

KALEIDOSCOPE KAL'S

I NEVER KNEW THE MAN'S NAME. But as Katherine Hepburn said in that wonderfully rich, warbling voice of her's in the movie, *On Golden Pond*, he was "my Prince in shinning armor." And he was a Prince that I discovered, but by chance. By 2:00, on the afternoon of August 31, 2005, the blistering heat had wrapped itself around me like a dense, woolen, blanket, drippy-wet with humidity. Because of that heat, my early morning arrival at what had been my home on Gulfport's 2nd Street seemed like an eternity ago. But from day one after the storm, my early morning arrivals always began the same way.

First came a piping-hot cup of instant coffee, which woke me, but also increased my body temperature. That cup of coffee was followed by a freshly scrambled egg, doused in salt and pepper. Thankfully, my parents' house (which had survived the storm unscathed and to which I had evacuated) had a gas stove, so hot meals and hot water were possible after the storm; that is, as long as the ice in the ice chest kept the eggs somewhat fresh and chilled. After breakfast, came a shower.

Because water was for drinking and not bathing in the days following the storm, a Katrina shower was more like a "sponge bath," as the old-timers say. My sponge bath consisted of a pot of cold water, which was filled with the same dirty water from the day before, and a dirty washcloth. But at least the water was cool to the touch, and the smell of soap a reminder of more pleasant days. After the bath, it was time to pack a lunch.

My Katrina lunch usually consisted of an apple, as long as they lasted, and a can of deliciouslysmellysardines. The sardines were topped off with a few stale crackers. This taste treat was washed down with a jug of water that was warm, but refreshing in the blistering heat. Having lived through Camille and remembering how hard it was to get water, my Mom and I had filled every empty jug we could find. Those jugs of water

were our salvation in the trying, tumultuous days to follow.

"Bye Mom! See ya later this afternoon. Love ya!" And with those words, I was off.

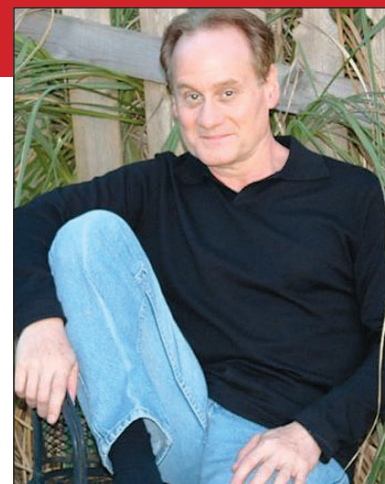
Before Katrina, the drive from my parents' house in the College Park Subdivision to my 2nd Street apartment would have been a 10-minute jaunt at best. Not so after Katrina! For those who traveled Pass Road in the days immediately following the storm, you know what an obstacle course it was. There were downed trees on the street and debris was everywhere. You'd speed up, just to slow down. Speed up when the traffic was flowing! Slow down when it wasn't! Stop! Go! Stop for emergency vehicles tearing up and down the street. Go after stopping at every downed red light, hoping the other drivers knew it was now a four-way stop. Those obstacles changed what was once a 10-minute ramble into a 45-minute scramble.

But the day had just begun.

Upon first seeing the debris that covered the streets south of the railroad tracks, I thought, "Best park on the tracks, and walk home." Seeing the Mt. Everest-like piles of splintered lumber—the lumber saturated with jagged, rusty nails—all I could think of was a flat tire.



"And where ya gonna get a flat tire repaired these days?" I thought. And so I parked my car on the railroad crossing at 18th Avenue, and started walking south—walking south into a modern day version of Dante's Hell.



I thought it best to post a note on my car before leaving it, just in case the police might stop, and wonder where the car's driver had run off to. My note read: ATTENTION! I'M AT 1518 19th AVENUE. I'M NOT A LOOTER, ONLY SOMEONE TRYING TO SALVAGE A FEW MEMORIES. My note must have worked, because my car was always just as I had left it, even though there were many unsavory characters roaming the streets during that time.

My arduous trek to my old digs was fraught with difficulty! I had to walk gingerly over debris piles that consisted of everything from the portico of the Gulfport Woman's Club, to huge chunks of the boardwalk that had once hugged the seawall, two blocks south. Because of the vast piles of debris that covered 18th Avenue, and made 19th Avenue impassable, I found it easier to walk through the backyards of my neighbors. Why the backyards? Because their houses had acted as a barrier of sorts, funneling the debris down the street, and leaving the backyards somewhat passable. The debris in the street was 11 and 12 feet high in places, so I, like electricity and water, always looked for the path of least resistance.

Walking along, I saw that the ground was littered with my neighbor's ruined finery. Broken Wedgwood china. The stumps of Waterford crystal goblets. A man's Italian-leather shoe – tawny brown, size 12. Muddy Brad Paisley CDs, along with those of Mozart and Bach. A soggy leather-bound Bible – King

James Version. Scores of family pictures, complete with smiling, snaggle-toothed children. And a white casket! Yes! A white casket that was lodged between two protective oaks. It had been set afloat by Katrina's boiling tsunami, which had lacerated the ground floor of the Bradford - O'Keefe Funeral Home. Thankfully, the box was empty!

And then it happened! I fell!

I had prided myself in being soooo careful while walking the debris line; so watchful of every loose board or shifting piece of plywood. But "pride cometh before a fall," so says the Good Book. And my pride had landed me in a "pickle-of-a-fix," as the old timers say. Not only had I fallen, but my left leg, especially my ankle, was now in the vice-like grip of two, non-cooperative, wooden beams, each proudly displaying a lethal arsenal of rusty nails.

My first thought was, "Please Lord! No cuts! No gashes! Can't remember the last time I had a tetanus shot. Can you?" The All Mighty gave no answer. Thankfully I had only a few minor scrapes, which never became infected. But at that point, those minor scrapes were the least of my worries. I was alone! Totally alone! The few neighbors who generally made the southward trek with me were nowhere in sight. So there I was. Stuck! My only companion was the viciously-hot afternoon sun. There was however, one other companion lurking in the afternoon heat – silence.

Because of the eerie, surreal-like silence that coated everything it touched, it was all too easy to hear anyone or anything walking the debris line. So I listened intently. I could hear nothing. Nothing at all! Only the occasional sound of a piece of tin, dislodged from someone's roof, and now entangled in the broken branches of an oak tree, scraping those branches with short, sharp strokes. And so I sat thinking, "What-on-earth are ya gonna do now?" Each time I tugged on one of the recalcitrant wooden beams, the other beam would tighten its grip. Tug! Tug! Tighten! Tighten! I yelled for help. Nothing! After some 30 minutes or more, I thought my situation was hopeless. But I was wrong.

It was then I heard a gruff, gravelly voice say, "Boy! You got nothin' better to do, but sit here all day?" Just as the voice had seemingly come from nowhere, so had the body to which it belonged. As if he had materialize from thin air, my Prince in shinning armor stood before me in a pair of torn, bib-overalls, wearing a Rebel-flag du rag,



and sporting a mouthful of pearly whites – the left front tooth slightly chipped.

"Sir!" I said with a smile, "You are like manna from Heaven! Can you give me hand?"

My rough-around-the-edges Prince said nothing. He wiped his sweating forehead with an equally sweaty red bandana, and proceeded to pry the beams from around my ankle.

"Hurt?" he said.

"A little." I winced in pain, thankful my thick socks were absorbing some of the discomfort. The Prince kept pulling. I wiggled my foot, which by now had fallen asleep.

"Keep wigglin' that foot!" said the Prince. "Try pullin' when I push!" So the Prince and the new Pauper of 2nd Street went to it. He pushed. I pulled. He tugged. I yanked.

And finally, with a great heave-ho, one of the encapsulating boards moved slightly, and I jerked my foot from out of its vice-like tomb.

"Thanks!" I said with a big grin. "Don't know what I'd done if you hadn't happened along." The Prince smiled, and started on his way. "Sir! Can I take you somewhere? Do you want some water?"

"That'd be nice," he said. I quickly open my ice chest and gave my Prince a gallon jug of cool water. "I'd take ya up on that ride, but they say it's bad over by the harbor . . . real bad."

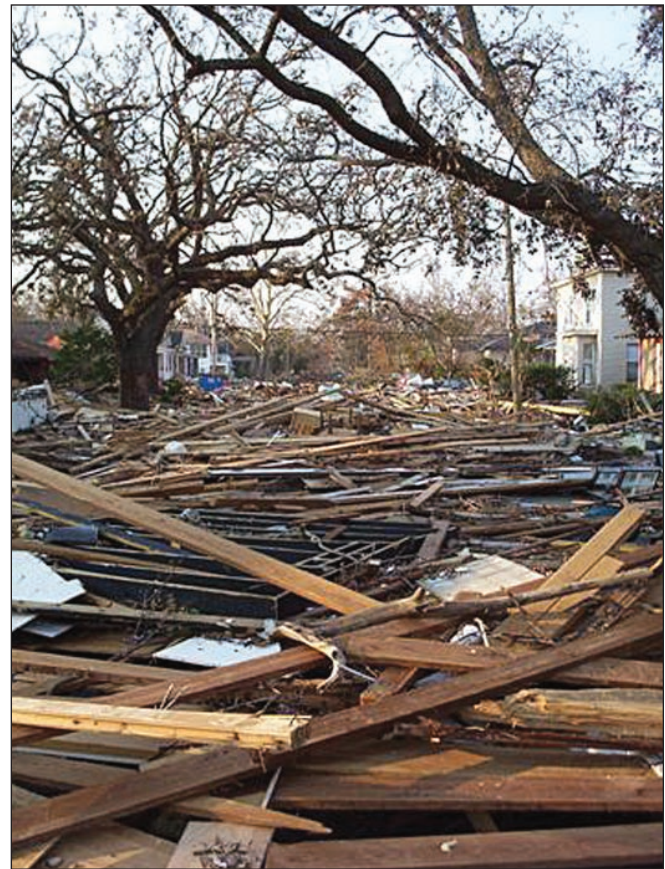
"Got family over that way?"

"Yeah. My brother, his wife, and his kids. Ain't heard from 'em since the storm." Tears welled up in his eyes. "Hope they made it."

"Sir, I'm so sorry. I'll send up a little prayer for 'em."

"Thanks," said the Prince. "Prayer's about all we've got left these days."

I then looked down to check my leg and to get another jug of water for the Prince, but when I looked up, he was gone. I could hear him walking the debris line, but I couldn't see him. "Hey Mister! What's your name?" I yelled. "Stop! Let me at least shake your hand!" There was



no answer. By the time I grabbed my ice chest, and started walking the debris line myself, the Prince was gone. I never saw him again.

Now, eight months after Katrina, I cannot help but wonder what happened to my Prince in shinning armor. And I've often wondered if the Prince found his family safe and sound. But something tells me that in the days following the storm, when drinkable water was scarce, law enforcement was spread paper thin, and slimy, filthy, things called looters bubbled up out of the sewage, I was not the only person lucky enough to have been helped by a Prince in shinning armor. For even in the darkest days, God in his wisdom sends to us bright rays of sunlight in human form. Those bright rays dispel the darkness, and in so doing, renew our faith in our fellow travelers traveling down Life's path. And if by chance my Prince should read this, please e-mail me. And if other Prince's who came into other people's lives read this, maybe they too will attempt to contact those they helped during a time when the simplest of act of kindness was truly like a "Prince in shinning armor."

Please remember to pray for our troops.

May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.

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