

# **BROKEN LEVEES-BROKEN LIVES**

*By Michael Groetsch*

I wake and stare at the digital clock that pulsates on the nightstand. It is 5:55 in the morning and my wife Barbara lies sleeping beside me. For a moment, just a moment, I imagine that I'm lying warm in my bed at home. I gather my thoughts however, to the reality that we are still in a small hotel room surrounded by personal clutter. Our luggage, clothes, food, and other necessities leave little room for movement. Our pets, Weasel, Wicket, Georgie Girl, Marilyn, and Monroe who fled the storm with us seem confused by their strange surroundings. At least they are safe. Had we left them behind, they may have perished.

Within minutes, Barbara awakens and we begin to discuss our plight. It has been three days since we fled our home near New Orleans to escape the wrath of Hurricane Katrina. We left everything behind but essentials. The notion that we may not be able to return for weeks, perhaps months, is becoming frighteningly apparent. We may not be allowed home for Christmas. We may no longer have a home. The thought of living in such uncertainty is daunting. The realization that the storm has changed our lives forever careens through my thoughts like a speeding freight train. But we are not alone in our plight. Millions of storm refugees throughout the southern coastline share our questionable fate.

We may be considered among the lucky ones. While our family shares the comforts of a nice hotel, other evacuees sleep in truck stops, rest areas, and open spaces. In cities like New Orleans, Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, and Biloxi, many victims no longer have the ability to feel pain. They have been found bloated and floating in the floodwaters of Katrina. Others lie decaying within

piles of storm debris soon to be unearthed. Governor Haley of Mississippi currently places the number of fatalities in his state at 110. Nearly three-dozen residents are said to have perished in a beachfront complex. Only time will reveal the truth. Logic suggests that the death toll in Mississippi will be much higher. The dead can't speak until they are found. In a 30-mile stretch of coastal Highway 90, it is reported that 80% of all structures have been completely destroyed. The twin bridges that cross the Bay are gone. Much of Biloxi has been reduced to nothing more than a town of concrete slabs, debris, and steps to nowhere.

It is 7:00 a.m. My son Justin and his fiancée Jessica come into our room to share dismal news. Using a computer and satellite imagery, they have determined that the new home they bought several months ago is probably flooded. An aerial view of their neighborhood shows that it is completely surrounded by water. It also reveals several uncontrolled fires in the same area. They are to be married in four months. Wedding gifts and furniture still sit in boxes waiting to be opened. It is likely that everything has been ruined. They may have to start their married life over before it even begins.

Justin and Jessica's home is only two miles from our own. My wife and I also have several pieces of rental property in the immediate area. Our business may have been destroyed as well. Upon evacuation, it was discovered that we, like so many others, were grossly underinsured. If a levee break has occurred in our neighborhood, we are financially ruined. We will have lost everything. To determine if there is still electricity going into my neighborhood, Justin dials our home number on his cell phone and seems concerned at what he hears. I grab the phone and place it to my ear. Although my answering machine has been activated, the sound of wind and

water can be heard in the background. The thought that the roof of our home may be gone is unnerving. My mind rambles to my deceased mother's picture that sits on my desk. Why didn't I take it with me?

My wife and I are in our late fifties. We are too old to rebuild our lives. How will we pay our bills? How will we find new jobs? Will we ever see our old friends and neighbors again? What does the future hold for my children? Will they have jobs when they return? Will they have a home? I suddenly break down as my son and wife tries to calm me. After regaining my composure, we console one another.

At 1:00 p.m., I sit in the hotel lobby to watch the afternoon news. Although the lobby is crowded with people, it seems so very empty. CNN reports that the conditions in New Orleans have deteriorated to Third World status. My city has become an urban Bangladesh. It has the potential to become Armageddon. Mayor Ray Nagin releases a statement that hundreds or perhaps thousands of people are dead. A professor at Louisiana State University places the potential number of fatalities in the tens of thousands. A reporter is asked to share anything positive but remains almost speechless. Another tries to describe what she sees, but breaks down into tears. Until this time I have never seen a news reporter cry. In the last two days, I've seen three.

While many have died in the floodwaters, some have been crushed by fallen buildings and trees uprooted by the fury of Hurricane Katrina. Others will die from a toxic gumbo brewed in water contaminated by the combination of waste, oil, garbage, and the corpses of animals and rodents. The images that I see on CNN are surreal. They are incomprehensible scenes that our worst

nightmares would hesitate to reveal. It is a nightmare that is being staged in my hometown. As a news helicopter flies over the court building in which I am employed, I am astounded to see that it's partially immersed under a sea of water.

The news cameras show thousands of people walking aimlessly through cluttered streets in search of survival. I witness men, women, and children screaming from the windows of buildings hoping to be rescued from conditions that may kill them before help arrives. The roofs of homes rise from the floodwaters like schools of sharks in search of prey. Many structures have been reduced to empty shells. So are the hearts of those caught within the midst of this calamity. As the camera from a helicopter scans an area of which I am familiar, it reveals that the city morgue is also submerged. The dead have died a second time.

A young daughter cries for help because her critically ill mother is dying from a lack of dialysis. A frail elderly man, shirtless and weak is airlifted from the balcony of a building by a black hawk helicopter. Infants are transferred from specialized medical facilities that have been reduced to primitive conditions common to MASH units in war zones. Patients with critical conditions will die. Babies with special needs may perish. Survivors and families will mourn.

A news anchor reports that civil unrest is rapidly spreading to epidemic proportions. There has been a total breakdown within the city's infrastructure. As a result, there are no means of social control. Anarchy is rapidly becoming apparent in the streets of New Orleans. There is an unconfirmed report of an uprising in the Orleans Parish Prison that allowed inmates to escape into the shadows of city streets. A Wal-Mart near the river has been broken into by scores of

thieves who have pilfered its gun department of automatic weapons. Lawlessness within the city has become the norm. People smash the windows and doors of businesses and steal its contents. Addicts and thugs break into pharmacies and hospitals in search of drugs. One man runs from a store with a case of beer. Another dances in the street with a shopping cart filled with clothes, tennis shoes, and wine. A police officer points a rifle at a man who smiles and walks away. Another officer is shot in the face as he chases a man who breaks into a nearby building. Small gangs of hoodlums stalk the troubled streets. They know that they cannot be stopped. Many are new to lawlessness. Others are seasoned veterans. Some are convicts that have nothing to lose. President Bush declares Marshall Law. I contemplate why it took so long.

A camera turns its eye on the chaos that continues to unfold on the streets. People rise from sewers in search of dry ground like rodents forced from their homes. A body bag lies on a curbside like packaged debris. Near the New Orleans Convention Center, a building often filled with festive activities, thousands of victims crowd the sidewalks and cry for help that doesn't come. Hoards of elderly men and women bake in a heat that threatens them with dehydration. A lone nurse does everything that she can do, but without supplies and support staff, she can do little. On the outside of the Convention Center near a cargo door, two bodies sit wrapped in sun bleached blankets. One is propped up on a wheelchair with a name- tag attached to its handle. The second is bound tightly with rope and lies several feet away. A young woman, her face burned by an unforgiving sun, clutches a baby and screams that the child won't rouse. The small body appears limp and unresponsive to prompts. Like those covered by blankets, it appears that the baby is dead.

On the high-rise Interstate that snakes through the city and around the Superdome, thousands of refugees appearing stunned and confused, stand in 95 degree heat with no where to go. Near the far side of the Interstate lies the body of an elderly man who fell victim to the elements. His corpse straddles the curb and appears as a stray dog killed by a careless motorist. He is left unattended by those who walk pass. They are focused on their own survival. They no longer have time for the dead.

The scenes on the evening news become tragically redundant. The New Orleans Yacht Club is engulfed in flames. The roof of the Superdome is peeled away like a discarded sardine can. Cars sit crushed by fallen buildings. Affluent looking people push shopping carts down littered filled streets. People are rescued by helicopter from rooftops surrounded by rapidly stagnating water. People in medical distress are transferred to medically distressed hospitals. Looters run from stores with items that belong to others. Boaters float down streets that have been reduced to rivers. People plead for help but there is no one to help them. I feel that I'm looking into the window of hell.

The repetition of such scenes, however, is overshadowed by reports that conditions are growing worse. Two levees that have been breached continue to spill waters from the gulf and lake into the city. The water levels in New Orleans are rapidly rising in neighborhoods that were thought to have survived the worst. It is estimated that 80% of the city is under water. A stiff wind blows whitecaps down the streets. Fires are raging everywhere. The city is burning and high water has made it impossible to respond.

As I turn to CBS News, they present another perspective of what Hurricane Katrina has done to our city. An aerial view of Tad Gormley Stadium, a football arena in City Park where I attended a Beatle concert in the 1960s, resembles a giant fish bowl filled with water. The majestic oaks that surround the stadium are submerged under a sea of black murky water. The ecological devastation of our park is unimaginable. While it's natural beauty and wildlife may emerge in someone else's lifetime, it has forever disappeared from ours. City Park and its stadium are not the only nearby treasures that have been destroyed. Many above ground tombs, indigenous to the cemeteries of New Orleans, have also been victimized by the floodwaters. As a helicopter flies above Lake Lawn and Greenwood Cemeteries, the camera reflects a scene that seems inconceivable. Graveyards that stretch for miles along the Interstate 10 appear to be under 10-feet of water. My mother and grandmother are buried in Greenwood. The rest of my family is buried in Lake Lawn.

In the late afternoon, Air Force One flies over New Orleans and the surrounding area to view the horrific damage. President Bush, appearing somber and affected by what he sees, states that "This is the worst national disaster in the history of the United States." His statement is extraordinary because it has occurred both in my lifetime and in my hometown. This is New Orleans's 9-11. It will be recorded in history books that our great grandchildren and their children's children will never fully comprehend. Although I have read about the tragedies of other people's lifetimes, I could not feel their pain. I feel it now. Life as we know it will never be the same.

It is nearly midnight and I am exhausted by the stress of the day. I speak by cell phone with Paul. He is a paramedic currently doing rescue work in the New Orleans area. Along with other first responders, he is currently housed in a hospital surrounded by several feet of water. As we discuss the problem of looting, he confesses that in some cases, the rescuers have become the looters. They break the windows of grocery stores and shops to survive. Food and water have become prized commodities. Earlier in the day, he tells me that he recovered three bodies lying on the lawns of their home. He tells me that he didn't have time to find out their names.

Paul explains that levee breaks in New Orleans continue to hamper rescue efforts and people are becoming more desperate. He has been told that a nearby levee is beginning to seep water. Jefferson Parish, immediately west of New Orleans, is now threatened with catastrophic flooding. Paul tells me that evacuees who have made it out of the hardest hit areas of the city are being brought to Interstate 10 for the purpose of triage. The evacuees will be placed on buses and transferred to locations in Dallas and Houston. The Governor of Texas has extended his hand and stated that "By the grace of God, it wasn't us."

After 26 years living in our home, every room stores a memory. It is the home in which we raised four sons. The chair in which Barbara rocked and cuddled them sits in the corner of our bedroom. It is where the intangible memories that we left behind hopefully await our return. It is where our beloved pets that passed away over the years are buried. A tombstone with our cat's name, Bright Eyes, marks his grave near the goldfish pond. I sat there and cried the evening before I fled the storm. Paul promises that he will try to reach us tomorrow and share the fate of

our precious home. I pray that our memories have not been erased by nature like a mountainous landscape beneath volcanic ash.

It is getting very late. Barbara and I visit our sons on the first floor of the hotel. We want them to know how much they are loved. We want them to know that there is a future. After taking a brief walk with our dog Wicket, we return to our room and retire for the evening. It's been a long day. It's going to be a longer week. As I turn off the light and lie next to my wife, her scent provides me comfort. The white noise of the air conditioner is soothing. Morning will come all too soon.