



LOVE LETTER TO NEW ORLEANS

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The city where I used to live is gone.

Sure, there's still a place called New Orleans, and Joan of Arc still may even ride her golden horse at the split in Decatur Street, above the smells of the French Market. The streetcars might run again, and the French Quarter smell like liquor and vomit and good food and sex in equal parts.

But it won't ever again be the city where I lived and loved.

There's a part that's gone forever, scattered across the country, with colorful tattooed hipsters dancing on Austin stages or New York streets, smoking ten feet outside of California bars and scrambling to pay other-city rents. It's gone with the people living in tents or trailers or with relatives somewhere in Texas or Alabama, finding jobs just a bit blander in cities just a bit tamer. It's gone with each trumpet player locked behind

a velvet rope and a \$20 cover charge instead of a couple of bucks and free barbecue and red beans and rice.

It's fading like a refrain of "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans," or Tom Waits' "I Wish I Was in New Orleans," like the color from the beads tangled in tree branches down St. Charles (where Mardi Gras doesn't mean tits and plastic cups of candy-pink, tourist-sweet cocktails that

someone unfortunately named the Hurricane).

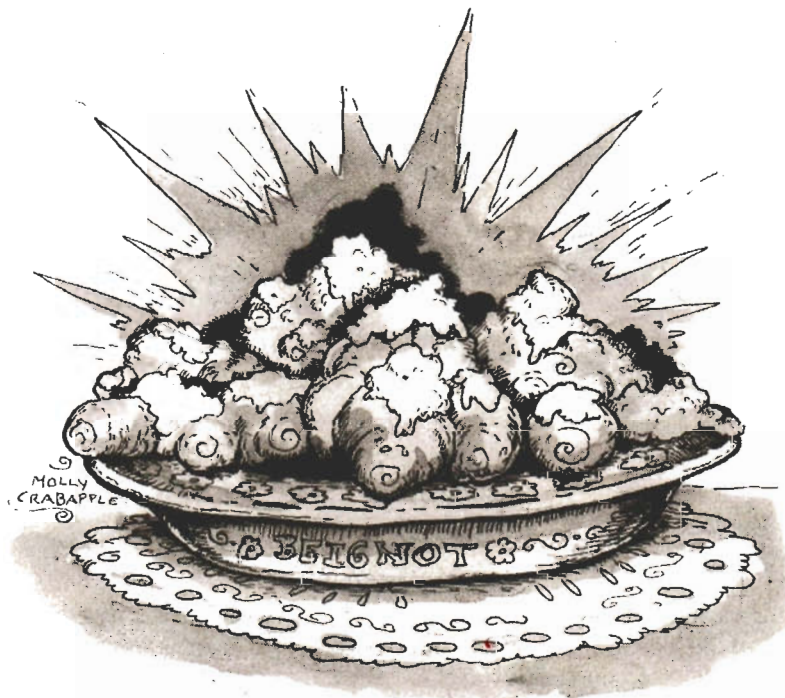
One year ago today (I'm writing this on August 29th, a Tuesday night), Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Not in New Orleans, by the way. No, it passed to the east, and was only a Category 3 storm by the time it hit. No, New Orleans wasn't blown away. She drowned. The levees that we used to walk down, swigging off a bottle of Jameson in a brown paper bag and laughing at the faces we made, the levees that were supposed to save the below-sea-level basin of the city, failed.

When I was a freshman at the vastly overpriced Tulane University, the institution that brought me to New Orleans, we were threatened by the slightly less menacing Hurricane Georges. Tulane, that bastion of Northeastern rich kids often referred to as "Jew-lane," had a brilliant evacuation plan for those of us whose parents didn't cough up the cash for a fast flight out of town. They moved everyone above the fifth floor in the tallest, creakiest

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dorm building, and locked us out of our rooms. Apparently the breaking glass and incoming water and wind would be stopped by the doors to our rooms, and not seep through the cracks and drown us and our mattresses in the hallway.

Luckily for our not-quite-Ivy-League (and mostly white) asses, Georges took a spin to the east and all we got was a little rain and a lousy night's sleep. When the reports started coming in on the news of Katrina's flooding, I had to wonder if Tulane had improved any on its evacuation plan in seven years.



You may not have watched the news in the days and weeks following Katrina the way I did, searching for familiar faces and praying for people I hadn't thought about in years. You may not have wondered what happened to the auto mechanic in Mid-City who never charged you labor on repairs and came with you to look at used cars when yours was totaled by a yuppie tourist in an SUV. You probably didn't have a neighbor who'd never left the city except for a tour of duty in the army somewhere that left him minus a leg. No prosthetics for him, though—just a crutch, a smile, and a handshake when he introduced himself. I couldn't even look up his name on some sort of casualty list if there was one, though—I never figured out if his name was Ron, Rod, or Rob through the thickness of his accent.

There's music in the speech of the natives of New Orleans, even the ones who don't make music for a living. They address you as "baby" even if they don't know you, and not with a leer, but a genuine smile. Much of the city is divided by race, but the one place you can always make friends across those lines is in a bar with a band onstage. You can dance with someone three times your age and not worry about him grabbing your ass instead of your hand, and join in the infamous "second-line" that will inevitably weave its way around the room before the night concludes, more or less raucously.

We used to skip from two-for-one sake and the Deltabilly Boys at the Dragon's Den to Donna's for Bob French and the Original Tuxedo Jazz band, and occasionally trumpeter Kid Chocolate and others from the band would join the party afterwards at the Matador for hip-hop night. Esplanade Ave to Rampart and back down Decatur to the corner of Esplanade again. And that was just a Monday. Other

nights it would be dancing in the streets outside of Cafe Brazil or people-watching in the window seats of posh d.b.a. or old stalwart Molly's at the Market (which rumor has it stayed open all through Katrina).

Every day in the city could bring some sort of celebration. Sometimes, like Halloween when the streets of the city overflowed with adults in costumes they'd spent a year making—or maybe just some strategic pasties and body paint—the party was wonderful and everyone was invited. Other times, like the days I was late for class when an impromptu parade from the neighborhood school shut down my street, it could be a hassle, an impediment to some semblance of a normal, structured life. That was what eventually drove me to leave New Orleans, degree in hand, four years' worth of stuff in a U-Haul behind my car or left for my room-mates to pick through.

I was gone for three years and many of the places I loved had changed before the hurricane hit and the levees breached. People that I miss left long before the winds howled through and tore



shingles from roofs. No one that I'm still in touch with was stuck on a roof to wait for helicopters or boats to save them. The people I wonder about are the casual acquaintances, drinking buddies, bartenders, mechanics, neighbors, professors, and coworkers. An entire city's worth. I could never track them all down.

I'm older now, too old for 4 AM most of the time and usually too tired to dance on bars. I haven't tasted Chartreuse in years (though people still remember me for it in various cities where I introduced them to bright green poison), but I want to drink a farewell toast to my city with the herbal liqueur, pass out in sweaty white sheets and wake up and chase away the hangover with chicory coffee.

I want to take my new lover there, the man I want to share my life with, because I want him to see what it all meant to me like I want to walk his New York City streets with him. I want to dance away a night with him, eat beignets and kiss powdered sugar from his face, climb a tree in the park, walk the streets at sunrise.

But those moments won't be there. They disappeared in a flood that, even if it left certain old haunts untouched, washed the city clean of my fingerprints. I'm afraid to see it again the way you fear seeing an old love. You want to remember him the way he was, the strength in his shoulders that you used to cry on, the sparkle in his eyes that was only for you. You



don't want to see new scars and new sparkles for someone else, and you certainly don't want to see that strength lessened, lost. And forget about bringing the new man. Like introducing him to an ex, there's bound to be inside jokes, uncomfortable silences, not-quite-rude stares and hisses of "What did you see in him?" when you've left. You can never quite explain the old to the new.

My city isn't there anymore. We had a fucked-up dysfunctional relationship—we both drank too much and showed too much skin, didn't sleep enough and didn't have enough money half the time, but New Orleans left a mark on me deep as any love. I lost my virginity to it as much as I did to that boy in my dorm-room bed, and it'll always be a part of me. At least I have that. Most of you never will know the city that I knew.

*This piece was written under the influence of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's **Funeral for a Friend** album, which may be the closest thing you will ever get to a real New Orleans jazz funeral. Influencing my thoughts are two very different books, **Breach of Faith**, by Jed Horne, a New Orleans Times-Picayune reporter, and **Stories Care Forgot: An Anthology of New Orleans Zines**, edited by Ethan Clark. The books are available from tattered-cover.com or many an online retailer, and you can buy music from the Dirty Dozen and many other brilliant New Orleans artists at louisianamusicfactory.com.*

To donate money, check out www.commongroundrelief.org, or www.nomrf.org. These organizations, unlike the government bureaucracy that vastly failed the city, are doing the right thing and trying to make sure that New Orleans is rebuilt for the people that have always lived there.

