

## Do Over

Moira Crone

Lila McHenry might listen to the Mayor of New Orleans, but she refused to obey him.

*“Folks may feel re-traumatized. Signs of trouble include inability to finish tasks, make simple decisions. Offer to help. Make a plan. And leave early.”* On TV, he was pleading with people in advance of Hurricane Gustav. It was August, 2008.

The screen’s scene switched: the indigent, the old, the sick were getting plastic name bracelets at the train station, soon to be hauled away by Amtrak. The governor called the exodus, *“Well under control.”* None of 2005’s mistakes. Lila was happy to see it, though she had made her decision. This was hype.

For Katrina, it was different: she’d experienced true dread. William, her ex-husband, refused to hear her until the very last minute. And then, he hardly packed, insisted their part of town didn’t flood, they’d be back in days. The trip was awful: clogged highways, filthy rest stops. They slept in twenty two different places over a fifty day exile—never again.

Even worse: the desolate evening they drove in past National Guard tanks to see their ruined, water-logged house. They slept in one of the drier upstairs rooms, but at daybreak, Lila woke unable to breathe. It was another hell, trying to find a doctor. The mold brought her childhood asthma back. She had to flee.

Once she arrived at her brother’s in Massachusetts, her wheezing cleared. After months on the road, she slept for a week. When she finally got out of bed, she discovered the charm of being alone. Her brother, a pilot, was never around.

She liked not having anybody telling her what to do, her

husband's specialty. She liked not having a job, rethinking all that. She liked not fighting, for they fought constantly on the road. Katrina scrambled her life, left things exposed.

"Give me a break, going Garbo on me, honey?" William said when she suggested they separate. "Katrina divorces are such a cliché. It's not that bad here. You don't *really* want to be alone."

"You don't know what I want," she said. "I know you better than you know yourself."

In the end, her brother's lawyer wrote the letter.

Her mother died after a long illness when Lila was a teenager; her father drank himself into a black hole after. She left for college in New Orleans—as far away from Boston as she could get. William was her drawing teacher when she was nineteen. She'd had a crush. He seemed exciting. Three years later, he came up to her at a gallery. "Excuse me, beautiful? Weren't you in my class when you were even littler? That *Lila*?" People usually called her "petite," "piquant," sometimes "scrawny," rarely "beautiful." In no time, she was in his loft—lured to the nest of a bowerbird—his sculptures, his big, semi-amazing messes, his towers of shiny objects. Three days later, he said, "We go perfect." She was incredibly flattered.

Her girlfriend said, "Mr. Bickham? The artist? You'll be his wife? How cool is that?"

And it was in a way. She walked right into his bohemian existence—and sort of disappeared she felt now.

The divorce went through the second spring after the hurricane. She didn't think she'd return to New Orleans, but then she got a job online with a new charter school in the city. When she ran into him downtown, William said he would have done anything to keep her. He had once been handsome for a big man, and very proud. That night, though, he seemed exhausted, needy, wrecked.

"It's not me you need," she stood up for herself. "It's me-in-your-life." But she felt selfish, guilty, a little cruel. "What is the difference?"

For a moment, she wasn't sure. He still had that effect on her.

"Some shrink in Boston told you to leave me, right?"

How did he know? The therapist had said, "We have to sort out the current crisis from the old losses it stirred up. Your feelings now are like an echo, copies of an original." And slowly, carefully, they started the process—going back, peeling away layers. Before she left Massachusetts, she made one decision: To live that limbo where you test yourself, find out what scares you. She'd skipped it when she was younger, rushed into William's arms.

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Around three, Lila went out on her porch. The city was too quiet. She hadn't expected so many empty driveways, so many houses boarded up.

To Lila's relief, Alice from across the street appeared in Capri pants, holding a beer: "I saw the Weather Insider website. We're cool. The rest on this block are scaredy cats."

Alice's son Julian wandered in barefoot. On his laptop he pulled up "the cone of uncertainty," the long funnel that indicated possible storm paths. Alice said, "Wasn't it closer to us before honey?"

"No, momma," he said. "This morning, it was farther away."

"I'm still not going through all that. For what?" Alice said. "You staying too, right Lila?"

Lila confirmed. Upon leaving an hour later, Alice added without any nod to her contradiction, "If things get bad, come to Memphis with us."

Something inside Lila's chest did a small, discreet flip, and then flipped back.

At five, Alice called again: "The cone has us, babes. Memphis, I'm afraid. Come." "It's still just a category two, right?" Lila said. She wasn't changing her mind. She wasn't.

"For now," Alice said. "I mean it. Come with us. Follow in your car. You don't want to be on the road alone, later, nowhere to go."

Alice was headed to her mother's cramped house, which she'd described in great and awful detail in the past. Lila would be on a couch in the TV room full of ashtrays, the only guest not part of the extended family. She'd been a refugee before. She told Alice, "I'll be fine here. Really, I will." But when she watched her favorite neighbor pull out two hours later, she had more than a few doubts.

She went out for a walk about nine to see if anybody was around. After many empty blocks, she came upon a lone green station wagon. Tarps on the roof covered coolers. Three children snuggled in the backseat, already sleeping. Extra gas cans, ruby red and glowing in the night, were tied on the back bumper. The father came out, said, "Goodbye," to Lila, and suddenly as he pulled away, she was ambushed by fear. It was as if she were suddenly the last woman in New Orleans.

What happened next seemed uncanny: an old red truck turned off St. Charles Avenue and drove right to her, stopped. The driver rolled down his window. "You staying for the storm?"

"How are you here?" Lila said to William, her ex, whose house was miles away in the Bywater.

"Dropping off my keys at Luke's. You know Luke Ward on Constantinople? The cop? He has to stay."

"So you are leaving?" she asked.

"Have you looked at the cone?"

"I saw," she said.

"I mean in the last half hour?"

"I was walking." She wondered if he could see the look on her face. She hoped it was too dark.

"Well, it's coming. It could overtop the Mississippi levee. Get us good. Mayor's been saying it's the 'Mother of all Storms.'"

"You believe him?" her voice was faint.

"Me in my attic: can't get the picture out of my mind. Early morning—won't be so crowded. The traffic is awful now. I got to clean up my fridge, clear the yard."

“Where are you going?”

“Friend of mine rented a three-bedroom in Pensacola for the weekend with friends, but he left for family in Arkansas. Gay couple there. I don’t know ’em. Two bedrooms vacant.”

“Two?” she said.

He stared at her. She could tell he wasn’t going to ask. She would have to. So she did.

He paused, looked over to the side, and down, gave himself a moment, then said, “Sure. Like, why not? The couple are friends of Jerry Jewel. Remember Jerry? I’ll tell ’em.”

“Thanks,” she said with great and unexpected relief. “I have my own car.”

“Well, yeah.” he nodded.

“Thanks, I appreciate—”

“Look, it’s okay. It’s fine. It’s a free room. It’s not like I don’t know you. Pulling out at four. I mean, we caravan?”

“Yeah,” she said, thinking how odd that seeing William could be lucky. “Till then. You know my house?”

He said he did.

So she had to go home to prepare her place for the worst—take things off the porch and the patio, empty her refrigerator, select pictures and favorite clothes for plastic tubs that floated. Her possessions were pared down after a hurricane, a flood, two moves, a divorce—but that made it harder, not easier. She hated not having any idea where she would be in three days, not knowing if this were the first act in a comedy or a tragedy.

Three-fifty in the morning, William stood on her porch in a rain slicker and cowboy boots clutching a road atlas and evacuation routes. He looked haggard, tense. She wondered what she was in for.

She said, “I thought you would have your girlfriend.” The second to last time she’d seen William, he’d been with a gap-toothed woman in a full skirt and braids.

“Amelie?” he said. “What was I going to do at Burning Man? I’m nearly fifty, remember?” he smiled. Lila knew right

then he wasn't going to give her a hard time. He'd try to be decent on this trip. He seemed humbler. She wondered if he'd gotten used to being left. There had been two others before Amelie she knew of. Maybe someone with a bit more backbone who could stand up to him. He seemed lonely. "Sides, I would have missed hurricane season and evacuating with you," he snorted.

What did he mean? "Look," she said.

"That was a joke," he snorted again. "Really."

She always thought his snorting was cocky before. Now it seemed lame.

He changed the subject, a good idea. "You watch on TV how they are doing everything right this time? Republicans talking about how much they care? Every homeless guy hauled off to bum fuck? They think it's like a do-over?"

"I had to turn it off," she said. They were still on the porch. She made no move.

"Well?" he finally asked.

A big step, letting him inside. He'd never been in her new place. He didn't sit. "On the way over, I started to think—the traffic for one thing. And Pensacola's in some trouble."

"But didn't you spend all night packing?" She was eager for resolve.

He looked around at her plastic tubs, seemed impressed. "So did you. But we are so late, like last time," he said.

"This isn't last time," she said. But she was thinking it was a little. She was accustomed to his scent, his size, how he talked, how he moved his big hands. She had the feeling of being surrounded. Also of being safe.

"I know. Believe me," he said.

She found that comment hard to read.

"What will you do if it's longer?" she asked, recalling how opposite they were in a crisis—she was shy, tentative, frozen, indecisive. He was adamant, ferocious. He had gained thirty pounds. She'd lost ten.

He shrugged, "Vermont?"

Lila didn't like the reference. In 2005, her cousin had

offered them a ski house for as long as they wanted. William said he couldn't be "taking vacations." He was more loyal to his roof, his sculpture studio, than his wife she felt.

"Look, Look, I'm just—I'm thankful. I am. But, like, I'm not up for—going back over—"

"Joke." He raised his two hands, "I know, I know. I'll shut up. A room in a condo in Pensacola. That was the whole offer. You want it? No historical references, how about that?" His mustache sank a bit into his bottom lip—he did that when he was really sorry. "Got essential papers? Insurance policies? Passport? Divorce certificate?" he asked.

She was glad he mentioned that last item.

He took a deep breath. "Inhaler?"

"I don't think I'll need it," she said. She didn't say her asthma had disappeared after she left him. "But I'll take it."

Outside, Lila was surprised by what he was hauling. The truck was loaded down with power tools, torches, scrap metal, three duffel bags. For Katrina, he took a knapsack. He gave her the address in Pensacola. She put her single, carefully packed suitcase in her Toyota and got in. They'd keep in touch by cell, meet at the condo if they were separated.

This was it.

Lila got queasy when she pulled out into the empty streets. Other than William's truck, there was nothing moving. On the highway, he called. The radio announced the interstate into Mississippi was closed to evacuees. Everybody had to drive north. He knew another way.

First exit, he went south to the old coast road. Lila followed. The traffic was light at first, but around the entrance to a state park, they came to a dead stop. Cars ahead as far as they could see. People got out, walked their dogs, waited. Were they being turned away? Someone said there was a one-lane drawbridge. The coast guard had ordered craft to inland harbors. It would be a while. Now and then, they climbed back in and crept along past fishing camps with twisted roofs from three years ago, a half-recovered neighborhood called Venetian Isles, beige stucco houses on

stilts. The pink tinge in the sky slowly became a full blown August day. They went over a few bridges that crossed narrower channels and finally approached the Rigolets Pass Bridge, over the waterway that led from the Gulf of Mexico to Lake Pontchartrain. Another stop. Lila got out this time and went to William's truck, said she was taking a little walk.

"Go for it," he said.

"You seem different," he said, when she came back. "Calmer."

"We weren't comparing," she said, but she was not as bothered as before.

"Innocent observation. And you never used to wear skirts."

"I knew not to wear pants when you might have to squat to." She grinned.

"I guess we learn," he said.

Around eleven-thirty, they made it into Mississippi. The first service station over the state line was swarming; queues wound out the doors—the old, the young, babes in arms, people in wheelchairs. A woman in white pants started screaming at Lila about the gas pump not taking her credit card, then left to complain to the cashier.

White pants returned, demanding Lila's pump, threatening her. Just as William got close to intervene, Lila stretched her own nozzle over to the woman's Honda, gave her ten gallons. The guy in line behind applauded.

When the woman was gone, William said, "That could have been ugly. You did good."

Lila said, "You seem surprised," though she was glad he'd seen her handle it. He always said she couldn't deal with things, she needed to be protected. In the next moment, however, she thought she should have gone with Alice. Anything with William was going to stir up everything else with William. She didn't want it.

On the Mississippi coast, the huge, rebuilt casinos dominated; they had the beach to themselves now—the cottages were still missing. One p.m. in Alabama, another full stop. They worked out a new route, but in the rolling

hills above Mobile among horse farms and subdivisions, they got completely lost. Lila called to tell him they should ask for directions, dreading his response, for he used to hate to do that. But he pulled over immediately into the empty lot of a church. A red-haired Baptist minister walked up between her Corolla and William's truck. "You all from New Orleans? Went to seminary there. Loved it. So sorry about what you been through."

They chatted, answered questions. How was the city?

"We are stronger," William said. "It was good for us."

"Your wife believe that?" he nodded over to Lila.

"Not married," William said before Lila could. "Old friends."

"Well good. Couples always fight on road trips."

"Don't I know it," William said.

Lila shook her head, laughed. Strange how this trip was easy, she had to admit.

The preacher gave them directions. Lila wrote everything down, thanked him, pulled into the lead. Forty minutes later at the Florida line, a mechanical voice broke in on the FM station: "*Attention Gustav evacuees. Do not stop. Tropical Storm conditions in the Pensacola area. Repeat, Hurricane Gustav threatens the Florida Panhandle. Keep driving.*" On the phone, they agreed to take back roads to avoid the state police, meet up at the condo.

Exhausted, Lila pulled up at the rental around six.

A three hour trip had taken fourteen. The place was concrete, raised up off the ground, a pink rock with windows. The other occupants, Richard and Neil, two lawyers in their forties, met her at the door in Hawaiian shirts.

"William Bickham get here? Big truck?" Lila had lost him hours back.

"Jewel's friend?" Neil, the shorter one, asked.

"I'm William's, who is Jewel's," she said. All this was familiar—depending on offers hosts might regret later, housekeeping with strangers. "He tell you I was coming?"

"We thought you decided against it. Some weather here,

you see. God, how many hours were you on the road?" He said Gustav was churning up the whole Gulf.

She told her story, leaving out that William was her ex. She liked them, they liked her. When Neil showed her the rooms, she picked the one with bunk beds and a sea view. They offered her a Bloody Mary—they were pretending this was an ordinary Labor Day weekend vacation. Later, they asked her come along to a Chinese restaurant—she said she would wait for her "friend."

When they left, she went out on the balcony, took a deep breath, and called William's cell—no answer.

If people had told her thirty six hours before that she would be on Pensacola Beach waiting for Hurricane Gustav and her ex-husband, she would have said they were crazy. But she had to allow that if you looked at the whole process step by step, it all made sense—except the part about how she felt.

Around eight, his truck.

"What happened?" she didn't conceal her concern.

"I stopped for one beer," he said. He looked sheepish, confused.

There had not been a single night in her married life when he'd chafed under her interrogation like a teenage boy. She didn't have the authority then. It was funny. "And?"

He paused and she saw his old charm. "I fell asleep in the car. Conked."

"Lord," she laughed.

"Can't do all nighters now," he shrugged.

She broiled the steaks from his cooler. He made a salad. They'd always cooked together well.

Dessert was a joint on the balcony. After several tokes and a long, long silence, he said, "You were right to leave me. I was an asshole. I know it now." He nodded his big head to emphasize.

It was all she had been thinking about, but she protested, "I believed we weren't going to go over—"

"Break the rule," he said.

“Okay. You didn’t get me, no, you didn’t. But I’m over it. Don’t berate yourself.”

He insisted on explaining. He had felt he was in a war after Katrina. Something kicked in. He thought he’d give way, everything would.

“We did,” Lila said. “We gave way.” She felt like she might cry.

“But why did we?” he asked.

“You know,” she said.

“Yes, but is that an absolute reason or a relative reason? I mean—”

“Absolute,” she said, but she turned away. She knew he could read her face. She pointed out how the Gulf was liquid pearl after the sun went down. And did he notice how fast the clouds were moving across the sky in the winds? He said yes, the scene was incredibly beautiful, and then he kissed her. As kisses go, it was sweet and not very demanding—not very William.

The strangest part: she reached up and held on, kissed him back hard.

“What was that?” he said, pulling away. “Lila?”

She only shrugged. She really didn’t know.

“Lila?” Disbelief.

She said truthfully, “I’m not sure. Sorry.” Something came over her, something in her wanted to hold him.

“Don’t have to be—”

“I think I am,” she said, and not long after, she found her room, closed the door, climbed in the bunk. Through her window’s thick glass, she watched the surf threaten to come over the road. She felt she was in a cocoon, a womb. Her mother used to tell her that when she was just born, she could have hidden Lila in a teacup.

Monday morning, she woke to cheering in the living room. Landfall was west of the city. New Orleans unscathed. So this was a comedy. Lila decided she should have trusted her first instinct, never left. But she had such a hard time trusting, being sure.

To avoid William's glances, she stared at CNN-Republicans in Minnesota at their convention, concerned about poor New Orleans. Richard said, "Tiny Tim Town. God Bless us everyone!" then threw his flip flops at the screen. Geraldo Rivera traipsed across the Ninth Ward holding a pinwheel, apparently praying the levees would break. Local news said the city had a schedule for allowing people back in. It would be a while before they could leave.

William was silent; so was Lila.

She looked outside. In daylight, it was easier to see where they were—the last building on a narrow strip between sea and sound. Across the way, the ocean sloshed under the houses. When it cleared for an hour, she went by herself to the little pool on the opposite side of the complex right at the edge of the bay—no beach on that side at all. A woman resident came out to walk her poodle. They chatted. She told Lila she got the condo in her divorce. "The road there," she went on. "See? It's closed. It used to lead to an old fort. But you can't drive there anymore. Hurricane Ivan split the island. All the buildings past here fell into the Gulf. This is the last one standing."

"Did you break up after Ivan?" Lila asked.

"What honey?"

"I mean, with your husband?"

"No." She shook her head. "It didn't have anything to do with the hurricane."

"Aren't you frightened to be living here?" Lila asked. "It's like you are out in the ocean."

The woman said, "Been through it all, I figure. So I know what I can take." She paused. "You said you live in New Orleans?"

The rain started up again but Lila couldn't go inside. She had to know what she'd say before she talked to William. She went past the state bathhouse and found the "CLOSED TO ALL TRAFFIC" sign.

The sun faded and parts of the huge sky melted into a single purple pool. The wind was so strong the rain drops

flattened like snowflakes. Rough, thick rollers from the Gulf and smaller, milder ones from the bay came together in a moving V that merged at the horizon. Ahead, a few figures marched on the submerged road, silhouettes in the swirling blue. At a place like this, Land's End on Cape Cod, Lila walked with her mother for hours at low tide once. When she was four, Lila knew exactly whom she loved.

Above her head, the sky kept changing, changing—huge gray fists opening to reveal bands of gold, clear patches. Lila climbed over the barricade, stepped on the sunken asphalt. She still couldn't decide what to say to William.

She was standing there, water swirling around her ankles, angry with herself. What did she really want? She thought she had figured a few things out in three years. But in truth, she wasn't certain of anything—not until William came upon her from behind, touched her, said, "You going to walk into the Gulf of Mexico, Lila? The Gulf of fucking Mexico? Or you coming back inside with me?"