

## *Special Report: The Day the River Ran North by Ali Vali*

One of the first apartments I had in New Orleans after college was this great place on Bordeaux Street right off Poydras. For those of you not from the area, it's the section of town everyone refers to as "Uptown." This apartment was a shotgun townhouse where I was second in line in a row of eight different places, which means I shared walls with two other tenants.

On one side of me on the end was a nice pharmaceutical rep who worked mostly mornings and was incredibly quiet. My other neighbor, though, was a character that makes this city the true gumbo that it is, and for the sake of this story I'll call her Connie.

Connie was standing on the front stoop the day I started moving in and was incredibly friendly. She offered everyone a drink, the use of the phone — pretty much whatever we needed, she was more than happy to oblige. On that first day everyone who I corralled into helping me commented on how beautiful this girl was. Blond hair, blue eyes, tight jeans, white T-shirt, and a smile that could melt your heart.

That's how she was dressed that first time I saw her, but it turned out Connie had quite the eclectic wardrobe. The first day it was the all American look, but the next time I saw her she was wearing a suede fringed jacket, matching suede pants, boots, and had a feather in her hair. I waved hello, told her how nice she looked, and went about my business for the night.

The suede outfit was followed by an ever-changing look that was anything but predictable. There was the sophisticated business suit, miniskirt with thigh-high boots and fishnet stockings, black mini dress and so on. One afternoon I was outside on my deck watering my plants when I heard her call my name. When I looked over the fence, she was sunning herself in an alligator-skin bikini made of what seemed to be genuine alligator hide. I think you can imagine that every time I saw Connie, it was like meeting

someone new, and each persona had temptation written all over it. At the time, most of my conversations with my partner started with what Connie was wearing that particular day, and I'm sure she thought I was making some of it up, but even my imagination doesn't stretch that far.

One morning I happened to be running late, and she asked me for a ride downtown. I figured this was my chance to talk to her for a long stretch and find out exactly what she did for a living. I say this because not too many people I've worked with go to work in black leather pants, pirate silk shirt, and stilettos. Her answer was customer relations. We arrived at an office building, and she thanked me for the ride and strutted into the building like she was the owner.

It was about a month later—because of that common wall I was roused out of a deep sleep—that I finally figured out what Connie did for a living. There are a lot of names for it, but when I found out what she charged, I elected to go with "high-priced call girl." Turns out the clothes were job related, and she didn't just date a lot.

When Radclyffe asked me to write a little about New Orleans and the odyssey we've been on for the past weeks, it was Connie who popped into my head. For me New Orleans is like Connie. It's a city that has a little something to offer everyone who visits and lives here. She's sophisticated, easygoing, friendly, and when you're in the mood she can be downright wild.

As a writer, most of my stories take place in and around New Orleans, not only because it's the place I know, but more importantly it's the place I love. I've traveled plenty over the years, but my home is just so unique and special it's like returning to the arms of a beautiful woman. No matter how long you live here, she'll never show you all her secrets and will continually surprise you.

The things you can always count on, though, are that she will always offer you the best selection of restaurants on the planet, her beignets will always be hot, her coffee strong, and the Mississippi River will always flow south to the Gulf.

On August 29<sup>th</sup> much of what I love was washed away in a surge from Lake Pontchartrain. Homes, businesses, and pieces of history were no match for the catastrophe that was wrought by Hurricane Katrina. My family and I had evacuated, not willing to face the monster that was brewing and churning its way through the Gulf of Mexico.

For one brief moment we thought we had (as the television weather announcers kept repeating) dodged another bullet. They said this despite the fact that for most of the night one of the given facts of New Orleans wasn't a fact anymore. As the hurricane slammed ashore the river actually flowed to the north. It was a fascinating and scary thing, but as the sun came up our brief moment of calm and victory was stolen when we watched along with the rest of the world as our city filled with water.

As much pain as those rising waters brought, it was the people left behind who really broke my heart. Much was made of the chaos that some people plunged the city into, but my family and I saw the faces of those who created magic in our favorite restaurants, played jazz down in the French Quarter, and made up the soul of where we call home. They were also the children who will pave our future, and the elderly who carry and keep our traditions alive.

We started for home the moment the winds died down and the worst of the weather was over. For days we weren't allowed to go home to see what Katrina had left for us on a more personal level. What we did know, and was made clear by the officials we talked with, was there had been water. It had receded at that point, but

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water nonetheless. As hard as it was to hear, it at least prepared us for what we'd be coming home to.

When we did get to go home, nothing on MSNBC, CNN, NBC, or any of the other stations covering the disaster could have prepared me for what it was like. For miles it was as if someone had come through and snapped the utility poles at their base. Not just a couple, but every single one. Huge trees, that are such a part of the landscape of south Louisiana we've come to take them for granted, were uprooted and tossed around like small shrubs. There were roofs of buildings that were peeled back as if someone had peeked inside, curious as to what they'd find.

I've never been to war, but the sight of Louis Armstrong Airport is as close as I want to come. There were dozens of helicopters taking off and landing in the short time it took us to drive past. Near those were large military transport planes waiting to be unloaded, and there wasn't a civilian in sight.

The streets were eerily quiet as we made our way to the house, only the sound of our footsteps on the street. We walked, because a lot of the ancient oaks that've stood sentry over our neighborhoods for decades finally lost their battle and were uprooted by the winds, making the roads impassable.

Our front door took a little coaxing to open, but it finally gave way to the reality of what Katrina had left us with. It can be summed up in one word that echoes in every community across the region from New Orleans to Alabama – loss. We may have lost possessions, but we tried not to dwell on that and started concentrating instead on what needs to be done.

We are incredibly lucky because we took away from this a few invaluable lessons. First, we may have lost some precious memories and *things*, but we have our family and they are all safe. The things we lost do not in the

end define who we are, so while some of them were precious, new memories are waiting to be made. One of the things we're most looking forward to is taking my mom out to dinner the day her hair finally is long enough for her to put away her scarves and baseball caps. Battling mildew and mold on my walls seems trite when I think of the battle she's waging against breast cancer right now.

The most touching lesson of all that will stay in my heart always was that while we were dealing with this mess, our new family was thinking about us. The people affiliated with Bold Strokes Books only reaffirmed my belief in what a top-notch organization it is by the way they reached out to us without being asked. Knowing you are not alone no matter how bad the situation is a precious thing.

That brings me back to Connie. One night I was out on a date having dinner with my partner—that was back in the wooing and courting stage for us—when from the corner of my eye I spotted someone waving discreetly at me, while seemingly hanging on every word the woman she was sitting with was saying. That night, it was the simple black dress most women have in their closets, and she'd gone with plain black pumps. Simple but elegant, which was a good look for her. I smiled back at her and had to laugh when she just winked, this time to both of us.

The reason I think Connie and I went on to be friends is I saw her for who she was no matter the outfit, and no matter how many dates she brought home. She was a nice and giving person, which made the rest not matter to me. I saw her for who and what she was and never judged her for her choices or her career choice.

New Orleans is a little bit of all the things you saw during and after the storm. We are a mixture of the good, the bad, the poor, the displaced, and the forgotten. Just like in a good

gumbo, you start with roux of flour and oil. It can't be rushed or you ruin the ingredients that will come next. When it's the color of an old penny, you add the holy trinity—that would be onions, bell peppers, and celery for flavor. What you add next depends on what you're in the mood for. One day it might be a spicy chicken and sausage combination, or it might be shrimp and okra. What's the difference you ask? It's sort of the difference between thigh-high boots and pumps.

Mother Nature is sometimes a cruel and unrelenting beast, but there is something she will never be able to steal away from us. That's our unfaltering faith that things will be better and that every person no matter their station matters. The cries of those on the street begging for a way out and a bottle of water were heard across the nation, and as Americans everyone can be proud of the response. Your generosity and your empathy is something each of us from New Orleans will never forget, and will work tirelessly to find a proper way to say thanks.

We will rebuild, and when we do, New Orleans will welcome everyone to the party. Be it for Saints and Sinners or the GLCS convention, we'll be waiting. We promise the food will still be excellent, and the jazz will be flowing right along with the hurricanes. Well at least the ones that come in a glass at Pat O'Brien's. As for what you want out of the city, just like Connie, I'm sure that's negotiable—not to mention memorable.

And no, I didn't forget. Most importantly, we promise the river will be flowing to the south.

*Ali Vali*