



A Love Letter to the City of New Orleans

JESSICA B. SOROL

Dear NOLA,

It's August 29, 2018, and I'm thinking of you. I want to let you know that my dear Uncle Steven passed away last month in Boston from lung cancer. You certainly helped to maintain his positive, vibrant attitude to the very end. One of the last times I saw him, we took pictures wearing our matching BayouWear attire from the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Fest. We were sporting the Vintage Vinyl design with multicolored records printed on the fabric. A smiling photo from that day is framed in my home.

Steven loved visiting you for JazzFest, and you recently had the pleasure of his company. One of his final wishes was to bring his whole family, the loves of his life, to you, which he fulfilled just a couple weeks before he left us. You inspired Steven's philosophy: *Laissez les bons temps rouler*. He loved the music, the Bloody Marys, the cuisine, the people, and the spark.



I fell in love with you, NOLA, in 1992. Eight of us are gathered around a tropically decorated kitchen table. Robert, a family friend, is cooking up a seafood boil feast with fresh lobster and crawfish. He looks professorial with his dark, curly ponytail, is a professional photographer, and cycles outdoors in whatever conditions nature may throw his way.

Robert's wife, Irma, is drinking red wine with my parents, and they're all laughing. Their family home in the Lakeview area, where Irma grew up, is spacious, eclectic, and colorful. It has wooden

floors, and many black-and-white photos adorn the walls. Robert strictly tells his two children, my brother, and me, "Stay away from the pots and pans. I'm serious!" And he purposely keeps the handles sticking out to teach us not to get too close to the sizzling stove.

I'm nine years old, and my brother is five. Maddie, Robert and Irma's daughter, is also nine, and her younger brother, Charlie, is six. After dinner, the four of us quietly venture into the living room and make crafty picture frames and gossip about our parents. The saltwater smell wafts in the carefree air.

I see my first cockroach in their home that summer. Mom says, "This is one of the reasons I could never live in New Orleans, but I love visiting!" We all do. You are an endless stream of enchantment, and I relish going back to school in September to gush to my friends about this wild and fiery city I get to visit. I feel so special having friends who actually live here.

In those days, my family flew down every August from western Massachusetts to visit our friends, and of course we wanted to see you. Each year, we'd spend a few days at their house before driving east on the I-10 for a week together in Gulf Shores, Alabama. Then we'd all return to their home, to you, to soak up the last few days of our trip. It's always something to look forward to, and our families become a big warm extended family.

In 1992, our rented Gulf Shores oceanside house sits on stilts. Above the garage the sun blazes through a sparkling stained-glass window depicting a rainbow and Dorothy's ruby-red slippers. It's a coincidence that *The Wizard of Oz* is my favorite movie.

A few evenings in, we learn that Hurricane

Andrew is heading up the Gulf in our direction, and I'm frightened at the thought of a deluge. The local authorities and media are urging us to evacuate. Area businesses and neighbors are frantically boarding up their places. I've never seen such confusion. Robert blurts out to Mom: "How fast can you pack?" Mom stubbornly shakes her curly blond head of hair and replies, "This is my summer vacation. I'm not leaving."

So what do we do? We go swimming in the ocean with the highest tide I've ever seen. The water has a dangerous mind of its own, sweeping us further from shore than we've ever been, but we feel invincible. To this day, Mom reminds me how lucky we are that we didn't get pulled under as she clung to me in the otherworldly waves. The earth was our playground.

Fortunately, Andrew misses our beach by about two hundred miles. The next day we walk along the flooded shore. The pristine finest, whitest sand my family had ever seen is now gone. We dodge debris, logs, hypodermic needles, and dead fish that have washed up on the sand behind our rental house. "We were spared," Mom says. "We are so lucky."

A few days later, we come back to you, NOLA, and I feel safe again. Charlie and I become quite close during these times; there's a glow around us together. He's sensitive and kind. We play cards, watch movies, and sit next to each other at dinner. I think he always had a little crush on me. It's sweet and innocent, and I love getting attention from the boys. We visit the Audubon Zoo and see the rare albino alligators at the Aquarium of the Americas. We ask our parents to buy us matching hats and stuffed animals. I still treasure my hat, and I treasure Charlie.

Robert and Irma take us around your French Quarter by foot, and we stroll along your sweaty streets, savoring the sights and lively music. "What a treat this place is," I would say about you. It's so different from the small farming community where I'm growing up.

On several evenings our families sit and watch the nightly news together, and I sit next to Charlie. I tell him, "I think it's so cool that everything on TV is an hour earlier here than back home in New England." Time zones, even the news, seem fun when you're a kid on vacation.

NOLA, there are more family trips to you, but I'll fast forward to 2005—when the storm came. It's late September, about a month after Hurricane Katrina washes so much of you away. Robert, Irma, Maddie, and Charlie lose nearly everything—their home, Robert's photography studio, everything. All the recollections I have as a kid in their house are now just cherished memories. The times Robert took our family portraits in his spacious studio will never happen again.

Robert is temporarily staying at my parents' house in Massachusetts. In the late 1970s, Robert and Dad worked together for a regional alternative newspaper; Dad was an editor and Robert the staff photographer. They became fast friends and formed an unbreakable bond. All these years later, my parents have Robert's portraits of legendary trumpeter Percy Humphrey at Preservation Hall and French actor and mime Marcel Marceau hanging on their living room walls. Dad also has rare prints of many of Robert's iconic images, which he stashed away in Massachusetts when the two worked together—long before Katrina. Dad says his modest home is made beautiful by Robert's timeless concert photographs of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Taj Mahal, Pete Seeger, David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, and others. A handful not drowned.

So seeing Robert sitting in my parents' living room post-Katrina isn't surprising, but it's devastating. What is he going to do without his home or family or studio? What is he going to do without you?

You, NOLA, know Irma so well. You were always her home. Robert met Irma soon after moving there, and it wasn't long before they were dating, getting married, and starting their family. But now, Charlie and Maddie are with Irma and Irma's mother in Alabama. Suddenly, they're all nomads, quite literally homeless. How could this happen to you? How could it happen to all of these people?

Irma declares that she knew Katrina would take everything from their family. She's always been an intuitive old soul, with you beating deep in her heart. The night before the storm, a squirrel comes to Irma in a dream and tells her to go to

Robert's studio to collect all his computer hard drives containing thousands and thousands of photographic images. She does exactly that when she wakes up, and although he lost more than a million photos, she's the reason some of his work survived and exists today. Credit Irma, the psychic talking squirrel, and the indomitable spirit of your city where she grew up. Did you somehow warn her about the torrential rains coming and the real-life nightmare about to descend on you?

Together in the living room one evening, my parents, Robert, and I watch *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, and it's surreal. Filmed shortly before Robert's visit, journalist Kevin Tibbles is interviewing him. The news team had accompanied Robert to his photography studio when he first returned there after the storm. On our TV, we see them with axes as they break down the doors to Robert's still-flooded studio and experience the damage for the first time. It's a dark, disgusting, and disastrous swampland. Robert's first words, "Oh shit!" are just barely bleeped off the audio. His facial expression is blank yet horrified. It's shocking and tragically different than the times Charlie and I watched *Nightly News* as little kids in your Lakeview area. This was real, and they are the news. I, we, can hardly contain our tears.

Robert's visit to see us in the aftermath of Katrina is short-lived. He'd soon need to get back to work documenting, through his photographic art, the painfully slow recovery of his beloved city, of you, after the storm. Before he leaves, Robert, my parents, and I hang out late one night playing Bob Dylan records. *Planet Waves* is a favorite of Robert's and mine, and I recall listening to "Hazel" over and over while hugging Robert for the entire song, both of us crying quietly. During Robert's visit, we cook vegan spring rolls, listen to lots of sixties' music, go to cozy restaurants throughout the Pioneer Valley, and just talk. But what do you say to a man you love who has just lost everything?

Charlie soon joins us in Massachusetts. He tells me how his interest and knowledge of music really came from my dad, who once regularly sent his family new CDs. All of them gone now. I ask, "How could my dad have taught you about music when you live in New Orleans?" He looks at me, shrugs, and says nothing. That's how much

our families meant to each other. I sit close with Charlie on our cozy futon watching *Donnie Darko*, his film of choice almost every evening. Charlie isn't talking a lot, and I have no idea what to say to my friend who has lost so much.

A few months later, with Robert and Charlie back in Louisiana, Irma and Maddie come for an all too brief stay. Irma is in good spirits, at least as good as anyone could be at this point. But I have a feeling she isn't fully aware of the next round of turbulence about to hit her family; her marriage to Robert is fracturing in the aftermath of the storm. Irma doesn't want to leave her mother alone in Alabama for long, and she swears she never wants to go back to you, her hometown. It seems the rest of the family wants to go back, but only eventually. Once the ground is dry.

Mom visits Irma, living in Alabama, in May 2006, and they make a side trip to you, fully aware how overwhelmingly hard it's going to be. You're still soaked, and you smell putrid. Police are standing guard everywhere with menacing machine guns. Mom calls me and says, "My stomach is sinking, and my heart is aching." I feel so helpless. She says, "Robert took me to their old Lakeview home, and all that's left is a deteriorated, ceramic, white bathtub on their gutted land." Through tears she also tells me that Robert has an apartment near the Port and is seeing someone, a new flame. Irma and Robert's relationship is scorched beyond repair.

Sadly at this point, Robert's family is living in different places, and it's only a matter of time before he really is with this new girlfriend. Irma is in Alabama, and eventually Robert, after more than thirty years with you, relocates to North Carolina and remarries. Maddie is in Colorado, but Charlie is back to you after a lengthy stint in Baton Rouge. Katrina broke them all up, and they didn't just lose their home, they lost their family, and each other. They lost you. For a long time, Charlie, Irma, Maddie, and my mom won't talk to Robert. My dad's caught in the middle, and my brother and I don't know what to do.

When you hear or read about Katrina and what it did to you, the city, it's often discussed in terms of

numbers. This many people lost their homes, this many people died, this is what it cost Louisiana. According to CNN and FEMA, Katrina displaced more than one million people from the central Gulf Coast. Ultimately, more than eighteen hundred people died in the hurricane and subsequent floods. Total property damage is estimated at more than \$100 billion. But you, NOLA, are the people, the families; it's not just those numbers. And here are just four of those people, just one of those families.

I wish we could all be back on the white sands of Gulf Shores, splashing in oversized waves together. We'd be laughing and just a little scared, like in 1992, when even the threat of a hurricane couldn't pull us apart.



It took me more than a decade to eventually return to you, NOLA, and to see Charlie again. During the past few years, I've started a personal tradition of going to the New Orleans JazzFest. It wasn't supposed to start because of my ailing Uncle Steven, but that's what happened. You have a sneaky and mysterious way of getting me to come back.

In 2016, the rains are so torrential that the festival gets shut down on Saturday night after lightning strikes and the power goes out. Drenched through my tutu, tank top, and flimsy trash-bag poncho, braving the winds, and walking around ankle deep in my mud-soaked flip-flops, I still want more music. That's what you do to people. You bring out our red-hot passion.

Stevie Wonder comes on, the evening's last performer at the large Acura Stage, right after the lights and sound shut down across the fairgrounds. There's no electricity, [so he sings a verse, a cappella, of "Purple Rain"](#) (as Prince had recently passed away) through a megaphone. What a spectacular sight! But the ominous dark skies are ever present.

The soggy crowd of fifty thousand goes wild. Before Stevie gets led off the stage, he shouts out something to the effect of "God bless you New Orleans! I love you! I'll be back next year!" What an emotional, inspiring, life-changing moment for me here at your festival. But how do your locals

deal, so often, with such destructive weather? The people around me, from near and far, don't seem to care. Everyone wants more music, and their spirit is almost unbreakable. Stevie's words make me vow to return to JazzFest next year—and I do. The name Stevie, my uncle's nickname, too, is a charming coincidence. I appreciate all the joy you gave to my Uncle Steven, especially toward the end.

Charlie is doing well, and it's a small wonder to me that he still lives in you, and he likes it. I get to give him a big hug when I see him for brunch every April when we kick off JazzFest festivities. You're his home again, even though his family isn't there and it will never again be the way it was.

Many people questioned why we should want to rebuild you after Katrina, and Charlie is a perfect example of why and a perfect example of hope. As my hero, Anthony Bourdain, once said, "There is no other place on earth even remotely like New Orleans. Don't even try to compare it to anywhere else." And in chapter four of *Chronicles: Volume One*, Bob Dylan famously writes, "There are a lot of places I like, but I like New Orleans better."

It seems you, NOLA, were destined to be burned from the start of the storm, but you are still blazing, beautiful, and exciting to me, and the fire in my soul shines brightly for you. You now feel like an entirely different place than that wonderland where I used to vacation as a child, all those summers ago. Because you are.

My memories live on from those gleeful, breezy summer holidays from you to Gulf Shores and the house with the stained-glass window of a rainbow and Dorothy's ruby-red slippers. These flashbacks will forever transport me to some of the happiest days of my childhood and to a home away from home. Thank you for the tunes and thank you for the times, NOLA. I crave your heat and even the subsequent rainfall that I'm sure will follow. And I'll see you again next year, I promise.

Love,
Jessica B. Sokol

