
When the Levee Breaks

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Austin, Texas. September 23rd, 2005. A sneak preview to the end of the world.

It's the second day of fall. The second time this year that both day and night should equal exactly twelve hours. Equinox is a biannual equilibrium, a stasis that occurs when the ecliptic intersects the celestial equator. But other forces have become aligned – simple things, like water temperature and wind speed – and the cosmic balance has been upset.

In these days, if you live in the Caribbean Basin, on the Eastern coast of Mexico, or in the Gulf Coast states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, there is confusion as to what is day and what, precisely, constitutes night. Waking hours are spent under a baleful shadow, looking for signs, furtively watching. Watching the sky, the water table, leaves flickering in a hot wind, the orange needle of your car's fuel gauge sinking lower and lower like an hourglass. Hurricane Katrina, one of the largest storms ever born in the Atlantic, made its second landfall less than a month ago. The city of New Orleans was nearly destroyed. The streets are underwater and thousands are still missing, but the mourning has not yet had a chance to begin. New Orleanians concede a temporary defeat as the city is forced to re-evacuate. Hurricane Rita, a storm estimated to be even more powerful than Katrina, is just days from making land.

I try to stop making biblical comparisons. I search for a nearer explanation. But even in Mayan mythology, it was *Huracan*, the one-legged creator-god of wind, fire, and storms, who caused that tradition's Great Flood, released after the first humans incurred the wrath of the gods.

Austin is locked in traffic. Even if the storm makes it this far inland, it will only be a category one, possibly two, and the worst is still a thousand miles away. But everywhere I look, cars are stalled or broken, or bleeding steam. Whole families of gaunt young men peer under hoods and over fenders, as if staging a revival of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Fifteen minutes and a few blocks later, and I can see a middle-aged Mexican man in a beat-up cowboy hat, lying on the asphalt under the engine of his broke-down Chevy as his wife waits patiently in the shade of an oak tree. In the dirt lot behind them, three little dust devils spin into existence. The wind is picking up.

This is a sneak preview. We are the actors, and this is our practice, our dress rehearsal.

The gasoline ran out all over town last night. The service stations were drained by thousands who arrived here on vapors, and then emptied by thou-

sands more who have no intention of going anywhere, but are afraid fuel will become astronomically expensive, or exhausted altogether.

Those who say that the oil industry is inextricably tied to violence would have found a dearth of irony in the snapshot scenes of gas stations whipping by my car windows last night, as the orange needle in my dash rapidly approached 'E'. At each one, all the nozzles were covered with plastic bags, like political prisoners awaiting execution. One station was completely roped off, like a crime scene.

Eventually, I did find gas; \$2.74 per gallon and I was happy to pay it, even though the line to ring up was even longer than the one to pump. Surprisingly, many of the people queued to the register didn't need gas. Usually couples, they asked the girl behind the counter if she had any more bottled water anywhere, and when she said No, they asked if she had bags of ice and Styrofoam coolers. The gas station had these things, but it was a chore to sell them, since the line kept growing longer and it was obvious the manager had instructed his employees to keep the outdoor icebox locked between sales.

As I pumped the gas, I recalled a question my wife asked me a few days before. My wife, who is somehow under the impression I might have the answer to such questions, asked me, "Why do people go crazy when there's a full moon?" "I don't know," I replied. "I supposed it's because people *think* people go crazy when there's a full moon." Perception, after all, is our only reality. Watch the news in Texas. The meteorologist won't just give you the temperature, but the heat index as well. Because how hot we *feel* is more important than a number on a thermometer.

Back in the present, it must be about 103°. As for the heat index, I have no idea. I'm still stuck in traffic, on the southbound access road beside I-35, on the periphery of downtown Austin. Rita, the rapid second coming of the worst hurricane in memory, has timed herself with the three-day Austin City Limits Music Festival and the Pecan Street Fair, when a good portion of the city streets are closed to traffic. What roads we have left buckle under the added strain of an influx of tens of thousands of people from the Gulf Coast area, not to mention our recent transplants from New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina, Act I for the dress rehearsal of *The End of Times*, was set in New Orleans, because that's where the levee broke, literally and figuratively. After the flood, armed gangs roamed submerged streets in search of free liquor and abandoned merchandise. They stole guns and shot at police and other rescue workers. Possibly they did this because they thought the rescuers would arrest them, or at least impede their looting. Maybe they shot at them just because they realized it was the one time they might be able to get away with it. Then, there is the bleakest possibility: maybe this is how a small but

dangerous portion of humanity will behave in groups, once the machine finally breaks down. Or at least that's what we were meant to believe. Some are already fuming at the dominant images chosen for broadcast. Stories of heroism and selflessness are proving stubbornly elusive.

To complicate the breakdown in New Orleans, there is also the stew of environmental hazards: Hugh Kaufman, the EPA's chief investigator and the man who accused his own agency of deliberately not testing the air quality around Ground Zero after the World Trade Center attack because they knew it would register as unsafe, has now claimed that the so-called 'toxic gumbo' of the contaminated flood waters will make New Orleans unsafe for full habitation for a decade, and that the Bush Administration is covering up this fact. Pollutants include bacteria from human and animal corpses, spillover from deluged sewage treatment facilities, petrol products from no fewer than five hurricane-induced oil spills, and purportedly high levels of carcinogens like benzene and heavy metals. Of course this is not limited to the Big Easy, but has already affected the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico as well. The environmental scarring could prove to be the hurricane's worst consequence in the long run, and those most affected will be the poor, anxious to return to their former neighborhoods, as well as migrant (and often undocumented) workers currently employed to pump out the toxic water and perform other cleaning duties. The gist: don't order the shrimp.

New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin became an overnight icon, putting a human face on the struggle against the ravages of nature, as well as outspoken frustration and heart-breaking disappointment with the leisurely response of the federal government. Nagin grabbed ears with his vitriolic criticism of the administration's lack of action, their "spin and bull," chastising the president for coming all the way to New Orleans only to fly over in Air Force One. Nagin's appraisal of the city was bleak, but rang with honesty. He also managed to paint a more accurate (even if more disconcerting) picture of the looters. The mayor attributed the long-standing free flow of illegal drugs into New Orleans for the post-disaster horde of zombie-like "drug-starved addicts wreaking havoc," stealing guns, breaking into pharmacies and hospitals, looking for something "to take the edge off of their jones." Sleepless and overtaxed, emotionally and physically, Nagin and a police force reduced by no-shows could do little more than form a perimeter around them and "hope to God that we are not overrun."

On September 23rd, I look out over the traffic and wonder if the same thing could happen in Central Texas. If Rita could be our Katrina. It seems like most of the gulf is fleeing, and Austin and San Antonio are the first large cities to the north. If we get hit, could it be that bad? Nagin seemed more afraid of human

destruction than he was of water. Surely we don't have the same scale of a drug problem as the bacchanalian port city of New Orleans, yet when I see people scramble for gas at record-setting prices, when I see them clean the shelves of all the bottled water and toilet paper at the grocery store before one drop of rain has fallen, when our cars choke the highways to a standstill under clear blue skies, it makes me think we ought to expand our concept of addiction.

I've got my windows rolled down in an attempt to glean some sort of breeze. Not knowing if there will be any gas tomorrow, I'm keeping the a.c. switched off. The drivers of the three thousand or so cars idling around me are of the same mind. In Texas, what some people call 'summer' can last through October, even November, and in our modern age of air conditioning the sight of a traffic jam with so many open windows should be an alarm of some kind. The air is a roiling cocktail of sound, a maelstrom of music as each car stereo blasts from a dozen different radio stations, each set of speakers almost deafening, as if they feel the need to crank the one knob on the dash that won't make them even hotter, or waste precious fuel.

Above, the sky buzzes like an agitated hive. Paramedic rescue helicopters from three different counties hang in a perpetual holding pattern of urgent vectors, waiting for a chance to land on the helipad at Brackenridge Hospital. Darting over them is a constant crisscross of military transports, dark and serious. And then one small, single-prop airplane dragging a square banner that reads DUNKIN' DONUTS.

Ahead and behind me, two firemen stand in the heat and exhaust alongside the access road, waiting for something or someone, occasionally chatting with idling motorists. Possibly, the reason they are here is the reported death, two days ago, of a woman stuck in traffic on U.S. 59. Her passing was most likely the result of a preexisting heart condition combined with the heat of Texas and the stress of evacuation. Houston Mayor Bill White had warned that highways could become a "death trap" if motorists become gridlocked when the eye of Rita finally makes land. His forecast proved true for at least one person, and a storm wasn't even required.

An ambulance with wailing sirens inches along the highway below us, and the firefighters turn to look.

A bus carrying forty-five nursing home evacuees burst into flames this morning, near Dallas. It's said that the fire began in the brake system, and was only made worse as the patients' oxygen tanks began to explode. Many of the elderly passengers suffered from impaired mobility, and escape was difficult for most, impossible for many. Twenty-four people died.

My radio is tuned to local news, and I turn up the volume to catch the voice of Governor Rick Perry. He assures me that his office is ready to handle any

disaster that may befall the state, and announces the readiness of “mass care strike teams.” I have to laugh at the juxtaposition of ‘care’ and ‘strike’. I’m unable to shake the image of storm troopers parachuting from airplanes, laden with stuffed teddy bears and thermoses full of chicken soup.

Perry seems to be handling the imminent disaster with his usual cool. But I can’t help but think back to August, just last month, when the governor held a “Pastors’ Policy Briefing,” a thinly veiled vehicle to aid his campaign for reelection. The private, two-day event was sponsored by the Texas Restoration Project. The TRP, a conservative group of religious leaders at least partially funded by oil money, seeks to break down the few remaining divides between church and state in Texas, chiefly by aligning themselves with politicians like Perry, and by seeking to register 300,000 new “values voters.”

The Pastors’ rally focused on maintaining a ban against gay marriage and featured, among others, Arlington minister Dwight McKissic, one of two African Americans invited to speak. He delivered an old-time, straight-from-the-pulpit denunciation of homosexuals, wrapping up his speech by drawing an allegory to the hell-fired destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He closed with, “God has another match!”

I wonder about the coming firestorm that McKissic refers to. I wonder if it could instead be a hurricane. Is the ‘match’ a metaphor, an allegory for all I now see before me? After all, wouldn’t a flood be more in keeping with the style of a vengeful Old Testament god? I wonder if McKissic tells his flock that New Orleans was punished by God because of its well-deserved reputation for alcohol abuse, drug-related crime, gambling, and all other attendant forms of hedonism. Does he tell them Houston was spared from Katrina because of a lower per capita gay population? Or was it because, in 1998, the city’s police had the just ethicality to enforce Texas’ anti-gay sodomy law, and arrested two men caught having anal sex in a falsely reported burglary? I wonder if Perry remembers applauding to the forecast of a second Sodom and Gomorrah, as he rushed to help assuage the natural violence wreaked upon the lower half of his constituency.

When people return to New Orleans to sift through the wreckage of their neighborhoods, to look around and see what’s left, they will no doubt encounter any number of peripatetic ministers. They will offer each survivor a good-quality mold remediation respirator filter and a gallon of clean water, but only if they first listen to a brief sermon on ‘sinners in the hands of an angry god’.

I can’t know this, not yet, but Hurricane Rita will in fact kill 119 people. Less than ten percent of Katrina’s death toll. Of those 119, all but six will be in Texas. And of those 113, only three will be the direct result of hurricane elements. That leaves one hundred and ten people who will die in collapsing

structures, in high water, under falling trees, in a burning bus, or languishing, waiting for aid.

If our response to crises are even more destructive than the catastrophes themselves, then our book will close and that will be the story of us, regardless of God or Terror, or elected official.

Two weeks ago George H. W. Bush and his wife Barbara visited the Houston Astrodome to meet Katrina evacuees. The former first lady suggested that it's "scary" that so many evacuees want to stay in Texas, and added that the displaced "were underprivileged anyway, so this – this is working very well for them." The Queen Mum of America's latest political dynasty was content to let them eat cake.

A few days later, Vice President Dick Cheney arrived in Gulfport, Mississippi. He came to view the destruction and to talk to reporters. A bystander told the vice president to go fuck himself, twice. The comments were caught on live television, and the epithet hurler was instantly thrust into the national spotlight, touted by some as the crystallization of frustration and dissent. The Vice President went back to Washington, apparently none the wiser.

The agendas will continue, storm or no. On November 9th, one in five registered voters turned out to officially ban gay marriage in the Texas constitution, making us the nineteenth state to do so. Conservative religious leaders will be satisfied, and their large corporate contributors will have a legal right to refuse spousal benefits for homosexual employees. In addition, the state of Texas should be adequately protected from hell-fire, plagues of locusts, raining frogs, brimstone, and having our rivers turn into blood, for at least a few more years. (When I heard the news, I stood on my back porch and smoked a cigarette, trying to wish away the feeling that my own heterosexual marriage hadn't also been assaulted.)

Literal flood prevention, however, will still be hard to come by. The New Orleans levee budget still won't be resolved by February. The Levee Board announced that it expects more than a fifty percent drop in property tax income, which previously paid nearly half their expenses. Protesters will cry out against the president's commitment of \$2.9 billion in federal funds for levee restoration. The larger, sturdier levees required to protect the city from category five hurricanes like Katrina and Rita may again be deemed too expensive at a whopping \$32 billion, even though Hurricane Katrina will cost at least \$75 billion in property damage alone. Tulane University, the institution that built New Orleans' oldest and best pumps, announced it must eliminate six majors from the *engineering school*, right on the eve of New Orleans' largest reconstruction in history. A city must be rebuilt, almost from scratch,

and the city's preeminent university can no longer afford to teach people how to do it.

Mayors and presidents and university administration will always be scrutinized in a time of crisis, occasionally crucified by hindsight. But they are bound by a contract that dictates they must only work to protect, repair and prepare. Elected officials are encouraged to analyze, but are not permitted to philosophize, to search for reason, or so it seems. Only the preachers, vicars and clerics may publicly speculate on matters beyond science because only they have been given the authority to speak on behalf of God. But if things go wrong, they cannot be held responsible for what God *does*, because they are, after all, only human. Maybe that's why so much of The Right has sidled even closer to their religious and spiritual backers. Maybe they're hoping they too may be allowed to delegate some of their culpability to the Lord.

Whether God's name is Jehovah or Allah, whether or not he is actually a she, or if God is merely the interplay of chaos and order, of designed success and intended failure – what will ultimately test humanity's faith will be how we interpret the signs we have for so long attributed to Him. How long we can keep our heads above water, how we prepare, why we don't, and whether or not we look back to see the city burn. We could do very well, or we could fail miserably. It is a heretofore unexplored ramification of Heisenberg's *Principle of Uncertainty*, of the Coriolis Effect of Human Inertia. Of bodies in peril, *en masse*, in motion, and unavoidably, stuck in traffic.

So far, our leaders' reactions have been less than encouraging. And as for God, all he's had to say is a tsunami in southern Asia, an earthquake in Kashmir, two massive storms in the Gulf of Mexico, and mudslides in Guatemala. The only levity so far: they found bird flu in Turkey.

The finale is homage to the wily resourcefulness of the South. Like the man who took his shotgun as he retreated into his attic to avoid rising water. God knows what he needed it for. But when the dishwater rose to the ceiling, he used the ordnance to blow an escape hole through his own roof. For those who find themselves in the next storm, I offer a simple, non-denominational prayer:

The stone fell far from me, and sank without my seeing. But I live in the same pool of water, and I can feel the ripples. I will not covet my neighbor's rations. I will seek higher ground. I will conserve my ammunition. Please, God of Land and Sea, please just let me stay afloat.