire situation. I had this persistent feeling of what other dreadful thing was going to happen. The city was devastated, everything was so fragile. The hotel management changed and the owner, whom I previously had no contact with, became suddenly involved in the renovation process. He was looking for every sort of way to cut back on the project, especially since they were losing money, with tourism at an all-time low. The cut backs included welshing on the agreement made with me on my billable hours, to the tune of \$16,000. I was devastated and financially ruined, all at the same time. So, I contested the decision, but the only option given was to be paid a quarter of the job's worth or take him to court. Regarding the latter, I simply couldn't afford, besides his son was a lawyer. So, I took the chicken shit payment. After that, I turned my back on practising interior design as a profession and started pondering my alternatives. My youngest brother was eager to get his house, ship shape. Out of work and with no home of my own, I moved in with his family and made myself available to get their house sorted out and upgraded to an even better state than it was before Katrina. Which took about 1 ½ years, but we got it all done. Of all the projects I've worked on professionally for the commercial sector, most of which were posh or for humanitarian organizations and animal conservation (national and international law offices, private schools and university, LA Supreme Court and judge's chambers, 40 ft corporate yacht, homeless shelter and accommodation, historic restoration and re-use, not-for profits) it is the one that I am most proud of. It meant a great deal to see their house turned from a disaster area, back into a lovely home.

As the renovation on the house was winding down, I decided to take a position as a portrait photographer. However, not in your typical studio; the job was on board a cruise ship. I'd done a quite a bit of travel for work and leisure; but this way I could do both, on someone else's dime. The ship's itinerary was headed to places that I'd never gone to before: Alaska in summertime, Hawaii in the autumn, The Mexican Riviera (Pacific Coast) in wintertime, then back to Hawaii in the springtime. I had so many fantastic experiences working onboard, met so many people and saw even more amazing things. I couldn't have asked for better; but at the same time the 12-16 hour long work days, 7 days a week and the mindset of the operations and management onboard was something I struggled to cope with for 1 ½ years; after working as a creative person in an office supported by other creative people. On the cruise ship, which was owned by a US conglomerate, the corporate mentality was over my head and didn't rest well with me, at all. My father was a merchant marine (working on passenger and cargo ships) for 40 years and then retired, having travelled to every major port in the world from 1945-1985 (except

those in Russia and Australia). And even though he knew how much I loved to travel, he would've turned over in his grave (he never wanted his kids to experience ship-life and now I understand why) to know that I was working on a ship, no matter how posh. But, for me the experience was worth it. Whilst working on-board I had made my decision on something I'd been toying with since I was a teenager after my first trip to Europe. Although I was also looking for a companion to share this experience with, I never found one, but made plans to pick up and move to London, the boldest venture of my life.

But before my adventure began another shocking and somber event happened. Regrettably my greatest loss after Katrina was my mother who died suddenly, four years after the storm. Loads of older people died, then too. The obits were sometimes four or five entire pages or more, filled with their faces and snippets of their lives, having died in some other state, far away from home. I think they were all heartbroken. They'd lost so much. Not just their houses and the things that they had worked so hard for. But their **lives** were gone. Their families, friends, neighbors, were gone split apart; even their daily routines were gone. All that was familiar was scattered. Never to be truly put back in order.

About my mum though, Katrina took her spirit. Even though she was a widow for fifteen years, she had a zest for life that few people had, at her age. Of which age, no one believed, she looked at least 20 years younger than she actually was; and barely any grey (she never coloured it). A brain aneurysm took her brilliant presence. She was gone within minutes. I was in Zihuantanejo, Mexico when it happened; my oldest brother was with her. I arrived at her hospital bedside the next day; she was in CCU kept alive on live-support systems. My niece and her fiancé arrived the next day. On the morning of the following day I got a call from the hospital unit to say that her vital signs were deteriorating and that we should all come to the hospital. This also meant we had to make The Decision; The Decision of when to turn off the switch; which we did, later that day. Upon seeing the state, she was in, we all knew we weren't looking at the woman we called our mother all those years. And felt she would've never wanted to exist as a vegetable. Can't say much else about all that' and I'm never at a loss for words, as you can tell. But the grief leaves me speechless at lot of time. It will probably be many years, before I'll be able to cope with all of that better. I lost both my parents suddenly. My dad died 6 weeks after being diagnosed with colon cancer. So, none of us were prepared for that either. You always hear people say, "When I go, I want to go quick. Like that (snap of the fingers)." Unless they've experienced it, they have no idea what they're wishing for. I just hope whatever other life there is, there's no more death involved in it. Dying is overrated, unless we truly don't die at all.

The following year, after careful consideration, I knew there's nothing more that I could salvage, emotionally or otherwise, from New Orleans. So, I detached myself from it. After I had ended my last contract on board ship, I came to the UK. And I made a promise to myself; that I will never go through another hurricane like Betsey, Katrina or Rita - again. When natural disasters happen, all over the world - I not only see what it's like, I feel what it's like. I can hear the sounds, smell the air, re-live all the chaos and mental distress. And know what's it's like in the aftermath to be negatively impacted by: the actions of uncaring people toward their family and their community, the commercial greed, misuse of authority, the failure of government on every level, the breakdown of civic duty. Security - for me has been totally lost, I feel that it does not exist in our human society as a whole. And the way we've all been carrying on collectively and it's shameful. However, having experienced one of the worst disasters in history and the events related to it; problems and challenges that I face of a lesser degree, I simply don't stress or worry about. What I took from hurricane Katrina was the fact that, whatever is good in the hearts of people will raise above dystopia and fear, no matter where they are or what terrible situation, they are in. The challenge is for me and hopefully all of us, to bring out that "good" and collectively use it to help each other, and we don't need a disaster to prove that we can do this, together.