

The Long Goodbye

After the evacuation, a husband and wife try to go home.

By Mary Tutwiler | 12/14/2005

Three months after Hurricane Katrina, my house in New Iberia is growing quiet. Our evacuees have returned to their homes.

All but one. My dad will never see New Orleans again.

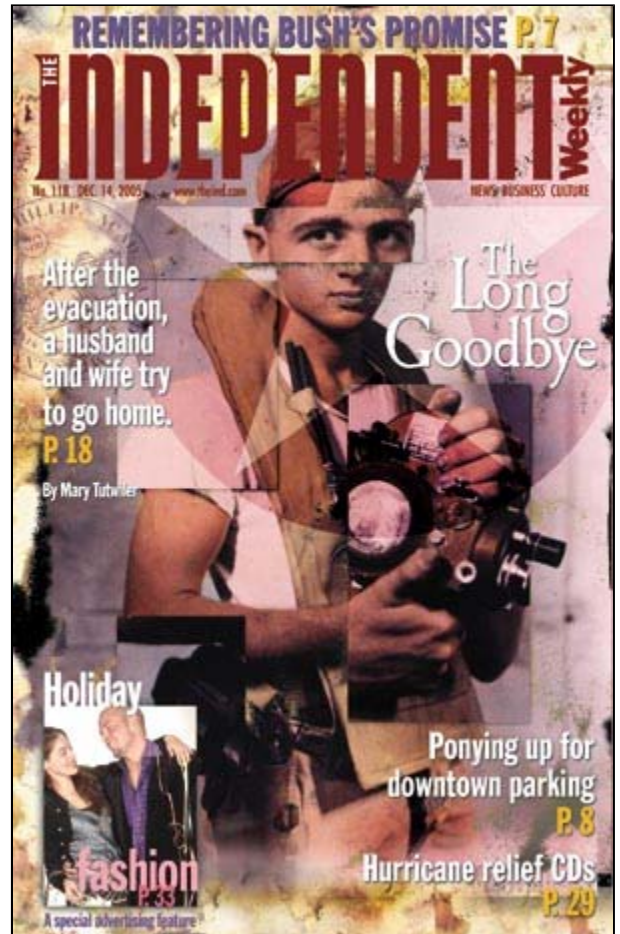
Our family's hurricane story began like everyone else's. My parents, Fred and Cathy Kahn, veterans of Betsy, Camille, and myriad storms over the years, were cavalier about the threat of Katrina. They evacuated New Orleans last year when Ivan sent residents fleeing into a nightmare of gridlock on the interstates. Fourteen hours bumper-to-bumper on the usual two-hour trip to New Iberia made them far more leery of the traffic than the hurricane bearing down on New Orleans. As the storm grew in strength and took aim at the Crescent City, they finally packed up the car with an overnight bag and my father's medications and came "out west," as my dad called New Iberia.

This was not an easy trip. My mother is 75, my dad 82. Daddy had his heart valves replaced in 2000. That gave him four good years, but in the past year he had two near-fatal bouts of endocarditis, a bacterial infection of the heart. Because his taxed heart valves weren't pumping enough oxygen, he used a breathing machine when he felt like he wasn't getting enough air. He was also beginning to show signs of developing Alzheimer's disease.

Nonetheless, despite their seven-hour evacuation, my parents arrived in good spirits and my dad greeted me with a cheerful "Hello, Mary," when he came in the door. In short order my brother-in-law and his wife, Steve and Elizabeth Seebol, childhood friends Peter and Paul Reynaud and their 80-year-old parents Dorothy and Richard Reynaud all turned up on my doorstep before the sun set on Sunday, Aug. 28. I made a vat of gumbo, and we all sat down to dinner.

The horror of the week following the storm is engraved on the collective consciousness of every resident of Louisiana. Anger, sorrow, outrage, grief – moods shifted constantly. I went to work at the paper, where people randomly broke down in tears. At home, we lived as if the world were ending, cooking extravagantly and drinking cases of wine to drown the images of a beloved city engulfed by chaos.

New Orleans has an intimate relationship with its dead. Raised tombs resemble houses, and locals mark the passage to a better world with jazz funerals, a final celebration of the life of the deceased.



Hurricane Katrina disrupted those ceremonies. With funeral homes shuttered, cemeteries only now beginning to inter the dead and congregations scattered across the nation, the ritual of burial is another traumatic legacy of the storms.

As Katrina hit the city, the business of burying the dead – like every other business – came to a halt. Billy Henry, manager of Bultman Funeral Home on St. Charles Avenue, and his staff stayed though the initial storm. (Bultman is one of four locations owned by Tharp-Sontheimer.) They were forced to evacuate on Thursday, Sept. 1, because of rising water. “Almost every funeral home that had embalming facilities had bodies [awaiting burial],” he says. At its funeral home on Claiborne Avenue, employees carried bodies up to the second floor and left them when they evacuated, hoping floodwaters wouldn’t rise above the first floor.

Alexander’s Funeral Home in Lutcher, also owned by Tharp-Sontheimer, was able to remain open. Henry went to work there on Friday, Sept. 2. “Just because there was a storm doesn’t mean people stop dying,” Henry says. “The phone began ringing when people found out where we were.” He rented refrigeration equipment to hold bodies because there was nowhere to bury them.

The embalmed bodies abandoned in New Orleans were evacuated by airboat the following week. The only functioning cemetery in greater New Orleans was Garden of Memories, on Airline Highway in Kenner. “They were gracious enough to allow us to do temporary burials in their mausoleum,” Henry says. “We’ve just now begun to transfer those caskets to permanent burial places.”

Others will never make it home. Legendary musician Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, already battling lung cancer, fled Katrina by evacuating to Texas. His family said he was heartbroken by the destruction of his Slidell home; the Times-Picayune published a stark photograph of one of Brown’s guitar cases lying amidst the rubble of his house. Brown died Sept. 10 and was buried in his boyhood hometown of Orange, Texas, on Sept. 17.

Renowned Creole chef Austin Leslie died in Georgia of a heart attack following an arduous evacuation from his home in Gentilly. A funeral service was held in Atlanta, and there was an Oct. 10 second-line parade honoring him in New Orleans. His family hopes to bury him in New Orleans sometime in the future.

My father saw his city submerged. The television was never turned off, and we watched in horror as an entire city block burned in my parents’ neighborhood. Through every heart-wrenching image and agonizing revelation, he alone remained cheerful. There comes a peace that accompanies diminishing powers. He sat next to the phone and loved to answer it



A water-damaged photo rescued after hurricane Katrina shows 22-year-old Catherine Kahn in 1953.



Fred Kahn and six-month-old daughter Mary Kahn in 1955.

He sat next to the phone and loved to answer it

as his longtime friends — now fellow evacuees scattered across the country — called the house. My mother, overloaded with the level of care my father needed, hired nurses who worked in shifts and became part of the swelling household. Daddy would ask my mother daily when they were going home, and sometimes in frustration, most often with kindness, my mother would tell him, “Freddy, we can’t go home; New Orleans had a flood, remember?”

“Oh, I remember now,” my dad would say with a rueful smile. But then he’d forget and ask again.

When mold began to consume houses as they emerged from the floodwaters, my mother and I realized that with my dad’s weakened immune system, he would not be able to go home for a long, long time. As the days passed and he became exceedingly frail — eating less, sleeping more — we knew that he probably would never go home at all. Dad was hospitalized with breathing difficulties at Dauterive Hospital in New Iberia when Hurricane Rita hit on Sept. 24. It was a blessing; Rita cut off the power for two days at my house, and Daddy would have been hot, miserable and confused had he been home with us.

My brother, Frederic, flew in from Atlanta. We spent two days evaluating my parents’ house in New Orleans. By then, five weeks after Katrina, we knew that the house was growing a toxic garden of mold, and we would have to rake out personal belongings, tear out sheetrock, deal with insurance companies and rebuild if my parents ever wanted to return to their home. While my brother was in town, my dad was released from the hospital. During that time, my father’s doctors, my mom, my brother and I understood that dad would never get well. We only wanted to make his days comfortable. My mother lovingly told him, “You’ll never have to go back to the hospital again.”

While mom stayed by my father’s side in New Iberia, my husband, brother and I took on the work of salvaging what was left of my parents’ belongings in New Orleans. We’d make the two-hour drive back, covered with grime, hauling some prize we had found — daddy’s watch, the keys to their bank box, an unopened bottle of scotch. Dad promptly gave his watch to my brother, who burst into tears.

My mother was overwhelmed with paperwork. She had to file an insurance claim on their house, keep up with my father’s medical insurance, make sure all the mail came to my house, and transfer power of attorney to herself. She turned her other energies to running my household while everyone else went to work. The heaviest burden, however, was the increasing amount of care my father required and the loneliness and fear my mother experienced, isolated from her friends, her job, her temple and rabbi.

We all tried to help, but work offered a stability and normalcy we craved. I found myself spending long hours away from the house. It was hard to watch my father lose control of every aspect of his life, hard to watch my mother try to keep him alive by her will alone. My brother flew home. The Seebols went to stay with Elizabeth’s sister in Atlanta. Members of the Reynaud family returned to New Orleans, to a house virtually undamaged by the storm.

On Oct. 22, I had dawdled in town, unwilling to spend a whole beautiful Saturday at home. I returned at 4 p.m. as Mom and Dad were watching the Tennessee-Alabama football game. Daddy silently slid into unconsciousness, then simply stopped breathing. My mother kept patting his hand and calling his name.

There is no preparation for such a moment. My mother and I looked at each other across my father’s still form, then I stood up and put my arms around her. Neither of us cried. We had both cried so many tears for New Orleans that I think we were drained of emotion. The first call was to Hospice, then to a local funeral home we found in the phone book. When the undertaker arrived, my mother gave him my father’s blue blazer with his favorite Andover buttons. She also wanted my father to keep his wedding ring. We watched the hearse pull out of the driveway.

The shock was tempered with relief that my dad did not suffer. Tears never came. Instead, we did what we had been doing all along, making plans and decisions.

No funeral in New Iberia.

No memorial service until my mother was home in New Orleans.

Cremation was the only possibility.

That done, we had a drink.

Sunday, we paid the undertaker. My mom called some of her friends, the ones she could find. She realized she had to open a succession for my father's estate and discovered her lawyers hadn't returned to New Orleans. Her rabbi was living out of town. The funeral home our family has used for decades had been flooded. The cemetery in New Orleans where the family plot holds the remains of generations of my family was closed. There was nothing more my mother could do for my father.

But there was still a lot of work for her. Monday, she went with me to New Orleans to see the city and her house for the first time. Tuesday we went shopping for a new stove, icebox and dishwasher. Wednesday we bought her new clothes – the first time she had been shopping since she arrived with an overnight bag on the eve of the storm. We worked on her insurance claim. She got her hair cut. We went out to dinner.

Neither of us cried. My mother's rabbi, Ed Cohn, returned to New Orleans Nov. 13. When I spoke to him about my inability to grieve, he said my reactions weren't unusual. "Everyone's shoulders are bearing heavy burdens," he says. "Everyone is sustaining so many shocks. We just have to cope, push things along."

The week Cohn resumed his duties, he immediately performed three funerals for families in his congregation who had been waiting for him, and one for another congregation. The city's cemeteries are open again, but on very limited schedules. Only 10 percent of the employees of Lakelawn, Metairie and St. Vincent cemeteries – those who have a place to live – have returned to the city. Burials are limited and have to be scheduled three weeks after the funeral in some cases.

My mother returned to New Orleans a month ago. She lives in a borrowed apartment and goes to her job as archivist at Touro Hospital, while her contractor works on her house. Everything has to be rebuilt. She'll have a new kitchen, new closets, carpets and new clothes. The house is projected to be ready by January if the neighborhood has gas to power her new hot water heater.

My mother will move into a house without a trace left of my dad. My father came from a family steeped in ritual; once something is done one way, it is forevermore the only way. Every object held meaning, and nothing was ever discarded. Katrina changed that. Dad's clothes, frosted with mold, were thrown out months ago. His wooden desk, sitting on a water-saturated carpet, rotted away. All the odds and ends – hoarded candy, worn slippers, favorite shirts, collars of long dead but much loved dogs – the accumulation of a lifetime is gone.

My brother and I returned to New Orleans on Dec. 4 for graveside and memorial services for my father. Daddy is buried at Hebrew Rest Cemetery. I don't know how much of the rest of the congregation of Temple Sinai has returned. Many of my parents' friends have bought houses elsewhere, forsaking New Orleans and the network of lifetime friendships. My mom, fifth-generation New Orleanian, wouldn't think of giving up on the city. New Orleans shaped her as it did my dad. They represent a generation imbued with character, their memories reaching back to the stories told to them by great grandparents whose primary language was French or German. If New Orleans is to survive, if its history informs the future, it will be because of people like my parents. That's why it was so important for them both – in death as in life – to return.