I Take Back Everything I Said About Southwest Louisiana

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Body

My hometown may be soul-crushing, but it didn't deserve this.

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When Hurricane Laura's destruction fell off the front pages of national newspapers within 48 hours, my people in Southwest Louisiana felt more than a little bit peeved. The narrative of the storm that "passed quickly" and "was not as bad as it could have been," doesn't reflect what's happening there: the many weeks without power or potable running water in heat that has reached into the 100s, the barely functional hospitals and indefinitely closed schools. The damage everywhere, exhaustingly catastrophic, numbing in its ubiquity, mile after mile.

Granted, natural disasters disappear from the headlines faster than most other issues. It's true that Laura didn't inflict the dramatic storm surge that Katrina did in 2005. And let's be honest, Lake Charles, which suffered the brunt of the storm, isn't easy to love.

It's a petrochemical town on a "working coast," and like the wetlands it sits on, it gets the job done but isn't much to look at. Sprawling big-box stores, strip malls and parking lots, car dealerships, mobile home parks, pipe yards, fast food franchises. All those chemical plants, too, turning petroleum into ingredients for your shampoo, disinfectants, milk cartons, pharmaceuticals, adhesives, toys, shoes, furniture, electronics. And the poison those plants belch into the air and lakes and bayous — in which we swim, from which we eat.

In some ways, Southwest Louisiana is exactly what you think it is. Lake Charles is the kind of place where a committee of mostly white officials can vote to keep a Confederate monument on the courthouse lawn (until Hurricane Laura blew it down) despite the fact thatmore than half of the city's population is Black or brown. Itsschools andneighborhoods are deeply segregated. When my friend Ellen's family — who are Chinese-American — bought a house in a white neighborhood in 1980, their housewarming gift was a dead cat on the doorstep. Almost a quarter of the city's population of 78,000 lives below the poverty line. In 2016, the metro area voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump and almost certainly will again.

For every resident who says, in the wake of this disaster, "We're one community, we look after each other," there's another one grumbling that "media attention right now is all on North Lake Charles" (local code for the Black community) and shaking their heads about people "lining up for free stuff."

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And through all this, they just will not wear their goddamned masks.

Haven't there been moments when I've thought, like a child wishing her mother dead: Let a hurricane wipe Lake Charles off the map! Good riddance!

But now, my God, I take it all back. I love Southwest Louisiana in all its exasperating, hardheaded, soul-crushing glory. Because here's what else the place is:

It's the house my mawmaw and pawpaw built alongside our Cajun neighbors with whom we traded squirrels for electrical work, figs for rosary blessings. It's the Landrys, Joyce and Dan, who told my mother, unmarried and pregnant at 21, "If your mama and daddy kick you out, chère, cross the street and stay with us." It's the image of Joyce and Dan — now elderly, unable to evacuate — bedded down together in a hallway closet, their son crouching just outside the door, praying in the dark that the screaming winds wouldn't bring the house down around them.

It's my favorite, most punk-rock cousin, Dyann, and her unflappable good humor when she saw the limb that crashed through the roof of her house. "I always wanted an outdoor kitchen," she said, "but I thought I'd have an indoor kitchen at the same time."

It's Ellen and her family with their grocery store in North Lake Charles, finding more community among their Black neighbors than among their white ones. Even so, after my mother lost her job at a pipe-and-supply warehouse when I was a kid, they had the grace to tell us, more than once: "Come to the store. Take whatever you need."

It's another friend, Jeremy Boudreaux — a drummer who survived Stage 3 Hodgkin's lymphoma and now, 10 years later, runs the Village Music School. He posted photos on Facebook of his ruined business the day after the storm, roof gone, instruments buried under ceiling tiles and insulation. "My Pawpaw didn't say a thousand Hail Marys when I was doing chemo for me to lay down when times got hard again," he wrote.

Much of Southwest Louisiana is still uninhabitable. Its 200,000 residents are clearing fallen trees and power lines, tarping their roofs, scrambling for water to drink and food to eat and hotel vouchers and gas to get there. They're filling out applications for FEMA aid and wading through the mud of insurance claims.

The high-drama images, the "disaster porn" — a casino boat lodged under the rickety I-10 bridge, toxic smoke pluming from a petrochemical plant, the fallen Confederate monument, a "skyscraper" (I mean, there's really just the one) shredded by the gale — they don't capture the real devastation, its pervasiveness and likely longevity.

I know you're tired. We're all tired. Every one of us is suffering our own losses, of every size and kind. This storm was, asone hurricane researcher said, "really, really bad instead of apocalyptic," and in a year like this one, apocalyptic seems to be the threshold for newsworthiness.

Even in an ordinary year, an extraordinary hurricane holds this country's attention for only so long. Two whole years after Hurricane Maria cut its brutal path through Puerto Rico in 2017, tens of thousands of survivors were "still living under leaky tarps," The Times reported.

Distance — geographic and political — makes it easy to forget about these places. But please put aside some space to remember that hurricane victims are suffering. We need public pressure on insurance companies and government agencies (I'm looking at you, FEMA) to offer help in a timely fashion.

We need to know that our fellow citizens are rooting for us, and that compassion can reach even as far as a difficult-to-love place like Southwest Louisiana.

Stephanie Soileau is the author of the story collection "Last One Out Shut Off the Lights."

PHOTO: Downed trees surround the Bilbo Cemetery on the banks of the Calcasieu River in Lake Charles, La. (PHOTOGRAPH BY William Widmer for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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