

PROLOGUE

Our talk drained rather quickly off into silence and we lay thinking, analyzing, remembering, in the human and artist's sense praying, chiefly over matters of the present and of that immediate past which was part of the present; and each of these matters had in that time the extreme clearness, and edge, and honor, which I shall now try to give you; until at length we too fell asleep.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

I began writing the pieces that comprise this book out of a sense of urgency, compelled by seeing my adopted home crumbling into the rising water that followed Hurricane Katrina while the rest of the country looked on dumbfounded, believing that the horrifying things appearing on their televisions were aberrations, uncharacteristic of either our country or New Orleans. Each time I heard someone exclaim in shock at the city's resemblance to a "third-world country," I needed to respond that the city had long displayed such signs to anyone who cared to look at them. Indeed, those things that appeared aberrational in the days after Hurri-

cane Katrina not only were obvious on the surface of life in New Orleans before the storm, but remain obvious in cities, towns, and rural outposts throughout the country where people live in poverty. Nonetheless, the faces of those people are nearly invisible in our political and cultural landscape.

This book presents the stories of my friends, colleagues, neighbors, and fellow New Orleanians. Their individual stories are sad, maddening, and ennobling in turn, representing the dignity of human beings even under the most adverse circumstances. These stories also reflect bigger truths about the pressing issues of our day. The issues that will define us to future generations—the consequences of conservative governance, our continuing national struggle to confront issues of race and poverty, environmental disregard, mass incarceration, immigration, and the “war on terror”—appeared in New Orleans as magnifications of the thousands of instances in which these matters arise in daily American life. In this regard, the story of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina is, even though it may be hard to accept, the story of America at the beginning of a new millennium. Though we see ourselves as leaders in the world and attempt to spread abroad our ethics of democracy and equality, though we celebrate the supposed “victory” of the civil rights struggle with various holidays each year, we face many of the same grave obstacles to human and civil rights that we condemn in other countries and regret in our own past. These shortcomings were made plain by Hurricane Katrina’s landfall and its consequences in New Orleans.

The book also presents my own story: evacuating my home; anxiously awaiting news while living off the charity of friends and family; returning home to New Orleans, a city I love, to rebuild my home and continue my work as a lawyer, representing men on

Louisiana's death row. Although I was reluctant to write about myself, to make the story of the country's biggest natural disaster all about me, I began to see the bigger history of Hurricane Katrina reflected in my own story, and I began to see the human impact of the storm in the lives of my friends and neighbors. For those of us who lived in New Orleans in the year following the storm, it came as no surprise to read headlines like "A Legacy of the Storm: Depression and Suicide" or "Post-Katrina Depression Triples Suicide Rate in New Orleans."¹ Post-Katrina New Orleans hasn't been an easy place to live, it hasn't been an easy place to be in love, it hasn't been an easy place to take care of yourself or see the bright side of things. For that reason, let me offer this disclaimer: I am neither a journalist nor a historian and I haven't endeavored to tell this story in a manner that attempts impersonal detachment. No more or less than anyone else who lived here, I am part of the story of New Orleans.

Over the five years that I have lived here, my friends and family have continually asked me when I was moving back home to New York, where I am originally from and where most of them live. Though it was meant lovingly, I hated the question. Why would they assume that everyone needs to return to New York eventually? Why didn't they understand that I live here and that *this* is my home? Perhaps I was angry at their presumption because I was never too sure that I actually did live here, that I could become a New Orleanian, and their doubts merely confirmed my own uncertainty. Now that I have moved back to this city on the brink of ruin and doubled down with my home and life here, however, there can no longer be any room for doubt. As much as I can be, I am now from here. No one asks me anymore when I am coming home to New York. New Orleans is my home, and it matters to me enormously that I get our story right.

