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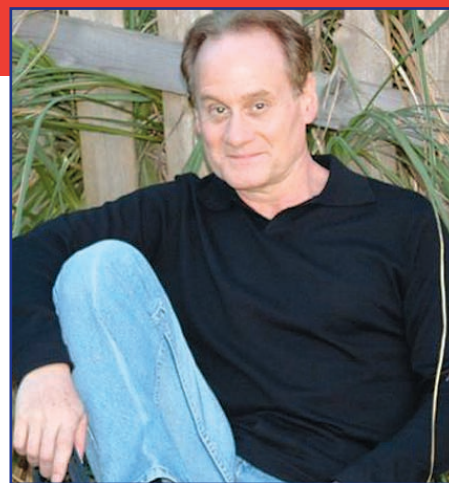
ONCE UPON A TIME, the way all good stories begin, George Gershwin wrote the music to these evocative lyrics, “*Summertime and the livin’ is easy.*” I’ve never read a biography about Mr. Gershwin, so I have no idea if he ever made it this far south. But I do know his song, “*Summertime,*” evokes the mood and feel of a Mississippi Gulf Coast summer like no other. I can only speculate if he knew why “the livin’ is easy.”

Those of us who call the Mississippi Gulf Coast home know why the “livin’ is easy!” Because it’s HOT! What else is there to do but take it easy and “hunt a cool place,” as the old timers say? For our tourist friends who might not know, a coastal summer can be a HOT, humid affair. And I don’t mean “*An Affair To Remember,*”



Carey Grant. The humidity, which hangs on a fellow like a wet fur coat, fuels the temperature, making it feel even hotter. And how HOT is HOT? As my sweet Granny from D’Lo would say, “So HOT, I’ve gotta feed my chickens ice cubes to keep’em from layin’ hard, boiled eggs!”

As a child growing up in Biloxi, I quickly learned that one of the few ways to escape the onslaught of summer was a quick dip in my mother’s Number 3 washtub. That simple pleasure always lasted until the neighbor’s children spied the tub with me in it, and attacked my watery refuge like parched camels at an oasis. The other respite was “sittin’ on the front porch” in the cool of the evening. Our house in Biloxi on Greater Avenue had such a haven. It was a modest example, which Mom jazzed up with that ubiquitous Southern porch staple: wicker. It fascinated me to hear our wicker chairs creak in protest when someone sat down on one of them, and how they would then softly purr, surrounding that lucky person with



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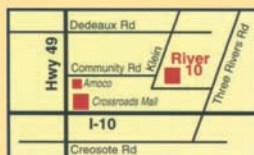
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their simple, luxurious comfort. Droopy, jade-green ferns, and my mom's ever present pots of Mother-in-law tongue, completed the ensemble. Life was great!

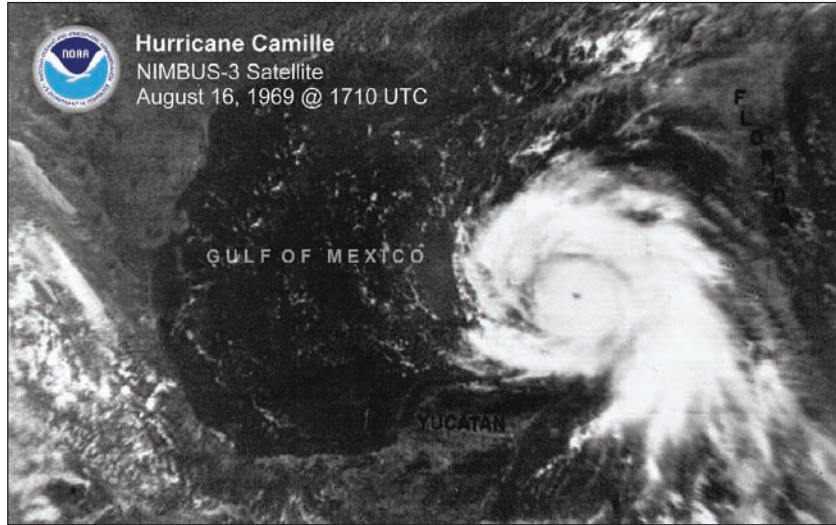
Sitting on our front porch, enveloped by the sharp, sweet scent of magnolias and the faint, faded nectar of mimosa, Mom's offering of Southern Table Wine – iced tea – served in crimson-colored, aluminum glasses dripping with icy-cold condensation, was the “bee's knees,” as the old-timers say. Many a late summer's afternoon, as the fiery, tangerine melon in the sky slowly dipped below the horizon, my family would sit and listen to the katydids singing their summertime opera, while the lightning bugs pranced in the twilight, as if choreograph by Diaghilev. Dad read his newspaper. Mom shelled her butter beans. And I played with a bubble-blowing toy elephant. Life was great!

In the dripping heat of July, 1962, we moved to Gulfport. But our new home in College Park had no porch. It had been replaced by that ranch-house-style phenomenon: a patio. The wicker was gone too, replaced by up-to-date, butterfly chairs that plopped you low to the ground, and engulfed you in corse, multi-colored canvas. Fichus trees and corn

plants kicked those old-fashioned ferns to the curb and reigned in majestic splendor over a vast, grey-white blob of concrete. “A patio!” said my sweet Granny from D’Lo. “Oh my! Y’all are certainly uptown now.” Life was great!

Our patio fell victim to a tranquil summer's evening of another sort. One that lured us inside. It was Dad's Deluxe-model Zenith TV – black and white of course. Encased in a mahogany cabinet, the TV boasted a high-fidelity record player, an FM/AM radio, and a clock that glowed in the dark. There we sat on our stylish Colonial furniture, dodging Matt Dillon's bullets on *Gunsmoke*, and singing along with the Lennon Sisters on *The Lawrence Welk Show*. But there was another reason we stopped sitting on the patio. “What was IT?” you might ask? IT made a low, dull roar, and was a little box wedged into a window – an air conditioner. “Air coolin’!” said my sweet Granny from D’Lo. “Not only are y’all uptown, but uptown is cooooool.” Life was great!

But as most of us know, and those now young must learn, the livin is not always easy, and life is not always great. And in days that followed August 17, 1969, my family learned that one of the greatest things about life was *LIFE* itself – life that could so easily be wiped out in the twinkling of an eye.



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It was pitch black when Camille came ashore. Because of that blackness, I never saw her vast, sprawling eye. The phrase, “the eye of a storm”, always fascinated me. I imagined that a hurricane possessed a huge, rolling, Cycloptic eye – all seeing, all knowing. In reality, the eye of a storm is the lull in winds and rain, signifying that the storm is directly overhead, its winds and rain about to change directions. Camille’s eye was a big one, some 15 miles in diameter. And she packed quite a punch, with ripping, cutting winds in excess of 200 miles per hour. She brought ashore other impressive credentials: a barometric reading of 26.61 and 20 foot tides, both of which broke records. The picture-books of the day gave her a dubious title: “Camille, She Was No Lady”. In the space of some six hours, that lady’s promenade irrevocably altered the Mississippi Gulf Coast – its towns, its landmarks, and its people.

Six months after Camille made her dramatic entrance upon the stage of our lives, my high-school sweetie was visited by her grandmother from London. After surveying the destruction, which still littered every yard, and draped itself around every building, my sweetie’s Great Mum, as she called her, proclaimed, “You chaps got in one night what we chaps got in four years of the blitz.”

Of all the sights I remember – night-patrolling soldiers, banana boats sitting high and dry on the sandy shore, gutted beach-front mansions, ancient oaks decorated like grotesque Christmas trees with bits of clothing, shredded oriental rugs, and the decaying bodies of dead animals, and a

waterlogged grand piano in the street – the most simplistic was the one which spoke the loudest. Passing a wretched ruin of a house, its bottom floor snatched from it as if some evil, demented giant had ripped out its very soul, I saw, battered and torn, Old Glory waving in all its majesty. That flag bespoke volumes to my 18 year-old-mind. To me, that flag symbolized America’s implacable spirit, and its ability to rise above any adversity.

Tears welled up in my eyes upon first seeing that flag. And it was then I knew that by God’s good grace, we – my Dad, my Mom, myself and all the other Coastal families — would rise above this disaster. And once again, life would be great!

Each Fourth of July, when the Coast is draped in bunting, and so many homes and businesses display Old Glory, I can’t help but think of that battered flag waving proudly from the remains of that house which had been destroyed by Camille. And as I get caught-up in the spirit of things, I can’t

help but feel that same sense of implacability that I had felt over 30 years ago. That dogged determination that said, “Whatever comes our way, we’ll get through it together!” And when we do, the livin’ will be easy once more. Life will be great! And we will live happily ever after, the way all good stories end.

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers.
May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.*

Anthony Wayne Kalberg

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