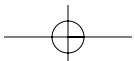
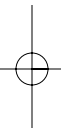


Fifty-Eight Days in the CAJUNDOME SHELTER



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Ann B. Dobie



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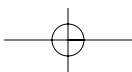
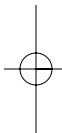
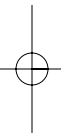
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*For all those who suffered and for those
who came to their aid in the aftermath of
Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita*



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Introduction

Those of us who have lived on the Gulf Coast for a few years know about hurricanes. We know the drill. First there is mention on the nightly weather forecast of a tropical depression miles away, and you hope that it will dissipate. A few days later it is renamed a tropical storm, and you rationalize that it is too far away somewhere in the Atlantic for it to be threatening to your home. Then as it crosses Cuba, slides around or over Florida, and moves into the Gulf, you pull out the hurricane chart you picked up from the television station and start marking the coordinates. Once it has been officially designated as a hurricane, you think about leaving, but still unsure about where landfall will be, you wait. You listen to the news. You mark the new coordinates. The storm begins to turn northward, and you check on the flashlight and radio batteries and make a grocery run to buy water along with canned tuna, soup, and chili. While it inches towards landfall, you watch with growing anxiety as the red ball on the television screen grows like an inflating balloon that covers the entire Gulf. You mark the new coordinates on the chart and see that the hurricane is taking aim on where you live. It is time to pack the freezer with bags of ice, put all the outdoor furniture

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away, and make sure the electric generator still works. You watch it begin to rain. The line of dots on the chart has met the land just where you are.

At the point of convergence, stage two of the experience begins. It is the essential story of the storm itself—the wind, the rain, the noise, falling trees, flooding, loss of power, darkness, and heat. Everyone has heard it and seen it. Television reporters include their viewers in the experience by going out in the tumult to demonstrate the strength of the wind—or their own foolishness. Their Eddie Bauer jackets whip around them as they show viewers the difficulty of standing up against the gale. They shield their eyes from the rain that lands like bullets on their faces. This is the hurricane itself, and at that point there is nothing more to be done.

In many ways, stage three of the hurricane experience, the aftermath, is the hardest. Certainly it is the longest. The process of preparation gives a person a sense of control over the gigantic force of nature bearing down, a sense of taking action that will diminish the threat of harm and destruction. In contrast, the experience of the storm itself is characterized by fear and helplessness. Instead of feeling in control, when the hurricane arrives, the storm victim knows that all one can do is wait. Watch, listen, wait. Neither of the first two phases of the hurricane experience demands the strength that the third requires. Although less reported by the press, and less noticed by the public, the efforts to recover are painful and enduring. The physical and emotional damage caused by the hurricane's crippling power can take years to repair. In some ways, the scars never disappear.

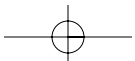
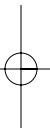
When Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana and then

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Mississippi on August 29, 2005, the destruction was vast. It swept away whole communities that are yet to begin rebuilding. A year later, jury trials in New Orleans had not resumed. Only three weeks and a few days after Katrina, Hurricane Rita ravaged the southwestern coastal parishes of Louisiana, leaving even more people without homes and functioning towns. Families that had lived in one place for generations were scattered across the country. It is not too much to say that every social institution and every person in the storm-damaged areas was touched and changed by Katrina and Rita.

For almost seven weeks, the staff of the Cajundome—a sports and entertainment arena in Lafayette, Louisiana—local volunteers, representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the American Red Cross tried to cope with stage three, the aftermath of two major storms, Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. They struggled to create a livable community for people who had lost their homes, family members, and treasured personal possessions. More than 18,000 evacuees landed there, some of them having gone through horrendous experiences during and after the storms, many of them ill, and all of them needy. It was a gigantic effort at problem solving that went on for fifty-eight days. This is the story in all its complexity—its moments of transcendent human kindness and its incidents of malice, the selfless human gestures and the selfish, the noble and the base.

All names of evacuees in the stories found in this book are fictional, although their stories are real.



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