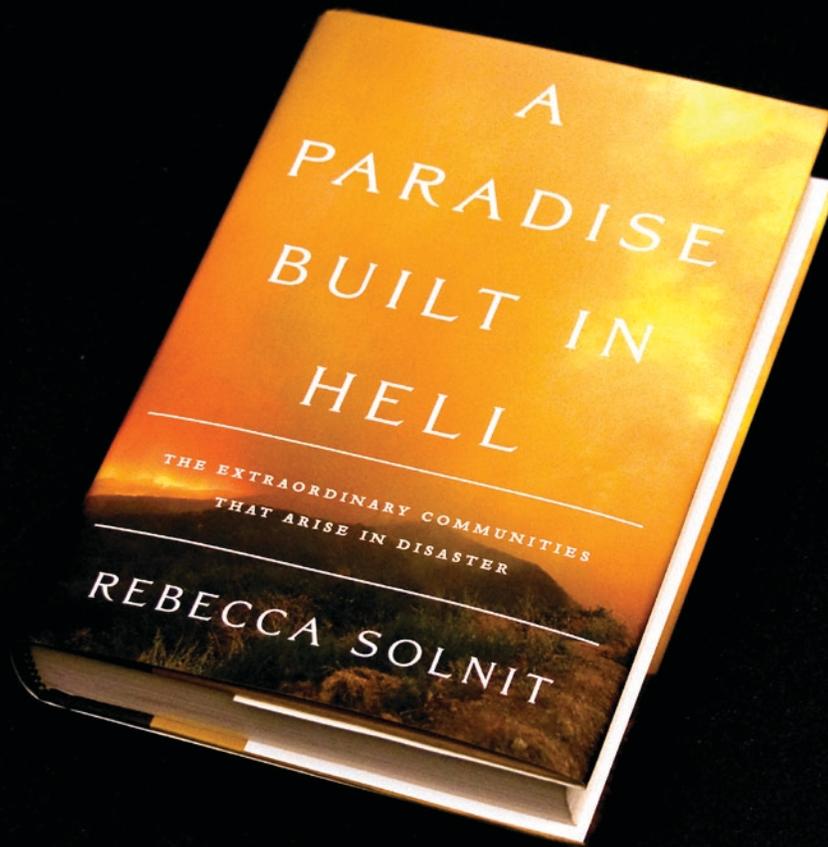


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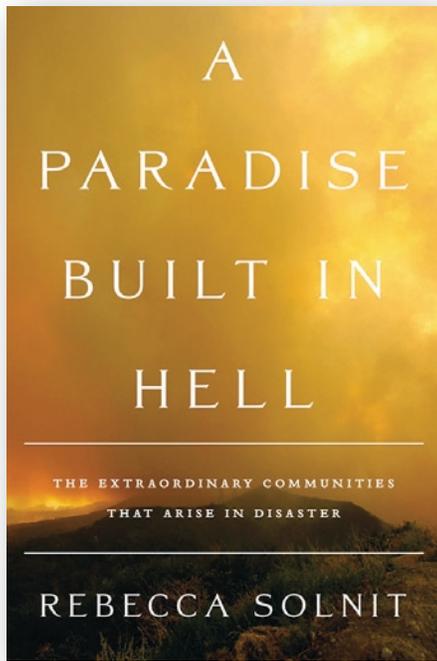
**THE MURDERERS
OF NEW ORLEANS**

An excerpt from

A PARADISE BUILT IN HELL

The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster

By **REBECCA SOLNIT**



A PARADISE BUILT IN HELL

The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster

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Why is it that in the aftermath of a disaster— whether manmade or natural—people suddenly become altruistic, resourceful, and brave? What makes the newfound communities and purpose many find in the ruins and crises after disaster so joyous? And what does this joy reveal about ordinarily unmet social desires and possibilities?

Award-winning author **Rebecca Solnit** explores these phenomena, looking at major calamities from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco through the 1917 explosion that tore up Halifax, Nova Scotia, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. She examines how disaster throws people into a temporary utopia of changed states of mind and social possibilities, as well as looking at the cost of the widespread myths and rarer real cases of social deterioration during crisis. This is a timely and important book from an acclaimed author whose work consistently locates unseen patterns and meanings in broad cultural histories.

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It Made People Crazy

When I came to the Gulf Coast, I thought that my subject was the extraordinary communities of volunteers that had sprung up in the wake of Katrina and become funnels through which hundreds of thousands had come to the region, and that is one of my stories. But though no one seemed to be looking for the story of the murder of perhaps dozens of African American men, I couldn't avoid it. At first it was all secondhand. Or thirdhand. On my first trip to New Orleans after Katrina, I heard that an uptown woman had said her son had seen the forces patrolling the French Quarter shooting black men and throwing their bodies in the river. A friend who'd done extensive investigations himself in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane knew someone who'd witnessed a military escort on one of the rescue boats shoot down two young black men stranded on a rooftop. The black men had fired first, but probably into the air – much of what would be imagined as sniper fire or

On my first trip to New Orleans after Katrina, I heard that an uptown woman had said her son had seen the forces patrolling the French Quarter shooting black men and throwing their bodies in the river

threats were shots fired to get attention. (It turned out that an astonishingly high number of New Orleanians of all classes and races seemed to own pistols, rifles, shotguns, and semiautomatic weapons. Even the most altruistic rescuers went out in boats with sidearms as well as life vests.) But the witness later committed suicide.

This was all hearsay, but it didn't arise from the kind of fears and stereotypes that the other rumors did. It was white people talking about the savage things other white people had done to black people. And then there was Jeremy Scahill's account in *The Nation* magazine of private security firms – part of the mercenary army that along with the official army overran the city in the wake of the storm – firing into the night at “black gangbangers.” They were allegedly returning fire, though none of the hired enforcers had been hit. They left behind, in their own words, “moaning and screaming.” The army showed up to check out the mercenaries, but no one investigated the injured then or after. A few days after the storm, middle-aged Danny Brumfield was shot in the back by police in broad day-

light, in front of his son and daughter, outside the New Orleans Convention Center. He had a pair of scissors in his hand, and the police inside the car claimed their lives were in danger. His family said the scissors were for cutting up cardboard to make shelters for his grandchildren.

Sixteen months after the hurricane, seven policemen were indicted on murder and attempted-murder charges for the one incident that did become well known: the September 4, 2005, shooting on the Danziger Bridge that left two people dead and four wounded. The police claim they were responding to reports of snipers. Witnesses said there never were any snipers. One of the dead was a mentally retarded man, age forty, Ronald Madison. Madison's brother Lance said the two were walking across the bridge to the dental office of a third brother when shooting broke out. The police claim that Ronald Madison reached for a weapon in his waistband, but his brother, a longtime Federal Express employee who has no criminal record but was arrested that day for attempted murder, says they were unarmed. The retarded man got five bullets in the back, though the police report says he was shot only once. Nineteen-year-old James Brisette was walking with a friend's family to get groceries when the police opened fire. He died. One of his teenage friends was hit by bullets in the hands, elbow, neck, and stomach and now has a colostomy bag. The friend's aunt, Susan Bartholemew, had her forearm blown off. "My right arm was on the ground lying next to me," she recalled. Her husband was shot four times. The Bartholemews' daughter was unhurt. The policemen were out of uniform and had emerged from a rental van. The victims thought they were vigilantes. The indictments led to no convictions, though in late 2008, the United States Justice Department opened an in-



The police claim that Ronald Madison reached for a weapon in his waistband, but his brother, a longtime Federal Express employee who has no criminal record but was arrested that day for attempted murder, says they were unarmed. The retarded man got five bullets in the back, though the police report says he was shot only once

vestigation into the shootings at the request of some of the victims' families.

Michael Lewis, a native son of the affluent Uptown area, wrote a wryly humorous piece about his and his neighbors' experiences of Katrina and the fears that afflicted them. The few who remained behind in unflooded Uptown were mostly men convinced they needed to protect their property, turning each pretty old home into a fortress to be guarded with an arsenal. "Pretty quickly, it became clear that there were more than a few people left in the city and that they fell broadly into two categories: extremely well armed white men prepared to do battle and a ragtag collection of irregulars, black and white, who had no idea that there was anyone to do battle with. . . . The police had said that gangs of young black men were looting and killing their way across the city, and the news had reached the men inside the forts. These men also had another informational disadvantage: working TV sets. Over and over and over again, they replayed the same few horrifying scenes from the Superdome, the Convention Center, and a shop in downtown New Orleans. If the images were to be reduced to a sentence in the minds of Uptown New Orleans, that sentence would be 'Crazy black people with automatic weapons are out hunting white people, and there's no bag limit!' " Lewis can afford to be amusing because he assumes the people who sat on their porches armed to the teeth didn't actually use their weapons. That's probably true of Uptown. Elsewhere, crazy white people with automatic weapons were killing black men and joking about it.

There were vigilantes, and they committed the most heinous crimes during Katrina – well documented but not publicly acknowledged. The *Times-Picayune* won two Pulitzer Prizes for reporting on the

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devastation of its own city, but the newspaper didn't always ask tough questions. In the commemorative Katrina book the paper published, there's a photograph of a chubby, snub-nosed white man in an orange T-shirt sleeping on his side, an arsenal next to him. The caption reads, "On a balcony in Algiers Point, resident Gary Stubbs catches a couple of hours of sleep as part of a self-appointed posse that guarded the neighborhood against looters. The weapons, including an AK-47 assault rifle, five shotguns, a derringer, a flare gun, and a pistol, were donated by evacuees who had given the neighborhood defense force permission to enter their homes and take what they needed." CNN's Katrina picture book ran the same picture with the caption, "A New Orleans man grabs a couple hours of sleep next to an arsenal of guns. He and several friends rode out Hurricane Katrina. . . . The guns were donated to them by out-of-town residents so they could protect everyone's property." Most people would come up with two questions immediately: did people menace that property? And did the vigilantes shoot them? The answers appear to be no and yes. The media didn't ask those questions, though the answers were pretty easy to come by.

New Orleans is both a city and a parish – the latter being the term Louisiana uses for its counties – and New Orleans Parish stretches across the broad Mississippi to claim Algiers, a small portion of what is usually called the West Bank. As the Mississippi snakes along to form the undulating southern edge of the city, it creates a bulge on the northern shore that is the community of Algiers, a mix of old and new houses with black and white inhabitants. At the top of the bulge is Algiers Point, a neighborhood of pretty pastel-



At the Common Ground clinic founded in Algiers shortly after the storm, everyone who came in for an injection or a dressing or medication also needed to tell their story, and the volunteers heard a lot

painted cottages with gingerbread trim where some of the bloodiest crimes of Katrina took place. A native New Orleanian told me that there on the West Bank, the other side of the river – where no flooding and what appears to be the worst massacre took place – officials issued her cousin a bulletproof vest, a badge, and a gun and told him to "go shoot niggers." He may not have, but some did, and the confessions fueled by a sense of impunity and perhaps by guilt have seeped out everywhere. At the Common Ground clinic founded in Algiers shortly after the storm, everyone who came in for an injection or a dressing or medication also needed to tell their story, and the volunteers heard a lot.

Aislyn Colgan, a young medic who worked there in the early days, told me, "We made it a policy early on that everyone getting a [tetanus or immunization] shot had to get their blood pressure taken and their temperature taken and do the whole thing, which allowed me or whom-ever to sit down and have a conversation and that was mostly what we were doing. 'How's your house? How's your family?' Some of the hardest parts of it was hearing people talk about how they had lost everything. Just so many people, one after another: 'I've lost everything, I've lost everything.' That became the daily norm. . . ." She admired the religious strength that got many people through the loss of ancestral homes, of all their worldly goods, of family members.

But that young medic from Oakland, California, a sturdy fair-haired woman with a broad, honest face, also told me, "In Algiers, a lot of people in the white neighborhood formed vigilante groups. They got in their vehicles and drove around. More than one person told me, told me personally, that yes, 'We shot seven people and we killed them.' Or 'We killed five people

and we don't know what happened to the other two.' Or 'It was four and three.' And people were saying that you would've done the same thing, 'You don't understand, they were coming for you,' because of the chaos and probably the rumors that the sheriff was spreading. But that was what was scary to me: people have this capacity for good but also this tremendous capacity for evil. One of the most intense conversations I had was with this woman who said: 'They were coming for our TV and we had to shoot them. If we hadn't shot them, they would have come back with their brothers and killed us.' I think the same thing that brought people to completely rearrange their priorities, to be like, 'Whatever I'm going to do, I'm going to rescue you, if that means I have to get this refrigerator to float and pole you back one by one I'm going to do it.' I think the same kind of response was 'You are not going to get near my house.' It made people crazy."

We Shot 'Em

The murders were no secret. There were plenty of rumors, but the evidence was there. When I mentioned them, some people looked at me as if I was a gullible, overwrought bleeding-heart outsider, and then paused thoughtfully and said, "Well, actually... ." Then they'd add a new detail, a new firm of mercenaries set loose in New Orleans, a new vigilante crime they'd heard about. That was the locals. I tried to enlist a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from another part of the country to investigate, and she said she was going to check out the story with her friends at the *Times-Picayune* to see if there was anything to it. I was furious. It wasn't a rumor or a theory. I had the evidence. So did much of the rest of the world. More than a million people saw the premiere of Spike Lee's 2006 HBO documentary, *When the Levees Broke*. It



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includes an interview with Donnell Herington of Algiers, a sturdy, soft-spoken African American guy not nearly as tall as his basketball college scholarship would suggest.

Spike Lee found him and put him in *When the Levees Broke*. Standing on the levees near the Algiers ferry, he told just the story of how he was shot by vigilantes, not who he was and what he had done before, or what happened afterward. On camera in that film that was seen by so many millions of people, Donnell pulled up his shirt and said, "This is the buckshots from the shotgun." His torso was peppered with lumps. And then he gestured at the long, twisting raised scar that wound around his neck like a centipede or a snake: "And this is the incision from the surgery from the buckshots that penetrated my neck and hit my jugular vein." A man described his own attempted murder on nationwide television, and no one thought to investigate? Even Spike Lee, who had devoted a whole documentary to the murder of four little girls during the civil rights era, just cut away to news footage of Governor Blanco announcing that they were going to restore law and order.

Lee's film was the most widely available piece of evidence. But I'd also offered the journalist a copy of another documentary, Danish filmmaker Rasmus Holm's ironically titled *Welcome to New Orleans*, which focused on the events in Algiers Point. In it, longtime Algiers resident Malik Rahim showed the camera the body of a black man lying on his face near the street, bloated from the heat, abandoned. As he also told the nationally syndicated news program Democracy Now, "During the aftermath, directly after the flooding, in New Orleans, hunting season began on young African American men. In Algiers, I believe, approximately around eighteen

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African American males were killed. No one really knows what's the overall count. And it was basically murder. It was murder by either the police or by vigilantes that was allowed to run amok."

There were bodies lying on the street in the place that had never flooded, the comparatively undamaged place where no one was dying of thirst or heatstroke. A lot of people seemed reluctant to take the word of Rahim, an ex-Black Panther with dreadlocks halfway down his back, but there was that body on camera. There was Herrington's testimony, and the mute testimony of his savaged body. And on Holm's film there were vigilante confessions, if confession is the right word for cheery, beer-enhanced boasting. At a barbecue the Dane managed to attend shortly after Katrina, a stocky white guy with receding white hair and a Key West T-shirt chortled, "I never thought eleven months ago I'd be walking down the streets of New Orleans with two .38s and a shotgun over my shoulder. It was great. It was like pheasant season in South Dakota. If it moved, you shot it."

A tough woman with short hair and chubby arms added, "That's not a pheasant and we're not in South Dakota. What's wrong with this picture?"

The man said happily, "Seemed like it at the time."

A second white-haired guy explained, "You had to do what you had to do. If you had to shoot somebody, you had to shoot. It's that simple."

A third said, "We shot 'em."

The woman said, "They were looters. In this neighborhood we take care of our own."

And the last man to speak added, "You know what? Algiers Point is not a pussy community."

Here was the marauding, murdering gang the media had been obsessed with,



A lot of people seemed reluctant to take the word of Rahim, an ex-Black Panther with dreadlocks halfway down his back, but there was that body on camera

except that it was made up of old white people, and its public actions went unnoticed.

Moved by his anguish over the murders, I vowed to Rahim that I would get them investigated and exposed. Eventually, I brought together the *Nation* magazine with the best and most fearless investigative journalist I know, A. C. Thompson, and handed over my evidence and contacts. A.C. is equally at ease with rogue cops and gang bosses and has broken a lot of crime stories in his day. The magazine supported many visits to look into records, launch a legal battle with the coroner (who was withholding autopsy information on all Katrina's dead and "lost" many of these public records), and interview the victims and the perpetrators. Nine months later, still waiting to get the coroner's records, A.C. sat at my kitchen table and riveted me with his accounts of whom he'd met and what he'd already figured out.

He'd become close to Donnell Herrington. And he'd talked to the vigilantes, who unlike even convicted killers doing life without parole he'd interviewed for other investigations, readily confessed to murder. Boasted of it, really. One guy who took him home to show him incriminating videotape and photographs of what he and his companions had done said, "People think it's a myth. But we killed people." The vigilantes told Adam that they'd shot three black men one morning and that they knew they were looters, because they had tote bags with them. The bags were full of nice sports apparel. Definitive evidence. A.C. wanted to tell them that when people attempt to evacuate their region, they often take clothes, their best clothes, and that if you know anything about inner-city African American men between about fifteen and thirty-five, they wear sports gear a lot. What does it mean to assume that

anything a black man carries is stolen? But it wasn't his job to educate them, just to let them talk.

And they talked. The vigilantes had gotten the keys of some of their neighbors who'd evacuated, set up barricades – even felling trees – to slow down people's movement through their area, accumulated an arsenal, and gone on patrol. Unfortunately, they were also between the rest of New Orleans Parish and the ferry terminal from which people were being evacuated; a lot of people had good reason as well as every right to walk through those streets. At one point they even demanded a black man leave the neighborhood, even though he lived a few blocks from where his neighbors threatened him. Suddenly, in that mixed neighborhood, blacks were intruders. The vigilantes were convinced that their picturesque neighborhood on the other side of the river would be overrun by looters, and they claimed the men they shot were looters, but they did not report the loss of even a garden hose or a flowerpot from a single front yard. “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?”

The Ordeal of Donnell Herrington

One balmy September afternoon in 2008, A.C., Donnell, and I sat at a picnic table in New Orleans's City Park under the spreading oak trees with the ferns running up their thick arms and the Spanish moss dripping down their fingers. Big black butterflies flitted through the soft, humid air, and squirrels chased each other around the trees. A.C. found Donnell Herrington, the vigilantes' surviving victim, the hard way, since he was one of the myriad displaced and bounced around by the aftermath of the storm. He looked through obituaries for relatives, looked the relatives up in phone books, and they eventu-



Before Herrington was a victim he was a rescuer. He saved old people. He saved children. He saved family. He saved the neighbors. He saved strangers

ally led him to the man. Donnell told us in a soft, level voice what he had seen, done, and suffered during those three days. His story arcs through the best and worst of disasters and human behavior. Before Herrington was a victim he was a rescuer. He saved old people. He saved children. He saved family. He saved the neighbors. He saved strangers. The twenty-nine-year-old could have evacuated his hometown, New Orleans, as Hurricane Katrina approached, but he couldn't bring himself to leave his grandparents. Their home in the St. Bernard housing project out near City Park on the north side of town weathered the hurricane fine, but later that day the water began to rise, mysteriously, horrifically, until it had filled the first floor of the buildings all around and what had once been a city was a weird lake. No help appeared, but word spread that if you could get to the elevated interstate you could get evacuated from the flooded city. Some of the stranded people, like his grandparents, were frail; some couldn't swim.

Herrington was strong, and so he found an inner tube and got into the vile water to look for a boat. “Another cousin of mine, just when we were thinking there was no hope, came along with a boat. I told him, ‘Let's get our grandparents.’ That's when I started helping people throughout the neighborhood.” Herrington stood in the prow of the small skiff, and he and a few friends poled the boat along through the murky waters with the submerged cars, stop signs, and other obstacles. They continued rescuing into the night, when the city without power became darker than he'd ever seen it before. On one of their night-rescue journeys, the one with his female cousins and their small children, they nearly flipped the boat, and Herrington recalls, “I was thinking, Lord, don't let it tip over because we had babies on board, and

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if the babies would've fallen into the water, we probably couldn't have saved some of them because it was too dark for us to see." He estimates that in the four hours they were in the boat, they transported more than a hundred people from the flooded neighborhood to the interstate.

At daybreak, he, his cousin Marcel Alexander, then seventeen years old, and their friend Chris Collins set out walking the several miles on the freeway to downtown New Orleans, hoping to find help for his grandparents, who were sleeping on the asphalt with everyone else. "I saw some crazy, crazy, crazy things... . One young lady was having a baby on the interstate. I saw people dead on the interstate, some older people who just couldn't – it was crazy. I was just passing people up. My heart was going out to these people." He wasn't even allowed to get near the Convention Center, where thousands of evacuees would end up stranded, or the Superdome, and he wasn't allowed to walk back up the interstate to check on his family. At that point he was close to the Crescent City Connection, the bridge across the Mississippi, and so Herrington decided to just walk several more miles to the Algiers home to which he and his girlfriend had moved a year earlier. Alexander and Collins came with him.

The apocalypse kept unfolding. Nothing was flooded over there, but a huge branch from the pine tree in front of his rented townhouse had smashed in the roof of the place, and it was not habitable. Most people had evacuated, and the place felt like a ghost town. One of the few remaining neighbors told him that people on the West Bank were being evacuated from the Algiers Point Ferry a few miles farther on. His cousin was worried about their family and on the verge of tears. "I kinda felt responsible for him, and I kept telling him, 'You gonna be okay. You gonna be



A few blocks later, while Herrington had his head turned to talk to Alexander, a man he didn't even see stepped out and pulled the trigger on a shotgun

all right." The three young black men set out for the ferry, though Herrington didn't know the way exactly. They ran into another man and struck up a conversation with him. He gave them directions, told them that he had a generator but was going to evacuate to Atlanta when he'd fixed a flat tire, and told them too that maybe the neighbors who miraculously had a working phone might let them use it. They did. Herrington called his family and assured them that he was okay, though in a few moments he would not be.

As they continued their journey, the guy with the flat said, "Be careful because these guys are walking around the area with shotguns," but I wasn't paying that no mind." A few blocks later, while Herrington had his head turned to talk to Alexander, a man he didn't even see stepped out and pulled the trigger on a shotgun. "It happened so fast I didn't even hear the loud boom. Like I said, I felt a lot of pressure in my neck and it lifted me off my feet and I hit the ground and I didn't know what actually happened and I kinda blanked out for a second and my vision was kinda blurry, and when I opened my eyes I saw my cousin standing over me and I looked down at my arms and everything and some of the shots hit me in my arms, my neck, my chest, all over my body." His jugular vein had been punctured and blood began to spurt out of his neck. Marcel stood over him, overwhelmed with horror, and Herrington looked past him to see the stout middle-aged man reloading and told his cousin to run. Facing death, he was still taking care of his family.

"So I'm looking at the guy walking toward me and he was walking pretty slow, and that was because he was trying to get the rest of the gauges in the shotgun. And at this point I'm on the ground and I'm praying, 'God, please, don't let this guy

stand over me and shoot me, try and take my life.” He got to his feet, but his way was obstructed by the branches the vigilantes in Algiers Point had scattered around when they decided to turn their neighborhood into a death trap. As he tried to hop over one of them, he heard another boom. The would-be murderer had shot him in the back, and the blow knocked him down again. He got up, walked on, and asked the first people he saw for help but they drove him off their porch. He managed to stagger onward. He asked some shirtless white guys in a truck for help, but they called him a nigger and one of them said, “We’re liable to shoot you ourselves.” He managed to stay on his feet long enough to reach the house of the guy who had warned him a few minutes earlier about the men with shotguns.

You had to believe, first, that all African American men are criminals and intruders and, second, that people in a disaster have a pressing interest in acquiring private property to act as the vigilantes did believe. Deciding Donnell was a looter was crazy. He was a Brink’s truck driver routinely trusted with hundreds of thousands of dollars who was evacuating with a lot of money in his pocket and no interest in taking someone’s TV on his way to the ferry. He was a rescuer who’d just saved many lives. He was a kind man who told us later on, “I prayed about this situation and everything, I asked God to forgive those guys that done this thing to me; it was kind of hard to even bring myself to that, but I know it’s the right thing to do. But at the same time those guys have gotta answer for their actions.” So far they haven’t.

He had been a rescuer. Then he had been a victim. In the last act of his extraordinary journey through Katrina’s flooded cityscapes and desperate people, he was rescued. While the man who’d warned him



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worked on his flat tire, his girlfriend and her mother took him into the house and tried to care for him while they figured out what to do next. Donnell recalls, “Your life is in your blood; when your blood is draining like that it’s like your life is draining in a certain sense. I was actually fainting, you know, I was weak, I was pretty weak at that time; it’s a strange feeling, then at the same time your heart is racing and your mind is telling you that you’re about to die.” The younger woman saw the vigilantes in the street looking for Herrington to finish him off. After Donnell was shot, two younger men with guns had terrorized Alexander and Collins with racial insults, death threats, and a pistol-whipping, and these vigilantes came by to finish off Donnell. The younger woman kept them off the property until her boyfriend, armed, stepped in, though maybe it was the woman’s threat to contact the police that sent the vigilantes scurrying. The guy changed his tire in a hurry, and they got Donnell into the backseat. They drove to West Jefferson Medical Center and were told by a doctor in the parking lot that they were not accepting any more people. The young woman argued with them, a doctor took a look, signaled for a stretcher, and Donnell was on his way to the emergency room to get his jugular repaired, just in time. In his medical charts, the doctors estimate he had lost two liters of blood, nearly half the blood in the body of an ordinary human being. But he lived.

Maybe you can call him one of the lucky ones. The vigilantes confirm again and again that they killed several men, or rather each of the several sources A.C. found describes different murders. Talking to other sources, A.C. came up with another West Bank murder story. Henry Glover,

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age thirty-one, and his brother Edwin King were walking near a Chuck E. Cheese's place in an Algiers mall when shots rang out, and Glover was severely wounded. A man with a Chevy Malibu picked them up and decided the hospital was too far away. He thought perhaps the police would administer first aid and drove Glover to the elementary school, where a police tactical team was holed up. The police responded, Adam said, "by getting aggressive instead of rendering help." They beat up King and his friend, smacked one of them in the face with an assault rifle. "Meanwhile there's poor Henry in the back of the car bleeding, and no one's doing anything." The police took the men's wallets and marched them out of the area on foot. "The last they saw of Henry and the Malibu was an officer with flares in his pocket getting into the car and driving off. When they finally located the car and Henry, the car was on the levee a short distance behind the Fourth District Police Station, and the coroner had Henry's charred remains. There was no car left and very little left of Henry Glover" – just a skull, some ribs, and a femur, and a car "burned beyond belief." A.C. thinks someone took Glover's skull as a souvenir, because it was there in the police photographs but not in the coroner's report.

A homicide detective told A.C. that he was instructed not to investigate any homicides at that time. "We heard around the station that the guy had been a looter, shot for being a looter." He added that the tactical-unit people were crazy and that he thought someone in law enforcement burned up Glover's body, possibly with a flash-bang grenade taken from the nearby National Guard facility, when it began to smell. "Ever smell a dead body?" he asked. That detective quit the force because of everything that had happened during Katrina, he said to A.C., including shoot-outs



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between looting cops and law-abiding cops. Hobbesian man in uniform. The police had a substation in the mall, and perhaps they shot Henry. But no one in New Orleans was investigating some charred human ribs with a bullet in them behind a police station. Or a man who'd testified on national television about his near murder and shown the evidence written across his body. Or the suppression of hundreds of coroners' records of autopsied Katrina victims.

Like elites when they panic, racists imagine again and again that without them utter savagery would break out, so that their own homicidal violence is in defense of civilization and the preservation of order. The killing rage of the Klan and lynching parties of the old South were often triggered or fanned into flame by a story, often fictitious or exaggerated, of a crime by an African American man. Of course there were crimes committed by African Americans in Katrina, but to imagine that every black man is a criminal or to punish a whole group or unconnected individuals for a crime is racism at its most psychotic and vigilantism at its most arrogant. That force, driven by hurricane winds of fear and rumor and a flood of old stories, turned deadly. And because once again a disaster was understood in terms of all the familiar stories, what actually happened went almost unnoticed.

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