

Fall 12-20-2013

Something Like "Yes"

Laura J. McKnight Ms.
University of New Orleans, laurakwondo@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKnight, Laura J. Ms., "Something Like "Yes"" (2013). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1750.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1750>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Something Like “Yes”

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Laura J. McKnight

B.A. Nicholls State University, 2001

December, 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to show gratitude to a long list of people for teaching, guiding, entertaining, and delighting me. Without them, this collection would not be possible.

First of all, I would like to thank Drs. Randy Bates, Doreen Piano, Rick Barton, John Hazlett, and Elizabeth Steeby, as well as Jed Horne, Richard Goodman, and Henry Griffin for the important things they have taught me during my time at UNO. I would also like to thank former staff member Rebeca Antoine for helping me whenever needed.

My gratitude extends to my fellow students, who also served as teachers for me in many ways, as well as sources of inspiration and encouragement. I am grateful for so many classmates, but I offer a special thanks to the following individuals: Guy D. Choate, Coleen Maidlow, Coleen Muir, Barry Fitzpatrick, Summer Wood, Amber Wood, Lea Downing, Cate Root, Josie Scanlan, Whitney Mackman, Kat Stromquist, Alexandra Reisner, Erin Grauel, Laura Mattingly, and Melissa Remark.

Also deserving of thanks is John Coltrane, for allowing me the focus to write these pieces, as well as the City of New Orleans, Frenchmen Street, and the artists, writers, musicians, and characters for making this place the magical place that it is.

I would especially like to thank my parents, sister, and godfather for everything they have given to me and continue to give.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iv
Introduction.....	1
Marking Birthdays with Hurricanes.....	5
New Orleans is Something Like “Yes”	15
The End of Fat Tuesday	25
My Name is Welmon Sharlhorne	29
A Night at the Red Carpet Inn	51
Wolf Bitch Is Coming to Get You	61
Grieving the Pies I’ve Never Eaten	85
Sunday Brunch.....	90
Kaboom.....	95
Sunset on the Beach in Haiti.....	98
Trekking the Himalayan Foothills	117
References.....	123
Vita.....	124

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1	4
Illustration 2	24
Illustration 3	60
Illustration 4	84
Illustration 5	94

Introduction

When people write about South Louisiana, they often note the especially strong attachment to the land—and water—here. This odd delta landscape, formed by centuries of annual flooding by the Mississippi River, helped create the strange and wonderful culture that Louisiana is famed for worldwide. Growing up in this part of the world, I naturally developed strong ties to the bayous, swamps, marshes, the Mississippi River, and the French Quarter---not just as scenery, but as inspiration for and integral components of the music, food, language, and personalities that I adore. To me, these settings are almost human in their personalities and moods—and in the characters and events they tend to produce. The more I listen to people’s stories, the stronger I believe that the eccentricity found here is intimately tied to this terrain, to this place. As I began traveling abroad, I noticed that the most magical spots tend to share similar strong connections between landscape and culture, a dynamic in which place becomes a character.

The following collection of essays encompasses a diverse set of topics, backdrops, and themes—graffiti, dive bars, Mardi Gras, Haiti, hurricanes, heartache, grief, anger, insecurity, wonder—but the one thread that ties them together is place. In most of these essays, the setting functions as more than a backdrop for the action, but as an influential character in itself. Place as a character becomes a part of the story or an important reflection or inspiration of the action or other characters.

A tumultuous setting like South Louisiana often produces stories of joy and grief—and perhaps more importantly, joy within grief. Essays like “Marking Birthdays with Hurricanes,” “New Orleans is Something Like ‘Yes,’” “Sunday Brunch,” “Grieving the Pies I’ve Never Eaten,” and “The End of Fat Tuesday” speak to the intensity with which life is lived here in

South Louisiana and how joy and grief often go hand-in-hand. These pieces express a raw determination to live to the fullest. With essays like “New Orleans is Something Like ‘Yes’” and “Kaboom,” I hope to present the sometimes tired concept of Louisiana’s eccentricity in fresh, creative ways.

Sometimes a place can best be captured in the form of a person. In “My Name is Welmon Sharlhorne,” I strive to profile a person who reflects the lively, interesting, and maybe even dangerous nature of the city itself. As with New Orleans, my love for Welmon likely shows, maybe even unintentionally at times, but it’s a love that doesn’t ignore faults. I try to present Welmon and the city as complex characters with both beauty and darkness and sometimes beauty that cannot exist without the darkness.

Sometimes a person—or at least a person’s struggles—can best be captured through a setting. In “A Night at the Red Carpet Inn” place inspired and reflects an inner exploration of universal ideas like insecurity and instability. On a narrow level, the piece looks into the self-questioning and feelings of anxiety and failure that can come with not having a space to call your own. On a broader level, the essay looks into the transient nature of my generation, the first to experience a collective “prolonged adolescence” by waiting until later in life to reach the traditional markers of adulthood—marriage, children, home ownership. We are a so-called “slacker” generation of wanderers with no place of our own, maybe even no identity of our own, which can make a one-night stay in a skanky hotel feel like paradise.

“Wolf Bitch Is Coming to Get You” uses an even more ominous setting to express themes of transience and powerlessness. This piece focuses on the fear and loneliness that can arise when living in a dangerous, isolated place—and how in the absence of community, repetitive messages of death and despair can grow loud and impactful.

The final two pieces take readers out of Louisiana and into Haiti and Nepal. These foreign settings could seem unrelated to the remainder of the collection, but both of these countries exude a familiar vibe I can best describe as “unbridled soul.” The lively, slightly rebellious spirit found in Haiti and Nepal helped produce stories that fit in well with a collection centered on South Louisiana.

In writing these essays, I drew inspiration from a range of authors, both fiction and nonfiction. John Steinbeck, and *Cannery Row* in particular, showed me that a setting can have a personality. David Sedaris and Anne Lamott taught me that mundane events in the life of a normal person can become fodder for extraordinary writings. David Foster Wallace changed my world with his brilliant displays of creativity in presenting inner journeys. Joan Didion and James Baldwin also showed me that an author’s particular voice can give new life to hashed-out topics and enable readers to see a subject from different and mind-opening perspectives. These authors showed me that while a lie can tell the truth, the truth can also tell the truth—and in a way that’s entertaining and even poetic.



Illustration 1: *Hurricane Birthday at the Rock 'n' Bowl, August 2008*

Marking Birthdays with Hurricanes

August 2008

I am 28, almost 29.

The apocalypse, in the form of Hurricane Gustav, is on its way to my hometown of Thibodaux, Louisiana, as well as Houma, the nearby city where I live, but I am on my way to the Rock N' Bowl in New Orleans.

In my childhood years, storms meant boarding your windows, buying batteries, and playing cards with family until the wind stopped screaming outside. But Hurricane Katrina wiped away the days of slaphappy, party-ready attitudes toward storms, replacing our fun with grave, escape-ready, panic-charged fear. Before Katrina, my neighbors would celebrate the vacation from work and school. Instead, as Gustav approaches, they are crowded around hills of sand in parking lots throughout our city, sweating as they shovel sand into bags, continuing to shovel even after the metal scoops clink and scrape against empty pavement, as through the world is about to end and this one last sprinkle of sand in a bag might save them.

Gustav is scheduled to rip into coastal Louisiana early Sept. 1. So on my birthday, Aug. 29, everyone I know is either packing, leaving, or caught in the intense battle of whether to stay or go, a dilemma that seems insane to anyone who doesn't live in hurricane land. My neighbors, friends, and family are deciding whether to withstand violent winds and water or brave excruciating evacuation journeys and extended stays with relatives. The stress of this decision

leaves most with a pinched, glazed expression, lips drawn and eyes open but empty, seeing only scales weighing whether to gamble or fold. Most fold; the stakes are high this time.

Earlier this week, my mom tells me she has acquired an ax, in case she needs to chop her way out of the attic, but I find this information more nauseating than comforting. I am relieved when she and my dad instead board the house, cram the family photos and keepsakes into their truck, and head to Arkansas. I spend much of my birthday packing my own prized possessions – mostly photos, my favorite books, and special artwork into plastic crates, distributing the most critical treasures to my parents for delivery to Arkansas and the second-tier keepsakes to a family friend with a two-story house on high ground. I haul furniture and books and knickknacks to the second floor of my own apartment, which sits just a few feet above sea level and precariously close to a large, swampy lake. As I hoist chairs and trinkets upstairs, I imagine the plausible contents of the lake – alligators, snakes, slimy algae, tangled moss, broken tree limbs, prehistoric-looking fish, lost nets, rotted cars, dead cats, murder victims – washing into my living room in one giant rush of swamp water. I picture myself stranded at the top of the stairs, staring into the watery green-black muck, ready with my stash of military MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) and Kung-Fu sword but wishing I had bought the cheap kayak at Academy Sports. Too late now, I think, as I push heavy chairs away from windows, and decide which of my pants, shirts, skirts, and shoes I definitely want to keep. One of my roommates calls to discuss sandbags for our home. I tell her I will pack, plan, prepare.

But I refuse to sandbag on my birthday. I will do it tomorrow.

Tonight, I am riding to the Rock N' Bowl, the place where my friends originally planned to gather for my birthday. New Orleans is under a voluntary evacuation; this time, most have

heeded the warning, which leaves a small and curious collection of holdouts attending the Rock N' Bowl for a performance by ReBirth Brass Band. The usually energetic band members look grim and nervous. They play a brief set of their classic songs, but somehow the music sounds more solemn than raucous tonight. During a break, they don't mingle with the crowd or sip beer; they sit huddled together near the bowling lanes, talking in quiet voices. I want to walk over and request "I Feel Like Funkin' It Up," but they look like they wish to avoid funk in' anything up, so I don't ask. My godfather uses his phone to pull up satellite images of Gustav and we hold the images next to our faces and pose for photos, our playful smiles and mocking saucer-eyes a touch disturbing, like hurricane versions of Day of the Dead skeletons.

The next performer, Kermit Ruffins, would make a fun Day of the Dead celebrant – a cheerful, laidback skeleton in a snappy blue suit and signature do-rag tied beneath his fedora, the label on his shadow box announcing "El trompetista." Tonight, Ruffins challenges the grave atmosphere by sauntering on stage and pulling out his trumpet with the most non-frazzled look I have seen in the past 24 hours. His entire demeanor basically shrugs at the storm, and this makes me feel like everything might be all right. Where ReBirth acts unnerved and Kermit uninterested, Rock N' Bowl owner John Blancher appears un-tethered to anyone else's reality. He jumps onstage and grabs the mike several times, interrupting the music to make passionate pleas for everyone not to leave New Orleans.

"You DON'T evacuate New Awlins when there's a storm by CUBA!" he yells repeatedly into the microphone. "The blessed Muthah will protect us!" he shouts, pointing wildly to an image of the Virgin Mary just above one of the bowling lanes.

John Blancher is making me very happy. Later, I dance with him, and he buys me a drink, offering me a few moments of birthday fun before doomsday – and a bit of questionable comfort about my decision to stay in the storm’s path.

I have chosen to gamble, partly because I work for a newspaper, and such tragedies offer the most important – and most exciting – chances to help by delivering news to evacuees anxious to know the exact toll collected by the storm. I also remain behind, because I want to witness the demise of my birthplace. But also to avoid getting stuck again in a place like Milwaukee...

August 2005

I’m 25, almost 26.

I am sitting in the New Orleans airport Aug. 27, glancing at newspapers and scoffing at histrionic headlines about a storm swirling in the Gulf of Mexico. By now, I have ridden out a roll call of tropical storms and hurricanes of varying categories and effects: attacks from Allison, Isidore, Lili; a scare from Georges and maybe a Bill; and threats from nameless others. Old-timers talk about Betsy and Camille with awe and reverence, but at 25, I maintain the reckless indifference common to younger generations of bayou dwellers. We’ve heard the urgent warnings issued by ecstatic weathermen and neurotic seniors, the admonitions to run or die, followed by anticlimactic damage that proves more inconvenient than dangerous. We’ve survived power outages, school makeup days, flooded streets, cabin fever and family closeness. Just get batteries and water, a bucket of Popeye’s chicken, and Monopoly, and we’ll be fine.

This morning, I am relieved to catch a plane to my aunt and uncle's Milwaukee home for a brief birthday vacation. I feel a bit guilty leaving the other news reporters to fill my duties in covering Hurricane Katrina, but not too guilty. I smile to myself as I sit cross-legged on the airport carpet, knowing I will avoid writing hypocritical news stories that advise everyone else to evacuate, while knowing that I never would. *I accidentally picked the perfect time to escape, I think. Monster storm? Right. They say that every time. All that chaotic preparation for another false alarm.*

But by the time my plane lands that afternoon, Katrina has morphed into an actual impending nightmare, washing the smirk off my face. My relatives try to sympathize as I stare into their television screen watching, estranged from home and powerless to help anyone I love as the monster marches toward them through the Gulf. But my relatives are citizens of this foreign place where I am now trapped, a strange land of dry basements, yeast-scented air, and land far above sea level, safe from oceanic ravages. Wisconsin is okay – I like beer and cheese – but I cannot get gumbo, crawfish po-boys, Yat accents, brass bands, unpredictable streetcars, or French Quarter men in butt-less leather chaps in Wisconsin and suddenly, I just want all these clichés of home. Even the butt-less leather chaps.

By the time my birthday arrives, the same day Katrina strikes, I cannot contact any of my family or friends, and I cannot get home. In some ways, I can never get home.

It's bright, sunny, beautiful in Wisconsin. The air is calm. In Louisiana, people are fleeing, screaming, drowning. In Milwaukee, people are riding their bicycles, visiting the art museum, ordering sandwiches from Subway. I try again and again on my aunt's Milwaukee-based cell phone to call my parents, evacuated from Thibodaux to Lake Charles, and my sister

near Waveland, Mississippi, but I only reach an automated message, delivered in a robotic female voice: “I’m sorry. The number which you are dialing is located in an area that is experiencing a hurricane.”

Everyone I know survives. No flooded homes, at least among my immediate family and friends. But Katrina ravages any confidence I held in our nation’s ability – and desire – to care for its own people. At 26, I miss the days when America seemed competent and good. I also miss the adventurous, survival-style bonding among family that comes only from weathering storms together...

August 1992

I am 12, almost 13.

I am riding through my hometown, a tiny city tucked into a south Louisiana bayou, staring from the passenger seat of my dad’s truck at the plywood that now shields the windows and doors of nearly every home, creating the kind of scrappy barricades one would expect in advance of a B-film zombie attack or alien invasion. It’s a weekday afternoon and usually, Thibodaux would resemble a lot of southern towns with children on bicycles, senior citizens caring for their lawns. But over night, the place has changed into a ghost town of silent, empty streets bordered by wooden zombie-shields. The sun shines and a light breeze blows, but the beautiful weather carries an ominous undercurrent, like a gleaming fake smile; the wider the grin, the creepier it becomes.

Still, I am 12, so the foreboding vibe in the air only electrifies me. I bask in the tropical breeze and sunshine, I gape at the alien-invasion barriers in fascination and think about how much fun the floodwaters could be.

Where I grow up, flooded streets represent cause for celebration. My street floods every time the sky dumps rain for more than an hour or two, and I watch with glee from my bedroom window as the water inches toward my home, past the ditch, past the willow tree, within feet of our front door. Flooded streets mean a vacation from school. They mean escaping loud, overstuffed classrooms to wade through my neighborhood in search of magical sights: an older boy snagging eels from the ditches to sell to Asians who make purses, my neighbors smiling as they row around their home in a pirogue, gangs of neighborhood children splashing water into the air.

Heavy rains turn the paved playground of our streets into a water park, a thrilling change of pace from long days of bike-riding, snowball-eating and dancing in my neighbor's driveway. Flooded streets mean my sister and I beg my mom to let us blow up our plastic inner tubes, so we can sail through our overflowing, eel-infested ditch, even though she always says "no." So I settle for wading instead, kicking my legs through the cool, dirty rainwater and watching it lap across our street in tiny ripples, seeing guppies wriggle across our street in teeny groups.

Hurricane Andrew hits tonight, and I am excited. Worrying is for grownups, but the grownups around me are not worried. My dad nails plywood over our windows and doors, with no more nervous energy than if he were mowing the lawn or checking the oil. Just another chore. From inside the house, the boards make the daylight disappear, turning our home into a cozy shelter.

Hurricanes form an ordinary part of life for us, so I don't understand why my relatives in Arkansas and Texas make frantic phone calls to my parents when a storm approaches our home. Their fear makes me giggle and roll my eyes. In even younger years, I would hurricane make season into a craft project, an excuse to build a tiny shelter in my bedroom closet, a little hideout equipped with batteries, flashlights, ghost-story books and a jug of water. I would put my favorite toys on my bed, so my Pound Puppies and My Little Ponies and Garbage Pail Kids cards could avoid any rising water.

Tonight, we hide in our shuttered living room, sitting around in the dim light as though nestled into an ark, waiting to hear the wind and rain. The winds start to whistle, softly at first, then screaming loud and violent. I can hear the clattering, ripping, breaking as the wind wrestles limbs from trees, knocks down our fence, tears the roof from our shed, but I feel safe inside. My sister falls asleep as the storm builds, and I find this hilarious. Then the wind slows and stops, as sudden as a roller coaster shutting from full speed to total halt when it reaches the end of a run. I grab my cheap, turquoise camera and rush out into the eye of the storm, running behind our house to capture the gray skies and flattened sugarcane fields. I marvel at the cane that usually grows much taller than me, now pinned straight to the ground as though stomped by a group of angry giants. Soon, the air starts whirling again and I go back inside to snuggle with my family as the wind and rain rage against the outside world.

Hours later, my sister and I emerge from our cave to survey our neighborhood, scampering through the new wonderland of fallen trees, tossed branches, knocked-over playhouses, and twisted gas-station canopies. The days-long power outage that follows is not so much fun, as my family struggles to sleep each night in thick heat. The four of us sleep side-by-side on my parents' bed, with the windows open, trying to tune out the steady roar of our

neighbor's generator. The blaring generators, August heat, and oppressive humidity make us miserable every night, yet the overall vibe maintains an air of adventure, the feel of an impromptu family campout – without even having to leave the interior of our home.

Two days later, my birthday arrives. The electricity remains out, which only makes my birthday cake, baked at a friend's home in a neighborhood with regained power, more special. Later that day, our electricity returns, and my family deems that a special gift from Louisiana Power and Light. I am 13 and cannot imagine hurricanes as anything other than adventures...

August 2008

I am 29 when I head back to Houma from the Rock 'n' Bowl. A day later, I gather vegetables, condiments, and any other contents of the refrigerator and freezer, including remnants of my birthday cake, and toss it all into a dumpster to avoid returning to the stench of food decayed in the August heat. I turn off all lights, unplug all appliances, and give the apartment one more look before heading to our paper's newsroom in Thibodaux. I drive down deserted roadways with two garbage bags of clothing, canned food, MREs, batteries, a flashlight, and a cheap sleeping bag. In Thibodaux, I station myself in a cubicle and start making hours of calls to emergency officials, scribbling down their updates on storm preparations and passing them along to editors.

I am nestled in my sleeping bag early Sept. 1, surrounded by cubicles and computers, when a much-weakened Gustav begins hitting the shore about 40 miles south of us. The hurricane delivers destructive winds and rain, but not nearly so much as forecasts predicted. A few of us walk outside during the storm, watching as wind rolls giant business signs down the

streets like metal tumbleweed. Other signs flap violently in the wind, threatening to become projectiles. We lose power, but our generators keep the computers and selective lights fueled, so we can chip away at endless amounts of work.

Gustav is a semi-dodged bullet, a grazing bullet, for most. The storm shreds roofs; tears away chunks of homes, schools, and churches; and ravages the electrical grids, yet spares us the predicted utter annihilation. I expected my apartment to disappear. Instead, my home suffers only a battered fence and a few missing shingles. Still, some lose their homes to the winds, and storm-related political drama abounds, supplying us with continuous fodder for the insatiable beast known as the news.

But sometimes, in quick moments snatched here and there from the grueling gnaw of the grownup world, I catch glimpses of a more magical one: Driving through an arch carved by chainsaw into the trunk of a fallen tree, navigating spider webs of downed power lines stretched across roadways, seeing layers of stars now unclouded by city lights, singing loud songs late into the night, exploring a church yard of toppled oaks to discover a concrete saint whose outstretched arms offer up a fallen tree limb, perhaps a late birthday gift.

New Orleans Is Something Like “Yes”

New Orleans is taking a break from schoolwork late Sunday night to slouch over to Frenchmen Street and into the Apple Barrel, a place aptly named as it feels insular, wooden, a bit rotted from the inside. The Apple Barrel is a claustrophobic’s bad dream, an electrician’s nightmare with its cramped space taken up almost completely by a small bar and several round tables and chairs near the windows. A narrow strip of floor runs down the center, stopping after about 15 feet. The place feels not much larger than the living room in my shotgun home – but the ceiling here feels much lower. I fight a constant impulse to duck, to at least hunch over and crunch myself into some formation that will have my body demand as little space as possible.

Musical performers are relegated to a rectangle of space opposite the bar and tables, right near the front door, so that every person entering or leaving the Apple Barrel must step awkwardly – or triumphantly – in front of the band, blocking the performers from view with every cigarette break or breath of fresh air. The bench outside, nestled right into the windows of the Apple Barrel, usually features a collection of the same elderly men with various flamboyant canes and hats who sink into the rickety wooden seat with the exhaustion of 65-plus years of scrounging for dollars and High Life, sweat running along the lines in their faces no matter the temperature outside.

To enter tonight, I must pass within inches of the keyboard player, a scowling funk artist who yells “I know YOU!,” into my face, and then do a clumsy sidestep to avoid bumping face-first into the singer, a tall and graceful woman with a muscular voice. I squirm my way to the bar and order a Guinness, laugh as a thirsty black-mouthed cur named Lucy stands on her hind legs next to me and places her paws on the bar, panting at the bartender.

New Orleans is knowing that this dog is a black-mouthed cur named Lucy, because by the time I finish patting the dog's head and complimenting her penchant for beer, I have already befriended Lucy's owner, Jeremy. By the time the band breaks, I know that Jeremy is from Florida, has lived in New Orleans for several years, loves his work at Adolfo's restaurant, and found Lucy wandering the streets here. By the end of the first set, I have "dog-sat" Lucy several times, gripping her leash while Jeremy takes bathroom and beer and cigarette breaks. People ask my permission to pet her. New Orleans is giving people in a bar permission to pet a dog that belongs to a guy I just met five minutes ago.

New Orleans is cleaning your clothes in a red-lit bar that one night presents a jaw-harp gutter-punk band, another night a Flamenco guitarist, another night a classic rock outfit, another night a bounce-rap squad fronted by an effeminate man in neon-pink spandex, another night the bartender behind the mike. It's dropping your underwear on the filthy floor and knowing you should just throw those underwear in the garbage or at least wash them again but you don't.

New Orleans is being offered more free marijuana in this bar-slash-Laundromat than you have ever been offered in your entire life. New Orleans is saying "no" to the weed only to have some dude leave some for you anyway, a dusty crumble of dark green plant from Mexico, lying in a tiny pile on the wooden counter next to the dryers, forcing you to say "yes."

New Orleans is dancing until your legs are sore and your body so dehydrated from sweat and beer and masses of gyrating people that you have to leave the club for air or you will absolutely pass out. And before you ever start dancing, you must eat the remnants of whatever fried chicken

or eggrolls are left decaying in the metal vats at Hank's gas station, because if not, you will throw up whatever alcohol has not exited via your pores. New Orleans is standing inside a convenience store around midnight, cramming old eggrolls that taste of fried grease into your mouth in the fluorescent lights so that you can dance until 3 a.m. Or later.

New Orleans is embracing the outrageous, including the outrageous wet heat of summer. It's deciding to just forget taking that extra shower because the minute you walk outside, your pores will erupt with sweat. It's giving up on that bit of makeup, the carefully ironed hair, the cute shirt that will only collect liquid beneath its sleeves. It's feeling that first rush of heat in the spring and telling yourself that really, you don't mind the summers here all that much, it's not that bad. It's telling yourself that in the summer, everyone looks kinda sexy, all steam-hot and glistening, like every person is caught in the height of passion. It's hoping that the sweat marks on the front of your tank top, the hair damp and mashed against your forehead, somehow make you look tragically sultry, like some southern gothic princess, all angst-ridden and feverish, fresh off the Streetcar Named Desire. It's knowing that you may picture yourself as Blanche DuBois, but in reality, your heat-inspired scowl and struggling steps make you look more like Ignatius Reilly.

New Orleans is strolling down Frenchmen Street and stopping near a nightclub to have a total stranger beg, I mean implore you to stick your fingers into his po-boy and dig out some barbecued shrimp to taste. And you do. And they are delicious. You say so, and he makes you dig for more.

New Orleans is licking the powdered sugar from beignets off your fingers as your friend snaps a photo of the guy seated on a bench outside Café du Monde, the guy with a leg missing who has just somehow hopped out of his wheelchair and is now tenderly petting the large iguana perched on his shoulder.

New Orleans is watching a bright red-and-green streetcar rattle past like an oversized toy train, then watching another rattle by, then another, all in the span of 10 minutes and shaking your head and wondering why in the hell you just saw three damn streetcars in a row when you hadn't seen a single one in the past three hours. New Orleans is asking three different people what time the streetcars stop running at night and getting three different answers and all of them are wrong because there is no answer that involves an actual point in time. The real answer is that the streetcars stop when they damn well feel like it.

New Orleans is standing next to the Mississippi River at night, watching the entire world – yes, the entire world – drift and float by in the form of tankers and tugs and paddlewheel steamers, and then getting kicked off the river – because the Riverwalk actually closes at midnight – by two security officers in a golf cart who pretend to run you over as a joke, grinning as they swerve closer to your feet. You rant about the idea of closing a whole damn riverside and then go get a drink, because what else would you do? They can shut down the whole damn riverside, but they will never shut down all the bars.

New Orleans is a pirate's hangout, a jazz nursery, a wild graveyard, an unlikely city in an impossible place – an impossible city in an unlikely place? – a bunch of strange stories remembered in fragments like bits of a burlesque dream or a clownish nightmare, maybe a dream *and* a nightmare, stitched together the morning after like a hobo blanket, all secondhand thread and mismatched pieces.

New Orleans is hearing a live band playing “Hey Pocky Way,” singing “Jacques-imo fi nah nay” as you walk into Rouses in the French Quarter to buy coffee and stamps. New Orleans is forgetting to ask the cashier for stamps, because you just noticed Satan standing in line behind you, grinning as he waits to buy the Coors Light tallboy cradled in his red hands. But no sweat, the cashier is too busy chatting with Satan to notice your absentmindedness.

“How are ya, bruh?” Satan asks, his teeth glowing white from among the thick red paint that coats his face. “Good,” the cashier says, sliding your coffee over the scanner. “I’m pretty hung-over,” Satan confesses, “might as well have this for breakfast.” Satan’s smile grows even wider as he brandishes his beer, so you smile back at Satan, trying not to stare at his ornate red-and-black boots, and then finally remember your damn stamps.

New Orleans is smack talk delivered by brass, trombones warring from either side of Frenchmen Street, their call-and-response drawing battle lines as crowds gather around each. And then

another trombone answering from down the street. Then all three sauntering toward each other, blaring jazzy taunts back and forth until they meet in the middle of Frenchmen and join together to face off with a taxi cab, forced to stop in the street as the trio marches toward the taxi's windshield, trombone slides thrusting forward like musical swords. And then a tambourine ruckus breaks out on the sidewalk, adding a din of rhythmic pounding and jangles to the impromptu showdown. Someone grabs a large plastic garbage can and begins beating in time. New Orleans is a worship of music that means a few trombones can literally stop traffic.

New Orleans is seeing one of the trombone players, who happens to be visiting from Philadelphia, and thinking that something about the expression on his face, the particular way he is smiling, says that he has never before hopped from club to club carrying his horn, receiving a forceful welcome – actually more like a command – to join every band for a song or two. Something about his wide eyes makes you think that this trombone player has probably never faced off with other trombones on the street, never roared into oncoming traffic, never shut down a street with his horn. His smile reminds you of the way you looked when at age 10, you saw snowfall for the very first time, felt the unreal white powder as it fell too close to the equator. His eyes remind you of the way you looked when at age 16, you boarded a boat to the Caribbean and for the first time saw water that was blue.

New Orleans is the un-bathed man tripping down Decatur Street begging for change, the one who promises, who swears to Gawd that he will not spend your hard-earned money on no hamburger, not on no food at all, that he will only use your money to buy alcohol. New Orleans is a cleaner-looking bum who asks “Do y’all have a dollar to support my crack habit?” You tell

this man that you do not have a dollar, that you just spent what you are pretty sure could be your last dollar bill on the jukebox. New Orleans is using the jukebox as a valid reason for not offering a dollar and having this man reply with a polite, “Yes, ma’am.” He understands. It’s 2 a.m., it’s been a long day, and you needed to hear that damn Teena Marie song. New Orleans is encountering yet another truly down-and-out-looking man who says “God bless you” even though you give him nothing, not even an excuse involving a jukebox.

New Orleans is walking past a male bum in his 50s, lounging on the sidewalk with no shirt on, watching him funnel some substance from a rolled-up newspaper into his mouth. As you walk past, headed toward the sound of saxophones, you are telling your friend Ben, in a matter-of-fact tone, “I need to be back home by 11 p.m., because I need to start accomplishing things in life.” New Orleans is having the shirtless bum look up at you from the sidewalk, and with genuine curiosity, ask “*Why?*”

New Orleans is life – sweaty, fermented life. It’s the kind of buck-jumping life that dances back death with glitter umbrellas, screaming trumpets and feet tapping on caskets. It’s post-Katrina graffiti on a block of cement, surrounded by overgrown weeds and abandoned homes, the jagged-letter cry of some spray-paint prophet screaming: “There is *life* in this Necropolis.”

New Orleans is an impossible conga line, or at least a conga line that you thought would be impossible inside a place like the Apple Barrel. Yet here they are, the bartender who looks about 50 with her bobbed white hair and short khaki shorts, grasping the waist of a tall middle-aged

man who could be in his 30s or 40s, followed by another large-statured man, all rocking their hips side to side, busting their best calypso-inspired moves down the thin strip of floor space squished between the bar and the tables. The conga line moves three or four steps and then halts, but the trio does not stop moving to the beat. “We can’t go all the way around because we might run into the faulty wiring!” the bartender shouts, her arms above her head, swaying to some island rhythm.

New Orleans is tapping your foot to a funk song as your new friend Jeremy tells you that there’s something about this city, there’s something about “the fun and the despair,” and you nod in agreement, keep sipping your beer instead of finishing your homework.

New Orleans is going to Haiti and – amid the wild colors and gritty streets and dirty beaches and rich stews over rice and poor families somehow surviving and the grins at the mention of Mardi Gras – feeling not so far from home. It’s going to Haiti and understanding that tragedy and poverty do not always equal misery, that sometimes joy of life can be gritty and relentless, more violent even than despair.

It’s going to Haiti and feeling like you’ve just met a long-lost family member who has the same beautifully crooked nose as you.

New Orleans is walking through the French Quarter at twilight and for the first time really noticing the variations among balconies along Bourbon and Royal streets, the distinct personality reflected in ironwork forged centuries ago. It’s watching the gas lamps come on, soft flickering

circles that add warm yellows and oranges to the cool greens of the plants and the purple dusk. It's walking among these things and seeing them fresh, gawking with wonder like a bewildered tourist, alarmed at the presence of beauty, artistry that you completely forgot amid that day's dealings with broken roads and broken government and people who are even more dysfunctional than the streets or government.

It's stopping in the middle of the road and turning slowly, slowly around to fully take in the scene before you, and wondering if these balconies and lanterns can possibly make up for the crippled streets and people that often leave you crippled as well. It's knowing the answer is something irrational, something like "yes." It's knowing that if you had to explain this answer to someone from Idaho or New York, you could not. It's knowing that really, if you had to explain this answer to yourself, with any kind of actual logic, you could not. New Orleans is losing these thoughts to the music coming from somewhere just ahead of you. It's continuing to wander the streets starry-eyed, breathless, tripping over crooked sidewalks, stumbling into deep potholes that you are too in love to notice.



Illustration 2: *The End of Fat Tuesday*

The End of Fat Tuesday

Night has fallen on Fat Tuesday when I drive my truck through Uptown to pick up Dan* for dinner. The streets are empty, settled into that eerie brand of quiet that often follows a violent storm. The cacophony of earlier – drunken whoops, happy screams, strands of beads clattering on sidewalks, bags of beads pounding against pavement, chaotic music regulated by relentless bass – has hushed into an exhausted silence; when I roll down my window, I can even hear the wind send bottles rolling down the roads and sift through emptied bead bags strewn across the streets, the soft bumping and shuffling sounds interrupted only by the occasional car horn in the distance. Tonight’s darkness only partially hides the messy remnants of Mardi Gras day, the litter of plastic cups, twinkling doubloons, beads glimmering from street signs and tree limbs, dangling above the mysterious brown soup that pools in potholes and collects along the curbs.

My truck turns off St. Charles Avenue and bounces through potholes and garbage to the mottled street where Dan’s friend, Sean, lives. I breathe in deep as I park and step to the front door, then knock. Dan opens the door and behind him, I see Sean and his wife cuddled onto their living room sofa, semi-prone and almost motionless. Their house, too, is silent. Dan steps onto the porch with me, lights a cigarette, takes a drag.

“How was Zulu?” he asks.

“Great,” I say. “I didn’t catch any coconuts, though.”

Dan is a lover of all things uniquely South Louisiana, especially New Orleans. He is a lover of Zapp’s Cajun Crawtator potato chips, Abita Strawberry Harvest Lager, and Snake and Jake’s Christmas Club Lounge. Above all, he is a lover of Mardi Gras. And Zulu is one of Dan’s favorite parades, rivaled only by his beloved Muses. A wild night and lack of transportation

prevented him from catching Zulu this morning, and standing on the porch, I know he grieves this.

I think of last Mardi Gras, when Dan and I woke next to each other early Fat Tuesday, slouched out of his bed in Thibodaux, and sipped warm coffee from travel mugs on our hour-long drive to New Orleans. Everyone I know watches the parade downtown on Canal Street, where the parade forces tired revelers out of bed at 8 a.m., but Dan insisted on his usual post near Basin Street, where the parade arrives much later for a more energetic crowd. We joined a small family positioned on the curb, huddling close until we could join the clamor for coconuts, begging and grabbing until we claimed four. Later, we picked up a sack of crawfish from a dirt-covered corner store and ate them next to the Mississippi River. We drank Abita beer and lay cuddled on the spiky grass, drifting near sleep. I stared at his face as he lay there, trying to record the curve of his upper lip, the surprisingly thick curls, the unusual shape of his eyes, the low register of his voice, the effeminate way he holds a cigarette, that nervous thing he does with his tongue. I struggled to focus on present tense – the breeze, the river, the arms around me – but my mind wafted toward the near future, when he would move thousands of miles away from this breeze along this river.

Weeks later, when Dan had settled into his new apartment in Portland, he texted me early one morning: *I miss you. A lot. Just saying.*

After that, I would receive texts from him now and then, but they usually centered on discoveries of some edible slice of South Louisiana culture hidden among the Pacific Northwest's organic offerings. A texted photo of Zapp's Potato Chips in a Trader Joe's grocery store. A photo of a barbecued-tofu po-boy at a Portland restaurant. A photo of Abita beer found at the liquor store near his new home. The photos always came accompanied with victorious

exclamations. *Boosh!* Sometimes, I would send back photos of New Orleans items that brought him or Portland to mind: a bottle of the new Abita Satsuma seasonal, vegan po-boys at a street fair, a homemade sign banning drum circles.

Man, I miss that city, he would respond. *I really miss that city.*

Tonight, a full year after our short-lived romance, we enjoy a meal at The Delachaise, a swanky Uptown restaurant with an impressive whiskey menu. We return fast to our comfortable conversational rhythm, discussing my work, his schooling, our Mardi Gras, mutual friends. *Yes, Kat is still dating Kelly. Nope, haven't seen zombie guy lately. Raymond says he's moving soon, do you think that will actually happen?*

Tomorrow, Dan leaves again for Portland. But first, we make the night stretch farther by visiting one of my favorite bars, The Saint. We walk together down the dim sidewalk, our voices nearly overridden by the eternal buzz of the broken streetlight nearby. The Saint, a shadowy dive bar glowing with Christmas lights and prayer candles, provides an altar to cheap beer and long nights. Statues of the Virgin Mary and other religious icons gaze blankly as we sip Abita and High Life. Dan invites his friend Sean to join us, and the ache in my chest sharpens. I try to remember that Sean causes no more intrusion, no more flame-quenching force than the 2,000-plus miles that distance Dan and me. Sean takes a seat next to us, and the conversation turns to women and the beauty of the female body.

I envision Dan's and my bodies, at one time posed together as the bodies of lovers. An even holier vision emerges, this one a secret fantasy of Dan asking me to move to Portland. I see us walking through the city's Chinese tea garden, sitting close on a bench, surrounded by delicate flowers as we sip imported tea. I see us exploring the geometric series of fountains downtown, standing together as the water rushes from pool to pool to pool, gushing past us. I imagine us

walking the shiny-clean streets together, holding hands in the mild spring sunshine, untouched by the constant drizzle of the city's winter rains.

The deep voices of Dan and Sean break my trance, and I rejoin the conversation, laughing and joking, adding a few more hours to our good times. And I struggle to ignore the looming end of Fat Tuesday's fun. When that end comes, Dan offers to walk me outside and for a moment, I am hopeful. Outside, we stand alone together for a moment under the anxious buzz of the streetlight, and I hug him, tight, digging my fingers into the back of his woolly black pea coat. I glance up at him for a moment, my expression questioning. He answers by turning his head to the side, ensuring our lips do not meet.

**Name changed to protect privacy.*

My Name is Welmon Sharlhorne

I am crouched on the sidewalk outside Check Point Charlie's, a 24-hour Laundromat/bar/pot-exchange/urban-nomad receptacle in New Orleans, on a Sunday afternoon, trying to make a phone call for work while my clothes wash, when I spot him, Welmon Sharlhorne, approaching.

Today, Welmon wears a very Welmon-style outfit, a Welmon uniform of sorts: the ever-present black Kangol cap, black-framed eyeglasses with no lenses, dress slacks, pack of Kools stuffed in the pocket of his striped button-up linen shirt, the entire ensemble accented by this afternoon's choice of glimmering jewelry— a shiny watch worn over one shirt cuff and two large gold necklaces hanging from his neck, one necklace looking like a gold Mardi Gras bead with lengthy golden fish as beads and the other a gold chain ending in a giant golden treble clef.

I smile my hello and Welmon greets me in an oddly distant tone, his eyes hard, and then launches into a growling tirade about how he needs \$19 because he needs to pay someone \$19 and he doesn't have it and all the people who would usually give him money are out of town. I ask why he needs \$19. For rent? He eyeballs me with an annoyed look and says, "Now I'm not going to tell you that."

I laugh and he jerks to attention, recognition lighting his eyes.

"Oh, it's you," he says, and his whole body, even his voice, seems to relax into a more flamboyant, more Welmon-esque posture, his cane now held with more of a flair, as if some benevolent witch had abruptly tapped him with a wand to unfreeze him.

His voice unfrozen, he now fusses loudly about the \$19 owed this mysterious man, preaching to all of the empty corner about how he doesn't like this "penny-ante shit" or this "penny-ante nigger."

He turns to face me and offers to draw me a picture for \$19—because he needs weed.

I ask if he would really draw me a picture and he looks annoyed again and says, “You know I will.”

I start digging in my backpack, searching for a \$20 but find nothing but a few crumpled dollar bills. “Sorry, Welmon,” I say, “I’m broke, too. I’m in school. You know I’m broke.”

“That’s all right,” he says, his voice soft, and lets me keep my bills.

I met Welmon Sharlhorne in 2007 back in Houma, a small oilfield city about 60 miles southwest of New Orleans. I was living there, working at the city’s newspaper, covering local culture and the arts-and-entertainment scene, which was expanding and diversifying thanks to a group of twenty-somethings determined to move Houma beyond the safe standbys of watercolor flowers and Neil Simon plays. My friend, Glenda, leader of the Houma Regional Arts Council, called one morning to tell me that the Arts Council was about to hold a very interesting art exhibit: pen-and-ink work by an ex-con who taught himself to draw using Bic pens on manila folders. He used these tools because they were the only ones available to him during his years in Louisiana’s Angola State Prison. Glenda told me the artist, who was born and raised in Houma, had tried to get the Arts Council to show his work years ago, but the leaders brushed him off.

Intrigued by the story, I rushed over to the Bayou Terrebonne Waterlife Museum, where the exhibit was housed, to meet this Welmon Sharlhorne. Despite the nontraditional art supplies—ink pens and manila folders, I expected to find traditional folk-art scenes: women in cotton dresses hanging clothes onto lines with babies at their feet, men in overalls carrying buckets of cattle feed and conducting other rural chores. Instead, I discovered my favorite folk or “outsider” artwork, a display of dark and imaginative drawings: bird-like creatures with

mischievous smiles, wild school buses, sharp church buildings, and always, somewhere within the curved lines of the birds or straight lines of the cathedrals, a clock counting the time.

I'm not sure what I expected in terms of artist personality, but I'm sure I did not expect what I found.

When I arrived at the Waterlife Museum, I found a 54-year-old Kangol-capped man relaxing on the porch with a cigarette—because he had already been thrown out of the museum exhibiting his work. Welmon had tried to defy the museum's non-smoking policies and then gotten smart with Ms. Pearla, the stout woman who runs the reception desk. My friend Glenda had to sweet-talk a peeved Ms. Pearla into letting Welmon back in so he could be interviewed.

The video portion of the interview took roughly three times as long as I expected, as Mr. Sharlhorne turned out to be somewhat of a prima donna, wanting his tools arranged just so on the table, needing another cigarette before he could draw on camera, rambling at length about what he would say to children if he could host a children's show. His voice boasted a rich, melodic quality that he enhanced by speaking in rhyme, with occasional bursts into songs by Beyoncé, Ray Charles, the Mardi Gras Indians. Like a one-man Broadway musical, Welmon's stories and life advice often morphed straight into song. "To the left, to the left..."

He wore glasses with no lenses yet still put them on when looking at printed material, as though they somehow helped him see. I respect people with that kind of commitment.

Welmon's perpetually stylish attire can distract from other aspects of his appearance, but look past the shimmering chains and gold- or black-rimmed glasses and you'll find a naturally attractive man. His skin is a rich brown, the color of coffee with just a touch of milk, and much smoother than his age, 61, would suggest. His dark brown eyes crinkle at the corners and his lips usually curve into a sly smile, giving him a mischievous aura. From the side, it's easier to see

that Welmon's mouth hangs slightly in that particular way mouths hang when they contain no teeth. I'm not sure when Welmon lost his teeth, but after Hurricane Katrina, benefactors in Maryland gave him living space for a while and offered to buy him dentures. He told me the dentist took a mold of his gums and everything, started the work of creating his teeth, but Welmon left Maryland before the teeth were done.

“Fuck them teeth,” Welmon said. “I was homesick.”

Welmon was just the sort of outlandish and complicated person I gravitate toward, which may be why the Arts Council leaders contacted me instead of my coworkers. During my four years at the newspaper, I had developed a reputation for spotlighting the bizarre. When someone heard about a motorcycle-drawn hearse, a roadside stand selling raccoon meat, a lost cat located by a cat psychic, or a guy who rode out a hurricane in a boat on land, they often called me first.

During our 2007 interview, Welmon sipped coffee with too much sugar—too much sugar I say because my diabetic new friend fell asleep during the interview. I asked him a question and he leaned back, shut his eyes, and I waited for some deep answer drawn from the depths of his soul. Instead, I heard light snoring and noticed his mouth agape. I had to wake him twice during the interview.

He was like an ex-con Dr. Seuss with narcolepsy.

I loved him already.

Since moving to New Orleans, I spot Welmon fairly regularly, at least once or twice a month, to my delight. Shortly after my arrival here, I began tracking and recording my Welmon sightings, creating a Facebook page in his honor partly to show off his artwork but also so others can track along with me. Some of the very first fans of the page include his family members in Houma,

who seem eager for updates on their wandering uncle, cousin, brother. “Hi, Uncle Welmon!” they sometimes write. Or “Hey Unk I was stopping by to say hello... Happy Father's Day and I hope all is well....”The page now includes more than 300 fans who post photos and stories of their encounters with Welmon. There are photos of Welmon with visitors from all over the country, with local news anchors, with author Dick Gregory. There is Welmon in Houston, Welmon in Atlanta, Welmon in Treme and the French Quarter and the Marigny.

Welmon himself is not among the fans. He doesn't really use the Internet from what I can tell. He also, from what I can tell, can't read. Welmon has never told me that he cannot read, and I have never asked. I think someone else suggested to me that Welmon was illiterate and at that suggestion, pieces snapped into place, the way subtle oddities strewn throughout a suspense film suddenly make sense when the mystery is solved. I realized that some of Welmon's rituals and demands were not just the quirks of an eccentric man, but the quirks of an eccentric man who either cannot read or does not read well.

When I first started bumping into Welmon in New Orleans, we went through a ritual: he would demand that I get him a cup of water with no ice and then read aloud from an article written about him, collected in a blue plastic binder that holds his photos and newspaper clippings. As I read the description of Welmon's appearance, Welmon would illustrate each part, lifting his glasses slightly up and back down, patting the pack of Kools in his front pocket. When Welmon showed his work at the Waterlife Museum, Glenda could not get him to write descriptions to accompany his drawings, so she wound up following Welmon around the display, scribbling notes as Welmon dictated rhyming thoughts inspired by each piece. These impromptu poems went on placards next to the drawings, which I then viewed as a funny tribute to

Welmon's ornery nature. Now, I realize the placards symbolize how Welmon's proud, unapologetic commitment to his own style turns deficiencies into poetry.

I often explain to his family and fans that in all likelihood, Welmon doesn't see the Facebook fan page. I get responses such as this one, from Alicia Stovall of Houma: "Hi Laura I HIGHLY doubt he uses internet lol but if u see him around tell him his nieces say hi."

I try to remember to do this, to tell Welmon hello from Alicia and Tara and people living across the United States who remember Welmon as the guy who drew them a picture, who talked them out of a cigarette, who entertained them during a walk on Decatur Street, who gave them a lasting memory of New Orleans that still makes them laugh. The Facebook page gets posts like "We talked for over an hour about our need and love to create art," and "we met you in New Orleans over 15 years ago where you drew a piece of your art on an 8 1/2 by 11 piece of paper for a couple of drinks." Posts like "I've got his number in my phone. No idea how it got there" and "Hi this is Kayden from Saturday in the French Quarter, you gave my dad your number and some pineapple Vodka(sic)." I turn Kayden's post into a status update, letting the online world know that Welmon is alive and well and sharing his pineapple vodka.

The public updates are an expansion of the private e-mail and in-person Welmon updates shared for years among my art friends in Houma. Since his show there in 2007, my friends and I often alert each other to Welmon sightings and regale each other with tales of Welmon being Welmon. An email from Glenda in March 2009, with the subject line "Welmon here right now:"

"Hey Laura,

Welmon is in my office right now, drinking coke, and drawing me a long overdue picture. I gave him some candy cigarettes, and he's smoking them.

Glenda"

We have established a collection of Welmon lore.

There's the time Welmon's close lawyer friend and benefactor, Dean, drove Welmon, Glenda, and our artist friend Andrea to lunch at the Pit Stop Restaurant, a 24-hour greasy spoon near the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway in Houma and right next to the Sugar Bowl Motel, notorious for its prostitutes and drugs, the whole way there Jean Knight's "Mr. Big Stuff" blaring from the radio at Welmon's request, Welmon's cane sticking in and out the window of the powder-blue Cadillac in time to the beat.

There's the time Welmon, just before his art show in Houma, got hit by a large truck while crossing a street in the city's downtown. A red light turned green and the truck's driver hit the gas pedal. The force knocked Welmon to the ground.

"It sounded like a sound you never heard," he told me. "My head went scroop, my glasses went boop."

The crash broke Welmon's drawing arm in three places, forcing him to wear a cast during the show. He sued the driver and won thousands.

There's the time Welmon lost those thousands of dollars during a wild night that started in Houma with his giving generous donations to his barber and then progressed to New Orleans, where hundred-dollar bills reportedly rained on the cab driver who transported Welmon from Houma, on random gamblers at Harrah's casino, and on hookers attached to either of Welmon's arms.

I try to carry a camera and pen at all times, so when I spot Welmon, I can document his most recent exploits and adventures, his newest drawings, his latest phone number. He knows this and

when he sees me, tells me to get out my camera, to write this down, to tell the world that Welmon Sharlhorne can be reached at this number.

“Write this down,” he tells me. “No this is not Mike Jones, My name is Welmon Sharlhorne, the Artist, you can call me, here's my number, don't you see. I may be home or I might be gone but I'll get to my telephone and call you right on later on. It's 504....”

The tourists and Frenchmen Street characters –the guy selling pipes on the corner, the woman selling used books and clothing near the Japanese restaurant, the doormen for various music clubs—often seem surprised when I approach Welmon and give him a hug.

“This is my home-girl,” he tells them, and I can tell by their confused expressions that they do not expect a youngish, clean-cut-looking white woman to be Welmon’s “home-girl.”

“We’re from the same place,” I explain. “He’s from Houma, and I’m from Thibodaux. They’re really close together.”

This explanation seems to satisfy people, though our friendship goes deeper than sharing a Cajun-country homeland. I appreciate his oddity, his artwork, and his ability to make an ordinary night into an entertaining event. I especially admire his talents for hustling, for surviving and thriving with whatever cards he’s dealt. He appreciates me, too.

“You a cold-blooded motherfucker,” he tells me one time.

“I like you so much,” he tells me another time.

“I like you so much, too,” I say.

I like watching Welmon with newbies, the unsuspecting tourist who looks him over, sees his sometimes shoeless feet resting against the sidewalk in their black socks and assume he is another street character looking to make a buck—which he is. But when he tells them he is a world-renowned artist, this is also true, despite the looks of disbelief scribbled across their faces,

the smiles and exchanged looks as they wordlessly decide to play along with this stylish man who thinks he's a real artist.

“My name is Welmon Sharlhorne,” Welmon announces to them, drawing out each syllable of his name with a dramatic pizzazz, like a circus ringmaster introducing the most exciting act under the tent. The introduction has a sweeping “ta-da!” feel. “I'm an artist.”

They smile politely, but Welmon has learned how to change the polite smiles into surprised jaw-drops.

“You got Internet on your phone?” he asks in that deep, melodic voice.

They pop out their phones. Sure, why not? The man is entertaining.

Welmon repeats his name, and when they do an Internet search, sure enough, there he is smiling that sly Welmon smile, posed with his magical, one-of-a-kind drawings

“I'm in the Smithsonian,” he says.

And he is.

Welmon's story remains something of a mystery to me, even after long hours of research and six years' worth of encounters with him. Online biographies of Welmon, most of them posted on gallery and other art-related websites, tend to be vague and vary in their details, sometimes significantly. Some of the bios also differ from the information found in court records. Some of the bios say Welmon served twenty-two years in Angola for non-violent crimes largely related to a disagreement over payment for yard work, which I find tough to believe.

This I do believe:

Welmon was born Aug. 17, 1952, in Houma as the fourth of 17 children. He grew up hunting fox, squirrels, raccoons, and rabbits with his best friend, Ezekiel Johnson. He also made a lot of his own toys and entertained his younger siblings (MarciaWeberArtObjects.com). Welmon says he endured harsh disadvantages growing up in the Deep South during an era of open discrimination and racism (UncleShadow.org).

“My mom and dad were some good parents to me,” Welmon told me during our 2007 interview. “They sent me to school.”

Welmon said he was an intelligent little boy and showed a propensity for drawing as early as age 6. But he was only seven years old when he rebelled against his parents’ wishes and started playing hooky from school with his “so-called friends.” He didn’t make it past the third grade, he said.

At 14, Welmon got in trouble and spent the next four years in a segregated juvenile-detention center just north of Baton Rouge. Though Welmon told me his crime was skipping school, online bios say the crime involved robbery. At 18, Welmon was released from the detention center and began independently mowing lawns for money (UncleShadow.org). He likely did this yard work in Houma, though some bios claim New Orleans.

Soon after his release, Welmon got in trouble again. Some online bios say he was convicted of simple burglary and extortion, mainly due to the discrepancy in payment for his lawn-mowing services.

Welmon told me he spent more than 20 years in Angola for extortion, burglary, and robbery.

“Being locked up is a miserable thing, my friend,” he said.

A court document from 1989 shows Welmon went to prison that year for attempted extortion. According to the document, the charge arose from this: Welmon entered a dress shop on Prospect Street in Houma and told the owner that he had recently been released from Angola and would like help from her in the form of a “donation.” When the shopkeeper declined, Welmon refused to leave her store and told her, “something might happen—people that give me money, things don't happen to their building.” The owner gave Welmon \$10, and he left.

The court sentenced him to the maximum time, seven-and-a-half years, after considering his previous criminal record, which included convictions of simple burglary in 1972 and armed robbery and “a crime against nature” in 1973. The document explains: “The trial court stated that it felt there was not only an undue risk but a moral certainty that, during any period of suspended or probated sentence, defendant would commit another crime, based on defendant's previous behavior.”

Welmon told me he started making art in prison around age 28 or 29. He first built hotels from matchsticks and then moved on to what he called “circle art,” the fantastical drawings for which he is now known. He asked for pens and manila envelopes to write his lawyer, a lawyer that did not exist, according to some bios (and this I find believable). He used tongue depressors from the infirmary to form the straight lines in his art.

He now draws on other materials, including mat boards, but still uses red, blue, and black ink pens.

“I like ink cause ink looks like snake colors to me,” he told me in 2007. “I can't stand a snake, but I love them colors.”

The decades behind bars also continue to influence his work, most noticeably in the form of a clock.

“People often ask me, ‘Why a clock always in there?’ Welmon told me. During his stay in Angola, “I had so much time to think about time, that I had time on my mind while doing time.”

“When the judge passed sentence on me for these charges, that’s when time became so different. Number one, you took time out of your precious time of freedom to be so small-minded and commit a crime,” he said.

Outside prison walls, Welmon’s art began flourishing. An art gallery in New York took notice and in the 1980s, his work became a hot commodity in art circles, said Dean Church, the New Orleans attorney and longtime friend of Welmon’s, who spoke to me by phone in 2007.

“He was the darling of the outsider art world, but he was never there to enjoy it,” Church told me.

Welmon last left prison in 1997. He hit the streets without much material wealth, leaving him to peddle his artwork around Houma and New Orleans.

He also, for the first time, got to see his artwork exhibited on museum walls.

I commissioned my own piece of Welmon work around 2010, after hearing that Welmon had returned to Houma from his travels to Houston and New Orleans. I knew that with Welmon haggling would be unavoidable, so I planned my approach before calling him from my cubicle in the newsroom. After going back and forth a bit, I think we originally settled on \$30 for a drawing

about the size of a regular sheet of paper. An hour or so later, the phone rang. It's taking longer than I thought, Welmon told me. The drawing had suddenly grown more complex and would require more money. Thirty-five dollars. We hung up, but I knew the bargaining was not over. Not long after, Welmon and I talked on the phone again and though he was not quite done with my drawing, decided I could drive to his family's trailer in the Mechanicville neighborhood and watch him finish the artwork. But it was going to cost just a bit more because the drawing required a lot of detail, Welmon said. I smirked with pride as I unveiled my final bargaining chip: a pack of Kools. We settled on a final price of \$35 and a pack of Kools.

Eager to meet Welmon's family and finally get a piece of art, I drove over to Mechanicville, an old neighborhood in Houma historically occupied by poor black families. The trailer sat near the start of East Street, one of the rougher parts of Mechanicville, on a plain grassy lot. What I remember about my brief time in the trailer is this: it was full of people. I think there were at least two men in their 20s or 30s, maybe another adult, seated on a sofa across from a large television screen. A middle-aged woman and a young girl in a sundress shifted around the small living room and kitchen, where Welmon sat at a tiny wooden table, his body hunched over my drawing of a large birdlike creature with a long, curved, flamingo-like neck. I noticed his other artwork, large drawings of churches and buses, each likely worth hundreds of dollars, shoved against the wall beneath the table and blocked out the horrifying ideas that began springing from my imagination: ketchup or coffee casually spilt onto the art, the dirty bottom of a shoe leaving tracks on a drawing. Welmon's relatives didn't speak much beyond a polite hello—except for one of the young men, a cousin I believe, who smiled and chatted a bit about Welmon being a trip. I squeezed onto a chair next to Welmon, watching as he used a red pen to fill the creature's neck with little lines. A series of red circles dripped from the creature's mouth.

“He’s dripping blood cause he just ate,” Welmon explained. A bright yellow circle hung from the creature’s tail end by a chain. “A lamp,” Welmon said.

The drawing is one of my most prized possessions, the piece of art that is displayed prominently in every New Orleans house I call home. When moving, I gingerly wrap the framed drawing in towels or newspaper and put into a box with warnings to be very careful while transporting. It is one of the first treasures to go into a waterproof, airtight container when a hurricane threatens and stored in the highest, safest place in case of flood.

Aside from in the Smithsonian and my bedroom, Welmon’s drawings are also included in collections at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and several other museums across the Gulf Coast. His work is exhibited at the Musee Collection De L’Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, The Noyes Museum in New Jersey, and the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore.

Perusing gallery websites, I decide that Welmon’s experience at the Bayou Terrebonne Waterlife Museum—shunned by some art leaders, embraced by others, and then kicked out of the building by a receptionist—forms a good representation of the conflicted responses Welmon tends to elicit. The website for Marcia Weber Objects of Art speaks of Welmon’s “beautiful voice and kind cheerful spirit.” The website for Barrister’s Gallery in New Orleans begins its description of Welmon with: “Absolutely nothing positive can be said of this man’s character, but he is utterly unique.” Likewise, my Facebook fan page includes a few messages from tourists saying Welmon took their money but never gave them any art. But those are few.

What people see when they look at Welmon and his work is up to them, a fact Welmon seems to recognize.

“I’m like a walking legend,” Welmon told me during our 2007 interview. “Not to self-esteem myself, but to appreciate myself. But that I’m good for someone else that allows themselves to focus their eyes on what God allows me to create on paper through this ink pen.”

Welmon’s own mother, who once told him “you was the worst child I ever gave birth to,” reacted with awe when she saw Welmon’s artwork in a folk art collector’s guide, he told me in 2007.

“Art gave me a break in prison and a break with my own mother,” he said.

Even Barrister’s Gallery admits Welmon’s work is “unrivaled even by Europe’s insanest art brutes.” Galleries in Texas, Mississippi, and here in New Orleans often price his artwork at \$500 to \$900 per drawing. Among the work at Marcia Weber Objects of Art, you can find “Serpent,” \$800.00, Pen on manila envelope, 19.5 x 13.75. Lisa Victoria’s Touche Par L’ Art in the French Quarter offers “Bus For All Creatures And Peoples,” ink on matboard, 14.5" x 30.5" unframed, \$600; “Welmon's House of Love By God, Ok?,” ink on matboard, 14" x 11.5", \$625; “Bubbleum Sweetness of Creatures,” ink on matboard, 30" x 20" unframed, \$850; and others. Recently, a gallery owner from the U.K. contacted me through Facebook to check into selling Welmon’s art.

Welmon’s work must also hang in countless homes across the world, homes of art collectors who purchased a drawing for \$600 and homes of tourists and locals like me who bought work for \$35 and a pack of Kools.

In 2007, Welmon contended that nothing good can come out of something that didn’t have some good to start with.

“That means even though I made mistakes in my early part of my life, there was some good in me.”

Still outside Check Point Charlie’s today, Welmon motions toward a tall young white woman crossing Esplanade Avenue toward us, a woman wearing the kind of tights and shorts that I would associate with aerobics in the 1980s.

“You see that girl? That woman?” he asks, and I nod.

“I had a woman like that come to my house last night with her husband, and I had to fuck her,” he says. “I wore a condom.”

“Well, that’s good,” I mumble, not knowing what to say to that, and then put all the pieces together. “Wait, what? Her husband was there?”

“Oh yeah,” Welmon says, smiling. “He was saying, ‘How you like that big black dick Margaret?’”

“Wow,” I say, scrambling for a clever way to smoothly change the subject while also debating within myself whether and how much this information should bother me.

I conclude that despite my slight discomfort when Welmon talks about his sex life, this is just Welmon being Welmon, take it or leave it. I tend to adore people who are genuinely, defiantly themselves, open and authentic, dark qualities and all.

So I roll with it and repeat the only thing I can think to say: “Wow.”

Then I tell Welmon I need to go in the bar to do my laundry.

I am squatting to pick up my backpack when a paper comes loose and begins to flutter down the sidewalk. I squat to the ground, but just as my hand nears the paper, I see the bottom of

Welmon's cane stamp down on it. Hard. I look up at him and he releases the paper for me to grab.

"Whoa," he yells. I turn my head to see a couple walking by, the woman curvy with a large, round behind. Welmon tells me to hold on a second, I nod, and he walks around the corner to watch the couple continue down the street.

He returns a second later and looks me up and down. "You been exercising those legs?"

Though he knows I'll never sleep with him, and neither will many of the curvy women sashaying past his appreciative gaze, Welmon's not one to hide his admiration of the female figure.

I grin and say I've been bicycling a lot.

I bump into Welmon perched on a stool outside Café Negril, holding court with several grungy-looking locals. I find him at Check Point Charlie's, washing his clothes and smoking weed, sometimes slouched over asleep next to the washing machines. I spot him at the Community Coffee shop on Royal Street and squeeze into the booth seat next to him, writing down what he says as he becomes mesmerized by the soap-bubble screensaver on my laptop. I see him outside 3 Muses and d.b.a. entertaining more small crowds of locals and tourists.

I sit next to him at a table outside Café Envie and watch as he regales a couple of young guys from Philly with stories and drawings. They are enthralled by Welmon and his work, so they buy him a coffee and a croissant, talk with him as he draws, and buy a piece of his art.

Sometimes, I buy Welmon a drink. Sometimes, I get him a glass of water with no ice. But mostly I just watch and listen and record.

Welmon often distracts me from worries, anger, or grief. When I bump into him, I get sucked into a whole episode or adventure, whether I'm initially in the mood for one or not. One spring night, I was walking down Frenchmen Street alone, moping over a broken relationship, when I spotted the familiar posture, the ever-present cane moving across the street from me. Eager for distraction and a hug, I rushed across Frenchmen Street.

“Welmon!”

The figure and cane froze and he turned to me. “Hey, home-girl.”

Welmon gave me a hug and I followed him around for the next couple of hours: to Check Point Charlie's, where he solicited various hobos and metal-heads for cigarette money; to the Blue Nile, where the bouncer let us pass without paying the cover and the bartender gave him a can of pineapple juice; to the Dragon's Den, where the worker at the food window asked him what he wanted and then packed him a container of juicy jerk chicken on the bone and rice with greens and mushrooms. He also secured a free hot-sausage sandwich with cheese for me.

We took our food into the open courtyard in back, grabbing two open chairs with several strangers at a table. Welmon introduced himself with his usual showmanship. He told the group about his drawings, getting someone to pull up his artwork on a smart-phone, but also mentioned he had been incarcerated for about 25 years.

“Angola?” a woman asked, and Welmon nodded.

“You killed somebody?”

“Little mixer-up,” Welmon replied. “But I got my way out again.”

I don't remember much of a reaction to that statement from the strangers at our table, which implies there wasn't much of one. Either way, Welmon went on to describe how he

survives with help from the denizens of the French Quarter and Frenchmen Street, who feed him, watch out for him.

“If you can’t make it in New Orleans, you just a can’t-make-it-mother-fucker,” he concluded.

I’ve seen vagabonds and street artists here get chased off by bartenders and food workers, told to stop scamming their customers, go beg elsewhere. But not Welmon. The service-industry workers along Frenchmen take care of him like an old uncle, handing him warm plates of food and chilled juice and water like I would hand something to my grandmother.

“What’s up, Shadow?” they ask. “Hey Uncle Shadow,” they say.

The people here know Welmon by these names. A new website dedicated to Welmon explains that the nickname “Shadow” originated in Angola Prison when other inmates decided “Shadow” was smoother to pronounce than “Sharlhorne.” Friends in New Orleans added “Uncle.” Within the past couple of years, Welmon caught the fancy of a local TV reporter, who highlighted Welmon in a well-done feature piece and then in regular segments titled “Ask Uncle Shadow.” The reporter also built Welmon a website at uncleshadow.org. But back home, Welmon introduced himself as “Welmon Sharlhorne,” and often still does. I will always know him as simply “Welmon,” a one-of-a-kind name that strikes me as more appropriate than “Shadow.”

Despite his notoriety and many friends, Welmon still carries a claw hammer in his belt. He showed me this once, pulling back his coat to reveal his weapon. I was surprised, but shouldn’t have been. We live in New Orleans.

Another night, I'm sitting in Café Negril alone, listening to funk music, when I see Welmon strut inside and start dancing, the same gold treble clef hanging from his neck, but sporting new glasses with John Lennon-looking small circular green lenses and a new, very ornate black-and-gold cane with carved-in designs and tassels and shiny things.

I make eye contact and he comes over and hugs me, pulls me onto the dance floor and even though I am not in the mood to dance, I try. We do some little steps around the dance floor and then Welmon says, "Let's go outside and smoke."

Outside, he offers me a cigarette and then weed, which I turn down because I'm not a smoker.

We walk a few feet down to the corner, where a large, middle-aged white man with long hair and wearing a sweat-soaked T-shirt mans a card table full of glass bongos and pipes for sale. He and a collection of young hippies greet Welmon, who introduces me.

"This my home-girl," he says and they nod, but look unconvinced. They probably think I'm a hooker or druggie.

Welmon stands on the corner with his cane and begins singing a Trinidad James rap to the crowds walking past on Frenchmen.

"Popped a molly, I'm sweatin'," he sings.

He repeats the same lyric louder as people pass our corner, making sure they hear it. Some people laugh. Others just look alarmed and continue walking.

"Popped a molly, I'm sweatin'," Welmon sings, eyeballing two young women who giggle and continue down the street.

Some young road-trippers from Connecticut walk up and start taking photos with Welmon as he sits back in a lawn chair behind the card table and blows fanciful swirls of smoke

into the air. Then they take group photos of all of us. One of them offers to text me the photos the next day. I offer him a beer in exchange for texting me the pictures immediately, and we make the trade.

“You smart,” Welmon says.

I appreciate the compliment from somebody so streetwise.

“If you’re miserable in this city, I have no pity, with all the fun to be had...” he says to no one in particular, then starts to drift off in his chair. I buy him water and tacos to wake him up, get his new phone number, and then post this latest Welmonism on his fan page. People love it.

Today, we walk into Check Point’s together and settle into the side nearest the Laundromat. The other side of the bar is filled with a row of young guys, all watching the Saints game on the television screen behind the bar. Welmon tells me he can get a PBR here, because he knows the people. Sure enough, he gets a PBR and sits next to me, sipping the beer through a straw. He asks me if I want a PBR, and I say sure, and he talks to the bartender. I can tell it’s not going so great and look down at my coffee, held today in a glass goblet. Welmon walks back and tells me the bartender misunderstood and thought I wanted coffee, so he gave up.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I don’t need a drink anyway. I’ve got work to do, but thanks for trying.”

Welmon leans over and tells me not to look now, but that guy over there owns the Dragon’s Den and to watch out for him because he uses women up and then lets them go and he, Welmon, catches them after.

“I get some of those little girls he’s fucked,” he says conspiratorially. And he pleases them, makes them happy, he says, now singing “cause I work my finger right down to the bone.”

“Now you can look,” Welmon says, and I look down the bar at the row of men.

“That one?” I ask, pointing like a fool.

“Yeah,” Welmon says, indicating that I should stop looking over and pointing.

I think Welmon is talking about the black guy in the black ball cap, but I’m not sure.

“He’s gonna try to holla at you,” Welmon says, telling me the man doesn’t understand “no” as an answer. “(He’ll say) ‘Why I can’t have you? I can have anyone else.’”

Welmon tells me to watch out for the guy, to be careful, especially since he’s seen me talking to him. It is the black guy, I surmise, as Welmon explains that the guy will try to take advantage of me because I’m a white woman talking to an old black man. The thought that Welmon is right about this racial dynamic makes me sad. But the way Welmon explains it makes me smile.

“He’ll see you talking to me and think things,” Welmon says, his voice low. “He doesn’t know we’re friends.”

A Night at the Red Carpet Inn

The cars on the highway seem menacing, their lights too bright, like searchlights, and their movements too quiet as I pull into the front drive of the Red Carpet Inn of New Orleans East. The relative calm here strikes me as peaceful but in a dangerous sort of way, the kind of ominous hush found at an abandoned home or overgrown lot. Human interactions have been shushed and shadowed, the cautious veneer of silence broken only by raspy threats, screeching tires, the sharp pop of a gun. The light radiating from the motel office windows glows off-key in the thick darkness, like the lamps used in police and CIA interrogation rooms in psychological-thriller films.

I am just an English teacher renting a motel room for the night, but I feel like Janet Leigh in *Psycho* as I slip my truck into a parking spot next to the tiny motel office, the one with a big yellow poster that shouts “Free movies! Free movies!” I feel criminal in the most glamorous way as I slide my driver’s license across the counter to the attendant, who has such a plain, ageless “average white guy” appearance that I would never be able to pick him out of a lineup. Even washed in harsh fluorescent light, he looks like every other white guy who might work the graveyard shift at a motel that caters to truckers. I say very little as I sign a form and take my room key, just “yes,” “ok,” “thank you.” I feel mysterious, sketchy. I wonder if he questions why I am there. I wonder if he sees me as Janet Leigh in *Psycho*. I bet he does.

I get back in my truck and follow his directions through a second gate, into a small parking lot. I stop in front of a dim-lit row of rooms and then climb the concrete stairs to a higher dim-lit row of rooms. I can hear my feet scrape from step to step; the only other signs of life come from machinery: the probing headlights of a car in the parking lot, the whoosh of trucks on the highway, the slam, crunch, roar of 18-wheelers being serviced at the truck stop next door. I

see no one else in the parking lot, on the stairs. I swing open the door to my room, suck in the cold air, and dump my bag of convenience-store food, bag of clothing, and work satchel onto the carpet. Joy bubbles in my heart as I click on the lamps to find myself immersed in a cheapish motel room lifted straight from the 1980s, right out of a suspense film. It's the motel room where psychopaths and murder witnesses lie low. It's the place where wayward women and blood-money thieves go to hide. And it's all mine.

For the past two weeks, I have been living in a cleaned-out storage room in a shotgun* house in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. Most of my belongings – my books, my clothes, my beloved rocking chair – sit in a storage unit in the nearby Marigny neighborhood. Many of my most-prized possessions, largely my collection of artwork, sit in a shed behind my parents' home in Thibodaux, about an hour's drive away.

This is what happens when you're a single 32-year-old graduate student and English teacher with a lifetime's collection of belongings and nowhere to put them when your roommate decides to move out, leaving you abruptly searching solo for affordable rental housing in a city filled with rental homes perfect for two. My existence is scattered, fragmented into various rental spaces and donated crannies, stored away and dependent on the kindness of others.

Such is the strange hyper-extended adolescence common to adults of my generation, which even in definition has no real home. Depending on who's doing the defining, we are either stuck at the tail end of Generation X, that notorious "lost" collection of aimless slackers embodied by Winona Ryder, an actress who often portrays conflicted, wandering characters. Or we are the vanguard of the narcissistic, entitled, fame-mongering, technologically advanced and

socially open-minded Generation Y AKA the Millennials AKA “Generation Me.” We Gen X-Yers are an odd, shiftless bunch caught between entitlement/open-mindedness and sarcastic slacker-dom. We are the 30-year-olds who have never owned a home, never married, never reached the traditional markers of adulthood.

My particular limbo stems from a desire to take a break from the troubled newspaper industry and return to college in a place I’d long wanted to live, New Orleans. With newspapers in decline, I saw college as a means for escape from the adult world where opportunities looked to remain scarce for a long, long time. With no husband, no kids, not even a dog or a beta fish, it was easy to pack up and move to the city—with a roommate. But my roommate abruptly moved out, and I could find no replacement—not even on Craigslist—so I jumped at the offer of any room in a home occupied by anyone I knew.

In my temporary housing in Treme, my makeshift bedroom is squeezed between the bedroom of the married couple who own the home and the kitchen used mainly by the German medical student who lives in the front bedroom. The room once functioned as a storage space, but couple knew I was in desperate need of a place to live, so they kindly shifted items around to create enough space for my bed, dresser, and chest of drawers. Because the house is a shotgun¹, the room still functions as a hallway, beginning at 4 or 5 each morning, when the German girl speeds through to begin cooking an elaborate and noisy breakfast, to at least 10 or 11 each night. I am Lelaina in *Reality Bites*, a wandering dreamer who can never quite find her footing.

¹ A shotgun house is an historic African-American architectural style common in New Orleans. These narrow houses usually have one room leading into the next without hallways. Some say the name comes from the idea that a shotgun fired from the front door would send a shot straight through the house and out the back door.

I am grateful for the kindness of the couple, and I love the character and communal feel of the neighborhood, but it is tough to sleep in a hallway. I am always in the way, as both people and dogs maneuver between my bed and dresser to reach the kitchen.

This is the worst time for me to be in the way. I am sick, nearly bedridden. I have mononucleosis, a disease that renders a person exhausted to the point of absurdity. I knew I had mono when I could not complete the short journey between the Student Center and the Liberal Arts Building without taking a break to stretch out on my back in the grass, my satchel a makeshift pillow. I should have known mono had struck when during student-conferencing, I had to rest my head on my arms between student meetings so I could get through the next 15-minute meeting without keeling over. Mono is cured only by Powerade and sleep, lots and lots of amazing sleep – the one thing that despite everyone’s kindness and generosity, I cannot have. Desperate, I try to nap on the grass in a nearby park. I sleep on a futon at a friend’s home. I spend a weekend in Thibodaux in a soft bed. But I can’t stay there forever and eventually, I run out of options. I crave sleep. I long for sleep. I just want sleep.

I am a little afraid of winding up in the hospital.

My generous, generous-to-a-fault godfather feels bad for me, so he has given me \$69 to spend a night at the only motel he could locate at a reasonable rate and within an easy driving of my workplace: the Red Carpet Inn of New Orleans East. Had either of us realized the existence of Priceline.com, etc., or bothered to check reviews on Yelp, I likely would have wound up safely tucked into bed at a ritzy French Quarter hotel or a charming Bywater bed-and-breakfast and never experienced the Red Carpet Inn of New Orleans East.

Travelers using TripAdvisor.com rank the Red Carpet Inn and Suites of New Orleans East at No. 134 out of 150 New Orleans area hotels.

Online reviews reveal an interesting mix of reactions to the Red Carpet Inn, ranging from anger and desperation to self-loathing and regret. “It’s my own fault for trying to take the cheap way and not pay the few extra dollars for the better, cleaner, a lot safer hotel,” laments one former guest. “Each night my wife and i return back to this hotel, there were women with very little clothes hanging in front to the security gate with room keys in hand.” Another former guest outlined the many signs that, on hindsight, clearly indicated the Red Carpet Inn may not have been the safest spot for an overnight stay:

There were several cops when we pulled in. It was very shabby looking, but we just needed a place to sleep. We asked a policeman if it was safe and he suggested we go elsewhere. We were informed the place was known for "ladies of the evening" and drugs/pot per the officer. We decided to check out the room. **BIG MISTAKE.**”

As I look around my hotel room, I am giddy with joy. I have read no reviews of the Red Carpet Inn and upon first sight of the interior, my only reaction is a strong stab of nostalgia brought on by the décor: a fuzzy blend of simple carpet, wooden furniture, a patterned comforter, and terrible framed artwork. The 1980s-inspired ambience brings back bubbly childhood memories of family vacations at the Holiday Inn in Mississippi. I think of tiny white bars of soap, the thin towels embroidered with the green hotel logo, the kiddie pool with the bridge, the Reese’s Pieces sold out of the snack hut covered in brown palm branches. Best of all is the air-conditioner, loud

and clanky, keeping the room freezer-cold. I picture myself as a child in my swimsuit, the one with the little ruffled skirt, trying desperately to blow up a bright plastic raft, eventually reconciling myself to the fact that I must wait for my dad to get up before the raft will come to life.

Simple, old, clean, the hotel room also looks like those featured in horror films. I lie in the bed, staring at the plain wall. I am the child of actor Jack Nicholson's character, Jack Torrance, in *The Shining*, gaping at the little ghost girl twins at the end of the hallway. I look up at the air-conditioning vents. I am Llewelyn Moss of *No Country for Old Men*, hiding from the killer with a bowl-cut who listens for me through the vents. I fight the urge to look into the vents. I am just too tired.

I am exhausted, actually. And quite thrilled, absolutely thrilled to be here, in this room at the Red Carpet Inn and Suites in New Orleans East. Honestly, I am so excited that my heart is turning cartwheels in my chest. I jump into the covers, stretching my arms and legs out as far as possible, spread-eagle, as though I am about to make a snow angel. All this space! I flip onto my back, flop back onto my stomach, bounce again onto my back, tossing and turning with joy. No one is more content than I am as I pull the comforter up to my nose and wriggle around like a happy puppy in the silent hotel room. I want to cackle like a Disney-movie villain. I wrap myself in the cool white sheets feeling like the luckiest person alive. I feel sorry for people who are not tucked in bed at the Red Carpet Inn.

I call my godfather to thank him and tell him how happy I am.

“This is AMAZING,” I yell into the phone.

“I’m so happy for you,” he says.

Before I drift off to sleep, my door begins to lurch open but gets caught by the latch-lock at the top before it can reach a full swing. I hear a male voice mutter, “Oh! Sorry.”

I get up and lock the door’s deadbolt.

Then I jump back into bed and snuggle back into the covers. Maybe I should be scared, but I am just too tired for that.

I jerk awake around 4 a.m. to find glowing objects scattered across the ceiling. My eyes pop open and my body flinches, my entire nervous system startled into gear by what I imagine is fluorescent satanic spatter. Every urban legend and ghost story from third grade rushes at me, all the slumber-party tales of Satanists and anarchies who paint walls with pentagrams that only appear in the dark, usually just after someone like me has been murdered. I breathe in deep, relax again, as I realize the mysterious shapes are just those glow-in-the-dark stars that people, usually kids or teens, stick or paint onto ceilings. I stare at them for a while, now almost fully awake. Next door, big truck doors are slamming, horns honking to signal the start of a new day.

But it’s still dark out.

I turn on the TV and flip through the channels, feeling like a queen in my soft covers, fresh sheets, holding a remote control. I cannot remember the last time I held the power to choose a TV channel.

I watch the Weather Channel for a while, thinking this must be what a normal person feels like. Normal people watch the Weather Channel. They actually sit there and consider the weather for the next day, make choices and plan according to this information. I usually determine my

apparel by feeling the windowpanes on my door for heat or cold. If I'm really curious, I actually open a door and step outside for a moment, raise my arms like a weathervane to test for wind chill.

Restless, I flip through more channels until I see an extreme close-up shot of a large penis. The penis fills the foreground of the screen, covering part of a woman's face which is marinated in white goo.

The hell?

Free movies! Free movies!

I can't stop watching. Next, there is a skinny black man with a big penis and gold chains and a black woman with a giant behind. They do not look like they are enjoying themselves, despite the constant moan-face the woman wears. I briefly consider stereotypes and then wonder: Why am I watching this? I then shove the thought aside. I am fascinated. I can watch whatever I want.

Whatever I want.

I turn over and go back to sleep, satisfied to be alone in this cold, quiet room.

A few online reviews of the Red Carpet Inn and Suites include positives of the place, but almost always accompanied by careful disclaimers that those plus sides are more appropriate for particular types of guests, i.e. prostitutes, drug dealers, undercover cops, lonely creepers, roving packs of partiers.

"Traveling as a solo male or a group of adults this isn't a bad place to use as a base camp," notes one reviewer. "The room was ok but I was only there for 5 hours to sleep. It was

clean and the heater worked. It's not a place I would go if I was taking my family.” Another reviewer had conducted research and still opted to stay at the Red Carpet Inn—and described the experience as generally pleasant, or at least not overly dangerous. “I had read the previous reviews for this hotel, so when we arrived I was not surprised by the security fence,” the reviewer writes. “Once inside the security fence, I felt very safe. I did not see any ‘sketchy’ characters, but maybe we came back to the hotel too early each night to see them.”

The next morning, I rise from bed, go through my morning routine all by myself. There are no interruptions, no noise as I brush my teeth, wash my face, put on my jeans and black blouse. I gather my belongings in the quiet room and head out into the ugly daylight.

I feel sad as I walk into the little motel office to check out.

A new average white guy is there, one with a friendlier demeanor, one who looks like any other white guy who might work the morning shift at a hotel that services truckers.

“Did you see the ceiling?” he asks with a smug grin.

“Yes.”

“We’re the only hotel in the state of Louisiana that has that.”

“It’s nice.”

I sign another form. I gather my belongings, collected in my satchel, my backpack, the plastic bag from the convenience store. I turn over my key. I am no longer Janet Leigh. I am not Llewelyn Moss hiding from a relentless killer. I am certainly not a little girl in a ruffled swimsuit. I am a Freshmen English Composition teacher in black slacks and a cheap sleeveless

blouse, headed to work in a borrowed classroom in the Math Building and then returning to someone else's home.



Illustration 3: *GOSPeL*

Author's note: This piece reflects the particular experiences of the author in a particular time and place, namely the period between November 2011 and May 2012 in the 1100 block of Spain Street, New Orleans. The author understands and expects that those living even a block away or living here during a different time may have very different experiences of the neighborhood.

Wolf Bitch is Coming to Get You

The graffiti here screams about violence, about the dead, about MRSA and shit-eaters and something called “gayoss.”

The messages call out from the facades of the forsaken buildings on my block, the first block of Spain Street off Saint Claude Avenue in New Orleans. These vacant buildings near Saint Claude look like the remnants of a tiny fallen Rome. They must have been government buildings or banks, with their stately columns, their lofty heights, and lots of large empty windows like empty eye sockets. Now they are just gray and white carcasses, decaying canvases for anger and aggression.

What does MRSA mean? Is it a nickname? Or the superbug? I don't know, but it looks painful. I think it's the superbug². The cartoon man shouts *MRSA!* as he scowls from his post on

² Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is a form of superbug, or bacterium that has become resistant to antibiotics. According to the Mayo Clinic website, most MRSA infections occur in hospital patients or other health-care settings, but another type of MRSA infection spreads among healthy people through skin-to-skin contact. Following Hurricane Katrina, the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported MRSA infections among storm evacuees and relief workers in multiple states. The infection usually begins with a small red bump that can turn into a deep abscess. The disease can cause life-threatening infections in bones, the bloodstream, heart valves, and lungs. Living in crowded or unsanitary conditions is a risk factor for MRSA, according to the National Institutes of Health.

a telephone cross box along Saint Roch Avenue. He is bald and chubby, naked with lips pursed in pain, some mysterious drops oozing from his exposed penis. *MRSA*, he cries, his penis still dripping, on the side of the abandoned business that fronts my block. *MRSA!* he shouts to all of St. Roch.

The agonized cartoon man aside, most of the graffiti in this part of the St. Roch neighborhood makes little attempt at artistry. Words are written in plain bubble letters or block print, just lines of red or black or white or blue. No shading or flourishes.

Despise hisses a wall on my block in thin red letters.

MRSA the wall pronounces in thick black.

GAYOSS, it tells me in more black. What is gayoss? I don't know, but it sounds like a mix of "gay" and "chaos," like some homosexual version of complete disorder.

Whatever it is, gayoss seems frightening, because the word is ugly and loud in harsh block letters.

A wall directly across the street from my driveway also shouts about gayoss. Every day, this wall yells at me: *Total Fuckin GAYOSS*.

I get in my truck to drive to school. *Total Fuckin GAYOSS*.

I walk to yoga class. *Total Fuckin GAYOSS*.

I get my mail. *Total Fuckin GAYOSS*.

I moved to St. Roch in November 2011. The neighborhood is an oddly-shaped 1.25-square-mile slice of New Orleans (City-Data.com). On a map, the outline of St. Roch looks like the outline of Vermont if someone added a jagged handsaw-blade to the top of the state, with the pointy end

facing west. The neighborhood is bordered by Almonaster Boulevard, I-610, Elysian Fields Avenue, Franklin Avenue, and perhaps most importantly, St. Claude Avenue.

St. Claude represents not just a geographic boundary but a major socioeconomic split as the busy thoroughfare separates St. Roch, a neighborhood just beginning to experience the gentrification process, from the Marigny, a neighborhood that has largely seen the completion of that process. Research the two areas on City-Data.com and you'll see that St. Roch is a low-income, predominantly black neighborhood, while the Marigny is a higher-income, predominantly white neighborhood. According to CityData.com, the 2010 median household income in St. Roch was \$28,157, a significant dip from the overall New Orleans median income of \$36,208 and the median household income of \$43,234 in the Marigny. Looking at a color-coded poverty-rate map by City-Data.com, the colors in the Marigny vary from a light purple, or a poverty rate between 30 and 40 percent, to darker shades of purple, or a poverty rate between 10 and 30 percent. Across St. Claude Avenue in the St. Roch and St. Claude neighborhoods, a few purple-ish areas remain, but are overcome by large swaths of peach and yellow shades, or poverty rates of 50 to 70 percent.

But I didn't need statistics or poverty maps to discern the differences in socioeconomic position from one side of St. Claude to the other. Walk around each side, and the divide becomes evident. The historic homes in the Marigny are freshly painted in bright, tropical colors—blood-orange red with palmetto-green trim, banana yellow with deep-blue, etc. Porch décor has been crafted into a bohemian art with potted succulents and herb gardens, carefully-chosen thrift-shop chairs, and some iconic New Orleanian symbol like a fleur-de-lis flag or wooden signs with “Be Nice or Leave” painted in happy colors.

Some of the graffiti here mirrors that in St. Roch: “Shit Eater” and “MRSA” appear on walls and garbage cans in some parts of the Marigny, usually parts nearer St. Claude. But in the Marigny, the words seem like weak whispers, almost completely drowned out by loud posters advertising burlesque acts, music shows, art classes, storytelling projects, and dog parks. “Shit eater” cannot compete with the collective chatter of Bella Blue on a pole and soothing images of koi swimming on sidewalk corners.

In St. Roch, the historic homes seem more worn, a bit more slouched, like they’re just too tired to stand up straight. Here, the homes are painted in more neutral colors, earth tones, and faint pastels: white with white trim, tan with white, brown, the weakest pinks and peaches. Porch décor becomes scarcer and more utilitarian: patio chairs and the occasional ivy in a pot. Signs say “No Trespassing,” and the distinctly New Orleanian symbols here are often spray-painted Katrina “X”s showing who searched the home after the storm, how many survivors they found, how many bodies. Abandoned homes and corner stores, lots overgrown with waist-high grass sprout at random throughout the neighborhood as the wilderness reclaims what we’ve neglected.

St. Claude Avenue itself, once known as a corridor for drugs and prostitution, reflects the changing nature of the Marigny and St. Roch, the growing mix of black and white, native New Orleanians and newcomers, poor and middle-class, as more art galleries and live-music clubs (offering a range of genres from heavy metal to bluegrass) crop up alongside the dollar stores, corner stores, and fast-food restaurants lining St. Claude.

The safer, artsier Marigny is now too trendy and too pricey for true urban pioneers, so they have begun settling downriver across the railroad tracks in the Bywater and now, finally, across St. Claude Avenue into St. Roch. St. Roch is the place that people say will be amazing in

about five years, the place where the hardcore urban pioneers earn their street cred. St. Roch is still dangerous enough to where if you happen to be a young-looking 32-year-old white girl like me, and mention that you live there, people will look surprised.

“I live right off St. Claude,” I tell people.

“Which side?” they always ask, always expecting the other answer.

I can tell they expect the other answer—the Marigny side, not St. Roch—by the way their eyebrows jump or their eyes widen for that split second before they can reign in their facial features to form a more open, polite mask.

“Yeah, the wrong side,” I say.

“McKnight!” My friend David says my last name loudly with a reprimanding tone, like a parent scolding a child, when I tell him I have moved to St. Roch.

David is a few years older than me, black, and a New Orleans native. He was my first boss out of college, and I still look up to him as one of the coolest, wisest, most interesting people I know. David is the kind of person who always wins at Trivial Pursuit and can tell a story so well that I almost forget that I was not present during the actual event. We would spend hours in his office discussing everything from politics and human nature to our favorite movies and music. Tonight, David laughs, that familiar wholehearted David Jackson guffaw, but I can tell from his tone that he is serious—and concerned. He gently reprimands me several times during our visit.

“McKnight! You gotta check with me next time before you move.”

When I moved to St. Roch in November 2011, I was not looking to gentrify anything, at least not on purpose. I was certainly not looking to earn street cred. Some would argue that my mere residence in the neighborhood as a young white person constituted a gentrifying presence, and perhaps they would have a point. While I can appreciate that I may meet some definitions of “gentrifier,” I saw myself—and continue to see myself—as different from those moving to the neighborhood specifically to “improve” anything or to gain some sort of “authentic” cultural experience of living in a place populated by low-income native New Orleanians. I saw myself as simply needing an affordable place to live.

I had spent the past year and three months living in a magical part of the Marigny known as “The Triangle,” an arts-inclined little section bordered by Elysian Fields, St. Claude, and Esplanade avenues. The city’s most celebrated live-music corridor, the stretch of Frenchmen Street from Esplanade to Dauphine Street, runs through the Triangle. In the Triangle, life felt like an entertaining but exhausting marathon party. It felt like a constant parade of brass bands and artists and gutter punks and bums and musicians and hustlers and jugglers and people clomping down the street on stilts on an ordinary Saturday afternoon. Almost every time I walked out my door, I saw life in full joyous swing.

My roommate and I, both graduate students at the University of New Orleans, moved out of the Triangle at the end of October 2011. He opted to move so he could get a French Quarter apartment with his girlfriend. I moved because no one I knew needed a place to live, and I couldn’t afford to stay in the house alone. I wound up living with generous friends in the Treme neighborhood for two weeks while scouring Craigslist for a new place.

I was determined to stay in the Marigny if at all possible, but could find nothing within my price range. So I began looking in St. Roch, dubbed “the New Marigny” by realtors, and noticed a studious-sounding young woman looking for a roommate. Jessa, age 25, a slender white Oregon transplant, works in a law office and is applying to med school. She has an old hound dog and lives just a half-block off St. Claude—not too far into St. Roch, I thought. Jessa did not sound like a white kid who would live in a dangerous neighborhood to be artsy or cool.

I visited the house one evening and immediately adored the place for its sheer oddity—and its distance from the street. Our “house” is actually a former dog-grooming studio attached to the end of a long shotgun house. The front portion of the shotgun house is visible from the street, but a tall wooden fence surrounding the house hides the rest of it, including the grooming studio at the tail end, from view.

The dog-grooming studio was converted several years ago into living quarters with a master bedroom, tiny kitchen, small living room, bathroom, and a second bedroom. After the grooming studio closed, the landlords added a wall to separate the former studio from the shotgun house in front.

In some ways, our place is quite charming. The kitchen’s wood furnishings and little window with plants make me think of a cottage in the French countryside. My room is large yet snug, with big French doors and vines with little orange buds painted onto the walls, all light green and tan earth tones with splashes of happy orange.

In other ways, the place looks like an underground bunker. The living room, especially, feels below ground, maybe even submarine, with its low ceilings, concrete floors and cinderblock walls painted bright-ass industrial blue. The glass sliding doors are like rectangular portholes that look out onto nothing but a fence less than a foot away.

Several quirks hint at the spot's past as a business: the floors are formed of rough concrete, the kitchen floor includes a drain in the center, the door leading to my bedroom is the hardier kind that typically leads to a garage or back yard. Flip the switches, and long rectangular fluorescent office lights blink to life.

At first, this bizarre structure felt like a cozy hideaway. But increasingly, I realize that life in a hiding spot, in a fallout shelter, is not all that cozy. It's unnerving.

Isolating.

For weeks, I occasionally peek through the windows of the shotgun house that butts up against our home. I wonder why I never see the home's occupants, never hear them even. Yet the home's kitchen is set up cute, like a country grandma's kitchen, the hallways lit by warm orange lights. The place looks lived-in, like someone will return to the stove and begin stirring a pot of spaghetti any minute.

"Who lives in the house in front?" I finally ask my roommate.

"I don't think anyone lives there," she says.

In a city famed for its friendliness, I have somehow found the un-friendliest block.

I do not know a single one of my neighbors, have not met a living soul on my block. I have caught only glimpses of them, sightings so quick and unsubstantial that I could not describe what any of them look like beyond their race and gender, maybe a general age. Parts of St. Roch, especially in the more dangerous areas farther from St. Claude, seem quite communal. The neighborhood has a church, a cemetery, a park, and a long history; unlike the Marigny, St. Roch includes a lot of native New Orleanians with generational attachments to the area. The elderly sit

on their porches in the afternoons, and younger men tinker with cars. Kids play basketball in the street. Even just a street over in either direction, if I make eye contact with people sitting on their stoops, they will offer a wave or a hello.

Not here. My block seems especially isolated for reasons I cannot fully determine. The front half of our block, facing St. Claude, is largely filled with abandoned buildings, but houses line the remaining half of the block, and most of them seem occupied. My neighbors hide behind security systems and tall fences and gates armored at the top with screws and nails.

I have likewise met none of those who trudge back and forth at all hours from Saint Claude Avenue to the farther reaches of St. Roch. These are not the elderly from the porches or men with the cars. These people – the young black man with handsome features and long braids, the wizened black lady perpetually carrying white plastic grocery bags, the troupes of grimy white men in flannel shirts – say nothing, refuse to make eye contact. I look straight into their faces, offer the start of a smile, only to be looked through as if I am not there. I cannot meet the eyes of the middle-aged black women walking to the bus stop with stone faces, chins up, daring the world to say something. I try to put on a similar hard mask when I cross Saint Claude Avenue, especially at night, an effort to look less like a target.

Despite the incessant flow of walkers, it's usually quiet on my block. No shouted greetings, no shouts of anger, just the wind rustling the leaves of the banana trees and the fronds of the palmettos and the branches of the oaks. Wind and leaves and branches. But it's not the quiet of nature. It's the quiet of abandonment. The quiet of forsaken.

My first week in St. Roch, my roommate leaves town, and I struggle to sleep. I stare at the yard outside and know someone could just smash a fist or tire iron through our kitchen door window or through the French doors to my bedroom and walk in with minimal effort.

Shit eater, accuses a brown garbage can on the sidewalk near my block. *Shit eater* it calls me each time I walk past.

“They’re shooting a scene for a movie at St. Roch Tavern,” my roommate, Jessa, tells me. “So don’t worry; it’s fireworks, not gunshots,” she adds with a strained, high-pitched giggle.

St. Roch Tavern sits a block and a half from our home.

“Oh good, thanks for telling me,” I say.

“Yeah, if you haven’t seen the Crime Maps for your neighborhood, you don’t want to,” my godfather tells me one night.

So of course, I can’t resist pulling them up.

On Nola.com, the city newspaper’s website, I pull up the Murder Map and watch little pink circles pop up all over my side of Saint Claude Avenue. The other side, the Marigny side, is nearly free of them, but St. Roch and the neighboring Seventh Ward are fields of pink. Selfishly, I click on the ones nearest me.

Two blocks down my street at 1300 Spain: Edwin Canales, 41, Hispanic, died Feb. 21, 2011, from a beating. Four blocks down my street at 1400 Spain: Larry Holmes, 20, race unspecified, died Aug. 18, 2011, from a gunshot wound. About two blocks from me on Saint Roch Avenue: Jonathan Hall, 27, white, died Dec. 23, 2010 of a gunshot wound.

Within the year before I moved to St. Roch in November 2011, two people had been killed just blocks from me on my street and eight people had been killed within six blocks of my house. Less than four blocks away, another man died in December 2011, after I had moved to the neighborhood.

In contrast, murder maps for the Marigny showed one murder from 2008 to 2011, zero murders during the past year, and zero murders from 2008 to 2011 within six blocks of my home there.

“St. Roch residents are determined to end the explosion of violence in their neighborhood,” reads the headline of an article from the March 21, 2011 edition of *The Times-Picayune*. “Over the past few months, the coroner’s van has spent much of its time picking up bodies in St. Roch and nearby neighborhoods,” the article states. The lengthy story describes a neighborhood that has seen deaths, but not to this degree. Something seemed to change following the murder of 17-year-old Rodney Coleman in November 2010, the writer says, unbalancing some unseen scale and causing the neighborhood to explode in brazen crimes. The violence has moved from the fringes into the heart of St. Roch, forcing children away from the park and the elderly off their porches after sunset. “Fear like this is unprecedented in the park, a hub of the quiet, historic community,” the article states. The surge in killings is accompanied by a surge in car burglaries and other petty crimes. Then there’s this: “Over the past few months, St. Roch and nearby neighborhoods have surpassed Central City as New Orleans’ most violent section.” The murders mostly involve black men, but in a city where innocent bystanders regularly include toddlers and the elderly of both genders and various races, I find meager comfort in not being a black male. A month after I move to St. Roch, a December 2011 shooting in Central City leaves its 19-year-old target, Emmett Allen, critically wounded. Instead, stray bullets from the shooting

kill Keira Holmes, just days before her second birthday, as she plays outside. Police are investigating a possible connection between that shooting and the murder of 26-year-old Charles Louis Anderson III, who is gunned down the next day in St. Roch, less than five blocks from my home.

I may not be the target for murder, but bullets here frequently miss their intended targets.

I search for statistics on sexual assaults, but cannot find any broken down by neighborhood. I can find no solid statistics on possible correlations between murder rates and sex-assault rapes, but from my past experience working with kids in rough South Louisiana neighborhoods, I suspect a correlation exists. I can find no numbers, but my gut tells me I better be careful.

I don't invite people over. I tell myself that it's because I would just rather go out. Deep down, I know it's at least partly because I would feel responsible if something bad happened to them here.

Trying to understand the explosion in violence here, the city's police, politicians, and St. Roch residents look to the usual suspect: drugs.

“Given the relative quiet in Central City, a previous ground zero for city violence, neighbors wonder whether St. Roch is merely the latest haunt of the city's nomadic drug trade and its accompanying violence,” the *Times-Picayune* article reads.

Community activists cite untreated mental illness, dysfunctional families, and a lack of jobs in the area as compounding the problem. Some say cuts to the state budget, particularly in the mental-health and social-service areas, have worsened the problem.

But neighbors also point to a deeper and some might say darker cause: the national and local neglect of an entire neighborhood, a whole community, following Hurricane Katrina.

The Times-Picayune article gives me a better understanding of the strange urban landscape I now call home. As I read, the pieces come together and make sense of not just the increasing crime and abandoned buildings but the feeling, the ominous undercurrent of grief and anger I sense in the air here. It's the kind of grief that comes from horrific loss and then betrayal and abandonment.

“Neighbors say that their once-stable, working-class, mixed-race neighborhood has been weakened by blight, neglect and the loss of nearly half its population after Hurricane Katrina...Key storm-damaged structures also remain shuttered, including nearly 1,600 vacant apartments and homes, most of the area's schools and the historic, city-owned St. Roch Market, which has yet to be repaired even though former recovery czar Ed Blakely named it a top city priority in March 2007.”

As I read, I grow sad knowing families with generational attachments to this neighborhood, people who believed in this place so much that they sacrificed comfort and safety to rebuild their homes here, are now watching the community they love threatened by surging violence. This is what happens when a community is ignored. This is what happens when an entire neighborhood is left behind.

Are we...? the cartoon girl in the long-sleeved blue t-shirt used to ask from the wall across the street from my home in St. Roch. *Are we...what?* I can't remember what. I'm pretty sure she was once asking a question, a question that has since been painted over, leaving her speechless.

The girl looks a little like me, I think, with shoulder-length brown hair, one arm at her side and the other raised, ending in a pointed index finger as though mid-proclamation.

Her face has no eyes, just a pair of spirals, the kind cartoon characters have when they've just been smashed over the head with a frying pan and their eyeballs spin with dizziness. Above her head is the graffiti marking every building in this neighborhood, the signature Katrina X with the numbers of people found alive, the number of people found dead. I try to read the blue spray-paint numbers, but I cannot make them out. I cannot tell how many people were found alive or how many were found dead.

My house in the Marigny Triangle was not the safest place either. This is a city, and it's New Orleans, so no one is ever truly safe. There were armed robberies on my block in the Marigny, one right across the street from my home. People tried to break into the neighbors' side of our double shotgun house. Someone got shot on the block of Frenchmen Street that bordered my backyard.

But I felt much safer there.

There was Tom the old British writer, Hubie the percussionist, the nameless mustachioed guy with the weiner dog, the pothead porch-sitters, Stefano the Slavic jewelry-maker rolling his cart back and forth from the French Market.

"Did you hear about the robbery down the street?" they would ask.

A constant flow of information wound among our little network of oddballs, fostering a sense of camaraderie and teamwork. There was also a constant flow of tourists—eyewitnesses—bustling past my home.

I was kept awake often – by live music. I knew my neighbors. Also, there weren't nearly so many murders there.

Friday, Dec. 30, 2011, there is a triple shooting in St. Roch, about a mile from my home. On New Year's Day, there is a shooting in the Seventh Ward. Closing out 2011 with death and opening 2012 with more death.

A Jan. 1, 2012 article in the *Times-Picayune* pinpoints St. Roch among major contributors to a 14-percent jump in homicides in 2011. Community activist Norris Henderson, involved in violence-quelling programs, is quoted saying, "The epicenter of murder in New Orleans has shifted from Central City...to the St. Roch area." St. Roch, the epicenter of murder in the nation's murder capital.

The medians along St. Roch Avenue are surprisingly pretty with curving concrete pathways lined by oak trees, the branches forming a protective arc overhead. Historic-style street lamps begin to glow at dusk.

But at the head of each median sits a gray, rectangular telephone cross-connect box, a large metal cabinet for phone-system wiring, that rises from the grass like a giant metal tombstone. Near St. Roch cemetery, one of these median headstones shouts *GOSPeL!* –or at least tries to shout, but half of *GOSPe* is covered with a poster of some sort, stuck to the tombstone like a giant sticker. On it are two male figures, each with a third eye on their foreheads connected by a triangle to an all-seeing eye in the middle. They are naked and chubby and bald and pig-

eyed, like old nasty cupids or little grimy Buddhas. A large blue-white drop drips from each of their penises along with two straight lines of tiny droplets, like rain. At the bottom of the image is a little storm cloud with lightning coming out and *MRSA*. Another cross box also shouts *GOSPeL!* and *I was born DEAD!...PLEASE Live xMRSA fuck life.*

My friend Coleen is late. Only about 10 minutes late, but it feels like forever when you feel like a target. I am especially conscious of my age, race, and gender at this moment: young white woman, sitting duck.

That's the story I see repeatedly in the media—black men are the criminals and white women are the victims. We are weak. We are vulnerable. I have a black belt in martial arts, but I haven't practiced in nearly two years. I could probably still put up a good fight, but would that be enough?

I shift my weight on my feet in the driveway and wonder if it's best to hide in the shadows or stand in the floodlight. Eventually, I duck back behind my gate, text her: *Are yall close? I can't just stand out on my driveway at night.* Finally, mercifully, Coleen and her boyfriend reach my driveway and I come out from my hiding spot behind the fence and get in the car. I feel like I have just skidded into home plate. I settle into the backseat of the car, let my shoulders drop. Safe.

Weeks before, I walked home with Coleen and her boyfriend from a party about a half-mile away in the Bywater. "You're walking home?" our friend Andrew asked me, his face skeptical. "Have you seen where you live?" I laughed hard at his joke, continued laughing about

it for days when I passed the empty buildings scrawled with graffiti, when I watched through cracks in my gate the shadows moving up and down my block. *Have you seen where you live?*

They cannot kill us. We are already dead, the signs across Saint Claude, near the All-Ways Lounge, remind me every day. *They cannot kill us. We are already dead,* they repeat.

The month I moved to New Orleans in 2010, my friend was robbed at gunpoint outside the Rock ‘n’ Bowl in Mid-City.

“I’ll shoot you, bitch,” the robber told her.

As I helped my friend call the police, I became shaken by her palpable fear, the trauma exposed on her face, red and swollen from crying.

Within months of living in St. Roch, a friend of mine gets robbed at gunpoint in the Marigny. He is pistol-whipped to the head and robbed.

“Oh no,” I say when I hear the news. “That sucks.”

But I think, *That ain’t so bad. He’s alive, isn’t he?*

Not long after, I hear myself tell someone: “I would rather live on the other side of Saint Claude. They just have armed robberies over there.”

Our walls are thick. Atop our fence are the sharp ends of thick metal screws sticking out at random angles, threatening and angry-looking. I move the recycling bin toward the street, so it's not as inviting for use as a step ladder to scale our fence.

I develop a routine for entering our yard: push open the fence gate with enough force to make it swing as wide as possible, scour the immediate opening for any sign of intruders—a moving shadow, the gleam of a gun, place my arms above my head as a shield, and step quickly through the gate, stepping to the right, into the floodlight where I can see and away from the leafy banana tree where someone could be hiding with a shovel to hit me over the head. That is the idea that scares me most. Slam. Shovel to the head and it's over. No chance to fight. No chance to run.

Wolf Bitch is coming to get you, warns the definitive black paint behind the All-Ways Lounge on the good side of St. Claude, but still on St. Claude. On the building to the side of the club, a vertical line of cartoon jellyfish float on the concrete, their tentacles hanging, ready to sting.

RIP LAWRENCE WALLACE, JR., says the wall a bit farther down. A thin horizontal line crosses out the entire name.

Lark. Her name is engraved in large, thin block letters into the cement floor of our kitchen, right by the refrigerator, just before the floor dips into the living room.

Lark, people say when they see it carved into our floor.

Lark, I thought when I first saw it, not connecting the name with the original owner of our home, the former Lark's Grooming LLC.

I know that Lark is dead. The moment I moved in, the landlords and Jessa warned me to never put nails in my bedroom walls, so as not to disturb the murals of vines and buds painted by Lark. I find the artwork soothing and arrange my furniture to expose as much of the murals as possible. I did not ask why Lark died, just assumed cancer, a car wreck, some typical death. But I begin to grow curious about this, too.

"What happened to Lark?" I ask Jessa out of nowhere.

"She was murdered."

I gasp.

Selfishly, I have one question in mind: "Here?"

"No, in Chalmette," Jessa says.

Thank God, I think.

I later learn from news articles that Lark died in July 2005 "in an apparent double murder-suicide linked to a love-triangle dispute" (*Daily Comet*). Police said Patricia Tipton, 55, shot Julie Carreras, 47, and Lark Bennett, 45, in the kitchen of a Chalmette home before turning the gun on herself. Other articles describe Lark as a major animal lover heavily involved in the SPCA and a founding member of the city's dog-parading Carnival krewe, the Mystic Krewe of Barkus.

I later learn from Jessa that the shotgun house in front of ours was Lark's home, that her parents have kept the place as it was when she died. I still peek through the windows sometimes, at the kitchen set up cute for no one.

I want to paint new graffiti here - something cute and fun, something like the images on my T-shirts. “Nom nom nom a saur” my T-shirt says. It has glittering pink letters and a big green dinosaur with rounded teeth for munching on vegetation.

I am wearing this shirt when I walk down St. Claude Avenue at dusk, heading from my home to a nearby Walgreen’s. I am wearing mustard-colored jeans cut off at the calf and rolled up to just below my knee, a pair of gold hoop earrings and a ponytail.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a small, worn-looking light blue car swerve out of traffic and pull over to the curb near me. The driver, a man who looks middle-aged and of Middle Eastern descent, is grinning at me. I stop on the sidewalk and peer through the rolled-down passenger-side window, expecting him to ask for directions. Instead, he grins broadly and pats the empty passenger seat next to him. I look at him, my eyes wide, mouth open, eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“What?” This comes out as more of an exclamation than a question.

He pats the seat again.

Jaw still dropped, I walk away.

Apparently, on St. Claude, I look like a hooker.

“Oh yeah, that was definitely a solicitation,” my roommate says, laughing. “I’ve been solicited several times walking down St. Claude, even when I’m walking Lewis.”

Lewis Meriweather is an old, guilty-looking hound dog. LewisMeriweather, on St. Claude, apparently looks like a hooker’s dog.

A week after the triple shooting, and the night after yet another murder in St. Roch, Jessa casually asks if I have noticed any damage to the lock on the front gate. I consider this and say no, and she tells me about something that happened Sunday or Monday night, she can't remember which.

On that night, she arrived home around 10 to find our driveway motion lights already activated, meaning someone or something had been very near our gate. The lights are not sensitive – stray cats slink past our gate and people trek the sidewalk crossing our driveway without setting them off. Sometimes, I have to pace back and forth near the gate, waving my arms, before they will come on, so that I can see the lock well enough to insert my key.

My roommate saw nothing in the driveway, so she pulled her car in and walked up to the gate, where she noticed our lock had been damaged. She very cautiously opened the gate and slowly, carefully, walked to the back. She saw no further signs of an intruder, so she just went inside.

After she tells me this, I walk to the gate to inspect, expecting to find some barely noticeable damage. I am shocked to see the circular face of the lock has been bashed to the point where the top half sinks in and the other half pokes out. I jiggle the lock around and discover it's so loose that I can now slide the entire lock mechanism, cylinder, face plate and all, up and down like a sliding window. I ask Jessa if she has notified anyone of this and she says no.

I call the cops. An hour later, around midnight, a cop car pulls in front of our gate. I show the officer, a stout youngish black man, the motion light, the dented lock, and the long, dark passage from the gate to our home in the back. My roommate repeats her story to the cop and heads to bed while I climb into the passenger seat of the cop car to file a report. The officer speaks in a very professional stoic cop voice, deep and mumbling and serious. I make nervous

small talk—ask him where he grew up, where he lives now, why he became a cop. He tells me grew up in the safer part of Treme and now has two houses, one in Slidell and one in New Orleans East. He tells me he used to think New Orleans would be a good place to settle down and raise a family, but not anymore. He said his home in Slidell feels like Disney Land, that he feels safer as soon as he starts crossing the bridge toward it. He tells me how the Fifth District, his district, now encompasses not just St. Roch but also the murderous section of the Seventh Ward, and how the Fifth District led in murders last year. He sounds jealous of the Eighth District cops, who get the Quarter and the Marigny.

I bring up the rash of armed robberies in the Marigny, mention that we don't get as many of those over here, and he agrees.

“They know who to rob,” he says. “They know the people back here got guns.”

In other words, the people in my neighborhood are too dangerous to rob.

Guns indeed. Earlier this year, St. Roch residents got a scare when a man with an assault rifle chased down and killed a teenager within a block of the neighborhood park.

At some point in our conversation the cop mumbles something about how he thinks I'm “kinda cute.” Still, I am caught off guard when as I step back into my driveway at 1 a.m., he peeks out his patrol car window and asks if he can take me to dinner some time. He gives me his number, says to call his cell directly if I ever hear any strange noises.

I wonder if he will still protect me if I don't go to dinner with him. Probably. Maybe.

I wake one morning at 6 to an alarm shrieking from the vacant business across the street.

The alarm screams over and over, screeching for no one. Bleary-eyed, my roommate hands me the phone to call the cops. Soon, the alarm stops, its shrieking silenced.

They cannot kill us, the graffiti reminds on St. Claude reminds me, *we are already dead*.

My roommate tells me that our landlord basically believes the lock got damaged on its own, that “it just got loose” from “regular wear-and-tear.

“Wow,” I say. “Somebody’s in denial.”

I am pleased, however, to find the lock fixed.

A few nights later, I arrive home to see the motion lights already on in the driveway. I approach cautiously, quietly, fling the gate open and stand there for a moment waiting and watching. Then I step inside with my arms above my head to block the force of a blow. There is none.

The graffiti across the street disappears, wiped out with thick tan and white paint. Within days, the words reappear like intractable weeds: *fuck town, DEATH, BITCH*.



Illustration 4: *Smoking*

Grieving the Pies I've Never Eaten

I'm a fan of most South Louisiana specialties – crawfish, king cake, Zapp's Potato Chips, et cetera– but a few things make me feel like a traitor to my local roots: I prefer my coffee without chicory, I'm ambivalent about oysters, and I'm pretty sure I have never in my life eaten a Hubig's Pie.

These fried pies, roughly the size of your hand, are stuffed with all manner of sweet fillings and glazed, creating a confection that rivals cake icing or nectar-flavored snowballs in sugariness. And they are sacred.

In the first episode of the HBO series “Treme,” a chef with very limited resources scavenges her purse to present a customer with a dessert humble in constitution but rich in meaning: a Hubig's pie. Though “Treme” received criticism for the inaccuracy—the chef serves up the pie months before the factory actually began baking pies again—but writers for the show defended the anachronism by saying the magically-appearing apple-flavored pie represents a thematic truth.

I have never eaten one of those New Orleans-made desserts, not even when I lived just one block down from the factory on Dauphine Street in the Marigny. My house sat at 2453, and Hubig's sat at 2417, our blocks oddly separated by a small street. I would walk past the large white building almost every day, sometimes catching a sweet scent in the air. I could see the roof of the factory from my third-floor bedroom window. But I'm not a fried-pie lover, so not even the happy little baker man smiling from the front of each Hubig's bag could tempt me to taste one.

Yet as I stood watching the firefighters drown out the giant scorcher at the factory on July 27, 2012, I felt the sense of loss already apparent on some of the faces around me.

Hubig's is one of those uniquely New Orleans institutions that inspire in locals a raging nostalgia bordering on madness. Its history in New Orleans goes back to the early 1920s, when Simon Hubig expanded his Texas-based bakery business into New Orleans, opening the factory on Dauphine Street. I imagine flappers eating these pies while doing the Charleston.

The Great Depression shuttered Hubig's bakeries in Texas, but could not extinguish the New Orleans factory. Neither could Hurricane Katrina in 2005. By early January 2006, Hubig's started baking pies again, an important signifier of the city's determination to rebuild.

Like anything uniquely and historically New Orleans, especially anything with an image that can be printed onto T-shirts or crafted into a group costume, Hubig's enjoys a fiercely loyal following. I mean diehard fierce, as in this fire at the pie factory was nothing short of a catastrophe.

That morning, I woke up at 6:30. Groggy, I started reading the news and saw the Internet ablaze with stories about the Hubig's factory burning.

Now fully awake, I rushed to my third-story window and sure enough, found a dramatic scene: red fire trucks and white Hubig's delivery vans, firefighters and people in their pajamas, flashing emergency lights, rubber hoses running down the street, and a giant crane angled high above the smoking building. It was directing a large and violent stream of water into the charred remains of the pie factory.

According to news reports, a Hubig's employee first reported the fire at 4:30 a.m. An hour later, the fire was upgraded to a five-alarm blaze.

Apparently, I had slept right through the raging part of the raging inferno, the part where 32 trucks with loud sirens rushed to my street and nearly 100 firefighters swarmed within feet of my house.

I do vaguely remember drifting into consciousness at some point and smelling smoke. My brain functioned just long enough to notify me that yes, I had turned off all knobs on the stove, and then question whether I should get up and double-check the house for a raging inferno. Should I? That question was never answered because I drifted back into sleep.

I figured the smell could be the residual effects of a burger-broiling incident from earlier that night, when an attempt to cook dinner succeeded in setting off my smoke alarm.

That morning, I furiously snapped photos from my third-floor window and then rushed outside in my pajamas to take more pictures and gawk, as did many others. The whole thing looked like a cliché action-film scene: joggers paused mid-run, dog-walkers tugging leashes to slow their pets to a stop, my unshaven and semi-conscious neighbors gathered on the sidewalk to stare into the still-smoking remains of a New Orleans icon.

At that moment, I felt my first craving for a Hubig's pie.

I had no idea what a Hubig's pie tasted like, but I wanted one. And I knew that, eventually, I would get to eat one.

You may love the lemon filling, others the chocolate or banana—or maybe you hate them all, but that doesn't matter. The pies belong to all of us.

This is why I am sure Hubig's will return.

New Orleanians will not let go of what is ours.

On the company website, Savory Simon is still proud and smiling, holding a pie aloft above a lengthy message of gratitude from Hubig's to #pielovers that ends with "REBUILD RESTORE REHUBIG'S, WE WILL NOT LOSE OUR FLAVOR!"

The fire at Hubig's started in the center of the factory, initial reports said, the cause unknown. More than a year later, I call Hubig's Pies and reach Otto Ramsey, member of the Ramsey family that along with the Bowman family, has owned the pie factory for generations. When I ask about the cause of the fire, he tells me in a gruff voice, "We feel that it started in the frying system, in the fryer itself." I ask Otto several more questions and he spits out terse answers, sounding tired, as though he has spent a lifetime answering these questions. Do you know when you're going to rebuild? "I wish I could say I did." Do you still plan to rebuild in the Bywater neighborhood? "We have permission from the planning commission, the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association and the city council to rebuild on Press Street between Burgundy and North Rampart. It's a very old section of town and, believe it or not, it does not have a municipal address."

I think of the pie craze following the fire, the rush on the stores and Hubig's delivery vans, the eBay sellers offering pies for up to \$500 apiece.

Do you have any pies left at all, I ask Otto. "No, we do not."

Do you know when you sold out of pies? "We're not sure. Shortly after the fire. I can't tell you whether it was two hours or two days."

But it's safe to say they were all gone within a week of the fire? "Oh, surely."

The night after the blaze, I walked past the factory on my way home. With the frantic emergency scene gone, the open site stood dark and solemn and hushed as though the fire was still sucking not only the oxygen, but all energy out of the immediate atmosphere.

Where once stood a bustling factory, now stood a hungry black hole on Dauphine Street.
Complete destruction.

Alone, I stopped for a moment to pay my respects and then sniffed. The smell of burnt
pies coated the air, the strong odor of smoke unable to completely overcome the persistent scent
of fried sweetness.

Sunday Brunch

I am wearing his blazer, the dark one with shoulder pads that almost fits me but not quite. It's just a little too big and square, so that I feel small and fragile, my arms suddenly like praying-mantis arms.

The day is perfect, a perfect New Orleans day at that. We sit in a small courtyard patio filled with green leafy plants and palmettos so shiny they almost look plastic. Little streams of water shush out of tiny unseen waterfalls hidden among the greenery, and the cobblestone floor brings the romantic side of New Orleans' past.

It's a Sunday afternoon in late January, but it's a New Orleans January so the cool air feels more like early spring than true winter. Walls border the courtyard on all sides, leaving just a small rectangle at the top for sunlight to come in, and the sunlight does find a way into the courtyard almost miraculously, angling its way through the plants to balance all the shade with light.

Other diners poke dainty forks and spoons into their eggs benedict and bread pudding. They sip quiet cups of dark coffee from perfect mugs. White-haired ladies and college boys dressed in suits speak quietly at their tables, voices relaxed but low, as though they are afraid loud chatter could disrupt the frail sunlight.

The scene looks like a painting by Renoir, perhaps a New Orleans version of "Luncheon of the Boating Party," like a moment that should be captured and copied and studied and stared at in wonder. The moment feels delicate, as if it could shatter the instant someone moves out of place or says something out of turn.

I stab my fork into chewy pieces of veal, swirl the meat around in the tangy red Creole sauce and shove the food into my mouth. I toss more red sauce over the cheese grits and scoop

up a gooey forkful, eating that like I eat most of my food, with the desperation and hunger of an abandoned animal.

I hear him saying that he hates to leave. To head back to New York. To leave Louisiana. More than that, he hates to leave me.

I sip my mimosa, savoring the mix of tart juice and champagne, and stare at my grits.

He's saying more. He tells me I'm smart, something about how I'm doing things right because I know not to go to fast or get too attached to someone who lives far away.

I think about the last man who left for a faraway place and how I didn't realize I was attached until he was gone.

And suddenly I am crying. Damn near unashamedly.

I'm not sobbing or anything. Tears are just sliding down my cheeks at a fast clip, and I know better than to try to stop them.

I grab a napkin, mumble something about the bathroom and rush away from the table cloaked in the too-big blazer, because that's what people do when they cry in a restaurant—they hide their faces and rush to the bathroom or even better, run out the front door. I've never had the guts to run all the way out the front door.

I am a little ashamed of crying in public, but much more ashamed that I am not crying for him, at least not only him. I am crying only a bit for him and more for the other guy who left and the guy who didn't leave and all the guys who left before they left. I am crying for everyone. I am crying for a special past brunch and for all the brunches that will never be and for all the people who will never have Sunday brunch.

Safely in the warm pink bathroom, I am surprised at how easily I stop crying. Proud of my weird strength—or insensitivity?—I stroll back out and return to my seat with a satisfied plop, my eyes only jumping around once to see if anyone is looking at me. Nobody looks at me. He and I shift the conversation to lighter topics like the present, as in the super-immediate present. We talk about the perfection of the food and fountains and the entire day. We finish brunch and walk out of the restaurant into more cool sunlight, but we step only a few feet when a saxophone stops us.

“That sounds—I think—that’s live?” I ask.

We stand still to listen.

Two saxophones, their jazz notes racing all over and around one another in wild riffs, warble in the air. Soft drums and bass create a low rhythm in the background. We look up and spot the source of the music at nearly the same time. There, on that upstairs balcony catty-corner to the restaurant, stands a lanky young man with a blond beard wailing into the street on an alto saxophone.

I look for the rest of the band, the second saxophone, but see nothing.

He and I turn to each other, excited to make the realization: “He’s playing with a recording,” I say, delighted to have solved the puzzle.

“He’s doing call and response with himself,” he says.

Then he grabs me, one arm wrapped around my back and the other hand pressed lightly against my hand. We start swaying to the saxophone, rotating together on the cracked, mottled street. I watch the world pass around me in a gentle circle.

The upbeat song ends and we break apart to clap for our private balcony musician. He shouts at us to keep going and shifts into a slower song. He and I dance closer this time, and the

world shrinks smaller, to just this corner. I think of how romantic this must seem. I think of how romantic this should be. This must look like the most romantic scene in all our tiny world. Then I realize that right now, this is the most romantic scene.

We continue rotating next to the sidewalk, and I watch motorists bump past. In one car, two young girls stare out at us expressionless, unimpressed. A van drives by, and a middle-aged woman in the passenger seat grins at me and gives me a thumbs-up. I smile back and keep turning with him, keep swaying until the saxophone finally stops and again we break apart.



Illustration 5: *Sleeping Bardog*

Kaboom

I had somehow forgotten about the science fair at my neighborhood barroom.

Eager to introduce a new friend to one of my favorite haunts, I was initially surprised to find one of the owners behind the bar in a white lab-coat on a Sunday afternoon, his face partially hidden behind streams of white smoke that clouded into the air.

I had been telling my friend about this place—how almost every time I step inside, I walk into something bizarre. A bit worried that today might prove disappointing, I was relieved to see the coat and smoke and to remember that the bar was holding a themed event in honor of a regular customer's birthday. For days, the chalk drawing on the door had announced: "Nikki's Bday Wacky Science Fair." I never thought to ask why, and apparently neither did most anyone else; when I later asked about the reason for this theme, the regulars responded with ambivalent shoulder shrugs, as if to say "Who cares?"

Like a lot of New Orleans neighborhood hangouts, this bar has developed into a tiny universe with its special collection of regulars, its own legends and lore, its own laws. But due to the ragtag bohemian character of our neighborhood, this particular universe happens to be a tad farther out into the final frontier. Free spirits congregate here, drawn by the bar's dedication to an anything-goes ambience. The place feels like a warm, beer-filled incubator for oddness. One night, so many dogs roamed the bar that the floor appeared as if made of moving fur. So many dogs, in fact, that an overwhelmed boxer mix hopped on top of a table-top arcade game to escape the roving packs of pets.

One afternoon, I sat down for a beer, turned my head to the side, and noticed hot sparks flying into the air. One of the owners was standing near the jukebox, welding part of an old

barber chair. Just as I began weighing the possible hazards of sitting so close to a welding project, a tiny chip of wood whizzed past my face. I moved down a few barstools.

On Monday mornings, one of the owners has mandated that everyone in the bar shall watch “Hee Haw.”

The afternoon of Nikki’s birthday party, some regulars were experimenting with baking soda and other ingredients often used in elementary-school science projects. I realized that the smoke floating up from behind the bar came from dry ice, which an owner was combining with water in a plastic bottle. However, I could not see that this man, as he walked to the other side of the bar, was screwing the cap onto the bottle while it remained in his hands.

My friend, appropriately awed by the scene before him, trailed along with his smart-phone to get video. But before he could hit “record,” a loud noise shook the bar, a sound that could best be described as “kaboom.”

The entire place seemed to jolt, to freeze mid-action and tremble the way the entire landscape and characters shake when an explosion goes off in the Super Mario Brothers Nintendo game.

The noise sounded like a bomb going off, which is exactly what it was.

My friend startled and ducked his head, then looked at me with an expression of wonder tinged with fright and confusion, the kind of expression worn by someone who has just witnessed an awe-inspiring and dangerous natural disaster, like a beautiful streak of lightning that hit too close.

Most of us laughed--until we all realized the explosion had damaged the owner’s hand badly enough to warrant a trip to the Emergency Room and to nearly make the stout bartender

with pigtails vomit looking at the injury. His hand suffered only minor injuries, but required several weeks wrapped in a wound tightly in a bandage to heal.

One patron received a bloody slice to the gums from shrapnel. Others complained of earaches and ringing ears.

My friend again surveyed his surroundings and then stared at me: “*Where* did you take me?”

Though intelligent and mature for his age, my friend is 11 years younger than me and lanky and blonde-haired, all of which made his question sound like a child questioning the judgment of an irresponsible parent or babysitter, the kind who sneaks a child into a place with unauthorized explosions.

For a moment, I felt like a bad parent—or maybe a great one.

Later that afternoon, the shrapnel victim and other regulars enjoyed Jello-O shots peppered with Pop Rocks. That night, customers popped leftover firecrackers.

And someone made additions to the chalk drawing. Next to “Nikki’s Bday Wacky Science Fair,” large letters proclaimed “HAVE A BLAST, “It’s the bomb,” and near the bottom: “kaboom.”

Sunset on the Beach in Haiti

I angle my face and press my right cheek against the pattern of palm-sized holes in our dorm-room wall in Haiti, feeling the cool rough concrete grate against my skin as I strain to catch sight of the nearby street. The lattice pattern of concrete holes allows winds off the Caribbean Sea to naturally cool our second-floor dorm, a large open room filled with bunk beds. I turn my head forward and press my forehead into the wall, looking hard into the night air. But no matter which way I position my face or for how long I stare, I can only see darkness.

So I crawl into my bunk bed and lie on my back listening to the sounds of the street: the thumping of drums and a deep, monotonous chant from the voodoo priest's home next door, a chorus of yelping dogs, bursts of fast-paced music as cars and mopeds pass, a man yelling in Kreyol into a microphone somewhere in the distance, and what sounds like a group of women all wailing together – wahhhhhhhhh – their voices rising and falling in intervals. The sounds, the drums and shouts and barking, remind me a little of lying in my bed in New Orleans, except that in New Orleans, the sounds would propel me out into the streets to discover their sources. Especially the music. Here, I am forced to lie still and wonder what the noises mean, to glare into the dark and let the sounds conjure images of all I cannot see.

During our week in Haiti, when we are not on the worksite, our group of 16 church volunteers from Houma, La. is kept on the grounds of the Youth With A Mission's "base" in Saint-Marc, Haiti. Each morning, we travel by truck for about half an hour to reach the village of Timonette, where we work with YWAM to build homes for earthquake victims. Each evening, we return to the "base," a large set of buildings with a dormitory and cafeteria, surrounded by a thick concrete

wall and guarded at the front by a man in fatigues with a large rifle. Everyone else calls this place the base, but I secretly call it “the compound.”

I do not belong to the Baptist church in Houma that has coordinated this volunteer trip, but my friend is a member, and I joined the group at her invite. I am here mainly to help families rebuild their lives following the horrific earthquake of January 2010. But I am also here to experience Haitian culture as much as possible—the food, the music, the people outside the compound walls—not with party-type consumerist ambitions, but in hopes of gaining an appreciation of aspects of Haiti that make Haitians proud, to get a more rounded view that encompasses more than poverty and despair, but also creativity and character. My friend, Melissa, told me we would probably get to see some of the local sights in the evenings, after wrapping up our work for the day. By Day Three, this has not happened. I knew I would be somewhat restricted by safety rules set by the Baptist church pastor and the YWAM leaders. But at this point, I am not feeling restricted; I am feeling imprisoned. I am also feeling crazy.

There is a lengthy and somewhat complex list of rules for when someone can leave the compound, and I mean even for simply walking out the front gate just to cross the street and come back. I know this because when I first arrived, I heard there was an Internet café fairly nearby and I wanted to check my e-mail, just once. I asked to be allowed out to visit the café and thus began three days of begging and finagling with various pastors and leaders, as the rules for going out vary depending on gender of departee, number of departees, time of day, intended destination, intended departure and arrival times. From the length and intricacy of these talks, I would never have guessed that the Internet café sat right across the street from the compound. Days of asking to cross the street and just when I think I will finally get my chance, the leaders instead allow me on the compound’s super-restricted wireless network for roughly three minutes.

Because that would be easier than allowing me to cross the street. Basically, no one ever leaves the compound because it is simply too complex an ordeal.

I check my e-mail that night and then walk upstairs to the girls' dorm, pull up a part of my dark-green mosquito nets and crawl into my bunk bed, the middle of three. I re-tuck the piece of disturbed netting back beneath the mattress so that it forms a delicate drapery and my bed again looks like that of some tropical Sleeping Beauty, waiting for her prince to come. I curl up on one side, seething as I run my fingertips along the lacy patterns of my mosquito net, up and down, back and forth, feeling the tiny holes, studying the webbing that keeps the mosquitoes out – and me in. *There aren't even many mosquitoes here. I've only seen maybe what, two? Three?* It is only about 8 at night, but I am too depressed to move. I hear the voices of the other women, two or three at a time, moving in and out of the room, talking loudly about Timonette or speaking in lowered tones on cell phones to their husbands or children. “Hey sweetie, Mommy misses you. Only four more nights and Mommy will be home.”

I do not know enough about Haiti, about Saint-Marc, to know whether the rules are actually extreme in regards to keeping a bunch of ignorant-ish Americans safe from violent aspects of a culture we do not understand. Maybe rigidity is necessary for our own good. But maybe not, I think, staring into the dim-lit dorm room until my eyes cross and fuzz over and I think I can distinguish separate particles of air.

In my experience on church work trips—and I have participated in several, including trips to Taiwan, El Salvador, and Mexico—I have seen safety rules used as disguises for religious rules. I think of how the American pastors in El Salvador made us women wear ankle-length skirts with our T-shirts, telling us we would offend Salvadorans if we wore anything else.

I later discovered that shorts or pants would not have offended Salvadorans; they just would have offended *certain Pentecostal Salvadorans*.

I'm struggling to be a cheerful giver and right now, I'm losing that fight. My problems are petty, especially here, but I can't let them go.

I think of my good friend from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and know he would be giving me an "I told you so" smirk right now. He told me repeatedly not to visit Haiti, not to do volunteer work there. I was initially surprised at his attitude, but then his explanation made sense to me: White people go to places like Africa and Haiti to "save" us, he told me, and they only see the poverty, hunger, war, and tragedy there, he says. They're too busy playing hero to experience the other side of these places—the cuisine, the music, the art, all the beautiful and brave things people do to save themselves. I want to prove my Congolese friend wrong, but I can't.

At the worksite, the children are charming and playful and sometimes anxious to help us paint shutters and walls—which works out well, because the children follow us everywhere, eager for candy, attention, hugs.

I am surrounded by a cloud of small children when Christy comes rushing over, frantic, to shove an open bottle of bubbles into my lap for no apparent – yet very urgent – reason. Children are clutching my hand and my shirt and my legs, but Christy is thrusting the bottle toward me anyway and it spills all over my lap, coating my crotch in a sheen of suds that feels refreshing in this dry Haitian heat. Still, I am annoyed. Can't she see that I am covered in children? Why are the bubbles an emergency matter?

I sigh, brush the excess soap off my pants and look at my friend Melissa, widening my eyes dramatically and pursing my lips, twisting my face into an expression of irritation. I have made this face at Melissa several times during our trip to Haiti, always after Christy has annoyed me in some small, yet potent way – by interrupting my quiet views of the distant mountains with silly questions, by taking the stack of lunch meat away before I get a chance to eat, leaving me hamless. When she is near, I somehow wind up with a cheese-and-mustard sandwich or a crotch full of bubbles.

“Christy, get off that jug.”

Hank’s voice sounds stern. It’s the third time he has told Christy to sit on the floor of the truck bed like the rest of us. She finally slides off the water jug and the truck starts grinding down the gravel road toward Timonette, the tiny village outside of Saint-Marc where our church group is building a home. To reach the worksite in Timonette, our group plus about a dozen Haitian volunteers must squeeze into the cabs and beds of three pickup trucks. The back of the trucks also carry generators filled with gasoline as we travel streets where whoever has the largest vehicle or most agile moped wins. Basically, we are roaring through lawless dirt and gravel roads on mobile bombs, but that is not exciting enough for Christy: she must take it the extra step and face the chaos from atop a tall plastic jug.

Most of us feel an instinct to protect Christy, usually from herself. She is 60 years old and looks good for her age, her cheeks still supple and her shoulder-length blonde hair thick and healthy. She moves with surprising agility, quick and smooth. But despite her bright face and lithe stride, she somehow seems feeble, vulnerable. Maybe it’s the soft, pale skin that looks a tad

flappy under her arms. Or the linen old-lady blouses she wears instead of the T-shirts preferred by everyone else. Or the flimsy, bright-patterned scarf always tied loosely around her neck. It doesn't help that she, even more so than me, has a head that floats in the clouds, rendering her a female Mister Magoo wandering willy-nilly around the houses and people and goats with eyes shut to danger. When I see her walking through the dusty village of Timonette, unguarded from people or the elements, I feel an urge to follow her in case she begins to stroll blindly into a ditch or a road while focused on candy and bubbles.

I have longed to walk up to the sea since we arrived, since we drove up the coast for several hours from Port-au-Prince to Saint-Marc. Through the bus window, I watched the blue Caribbean waters and rocky coastline slide past, untouchable from my seat.

The compound sits across the street from the sea, so all week from the back of the truck, I have looked for spaces in the rows of houses to catch glimpses of the water: seascape, house, house, house, store, seascape. So close.

Several days into the trip, I plead with one of the YWAM compound leaders for a chance to escape. She skirts my request with a "maybe later this week," but mentions there is a tree in the front yard with wooden pegs for climbing. She says that if I climb up, I can see over the wall and into the street. That night, I wait until the sky has turned a thick black, until most of our group has shuffled off to bed, to creep toward the front yard. The front yard is not off limits as far as I

know, but everything feels off limits here. I spot the guard sitting at the gate and stroll up to him, tell him I want to climb the tree.

“I no speech,” he says, before asking if I know Kreyol.

“No,” I say. “Je parle un petit francais.”

He nods.

“Je,” I say, tapping my palm to my chest, “voila,” pointing to the other side of the front yard, which holds the tree. He nods.

The front yard seems unnaturally still as I walk across the grass and use moonlight to find the tree. I spot a cleft in the trunk, and begin easing my right foot onto the first wooden block, while thinking about how bad I am at rock-climbing. I tug my left foot up and grab a sturdy nook, where a big branch divides from the trunk, and hoist myself onto the next step just long enough to catch my balance and make the final push to the cleft. I stand there, checking the dark knots in the tree for snakes, insects. I notice more wooden steps and climb them quickly to another cleft.

I lean into the trunk, embracing it in a side hug, and stare into the street below. The view looks like a scene from a black-and-white movie: the white gravel of the road and of men’s T-shirts against the black sky and windows and doorways, the images in motion but not quite real. Motorcycles pass in the white moonlight. A shadow of a woman leans against the wooden frame of her porch, her hair swaddled in cloth. I wonder what these people are like, what they eat for dinner, what music they listen to. The strange scene seems far away. I watch for a few minutes and then climb back down, hopping onto the grass. I walk back to the driveway, nod at the guard and say “mesi,” and walk back to the dorm, away from the world.

At the worksite, I am steadying wooden planks for a Haitian carpentry crew when Christy pulls me over.

“You need to come help spray-paint,” she says with that ever-present note of urgency. “Mark says it’s making him sick.”

I grab the two cans of industrial blue spray-paint and stencil cutouts sticky with layers of dried paint. The 50 duplex homes are arranged in circular sets of six, and I follow her down the dusty road to the last two sets. Since the start of the trip, I have tried to avoid the spray-painting task as it seems to demand more confidence and better fine-motor skills than I have to offer. The job requires balancing on a ladder and carefully spraying addresses onto walls painted the kind of light cream that makes every drop of paint used to form the blue letters and numbers very visible.

But I am too tired to argue with Christy. I am not sure why we do not use a ladder, but we don’t, which means that Christy and I are teetering together on the front steps of each duplex, our arms and legs intertwined awkwardly as though we are playing a game of Twister, so that we can both squeeze onto the steps while she holds the stencils and I spray-paint, wobbling with one foot dangled off the ledge. The paint drips, runs, but we get steadier and I get better at judging the correct amount of paint.

The spray-painting is one of the most satisfying things I’ve done in Haiti, as the homeowners become overwhelmed with excitement when their houses are finally marked. Some break into glowing smiles, others throw their arms to the sky and toss their heads back and yelp with joy. Some homeowners dash outside and press their fingers to the stencils to keep them

steady, wanting to help give their neighbors the critical markings. It's like the electric-blue "5A" or "6B" has truly given them the home, a legitimate place on the planet. They have an address.

I am excited as we move to the last set of houses and position ourselves. Christy hands me a stencil for 1, and I strain to see the fronts of houses in the other pods, trying to decipher a pattern of addresses. But most houses are positioned at angles that hide their markings and I am not wearing my glasses. I squint and turn back to Christy, eyebrows knotted.

"Are you sure this is Number 1?" I ask, staring at the home's blank cream walls for some invisible indicator.

"It is if you want it to be," Christy says.

The important thing is not to follow a pattern. The important thing is to give the family an address.

I squint again and begin spraying on a 1.

The children in Timonette tend to grow attached to one volunteer or another during the week and follow that person around. In Timonette, I bond with several little girls, especially one in particular, the brassy and energetic Nashka. She looks about seven, with a thin frame, wide eyes, and an oddly cute smile that shows as much gums as teeth.

Nashka doesn't follow rules, and she doesn't often stay still. Even her hair, loosely gathered into a small poof on the top of her head, looks more unkempt than most of the other girls'. She likes to widen her eyes and lurch at people while making loud screeching noises. Some of the other volunteers are a bit frightened by her and steer clear of her constantly moving path.

Nashka soon gravitates my way, taking a seat next to me on a stoop as I caulk cracks in front doors. She usually wears girly tops, but today she is shirtless as she sings and hums to herself, playing with the chunks of caulk that inevitably collect on the lower part of the doors. At one point, she touches my arm and points to a splotch of caulk on my schoolbag, worried my bag would get dirty.

It's a surreal moment, one of those moments when I marvel at how fortunate, how blessed—and actually how honored—I feel to be standing on my toes with a caulk gun to fix a crack in an earthquake survivor's home, as a tiny survivor with a lot of gall sits shirtless and proud on the doorstep rolling the caulk in her hands into a tiny ball and protecting my knapsack.

As the week continues, I am fine on the worksite, but become even more desperate and obnoxious back at the compound. I know I'm obnoxious, but I can't stop. I have pulled my friend Melissa aside once or twice an evening and begged her to ask Pastor Steve to let us go to the Internet café, the grocery store, somewhere, anywhere. Melissa nods and agrees, everyone is going stir-crazy, and she will talk to Pastor Steve. But nothing happens.

And then late one afternoon, I hear talk of a pharmacy trip. I ask to go with whoever is going and I am granted permission. I am so excited I cannot stop moving; I am bouncing up and down, vibrating like an engine in idle. But then the negotiations commence – who is going? How many people? Do we have to walk? Can we drive instead? – and then logistical concerns further delay the process as someone goes to find someone to drive a truck. My friend Sarah, a curly-haired twenty-something with an adventuresome spirit, is just as antsy to escape the compound.

We look at each other, share our frustration wordlessly. This will take a long time. Just to go down the street to the pharmacy.

Sarah and I have stepped away from the group to discuss our annoyance when I hear Christy's voice coming from a nearby table. Her voice is high-pitched and melodramatic, as though she is overacting in a community play. She teaches elementary-school children to use computer programs and her voice has that schoolteacher tendency to overemphasize each word, like she is constantly trying to either entertain or rationalize with a kindergartner. Her voice takes this tone even more when she gives us advice.

“If you keep waiting, you're never going to go anywhere.”

Sarah and I look at Christy and then at each other.

We start walking to the front gate.

The front gate is a large sliding sheet of metal that opens wide for our trucks to head out toward the worksite and then closes narrow, so narrow that only one person at a time can walk through the opening. The guard sits near the gate with a large rifle across his lap. As we shuffle down the gravel drive, we are joined by Sarah's father, Tom, a tall, lanky man with an easy smile that curves up at each end like a happy Jack-o-Lantern. Then a Haitian worker named Jacob joins our posse and we snake through the opening, one at a time popping out into the world. We aren't breaking the rules, as it's still daylight and we have met the quota for number of people and genders. But asking permission would have never allowed this to happen. Sarah and I had to just start walking toward the gate and let the men follow us out.

Oh, the outside! One motion and I am free, wide open and vulnerable on the dusty sidewalk of a busy Haitian street. The images I have only seen from the back of the pickup truck or the branch of a tree come streaming through my line of sight like motion pictures come to life,

so real I can touch them. To my right, little boys kick up dirt as they play soccer on a gravel basketball court. A few feet farther, naked boys wash themselves at a pump, their skin clean and coffee brown as the water splashes. To my front, motorcycles growl past, tiny Haitian flags flapping on their windshields. The women walk by in lines, necks tall, eyes beaming straight into the horizon, each with one arm curving upward to where her hand lightly touches the bucket atop her head, stepping gracefully alongside the veering motorcycles like a row of languid ballerinas.

Across the street, a row of slumping wooden houses. Beyond that, the sea, the whole world.

One morning, the YWAM leaders ask for volunteers to help buy supplies at the market, and I throw my hand into the air and beg for the job. Christy also volunteers. She and I accompany one of the full-time YWAM workers, an American woman, to a grocery store and then to a small outdoor market filled with women squatting behind spread blankets filled with fruits, vegetables, clothing, fake hair, charcoal.

It's during our market trip, while waiting for the YWAM worker to bargain for various items, that I see Christy and Dieunack become buddies. Dieunack, one of the Haitian missionaries-in-training, is about 21 years old, tall, lanky and light-skinned with a smile that takes over his face. He is almost never without a Phillies baseball cap turned backwards. Though I do not speak his language, I can tell that he has a comic streak. He laughs often and the instant there is a pause in work, he and another Haitian staffer begin play-fighting, swinging and kicking at each other in exaggerated movements until they are both bent over giggling and gasping. But Dieunack is also wise and caring. As we walk around the market, I can tell that he is protecting

us, making sure we do not slip into the nearby gutter or stumble into traffic. He stands near Christy and me while we wait for Audrey to buy fish and tomato sauce. A bright yellow poster with a grinning woman catches Christy's eye and she asks Dieunack to translate the words.

"It means 'secret home food,'" Dieunack says, pointing to each Kreyol word as he translates it into English. He explains the phrase refers to quick snacks like ramen noodles and Cup-A-Soup.

"Oh," Christy says, pauses for a beat. "Do you eat the secret food?"

Dieunack smiles and nods, and I laugh.

Throughout our morning at the market, I see Christy and Dieunack talking, or usually Christy talking and Dieunack nodding with an amused grin. *He must think we are absolutely insane.*

In Haiti, the sun feels closer. It's brighter, more intense, which is to be expected as we are nearer the Equator.

But somehow, the Haitian stars also seem closer, brighter, shine more than twinkle. At night, I step into the back yard and stare at the stars. But there are not many visible back there, just one of the dippers. The sky above the side of the building reveals a larger sprinkle of stars, so I wind up there, leaning against the waist-high wall of the pavilion, craning my neck nearly to the point of pain to see as many stars as possible.

I stretch my upper body in all sorts of ways, trying to find the combo of head tilt and neck twist that allows for maximum star viewing. In the end, it doesn't matter. I can mangle my neck all I want, but I will only see the same handful of stars.

Sarah and I are standing in the back of the truck one afternoon, waiting to ride to a worksite when I spot motion near the gate. I see a white woman slip through the small opening and disappear into forbidden territory. I turn to Sarah, intrigued.

“Where is Christy going?”

“She’s going to make a ‘delivery,’” Sarah says, emphasizing the word “delivery” with a raised brow.

“What kind of delivery? Where? To who?” I am still gaping at the now-empty drive.

“She’s going to bring some stuff to Dieunack’s family across the street,” Sarah says as though this is no big deal.

“Did YWAM get her to do that?”

“Oh no, she’s been sneaking out.” Sarah’s voice is still casual, calm. “I went with her last night.”

My mouth drops open and my head jerks forward on my neck. “I want to go.”

“You can’t tell anybody,” Christy says later, her voice a high whisper.

I follow this crazy woman in the dark, past the guard and through the narrow opening in the gate. The guard says nothing; even his face is blank. Outside, I see shadows in motion around us, in front of us, but there is no time for studying the street. Christy hurries across and I follow. There, she nods to a man at a carpentry bench, revealed by warm lantern light, and hands him some cookies. She chats with him in English and he nods, as I look around nervously. I want to get away from the street as fast as possible. The man takes the cookies and smiles. Christy then

guides me past the carpenter, who I later learn is Dieunack's stepfather, and he is not a carpenter but a coffin-maker. We squeeze into a tiny alley between the coffin-making shop and Dieunack's home, scuttling down a rocky path until we arrive in an open space by the sea.

It's so dark that the waves are just shadows that rise and fall to the familiar sound and rhythm of water crashing into land. But oh, the stars! So many more stars than I've seen in a long time, and so bright above the ocean.

Next I see the lanky silhouette of Dieunack appear along with his mother and several younger siblings, who look to range in age between 1 and 15.

"Hello, Sister," Dieunack says, his voice soft.

Next to the crashing sea, beneath layers of stars, Christy tells Dieunack's mother what a wonderful son she has, as he sheepishly translates the message into Kreyol. I study Dieunack's mother, who looks soft yet strong, a little on the stout side. We give Dieunack's littlest siblings small toys and cookies, speaking in voices low and warm in the Haitian night. Moments later, Christy and I rush back across the street and into the compound, up the driveway with casual steps. I am sure my face is broadcasting guilt, but when we stroll into the pavilion, people barely glance in our direction.

Nashka begins grabbing my hand each day and leading me to her home to meet her mom, aunt, siblings, and friends. She shows me the inside of her house, which like the others, contains two cement rooms, one a kitchen and the other a bedroom with one "bed"—a series of stacked cinderblocks topped with a blanket—for the entire family. We sit on the front stoop with her

mother and watch the tiny goats that wander the village. Some of the other volunteers look relieved that she is being entertained, so they can focus on their work or the other children.

I take lots of breaks from my work to stroll around Timonette with Nashka. As I walk around Timonette, she clings to my side and snarls at any child who tries to take her place.

It's our last night in Haiti and most of the group is hanging out in the pavilion, yet no one but Sarah and I notice when Christy walks through rolling a giant red suitcase behind her.

"Where is Christy going with that suitcase?" I mutter, almost to myself, and then realize the answer.

I run upstairs to grab a small box of toys, candy, and other gifts, and then do my fastest nonchalant walk through the pavilion and down the gravel drive. Christy is already gone. I jog down the drive, slip through the gate to find Christy and – Victoria?

I am surprised to see Victoria, another member of our group, standing on the roadside near Dieunack's house, her face glowing in the orange lantern light. Victoria, a wife and mother in her early 20s, leads a grownup life but still seems strikingly innocent. Her cheeks look rosy, and though mature, she tends to love in the open, fearless way of children. I am shocked to find her bucking the rules, yet here she is, chatting happily with Dieunack's mother, stepfather and siblings.

Later, Victoria recounts exactly how Christy got her across the street, and I laugh as I picture the conversation.

Just after Christy had rolled the red suitcase into the pavilion, she bumped into Victoria.

"We are going across the street to Dieunack's house," Christy told her.

"We?" Victoria asked. "I'm not going anywhere."

Christy's reply: "Just wait a minute. I'm gonna signal for Dieunack," as she waved one arm up and down in a "come here" gesture, which is apparently Christy's idea of a secret signal.

Dieunack walked over and seeing Victoria with Christy, lit up. "Oh! You are going to see my mom? That makes my heart so happy."

So out went Victoria.

And then I arrived, joining the group in the orange glow, beneath the stars, near the sea. I watched as Christy told Dieunack to use her red suitcase to visit us in the United States. I watched as his little sister played with her new light-up bouncy ball toy, as Dieunack's mother smiled and hugged each of us goodbye.

The day before, some of the leaders told us that if we finished our work early, we could hike up to a lighthouse and see the ocean.

We finish our work early but instead of hiking, the men want to build a roof. I know I should be happy that we will accomplish more than we expected to on this trip, an additional roof for the school, but deep down I feel like some of the men are driven more by ego than compassion at this point. It's that drive to make the road trip in as little time as possible, to lift more weight than the other guy, to build more than expected. And I resent it. What about the ocean? Shouldn't we see more of this country's beauty?

Instead, we finish the roof, hand out more toys, and visit more families before we leave. We keep working until the last possible moment, heading back to the compound later than we have all week, way too late for hiking or anything else. We tell the families and children goodbye. I give Nashka some special light-up bouncy balls and hugs. She looks a little sad as we

hug goodbye and I climb into the back of the truck, but we both knew she will soon be running and playing with new volunteers.

Our group reaches the compound at sunset and as I jump out the back of the pickup truck, I see the oranges and yellows fading into lavender above the housetops and know that the sky must be gorgeous next to the sea. As others shower and prepare for dinner, I stroll down the gravel drive, tell the guard I will be back in 10 minutes and walk across the street.

Dieunack's sisters and brothers are standing in front of their alleyway, smiling as though they expect me. I ask in broken French if I can go to the beach – “Aller a plage?” – and they nod, still smiling. I follow them down the gravel path and into the clearing, just in time to watch the sun drop into the sea.

Dieunack appears from the alleyway and my eyes widen, as I feel caught this time without Christy by my side.

“Don't say anything Dieunack,” I beg. “Okay?”

“Okay, sister,” he says.

The shore is formed of rocks and garbage. A little white dog noses through the trash, and Dieunack warns me to watch for human feces. But none of this can steal the peacefulness and beauty of an ocean at sunset. The waves rock slowly and close to shore, a few wooden fishing boats like brown bananas slosh back and forth, as the sky's purple colors deepen. I am mesmerized. I stare, trying to seize the sunset for my memory.

I pick up Dieunack's tiniest brother, the one Dieunack likes to nuzzle and kiss as he says, “I love him soooooo much,” and I hold the baby close as the sun finishes dipping into the sea.

I say “bon nwi” to Dieunack’s mother and sisters and lacking more words, we smile at each other in the deepening twilight. I then rush back across the street before the stars finish coming out, nodding to the guard as I slip back through the gate.

Trekking the Himalayan Foothills

An autumn sun warmed the hillside as we made our slow climb to the second-highest peak among the hills surrounding Kathmandu Valley, in the shadow of the Himalayan Mountains. The late October weather was surprisingly mild, even high above the valley. The hills looked much greener than I expected, with a subtropical diversity of herbs, ferns, orchids and brush spreading over the ground and spilling onto the trail. Oaks thick with green leaves offered shade, and citrus-colored butterflies flapped past our faces. The sprawling forest filled with the chirps and rustle of woodland creatures reminded me of my childhood hikes through Arkansas's Ozark Mountains. Not quite the lifeless snow-world I had pictured.

Hours before, an old van had bumped up dusty and chaotic Kathmandu roads to deliver my three friends and me, plus our guide, to the base of a trail at Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park in the hills surrounding Kathmandu Valley, at the bottom of the Himalayan Mountains. About an hour into the hike, our little trekking crew stopped to rest at a Buddhist monastery—and we needed the break.

Despite the gentle weather, we struggled to reach the monastery, and then strained even harder to reach the peak. Our group of inexperienced and unlikely hikers contained four adults in our late 20s and early 30s, at various levels of fitness: one health-conscious runner, one pickup basketball player and two out-of-breath cubicle inhabitants. We all hail from the flat, near-sea-level terrain of South Louisiana and all wore T-shirts, jeans, and other apparel more suitable for a trek around the grocery store than a mountain climb (with a height of 8,963 feet above sea level, this “hill” constitutes a mountain to many folks). As a whole, we provided a sharp contrast to the perky fifty-something British couple who effortlessly walked up the trail and paused next to us.

From what I remember, the Brits wore attire much more appropriate to hiking, some sort of boots as opposed to our sneakers, and the woman clad in what my friend John describes as “a blue Marty McFly life jacket puffy vest thing.”

“Which way up the mountain?” the woman asked with a smile, her nasally voice and British accent making the question sound prim and ceremonial, as though she were asking about the wine selection at an elegant restaurant.

We breathlessly motioned to the nearby set of steep steps built into the mountain. Most of the hike followed a dirt nature trail but just before the monastery the dirt turned to bumpy, irregular stone steps that evolved into a much more gradual set of sloping stairs.

“Thank you,” the man said, adding something that involved “jolly good,” and then the couple bounded up the steps, leaving us to stare behind them.

This hike occurred near the end of our weeklong stay in Kathmandu and unlike every other tourist we encountered in the Nepalese city, we arrived there with no intentions of hiking. The four of us had flown to Nepal from Dhaka, Bangladesh, to explore the wonders of Kathmandu—or at least any wonders available in the area’s lowest altitudes. John and I had traveled from Louisiana to Dhaka to visit two mutual friends who lived and worked there. Then the four of us journeyed together to Nepal for a leisurely adventure largely focused on eating and wandering the city.

I wanted to see a yak, had spent weeks ahead of the trip imagining myself clutching the beast’s shaggy hair and peering between its two curved horns as we bumped our way along a Kathmandu road or the lower climbs of the Himalayas. But once informed that yaks live in areas requiring days of trekking and exposure to actual cold temperatures, I settled for a yak-bone necklace and yak-hair blanket.

Still, a short hike sounded fun, so I asked our hotel concierge about scheduling one.

“We’d like to take a short trek,” I said.

“One week or two?” he asked.

My eyes bulged. “Um, I mean a really short trek, like do you have anything we can do within a few hours or an afternoon?”

Now it was his turn to look startled. He gazed at me with a puzzled expression, presumably wondering why anyone would travel to Nepal to take a three-hour hike. He thought for a moment and then offered our group a roughly six-hour trek complete with our own Sherpa and a lunch of yak-cheese sandwiches.

I had always pictured the Himalayan Mountains—and foothills— as perpetually snow-covered with rainbow lines of prayer flags flapping in icy winds, winds unimaginably and lethally cold. Any monastery there would sit half-drowned in snow. Elderly monks would be huddled around fires, their faces shadowed and graven in the flickering light.

Actually, I would never have imagined a monastery tucked into the Himalayan foothills at all. Surely even the most ascetic monks wouldn’t subject themselves to those kinds of conditions. But midway through our trek, there appeared a humble, yet beautiful monastery planted on a grassy patch of cleared mountainside.

The monastery’s temple was a simple rectangular building coated in yellowish-tan paint and fronted by red columns. Inside, I could see the large open room was light and airy with colorful murals depicting lotus flowers and the Buddha. The building was surrounded by thick grass and copious strands of red, blue, yellow, green, and white prayer flags that waved overhead.

Farther down the slope, the monks kept a festive little garden of pumpkins and other vegetables, all growing at an altitude I assumed would only accommodate a frosty snow-scape.

The altitude and remoteness made even the mundane things—the thick grass, the curving slope, the growing pumpkins—seem magical, almost otherworldly.

And then there were the monks. A handful of them clustered in a group on the lawn, and we sat near them to eat our lunches. The monks' heads were shorn, leaving just a short fuzz of dark hair, and they wore the deep burgundy and orange robes of Tibetan Buddhist monks. I expected Buddhist monks to spend all their waking time in formal postures of meditation and worship, their faces serious and devout. But these monks sat reclining on the grass in postures of complete relaxation. They laughed a lot, easy laughs as natural as the afternoon sun.

The monks appeared to range in age from children to 40s or 50s. I was surprised to see a tiny monk, about 7 or 8, running around the grounds, darting behind the temple columns and then peeking out and giggling like a bald, burgundy-robed mountain sprite.

We continued chatting with our Sherpa while eating tasty yak-cheese-and-cucumber sandwiches. Our guide hailed from Nepal and looked about our age, late 20s or early 30s. A member of the Sherpa ethnic group, famed for leading mountaineers to the highest Himalayan peaks, he formed a calm, quiet presence on our hike. He carried the weight of our lunches with ease, patiently waiting for us to struggle up the mountainside behind him. Four years later, I cannot remember his name. Neither can John, who like me, happens to be good with language.

“I couldn't even pronounce it,” John says years later. “It was something so foreign to any English/Latin dialect. The noises aren't anything I could make a mnemonic device with to remember.”

We finished our sandwiches and continued up the mountain, huffing our way to the top, which looked nothing like what I expected from a Himalayan peak; it was a large circular field of blonde-brown grass on softly curved, nearly flat, earth. The trees rimming the field largely blocked our view of the other slopes.

The Brits were just finishing their picnic and greeted us as they began to hike back down. I remember our guide telling us not to drink the clear water that trickled into small pools along the trail, as the foreign bacteria would make us sick. I remember him pointing out spider webs built like miniature hammocks or tiny trampolines, nature's crafty adaptation for catching prey as it falls down a steep incline. But the most memorable moment with our guide came as we stood on the grassy peak of our little mountain, staring at the skies above the tall tree line surrounding us. His voice kept its warm, peaceful tone as he told us as that yes, he had scaled Mount Everest, but he now sticks to lower climbs.

We soon began our trek back to base camp, stopping again at the monastery on the way.

It was then that I made an embarrassing error.

Our Sherpa said "she" or "her" in reference to one of the monks.

I gasped. "What? These are not women!" I said, my voice loud and incredulous.

The monks—or nuns, rather—must have known these words in English or discerned the reason for my alarm, because they began giggling furiously in their huddle on the lawn. Two nuns standing near us broke into big smiles and tried to reign in laughter. Everyone had referred to the site as a "monastery," and the nuns wore the same dress and hairstyle as monks, a fact I found interesting on a gender-equity level but embarrassingly confusing on a tourist-trying-not-to-offend-people level.

“They’re all women,” our guide said.

“Oh no,” I said, covering my head with my hands. “I’m so sorry.”

My friends stared at their shoes and the grass, but the guide gave me a gentle smile and said, “It’s okay.”

I built up the courage to look over at the nuns who to my relief looked much more amused than offended.

The young sprite was still up to her tricks, dashing around the temple lawn and laughing. When she finally sat on the lawn, some of the older nuns began prodding her playfully, almost like tickling.

We rested for a few more minutes and then began walking down the concrete stairs. As we walked down the steps, out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a flash of movement behind me. I turned around and saw nothing there but the stairs and the monastery.

A few more steps down and I saw it again, a quick motion in my peripheral vision.

I turned around fast to see the little nun sliding on her bottom along the handrail of the stairs. As soon as I turned around, she abruptly stopped and just smiled at me. I kept walking but this time I could hear her behind me, sliding down the handrail. I turned around again and she stopped, looked at me with the same mischievous smile. I smiled back and kept walking down the mountain, away from the nuns and the temple.

Years later, when I think of Nepal, I think of prayer flags and mountains and yak-hair blankets. But this image also comes to mind: a tiny giggling girl in a burgundy robe, sliding down a stairway handrail in the Himalayan sunshine.

References

- Allman, Kevin. "\$500 Hubig's Pies on eBay—and a message from the bakery's owners." *Gambit Weekly*. 27 July 2012. n. pag. Web 16 Sept. 2013.
- Boutwell, Chuck. "Hurricane Birthday at the Rock 'n' Bowl, August 2008." 2008. JPEG file.
- McKnight, Laura. "The End of Fat Tuesday." 2013. JPEG file.
- McKnight, Laura. "GOSPeL." 2013. JPEG file.
- McKnight, Laura. "Smoking." 2012. JPEG file.
- McKnight, Laura. "Sleeping Bardog." 2013. JPEG file.
- Monteverde, Danny. "Hubig's Pies bakery destroyed by fire in Faubourg Marigny." *The Times-Picayune*, 27 July 2012. n. pag. Web 16 Sept. 2013.
- Schwartz, John. "A Bakery at the Sweet Soul of New Orleans Falls to Fire." *The New York Times*, 27 July 2012. n. pag. Web 16 Sept. 2013.
- Troeh, Eve. "Pie-deprived New Orleans roots for bakery, a year after fire." *NPR*, 27 July 2013. n. pag. Web 16 Sept. 2013.

Vita

The author was born in Thibodaux, La. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in mass communication from Nicholls State University in 2001. She joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in Fall 2010, a move partly inspired by the New Orleans Saints Super Bowl win. The author has worked in the field of journalism since 1999, beginning with radio news-casting and moving on to write and report for several newspapers in South Louisiana, including The Courier of Houma, La., and The Times-Picayune of New Orleans. She continues to work as a freelance journalist.