



WHERE THE HEART IS

SINCE HURRICANE KATRINA OBLITERATED MY NATIVE NEW ORLEANS, MY FAMILY CALLS ATLANTA HOME THIS HOLIDAY SEASON.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

NEVER DID BELIEVE IN COINCIDENCES—and certainly don't now, given the fateful events that have occurred since Hurricane Katrina obliterated my hometown of New Orleans. The odds that my mother, Terri, and I, who have lived in Atlanta for nearly 20 years, would've gone home just days before the end of New Orleans as we knew it are extraordinary. In all these years, we had *never* flown home specifically to celebrate my grandmother, Mildred Williams', birthday. But her 77th, which fell on a Saturday in late August, just seemed like the perfect

occasion for our close-knit family to throw that overdue surprise party. For me, it was also an opportunity for a too-long-delayed visit with my dad and his family, who also live there. Not to give away the whole story, but let's just say we went to New Orleans for a surprise party and, boy, did we get surprised.

At first, our scheme progressed without a hitch. Mom and I nearly gave my

FAMILY CIRCLE

The author with (l-r) Terri Thomas, Mildred Williams, Tyrone Williams, Kim Moss, Jessica Moss, Anise and Anthony Sexton.

grandmother a heart attack by showing up at her front door on Friday evening. She still hadn't caught on that we had an even bigger surprise in store, and all the surreptitious preparations were falling into place. It was just like old times as we sprawled across my grandmother's couch, munching on shrimp and oyster po-boy sandwiches and sipping Barq's Root Beer. Little did we know that this would be a last supper of sorts.

Everything changed when the nightly news came on and, for the first time, I heard the name that I will never forget: Katrina. New Orleans Mayor Ray

Nagin was making rounds at the TV stations, appealing to residents to leave the city before the predicted Category 5 hurricane hit early Monday morning. Although I could hear his emotional pleas in the background, my cousin and I continued whispering party details over the telephone. I even tried to visit the French Quarter to meet a friend who is a television news reporter (duh, he couldn't make it). If our casual attitude seems reckless now, remember that New Orleans typically gets hurricane scares and calls for voluntary evacuation at least three times a year.

The next day, the severity of the situation finally began to sink in. We tried to take my grandmother to Saturday mass at St. Gabriel's; it was canceled. The restaurant where we had planned to hold the party called to tell us they were closing, and we couldn't find another place that was open—for even a makeshift surprise dinner. New Orleans was shutting down.

The big celebration we had spent weeks planning dwindled down to my mom, my grandmother and I sharing a bucket of "authentic New Orleans-style" Popeye's chicken at the kitchen table where we had shared countless meals—a choice, though perfunctory at the time, that will remain an endearing memory.

When we heard that the airport was

closing, my mom and I, like thousands of others, realized we were essentially stuck in a city that would soon be under siege. My dad, Charles Thomas, and his wife, Mary, insisted that I ride with them to Memphis. Thank God they did. "I'm stuck in New Orleans trying to escape Hurricane Katrina," I hastily e-mailed a friend just before deciding to evacuate. "I'm trying to get out so that I won't get stuck in the Superdome."

At the time we were supposed to be sipping mai tais and savoring fat slices of gourmet cake at my grandmother's party, my family was scrambling around, preparing—unbeknownst to them—to leave their homes *forever*.

While my uncles were busy outside boarding up the windows, I helped my grandmother pack. Like thousands of other New Orleanians, accustomed to occasional evacuations, she stowed four days of clothing, some important papers and a few toiletries in a small suitcase. I begged her to take the ornate antique jewelry box that held her vintage jewelry, including the engagement ring my grandfather had given her nearly 50 years ago. "Chandra, I'm not bringing

KATRINA'S WRATH

The hurricane's devastating aftermath at the New Orleans home of the author's grandmother.

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all of that stuff," she fussed. "We'll be back in a couple of days."

Just before I clicked off her bedroom light, I lingered over the framed black-and-white wedding photo that had been sitting on top of her chest of drawers for nearly half a century. My grandparents' youthful smiling faces stirred something deep within me. I wanted so much to stash it in my own bag for safekeeping, but I ultimately dismissed the premonition as overly sentimental. Even if there was flooding, surely the water wouldn't get that high, right?

Still, I couldn't resist moving all the irreplaceable family photos and yearbooks on low shelves to the very top of the bookcase in hopes of protecting them from a possible flood. As I zipped out the door en route to my dad's house, I grabbed the display box that contained my late grandfather's American flag and the Purple Heart he had earned in the Korean War. "You have to take this," I barked at my grandmother. Thank God she listened that time.

Ultimately, my mom's side of the family ended up in a hotel in Shreveport, Louisiana. I joined my dad's caravan to Memphis. Normally a five-hour drive, the trip lasted some 11 hours thanks to the heavy traffic of an entire city evacuating—think Georgia 400 at the height of rush hour. I managed to get a flight from Memphis that arrived in Atlanta at almost the exact time Katrina was battering New Orleans and the other Gulf states. We all breathed a sigh of relief when meteorologists confirmed that the city had avoided the eye of the storm, but as images of rising flood water flashed across our television screens, we soon





Sommer and Autumn McWeen, who fled Katrina, now live in Newnan thanks to the community's generosity.

realized that there would be no immediate return. Reports indicated that water was as high as 20 feet in the areas where my family lives, cresting over roofs in many cases. The knee-high flooding that we expected had truly turned into the worst-case scenario.

My mother conceded that the best option was to load my aunt, my grandmother and my young college-bound cousin into the car and head for Atlanta. My uncle and two more cousins would come later. Huddled in front of CNN for days at my mom's house, we began to worry about my elderly great-aunt and great-uncle who had insisted on riding out the storm in a downtown New Orleans hotel. We were told that they had been evacuated to the Superdome. Our concern turned to panic as we watched the anarchy unfolding there and at the New

Orleans Convention Center—no electricity, no food, rampant crime and subsequent rage.

There was a brief sigh of relief when my cousin from Las Vegas called to tell us that my great-aunt, Anise Sexton, had been quoted in *USA Today*, commenting that she had been okay at the Superdome until Katrina violently peeled off part of the roof. At least we knew she was alive. And we couldn't help but chuckle at the fact that, out of all the people holed up in the Superdome, my great-aunt, who is known as a big talker in the family, ended up being interviewed by a reporter.

But as the days wore on, we worried that she and her husband, both in their 80s, were still among those suffering in the now dark, filthy confines of the "shelter of last resort." Had they

packed enough food? Was there any water to quench their thirst in the blistering New Orleans heat? With no way of contacting them, another cousin, John DuConge, who lives in Decatur, frantically searched the Internet for clues to their whereabouts. At one point, rumors began to circulate among my family that my aunt was with the evacuees who had been relocated to the Houston Astrodome. We immediately dispatched family members who live in the area. For hours, they scoured the aisles of the massive facility—jampacked with some 14,000 displaced residents—but my aunt could not be found.

It was nearly a week before we were able to locate her and my great-uncle—in the two different states where they had been transported separately. A nurse called John, informing him that my great-aunt was at a shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana, (my aunt doesn't have any recollection of being there) and that she was about to board a bus bound for Dallas. Her husband, Anthony, in dire need of dialysis, had been airlifted from Tulane Medical Center to a

hospital in Pensacola. Amazingly, through all the chaos, my great-aunt had managed to cling to a prized sketch of her childhood home and the three suitcases she had packed for her hotel stay, one of which contained a single prized doll from her coveted collection, now mired in polluted flood water. Husband and wife were flown to Atlanta for a long-awaited reunion.

Just when things seemed to be stabilizing, I got a heartbreaking call on my cell phone. "Omigod, I am so glad to hear your voice," the person on the other end gushed. It was my cousin Sommer McWeen, calling from an American Red Cross shelter in, oddly, Newnan, Georgia. In all those days of watching my hometown destroyed on national TV, I hadn't shed a tear—until my 27-year-old cousin began to describe the harrowing ordeal of wading through murky, shoulder-high water alongside her boyfriend, who had hoisted her 7-year-old daughter onto his shoulders. Heeding her maternal instincts, she had covered young Autumn's face with a T-shirt (telling Autumn it was to keep her hair dry) in an effort to shield the young girl from the sight of the many corpses—human and otherwise—floating by. Thankfully, they managed to get to the elevated Interstate 10 and ultimately hitchhiked to Newnan, hoping to reach me in Atlanta. But, at the

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Red Cross shelter, the outpouring of kindness and support from total strangers and members of the Central Baptist Church quickly landed them a permanent home and jobs. Their story is a true testament of how the human spirit of compassion

rises up in the face of adversity.

The media buzz about Hurricane Katrina has died down considerably, but the harsh reality of its enduring aftermath lives on for me, my family and legions of others who lost everything overnight. My grandmother, whose home of nearly 50 years was destroyed, is now my roommate. My aunt and uncle, who owned their own houses before the massive flooding, now share rooms with their children in my mother's basement. Simple things we've all taken for granted—a winter coat, shoes, food—have become precious commodities.

Now that it's all had time to sink in, I am truly convinced that it was no coincidence that my mom and I journeyed to New Orleans just in time to bid adieu to the city that we love so much. This experience has truly brought my life full circle. I am now helping to take care of the grandmother, aunts and uncles who, for so long, took care of me as a child. I think of the many times I called asking my dad to send money; now I'm gathering donations to help him secure basic necessities for his family's new, albeit temporary, life in Memphis.

I hope the promise to rebuild bigger and better is kept, but there is a nagging fear that the true essence of what made our hometown one of the most unique and vibrant cities in the world may be gone forever. I am comforted, however, in knowing that the spirit of New Orleans will live on in our hearts.

This year will mark the first Christmas of my life that I have not celebrated the holiday with my family in New Orleans. Although a sobering thought, the realization also reinforces the true spirit of the occasion. As the season descends upon Atlanta, I am constantly reminded of the enduring pain experienced by those who lost loved ones in this unthinkable tragedy.

I am truly blessed to have my family here to celebrate with me, even if it won't be in the same house or in the same city that we all love so much. Home really *is* where the heart is. This is home for now. As my mom jokes, "We'll call it Atlanta Orleans!" ❀