

## CHAPTER 8

Superstition, as indigenous to Louisiana as gators and Tabasco, holds that the spirits of the dead avenge any disruption of their bodies, which makes one wonder at the rancor released on the 1957 day when fifty-five white families re-interred their beloved in Hope Mausoleum after the Rt. Rev. Girault M. Jones, Bishop of Louisiana, deconsecrated the Girod Street Cemetery, condemning every last African American bone to anonymity in a mass grave in Providence Memorial Park. From that pogrom grew the Superdome.

Thirteen acres of structural steel framing stretch up 273 feet from the unholy ground, a towering testament to the American propensity to cheer black men into end zones and desert them entirely six points later. Ghosts do not so easily forsake their heirs. It is said the Superdome was cursed from the start. Take as evidence the quadrupled construction costs and delays; the Saints' dismal record; the roof, meant to withstand 200-mile-per-hour winds, which peeled back in response to Katrina's 145-mile-per-hour gusts. To say nothing of the six dead bodies left behind when the refugees finally escaped her walls.

Which is why it cannot be said that Cilla and Rosy sought shelter at the Superdome. By the time they arrived there, shelter had long since ceased to be offered.

Their rowboat sluiced easily through the downtown streets, waterlogged to a depth of three feet, enabling the makeshift gondoliers to deliver mother and daughter directly to the raised walkway surrounding the stadium in the late afternoon hours of Wednesday, August 31. Cilla stumbled from the boat, holding her head, crying. She moved as if the sludge surrounding them had settled in her soles, though Rosy expected the mania to envelop them anew when the headache passed. She needed to get them

inside and isolated, way up in the nosebleed section where no one might notice them, before it happened.

Thirty thousand people stood in their way.

An elderly woman in a housedress, clutching a gold lamé pocketbook and wearing only one shoe, grabbed Rosy's shoulder for balance as she slid off the back of a military Humvee whose wake upended the rowboat moments after Cilla and Rosy disembarked. Beside the Humvee, a pickup labeled "Louisiana Wildlife Enforcement" backed up and disgorged from its bed a young woman with four children, one a babe in arms who wailed so fervently that the driver had to ask the woman to repeat her question three times before she shouted loudly enough for him to hear:

"Whatcha expecting me to do with these children?"

"Take them inside!" he shouted back, waving in the direction of the arena.

"But they ain't mine!" she replied, pointing at the two unattached to her, maybe five, maybe six years old, clutching each other while she stood separate, protecting her own two, one pressed to knee, one pressed to breast.

"Who they belong to?" he asked, staring at the two mute boys, white knuckled in their efforts to hold tightly together.

"Why you asking me? They was already in the tree when I grabbed on there, and you the one lifted them out!"

"Well, take them inside anyways," he said, then jumped from the cab roof through the driver's side window to confront a freshly stalled engine and water lapping at the door. His job: to collect, not to consider. Certainly not to reunite.

As the wildlife specialist flooded his engine, the oarsmen uprighted their boat, soaking the crowd with backwash, and a national guardsman stormed past, gesticulating wildly. He bumped into Rosy, then the elderly woman with the pocketbook, then the mother of two/four, making no apologies.

“Whatcha mean, there’s *one* bus?” he shouted into his walkie-talkie. “We got folks stacked up and screaming like white trash at a goddamn tent meeting, fixing to stampede offa the end of the loading dock and drown they stupid selves like a buncha fucking lemmings, and y’all saying we got one bus on the way? *One* bus? Get me General Lupin on the line! I’ll see what he has to say about ...” The guardsman’s voice trailed off as he pushed his way through the disordered cacophony of parents urging children to “Get back in this line!” and singles asking perfect strangers “You seen my husband?” and militants shouting “This ain’t no fucking ‘sanctuary’!” and over-eager newscasters inquiring “What’s the most meaningful possession you had to leave behind?” Their noise only accentuated the deafening silence of all the people who had already ceased to speak, absorbed by hunger or thirst or regret, who shuffled forward, propelled by equal parts resignation and peer pressure every time the person in front of them inched closer to the distant doorway opening into this shelter of last resort.

Rosy corralled Cilla in the direction of the undulating mass, pulling away from the hand of the one-shoed woman, who mumbled, “What do I do? What do I do?” and ignoring the overburdened mother plighted with two orphaned boys. She had no attention to spare, no time for special cases.

All thirty thousand were lost to the mayhem in one way or another.

Within four hours, it would swallow Cilla whole.

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It took nearly all that time to make it inside the doors and onto the sideline of the FieldTurf playing surface. Stanchions and armed guardsmen herded the line of refugees toward the security checkpoint at center field, with a demeanor that had begun on Sunday as polite and empathic but had withered by Wednesday to exhausted, plain and simple. It had been easier on everyone in the beginning: security checkpoint outside—in the fresh air, more manageable—until the rains hit and shivering babies soothed by old folks wrapped in soggy blankets made shelter a human-rights issue and they hauled the metal detectors inside under the fixed dome and set them up on the fifty-yard line. The wait had been excessive from the beginning, but at least on Day One there had been charitable food distributions and enough bedding to go around, and the streams of people had not so much fled their homes as made a deliberate choice to temporarily relocate. Which is to say, they came prepared, whereas the tens of thousands of victims tripling the occupancy on Day Four were an entirely different beast: terrified people plucked from rooftops without food or water; no clothing; no medical necessities. They entered a building without electricity, thick with condensation from storms and sweaty bodies, and met a locked-down population whose cigarette lighters and flasks had been frisked from them four days back. The tormented squeezed in among the viceless and agitated. Pure insanity.

Cilla almost fit in; might actually have fit in better had her mania been on parade, for the guardsmen ignored the agitators for the most part. Here and there twenty-

something-year-old men, hobbled by low-riding pants and 'roid rage, pumped branded fists in the air, and a smattering of rancorous women cursed at anyone in uniform—whether military, social service, or medical—and at anyone else otherwise engaged in charitable behavior that did not meet their most immediate personal needs.

“Whatcha mean you ain’t got no Motrin? Looks to me like he be getting what he wants!” a woman shouted at a physician from the New Orleans Health Department. The physician had been tracking the weather for two weeks, and had evacuated his own family to his in-laws’ three days ahead of the eye, but voluntarily stayed behind and made his way to the Superdome with a well-stocked first aid kit as soon as he heard the doors had opened. In the subsequent four days, he’d ingested only three bottles of water and six granola bars. It made him slow; reminded him of his residency days. Hard to keep track of the IV rotations, so he wrote himself very specific notes about timing and contents on the generic bags with a black Sharpie he brought from home. His wife used the pen to mark bags of chicken she stored in the freezer. *God, he realized, the house must stink.* Four days without electricity; all that rotting defrosted poultry .... So it went: his mind wandering. He reread what he’d written on the IV bag: two parts H<sub>2</sub>O to two parts—

“Did you hear me?! I said how you ain’t got no Motrin for me but you giving him what *he* wants?” The woman would not be ignored. She shouted down at the doctor from the wall above the end zone, where the wheelchair-bound were stacked five deep, one man’s IV held aloft by a stadium seating sign, others rigged to the goal post.

“For God’s sake,” the physician shouted back at her, “he’s got jaundice!”

“And I got the cramps!” the heckler retorted.

The physician's assistant sidled up and whispered, "Let it go, man," while patting his colleague's shoulder. "Hang in there. I hear they got a bus coming to evacuate out some of these dialysis patients."

In time, the woman fell back in amongst the set jaws and puffed-out chests pacing the upper concourses, pounding on the rails, raising a ruckus but nothing more. Amid a crowd more interested in acquiring diapers than apologies, such private soapboxes tended not to result in full-scale uprisings, so the docs and the guards and the good-deed-doers turned a deaf ear for the most part and the rogues soon enough raged themselves hoarse and irrelevant.

Cilla entered the Superdome that way and might not have faltered, standing silently in line while waiting to be searched, rocking gently back and forth beside her daughter as they inched forward through the line of still-unprocessed refugees. Listening to the woman scream at the doctor, Rosy thought: *That could be my mother*. Then she wondered, *Why isn't it?* Cilla's normality had her worried; perhaps the uncharacteristic calm was a side effect of injury. Rosy put a hand to her mother's cheek. Cilla let her. Bad sign. A manic Cilla would not tolerate touch; a hurt Cilla might. Her skin felt clammy. Her pupils were fixed. Guilt rising, Rosy wondered if the action she'd taken to save her mother's life—slamming Cilla's head on the roof beam to ensure her compliance—had fractured her skull. Could she be brain damaged? Sweat rolled in rivulets from her hairline and pooled in her ears, dripped from the edge of her nose. Rosy wondered if Cilla had spiked a fever until a droplet from her own nose landed on her outstretched forearm. Everyone oozed sweat, close-pressed together, the AC dead these four days. Even the stadium bricks leaked pent-up fluid inside this sealed Southern summer swamp, the result

of weather- and body-borne humidity germinating over half a week. Christ, it stank. Stank so much it made Rosy retch. She had to stop thinking about it, stop noticing the smell, turn off her senses. Maybe that's what accounted for Cilla's fixed pupils and everyone else's. The solution: just look ahead, don't think, do as you're told. Otherwise, unbearable.

Unfortunately, when Cilla turned and looked at Rosy doubled over with dry heaves beside her, she began retching too. A nearby guardsman broke the cordon and directed them toward the restroom, promising to hold their place in line until their return, so close were they to reaching the security check-point at midfield.

It was the worst thing he could possibly have done.

Thirty thousand people, four days, dozens of untended toilet stalls. Every single one stuffed full and overflowing; the toilet seats peppered with menstrual blood and feces; the floors an insalubrious mix of urine and coagulated paper—the toilet paper used up on Sunday, the paper towels run through by Monday, the flyers and book pages people resorted to wiping with on Tuesday. Come Wednesday, folks were squatting in corners; it was cleaner. Not wiping; nothing left to use. By the time the Superdome was emptied at the end of the week, more than four thousand tons of trash and human debris would be hauled away on the backs of the guardsmen left behind. It would take an additional thirteen months and \$193 million to fully repair and refurbish the structure picked to pieces by the hordes that clawed down the doors, ripped seats from the tiers and relocated them outside, and smashed the bathroom mirrors into shards that they used to etch their names into the concrete causeways.

Rosy and Cilla skirted the shattered glass of the mirrors littering the floor around the sinks but didn't make it five feet further into the restroom before the stench drove them out, both of them sinking to the floor against the wall on the lower concourse, retching up nothing, not even bile after half a week without food. Uncontrolled stomach spasms moved through Cilla's body, and her legs began to tremble. Rosy pressed down on them with her hands, to keep Cilla from toppling out of her seated position. "Hold it together," she whispered, to herself and Cilla both, knowing they couldn't get to the doctors out on the field yet, not until they'd gotten back in that blasted line and been cleared through the metal detectors. When Cilla nodded her head, complicit, and smiled with gratitude instead of raging with fury, this frightened Rosy even more. She mistook her mother's weariness for failing consciousness, erroneously believing her mania—which had always been the strongest force within her—should have trumped starvation, dehydration, and injury. Unless the injury was too severe. So after years of wishing the mania away, under these most desperate of circumstances, Rosy wished it back, for it would make the situation more predictable, less abnormal.

Mania beat a head injury any day.

In that moment, terrified her mother had some sort of brain bleed, Rosy wrapped Cilla's arm around her own neck, hefted her aloft, and half pulled, half dragged her back toward the crowd. *To hell with it*, Rosy thought. Circumventing the requisite security line, she stormed toward the medical personnel out on the playing field, calling for help.

The guardsman who'd ushered them toward the restroom now stepped in front of them. "Whoa, ladies! Y'all need to get back in line."

"My mother's ill!" Rosy insisted. "She needs medical attention. *Now*."

“She don’t look no worse than nobody else,” he said, peering at Cilla.

“I’m fine,” Cilla said. She pulled herself away from Rosy and repeated, “I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.” Rosy’s fluster had raised Cilla’s alarm. She nodded her head up-down-up-down. Big smile. “I’m fine!” She was coming back to her demented self.

“See. She fine,” the guardsman said, and pointed again toward the metal detectors where people stood, arms overhead, up to ten minutes apiece, being felt up, patted down, grocery sacks and plastic bags full of salvaged clothing and foodstuffs upended in a search for weapons and contraband. With only Cilla’s jewelry box in tow, they’d have made it through quickly.

Cilla began to laugh her high-pitched cackle, and the familiar sound comforted Rosy until she realized this hint of returning psychosis did not necessarily preclude a skull fracture. “She’s got a closed head injury,” Rosy said with authority. “A brain bleed! She needs immediate medical attention!”

“She’ll be getting medical attention once she been cleared through security,” the guardsman said. “She can walk, she can talk, she can pass by that line. For God’s sake, you been waiting now for what? Almost four hours? Calm the hell on down. You almost there!”

Rosy likely would have acquiesced, except that just then a physician walked off the field near them, headed outside in search of fresh air, and she turned toward him to ask him to take a quick look at Cilla. But as she spun, she moved into the path of a policeman, deep in conversation with a military officer about how best to evacuate the dialysis patients. Emphasizing his point that the barricades should be shifted toward

midfield with a straight-armed thrust to his blind side, he walloped Rosy mid-sternum with the bony back of his hand.

She'd have screamed no matter what, caught by surprise and knocked windless. But misfortune had directed his hand to the precise place where Cilla's foot had earlier that day landed a desperate underwater kick, bruising Rosy's breastbone and displacing a sliver of rib cartilage. So Rosy not only screamed but also fell to her knees, clutching her chest as if assaulted. Which brought her mother fully back to life.

Made her crazy, in fact.

In the ensuing skirmish, Cilla broke the cop's jaw, toppled two National Guardsmen, and had a firm grip on the startled policeman's unholstered Glock, its semiautomatic barrel aimed at her own foot, of all things, before she was tasered into submission. Too many potential felonies to count, including assault on a police officer, on military personnel. Oh, they did not treat her kindly. Used her hair as a grip to drag her, handcuffed, to the temporary jail constructed of chain-link cages at the Amtrak station a few blocks southeast of the Superdome. She bucked with a fury that would put a rodeo bronc to shame, roiling with full body spasms that tossed waves up into the faces of her wading captors, showering them with equal parts sputum and splash. Rosy plowed along behind the furious security contingent, struggling to keep up as the knee-deep water on Liberty and Girod, working as suction, impeded her pursuit of the well-hydrated, well-fed men. The swells her mother raised up made it that much harder for her. She sobbed and begged the men for mercy, getting handcuffed herself when she caught one cop by the sleeve, clinging to him as she tripped headfirst into the dark water, coming up still

sputtering the phrase she'd been breathing when she went under: "But you don't understand! She's not a criminal! She's sick!"

They released Rosy at the makeshift jail but processed Cilla alongside two thugs arrested in the Superdome on sexual assault charges and an evacuee who shot a National Guardsman in the Convention Center, as well as some of the interstate snipers and thieves, a passel of looters, and the scavengers who snatched suitcases from tourists chased from the flooded downtown hotels.

Rosy pressed herself against the chain-link until nightfall, re-soaking her damp clothes with urine because she wouldn't leave Cilla for a single moment, holding her mother's hand through the metal fencing while Cilla wailed. But after dark, the prison staff withered to just one broad-shouldered corrections officer on loan from Angola, who raised a baton over Rosy's head and threatened, "If you don't get the fuck outta here I'm gonna break your goddamn arm and then toss you in there with her. And look round, bitch: ain't nobody here to stop me."

Realizing they'd both be lost if she were arrested, too—understanding that the best thing she could do for her mother was to get away, to get help—Rosy pried Cilla's fingers from her hand and ran from her mother.

"Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" Cilla begged, sobbing with fear that quickly transmuted to fury. "You ungrateful bitch! You left Maya to die, and now you killing me, too! Murderer!"

Those words that she slung at Rosy's retreating form—slurs motivated by a mania that suffused them with hate, with desperation—would be the last words Cilla ever spoke

to her daughter. Her forever goodbye to her beloved child: “I hate you, you fucking coward cunt!”