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Katrina and the Cat: Responding to Society's Expendables

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"Is it a rat or a cat?" My next-door neighbor's loud voice interrupts my reverie. I look up from yanking the vines smothering the bromeliads in my front yard, and I see it too. A creature crawls slowly across the road in front of my house toward the neighbors' driveway, which divides their property from ours. My neighbors continue laughing and talking.

Squinting to see through the hot, midday summer sun of Florida, I note that the creature does look like a cross between a rat and a cat. It has a cat's head, but the body dragging behind is rat like. For a moment, I imagine this is a deformed animal, born that way. But it is not. Walking toward it, I see a young, severely injured cat, normal from its head to half way down its back, with a squashed flat backend low to the ground and legs splayed outward at 90-degree angles. Still, it "walks," dragging its useless hind end along by pulling with its front paws, meowing with every hard step won. Sensing my presence, the cat changes course and heads toward me and my yard.

I resist the urge to move away and instead get on my knees beside the cat. I want to give comfort, but when I see its hind end covered with flies and maggots, I am reluctant to touch it. Instead, I stand up and watch.

The cat looks directly at me. "Please help me," the eyes and rhythmic meow plead.

Seeing me near the cat, my neighbor leaves his companions, walks toward me, and says, "Hey, we thought you moved to North Carolina." His wife comes over and stands at a distance behind him, stretching her neck to peer at the thing in the street.

Wondering how anyone could think about anything now but this tragedy that has found us, I ignore his statement and say quietly, "It's been run over by a car."

"Is that a cat?" he asks.

"Yes, I have to get it help."

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“Oh, good,” he and his wife say together, then turn, and walk back to their companions.

My soothing voice has invited the cat into my yard. Now the cat is definitely my problem.

I shout to my partner, Art, who is pulling weeds in the far corner of our yard. “Art, this cat’s been hit by a car.”

“What do you want to do?” Art shouts back without coming over.

“I don’t know. I have to get it help.” The tears flow freely down my face.

“Don’t touch it. It might have a disease.”

“I haven’t touched it,” I say, then back away from the cat. What is there to be afraid of? I wonder. Later, Art will tell me that in childhood his brother got Rocky Mountain fever from touching a cat.

I cannot imagine how much pain the cat must feel. I am awed by the cat’s plea for help, its determination to get across the road in our cul de sac to voices that might save it. Though I love animals, dogs in particular, I don’t usually pay much attention to cats, primarily because I am allergic to them. But I feel connected to this cat. I squat again and stare at the cat. If my eyes focus on the head, I see a cat. But when my eyes move over the length of its body, I see only a mangled disaster. How can this animal still be alive? I force myself to keep looking at the destruction, much as I have looked all week at the devastation in New Orleans and along the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts. This cat is asking for help; it is asking *me* for help. It’s a matter of life and death. What do I do?

I want to return to pulling vines and pretend this cat doesn’t exist. I am not responsible for the neighborhood cats. I feel anger toward the renters across the street who have more than a dozen cats. This must be one of theirs. Why has their negligence become my responsibility? Yet I know I cannot ignore this cat’s dilemma, as our national government did the plight of the thousands of people smacked by Katrina this week. Now five days after the hurricane hit, people—poor people, mostly poor Black people—continue to be housed in “subhuman conditions” in the Superdome and convention center, littered on I-10, and trapped on their roofs without their basic needs being met. Like this cat, they are neglected, treated as disposable. This cat needs help, and it needs it now. Not tomorrow. I can’t turn away.

I sit beside the cat, tears streaming down my face, a continuation of the crying I’ve been doing all week as I watched and listened to the personal stories coming out of New Orleans and worried about my sister, Judi, and brother-in-law, Ron, who were captives in the flood zone of Mississippi. The damaged and abandoned cat reenergizes my tears, displacing them from the middle-aged Black man on CNN whose face and words haunt me every time I close my eyes to sleep or dream. I see the camera pan to a close-up of the eyes of a person overcome by fear, loss, and uncertainly as he speaks.

into the garage. Cats with no tags, likely no vaccinations or heartworm treatment. What kind of people live here, in the midst of our middle-class neighborhood? One neighbor says they sell drugs. "If they sold drugs, they'd be living better than this," I tell her.

When I return home, the cat has crawled farther into my yard. Yes, no doubt about it. It is distinctly across my property line now. Maybe it will die. That would be a blessing. For the cat or me? I talk to the cat. "I am sorry about what happened to you. I don't know what to do, but I'll try to get you help. It is going to be all right." Meow. Meow. The cat knows it isn't going to be all right, and so do I. When I pay it attention, it pleads more.

This cat is going to die, and there really isn't a damn thing I can do about it. I go back to pulling vines, momentarily seeking to reenter a numbed state of reprieve from loss and destruction.

"Do you want to take it to the vet?" Art asks from his side of the yard. "Keep it?" "What?"

"Do you want us to take it in and care for it?" Art asks forcefully. I think that he has not really looked at the condition of the cat, or he wouldn't ask this.

Still, I appreciate his question, especially since he is so dismayed about the stray cats that have taken over our neighborhood. What I really want is for him to be with me emotionally in this time of trouble, but I don't ask that. From his words and the distance he keeps, I sense that he also is trying to hold onto the respite produced by the mundane, physical act of pulling weeds. I sense Art wants to make me feel better, while not being pulled into the depths of my despair, a continuation of how he has acted most of the week. Though he has at times wavered between emotionality and stoicism, for the most part, he has performed rationality and strength, wanting, as he will say later, to be there for me as I struggled with my family's situation.

"No, I don't want to keep it," I say softly, tears still streaming. Maybe I should want to keep it. Nurse it back to health. Have a cat that walks on two legs and a story to tell about its recovery. But I don't want to keep it. Why doesn't this cat go away? Quit bothering me. Don't you know I've had a hard week? What do you expect me to do? Desperate, the creature comes closer. It struggles now toward a flower bed, five feet from where I stand, the same place I found a dead cat just months before.

"Don't lie in the sun," I say, when the cat plops down for a moment. "It's too hot." Is this my definition of "helping"?

"That's right. Go to sleep, kitty," I say. Maybe it will die if it goes to sleep. What a thing to wish for.

Horrified at myself, I imagine a heroic rescue. Art and I take the cat to the vet. We pay hundreds of dollars and get it "fixed." The act identifies us not only as people who care but also people who do something. We join the circle of activists.

But I don't want a cat. Maybe I could want a cat, but there seem to be too many obstacles in the way—our two dogs and my cat allergies to start. Besides, this cat is going to die. I don't want a cat that's going to die. Oh god, that's the

worst. I think of how devastated I was when three of our dogs died last year. Though the cat is not mine, already I have to prepare for its loss, a loss of something I never had.

When I again walk toward the cat, it sits up and meows more softly this time, as if it is running out of energy. But when I approach, it cries loudly. This cat is using its last ounce of energy to call out to me for help. I want to cry out for help too.

“Help!” I say softly. Nobody hears, and I’m afraid to say it louder and acknowledge how very helpless I feel right now.

I am awed by the cat’s survival instincts. I kneel beside it, taking in every detail of the splattered mess. When I wave away the flies, the maggots embed deeper into the surface wounds, and the flies reappear behind my wave. I think I see tire marks on the cat’s back and then a white hole covered by maggots who have eaten through the flesh. I am amazed there is no blood.

Why hasn’t this cat died already? Why can’t it be in shock instead of trying to live? I am disgusted by the whole life-death process.

Is there some way to make the cat comfortable? In the movies, they always bring water in a crisis. But when I offer water in a cup, the cat refuses to drink. It wants to be saved, not have a drink. When I pour the water on the cat’s back, the maggots and flies are unfazed.

The only way to relieve the cat’s suffering is to strike it dead. I envision hitting it with the hoe in my shed, like the neighbor once killed a black snake. The visual image horrifies me. Slow death will have to do.

There has to be somebody who can help. If not, what kind of society do we live in? I go inside my house to check the Hillsborough County phone listings and find “Animal Services.” I sigh, realizing they will mostly likely euthanize this cat. After all, they put down thousands of healthy cats every year. Why would they put resources into saving a damaged cat? Death seems a relief compared to the suffering I imagine the cat is experiencing. If the cat were healthy, maybe the Humane Society would come. But there’s nobody to save my damaged cat. My cat? It’s not my cat.

I dial and am put on hold until a voice message tells me that the office is closed on Saturdays. If this is an emergency, the voice instructs, I should call a second number.

When I call the second number, I get a recording: “If this is an emergency which consists of . . .” The voice offers a list of things that constitute an emergency, for which the caller should stay on the line. I quit listening when I hear “an animal in danger.” All others are instructed to call back during regular business hours. I wait impatiently. “Damn bureaucracy,” I say, empathizing with what the people in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast have experienced this week and will go through for a long time. No comparison. They don’t have the luxury of being put on hold; few have phones or working phone numbers. Now I wait patiently on the phone until I finally can tell my brief tale to a woman who wants only my name and address. “Animal Services will call you directly,” she says with no emotion.

When I return outside, Art directs, "Get a box. We're taking the cat to the vet."

"No. Animal Services is coming. At least I think they are."

"Did they say they would?"

"They're calling me back."

I look down at the cell phone cradled in my hand.

All week, a cell phone has provided a life line to my sister Judi and her husband Ron in Biloxi. Though I have not been able to get through the downed telephone lines and towers in the five days since the hurricane blew in, they have managed to call me about once a day, frequently connecting for less than a minute.

On Sunday morning, before the storm hit, I had called and begged them to leave the area. "You have to get out," I said, envisioning their home, located in a low-lying area, not far from the Biloxi coast. They said they would, but then they went to a neighbor's house on high ground instead. "It's ten miles from the Gulf," my sister reassured, when she called the night before the storm. "Our cats and dogs are here with us. We're safe. Don't worry. We have a generator. We're cooking dinner right now."

"Why didn't you leave?" I asked.

"By the time we got all our furniture up on tables, the animals taken care of, and the car packed, it was evening," she said. "We tried to leave, but they wouldn't let us on the interstate. We were afraid we'd be stuck on the highway with our two cats and two elderly dogs and in worse shape than if we stayed."

Wanting to support them, not second guess them; wanting to believe they had made a good decision, that they were safe, I said, "I know you made the best decision you could," but I am upset they didn't get the hell out of there.

I called to tell my brother in Virginia the news. Then, along with most Americans, Art and I watched CNN, until late in the evening. We slept restlessly that night.

Ron called at 8:30 the next morning. "It's coming," he said, "the big one."

"Are you okay? Do you feel safe?"

"Yes, we feel safe," he said, taking a deep breath. "Can you hear the wind?"

"Yes, I can. Call me, as soon as possible, after it's over."

"We're having breakfast," my sister reassured, when she returned to the phone.

"Don't take any chances." I tried to sound calm and wanted to say something meaningful in case we never got to speak again.

"We won't. I love you."

"I love you too" was all I could think to say.

As my family waited for the storm, life went on in Tampa. By 9:30, I was at school for the first day of classes. I didn't know what to wish for. If I hoped for a direct hit on New Orleans, my family and their home might be spared, but then thousands might die in New Orleans. Where was my concern for the "greater good"? But I couldn't wish for a direct hit on the Mississippi coast. I just couldn't. So I hoped only that people might be saved.

I was in class when the hurricane struck land around eleven on Monday morning. I dialed Judi and Ron as I walked back to my office. I rang them continuously, first their cell phone, then the phone where they were staying, then their home phone, then their internet phone. Over and over. A loud and fast busy signal met my ear every time. I sent Ron e-mail messages and text messages when I got back to my office. Nothing came back. I read news reports and watched video on the Internet in my office. I walked the halls asking if anybody knew what was happening with the hurricane. No one did. I called friends outside for the latest CNN news because we had no reception in our building. I longed to be home where I could get updated news and feel connected to the “community of hurricane viewers.”

Though I had a migraine headache and felt anxious and sad, I prepared for my evening class and reassured new students, who seemed more anxious about the first day of classes than about the hurricane. Was I the only person in my department who had family in the storm-hit area? Though some people were sympathetic, nobody seemed as concerned about the hurricane as I was. I thought back to the anxiety local people had expressed when a hurricane was headed toward Tampa Bay and they were personally involved. I wonder if I would have been as concerned now if my family wasn't in Biloxi.

With each bit of news on the Internet, I moved from hopeful to grief stricken. With all the wind and flooding of Katrina, how could their house not be destroyed? The hurricane had hit a little to the west of them, meaning they were on the “bad” side of the storm. I took little solace from the lack of direct hit on New Orleans, though I was thankful that fewer people might be affected.

When I got home from my evening class at 8:15 p.m., I called my brother Art, who said that a family friend had last heard from Ron at eleven in the morning, just as the hurricane was coming through. He reported, “Ron said that the wind was unbelievable. Then he said, ‘Oh, no, there goes another tree’ and the phone went dead.” We are silent. Images of trees falling, roofs caving in, and water surging through the door fill my thoughts.

I finally lay down my phone to eat dinner. When I returned to it, I saw the 228 Mississippi area code staring at me. I tried to return the call, which had come in minutes before at 8:36, but I heard only a fast busy signal. Over and over.

I called my brother to tell him Judi and Ron must be alive because they had phoned. When he didn't answer after a few rings, I hung up, thinking he might be on another call with my sister. No sooner had I hung up than my brother called back to say he had been talking to Judi and that she and Ron were okay. Immediately, I heard call waiting beep, and I took it. As I rushed outside for better reception, I heard, “Carolyn, it's Judi.”

“Oh, thank God.” I released all I'd been feeling in loud, uninhibited sobbing. “We're okay,” she said.

“I didn't know if you were dead or alive.”

Now she's crying. “Oh, you poor dear,” she comforted. “It must have been awful.” I liked being comforted by my sister; often these roles were reversed.

"We're alive and there's not much damage to the house," she reassured.

"Are you in your home now?"

"Yes, we are."

"How'd you get there?" I asked, envisioning downed power lines, storm surge, and destroyed roads. I was talking to air. The phone was dead.

The next morning, hearing the news about the scarcity of gas, I went out to fill our cars. While I was gone, my sister's daughter, Ginger, called from Baltimore. She told Art she had not heard from her parents since before the storm, when she had begged them to leave. She had been able to reach her brother, Blayne, who was okay though he feared his two rental houses in Gulfport had been flooded. She and I then began to pass each bit of information back and forth. Occasionally, Ginger heard news from her brother, and I passed news to my brother. Though my thirty-year-old niece and I had rarely spoken on the phone and almost never saw each other any more, we quickly fell into operating as a team.

Tuesday morning, my sister phoned again. I told her we would wire her money . . . and the phone died. She called back to give me her account number. They shouldn't have to worry about money at a time like this, my brother and I had decided, pooling our resources. The situation was reminiscent of 1982, when my younger brother died in an airplane on his way to visit me. Then, my brother Art and I talked constantly, waiting for news of whether Rex was alive (Ellis, 1993) and planning each step of the way.

After wiring the money, I wondered what would happen to it. Was the bank in Biloxi still there? Did the computers still work? Would the bank open? Would ATMs work? How would my sister get to the bank to get the money? When I called the Credit Union the next day with my concerns, an employee said, "Yes, we wondered all these things when you called yesterday. Let me ask my supervisor." When the employee came back to the phone, she suggested I call back to ensure the money was not returned to my account.

"Might it disappear into cyberspace?" I asked.

"Are there other branches of the bank?" I said I thought there were. "Well, then that won't happen," she replied, but I wasn't convinced and I wasn't sure she was either.

It would be days before the bank opened, and more than a week before my sister would be able to get money from her ATM. In the meantime, she borrowed money from neighbors since she had no cash, and Ron stood in line for gas—one time getting seven gallons and several times none. They bought a generator on Wednesday at a Home Depot, but they had no gas to fill it. Their fifteen and half-year-old dog suffered from lack of air conditioning, and they feared he might die. They reported seeing dead bodies and sewage in the street and fearing diseases and looting. Along with the top news stories on TV, what I heard made me realize the fragility of our infrastructure and social system. At the same time, Ron and Judi also validated stories I had heard of people risking their lives to help each other and communities of local support forming to help with the necessities of life.

For a while, I was one of the few people Judi and Ron could reach, though their calls were short and sporadic. They couldn't call anyone locally, including their son and, for a while, could not reach their daughter or my brother. None of us could call them, so we called each other. I spent hours a day on the phone passing messages between family members, offering advice, and soothing feelings. When Judi and Ron finally made it to their son's house, tempers erupted when my nephew insisted they help peel paint and tear drywall off his water-soaked walls while they thought the house was beyond saving. Over the phone, Ginger accused her brother of concentrating on his own water-sogged possessions rather than helping their parents by checking on them and sharing the gas he had. Blayne unloaded all his frustration onto his sister, frustration that came from sleeping for two nights in his truck in front of one of his Gulfport homes, a rifle by his side, daring anyone to loot his possessions drying on the grass and worrying that he might be ruined financially.

Ron and Judi continued voicing that they wanted nothing more than to leave Biloxi. But they continued to stay. Trying to understand why they had stayed during the hurricane and what held them in Biloxi now, I thought about their history with hurricanes. Before he met Judi, Ron had stayed in his childhood home in Gulfport in 1969 during Camille, a Category 5 storm. Both Ron and Judi had stayed in their current home in 1998, when it was flooded during Hurricane Georges, a Category 1 storm. Having few resources and no flood insurance, they did not immediately repair their house afterward, though they did purchase flood insurance. In 2001, they moved to Virginia to take care of my mother during her last year of life, and then they continued to live in her house until a few months prior to Katrina, when they moved themselves, their possessions, and all my mother's possessions back to Biloxi. They had bricked their home, put in new floors, cabinets, appliances, windows, and doors. No wonder they didn't want to leave now.

I told them to go to our second home in the North Carolina mountains. They said they would, but they continued to give reasons for not leaving: The roads were closed or blocked, they needed to protect their possessions or cover their damaged roof, or they couldn't get enough gas. If you didn't have gas, you had no way to get out to get any. Once my nephew brought them gas from Alabama, they finally got out, eleven days after the hurricane struck.

Emotions ran deep. From deep love and concern that everyone was safe, to anger, resentment, and blame about what hadn't been done, wasn't being done, or what should be being done differently. And as with other families in this tragedy, many connections were forged, reformed, and deepened. My brother and I were reminded of how much we could depend on each other, my partner Art was an oasis of strength, I got closer to my sister's children than I had ever been before, and they to me. I felt as much love for my family as I've ever felt and empathy I didn't know I was capable of feeling. Even while some members fought with each other, our family formed a community of support focused on our loved ones in

Biloxi, an exemplar of the kind of communities that can arise from the ruins of disaster and become the “grounds for connection and joy” (Solnit, 2005, p. 33).

Judi and Ron felt they were among the “lucky” ones. Though we would find out several weeks later that a storage shed, which contained all my mother’s possessions, had been flooded and the contents ruined, they were fortunate that their house and possessions weren’t destroyed. They also were fortunate to have support inside and outside their community, including family members with resources and available places to which to escape, such as second homes.

Not everyone was so lucky. That I could see on the television, which I watched whenever I wasn’t on the phone or in class. Art and I were glued to our big-screen plasma TV in the comfort of our 3,000-square-foot home, cooled by not one but three air conditioners, content in the knowledge that we had full tanks of gasoline in our three gas-guzzling cars. We could not believe what we were seeing: Black faces being herded into the Superdome, Black faces on top of buildings waving for help, Black faces holding babies and screaming into the camera for somebody to do something, Black faces searching for food and water, Black faces carrying out food and diapers—and occasionally TVs—from broken-into stores. We saw poor and sick people dying, local officials pleading and crying, and spokespeople for the federal government claiming “help is on the way,” while they continued with vacations and shopping sprees. What did it mean that help was on the way five days after this tragedy? When things didn’t get better, the blame and finger-pointing began, then the antiblame forces joined in, some well meaning and others seizing the opportunity for political gain on one side or the other. At the same time, people were dying, losing each other, hanging on, losing hope, and taking it out on each other.

America was being put to the test.

I also felt put to the test. Art and I talked constantly of responding, doing something. We wanted to go to New Orleans to help, but we felt we couldn’t leave our jobs. We talked of taking in a family, but the inconveniences seemed insurmountable. When we thought of rescuing abandoned animals in New Orleans, I looked up Web sites of animal rescue groups and got information but didn’t follow through. When we sent money—lots of it—to charities that would help, we felt dissatisfied that we hadn’t done enough. A cartoon in the *New York Times* showed, on one side, people donating money, titled “The Big Easy”; on the other, it showed people doing hands-on assistance in New Orleans, titled “The Big Hard.” The cartoon hit a nerve.

And now again, I am being put to a test, this time by a cat, who also has hit a nerve. Suddenly who I can claim to be is intricately tied to how I handle what has befallen me.

Maybe I should have bundled up the cat and taken it to a vet. I didn’t. But I do again try to make contact with the renters across the street. Just the week before, I had met the two men and a woman who had moved there a few months

before. They had given me a business card with their phone number. The card. Oh yes, the card. Where is it? I hunt frantically through the junk on the kitchen counter until I find the air conditioning service card.

"Hello," I say, "this is your neighbor. I think one of your cats has gotten run over. It's still alive but looks seriously injured. The back end is crushed. I've called Animal Services."

"Neighbor?"

"Yes, you know. The one across the street. You gave me your card."

"Oh, yes. Well ah, that's too bad. Well, then, just let Animal Services put it down."

"But maybe it could live," I say.

"Didn't you say it had gotten crushed?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure Animal Services will come. They haven't called back yet."

"If the cat's still there when I get home tonight, I'll take it to the vet and have it put down. Hey, I appreciate your calling. I've been trying not to have to take these cats to the pound because I don't want them to be put down. But if they're going to get run over, then I guess I'll have to."

I don't know how to respond, so I say "good-bye." The land phone dangles from my hand. I breathe deeply. These "neighbors" have a dozen cats, including two litters of two-month-old kittens. Cats run all over the neighborhood. My dogs bark at them, and the noise disturbs my work. Damn cats. I sound like the officials who at first blamed the people in New Orleans for not evacuating when they didn't have cars or public transportation. None of this is the cat's fault.

Whose fault is it? According to another neighbor, the renters had "rescued" a few cats that had mated and then produced two litters. I don't know this family's story, I tell myself. Maybe they are poor, without the resources I have. But they have jobs, I think, fingering the air conditioning business card. At least they were trying to help the cats, and few people do anything about the overpopulation of stray animals, I argue back. True, but their idea of rescue is like the officials' rescue of the poor Black people in New Orleans, who were "plucked" off rooftops, then left to fend for themselves on I-10, or "housed" in the Superdome without adequate food and water, where many died.

If they weren't going to care for the cats, they shouldn't have taken them. They should have had the cats spayed. They should keep the cats inside. *Shoulds*. What good are *shoulds* and blaming? This cat is dying now, and I have to figure out what to do.

The next day, one of the renters will come over and inquire about the cat. He will ask me about identifying marks and say that, indeed, one of his cats is missing. He will tell me the missing cat was named Opossum and that it was his brother's favorite. I will see concern in his face. "All the cats have names," he will say. That he cared enough to name the cats will make me feel they meant something to him, and I will feel better. I will make him face the gory details of the cat's demise. He will have tears in his eyes and grimace. He will confirm the story of rescuing the cats and the unexpected pregnancies. I will quiz him on what he's

going to do with the cats. He will say that two people have said they were coming to take a cat but then they didn't come. I will tell him to take the kittens to some public places, such as the parking lots of grocery stores, while they're young, and surely someone will take them. He will promise to try to find them homes. He will tell me he is an animal lover and that he saves turtles crossing the road. I will mostly believe him and decide he is not such a bad person after all. Then, I will wonder if he's just saying these things and really doesn't care at all. I will say I would like to take a cat. I will not believe what I say, and I will follow immediately with excuses about why I can't. I would have to keep it outside, and that's where the danger is, I begin. I will hope my message is not too subtle.

Months later, the cats will still play in the road, and I will consider taking them to the grocery store myself. But I will not follow through.

I hang up the dangling land phone, grab my cell phone, and return to the cat that has now crawled under our palm tree. As I again face its desperation, my cell phone rings and the woman at Animal Services takes down my location. I say, "I talked to the neighbor across the street, and he said to just let Animal Services take it."

"Oh, is this an owned cat?" she asks, as though she has found me out.

Fearing that with this information Animal Services might not come for the cat, I call on all my performance skills, exclaiming in an exasperated tone, "I don't know whose cat it is. There are cats all over the neighborhood."

Silence. Then, "Well, if you're sure then, give me your location and someone will be out to get the cat." I am relieved they are coming.

I pull vines with a vengeance, raging against pain and death. Then, I sit beside the cat, but I can stand its agony only so long. I pour more water on the maggots. Back and forth, in the house, to the cat, back to the vines. What kind of person am I? How would I have reacted if I had been in New Orleans? I guess I could be a lot worse. Where's the person who ran over the cat? Where are its "owners"?

Someone should be with the cat in its last moments. I speak my final words to the cat. "Someone's coming to get you. It's going to be okay. Help is on the way." I speak lies.

The next day while watching TV, I will be reminded of how such lies function in times of disaster. Aaron Broussard, the president of Jefferson Parish, sobs on *Meet the Press* with Tim Russert (Fischer, 2005):

The guy who runs this building I'm in, emergency management, he's responsible for everything. His mother was trapped in St. Bernard nursing home, and every day, she called him and said, "Are you coming, son? Is somebody coming?" And he said, "Yeah, Mama, somebody's coming to get you."

"Somebody's coming to get you on Tuesday. Somebody's coming to get you on Wednesday. Somebody's coming to get you on Thursday. Somebody's coming to get you on Friday." And she drowned Friday night. She drowned Friday night.

Nobody's coming to get us. Nobody's coming to get us. The secretary has promised. Everybody's promised.

They've had press conferences. I'm sick of the press conferences. For God sakes, shut up and send us somebody.

For the cat, I am that somebody. Am I doing the best I can, or have I depended too much on others to solve my problems?

I wave as a white van, with Animal Services in small letters stenciled on the door, drives by. The driver circles our cul de sac before stopping in front of my house. A heavy-set Black man gets out carrying a long rod with a rope hanging on the end.

"Is that the cat?" he asks gently.

"Yes. Do you know what will happen to it?"

"I'll take it to Florida Vets, an emergency center, and see what they say."

My hope is renewed. The cat has a chance.

"There are cats everywhere in this neighborhood," I say, wanting him to do something yet not wanting to be the person who gets her neighbors in trouble. I wave toward the cat house, but there isn't an animal in sight.

"I know. I've been to this street before," he says. "I wasn't lost when I circled the street. I was checking to see if I was picking up one cat or a dozen."

When he approaches the cat, it meows and looks up eagerly. "The cat really wants to live," I say, trying hard to convince the man. He smiles and gently puts the loop around the cat's body, drawing it tight. The rope reminds me of a noose, and I almost cry out. I worry the noose is hurting the cat; I see it as a symbol of the cat's demise. The man carries the cat to the back of the van, its back legs and back end now hanging limply from the loop. Like trash, I think, flashing back to the dead who were left on the flooded streets in New Orleans.

"There are maggots all over him," I say. "What does that mean?" I fear the cat was run over a long time ago and nobody noticed. If that's true, then I can legitimately rage at my neighbors.

"That happens," the man from Animal Services says. "The maggots come quickly. You might not believe this, but they're cleaning out the wounds." Perhaps they should use maggots to clean up New Orleans, I think.

I watch the cat being put in one of the dozen or more crates in the back of the van. It no longer tries to communicate with me. I think of telling the man that I'll take it, care for it, but I say nothing. "We'll probably have to put him down," the man says after seeing the extent of the damage.

I nod. "He's really hurt badly, isn't he?" The man nods and I feel vindicated. But I cannot get rid of the thought that I might have been able to save the cat. Was there another option?

He nods and sighs. I put my hand on his shoulder and say, "This is a hard job you have. Thanks so much." Thankful the cat's misery will cease, I'm temporarily relieved he has taken my burden from me. He nods, then gets into the truck and drives off.

I pull vines, weeping with each pull. My lament differs from the uninhibited short burst of imagined grief and then relief I expressed when my sister called and I knew she and her husband were alive. My cries of agony have come now to live in my body, and the relief I felt momentarily from having my burden taken from

me has receded. I mourn out of empathy for all the people and animals affected by Hurricane Katrina, for all the stray cats left to die, for all those treated as expendable in our society.

Disaster shakes me loose from ordinary time and ruptures the routine of everyday life (see Fritz, 1996; Solnit, 2005). The freedom of not filling myself with thoughts and concerns of the past and the future allows me—indeed demands me—to be fully present in the immediacy of trauma, immersed in the images and emotionality of the moment. I allow myself to be thrust into the pain of the middle-aged Black man on CNN and Opossum, the cat who had a name but not a future. In these moments, I experience the passion of being, caring, and belonging, feelings made more intense by an acute awareness that one minute a life makes sense—you have a plan, projects, a schedule; the next, no-things, no-body, no-place.

Having been immersed in ruptured experience leads me to ask now in ordinary time: Did I do all I could? Have we done what we should? Against the backdrop of loss, blame, and disaster, how do we create a hopeful future?

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