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An Unorthodox Growing Experience

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*An Unorthodox Growing Experience*

The 7th ward. That’s where I grew up. It’s in New Orleans, Louisiana, in a place called Gentilly to be specific. My family and I weren’t dirt poor, but weren’t really middle class either. Where I grew up could also be described as “the ‘hood, the projects.” Life for me, however, was great. I was a carefree child and always took things day by day. My mother told me that when I was small the only way to get me to smile was to put food in my hand. I was a happy kid and never ever saw myself or my family as poor. I was smart and went to good schools and always had home-cooked meals every night. Nothing was wrong with my life in my eyes. I remember thinking that New Orleans was the entire world, literally. I sat on our porch one day and looked up at the sky thinking that this world was so beautiful. Thinking New Orleans was the world. I was so wrong. In my defense, I was only eight at the time and had never been outside of the city. However, my views of the world were unknowingly limited, but that was soon to change.

On my first day of second grade, I was so excited. School started in the middle of the week, on Wednesday, August 24, 2005. Everyone was talking about a big storm coming up and how we would only be in school for the rest of the week and would resume later the next week, after the storm. That was what we thought. I only remember a few moments from those three days of second grade, and the memories are vague. My feelings at the time were optimistic. I thought, oh, this big storm, eh? Is it really going to be that bad? I was ready to go back to school and for this “big storm” to be over with already. I never grasped the seriousness of it until it hit. Unlike many families in New Orleans, my family stayed, and so did a few neighbors. We lived in the projects, where our housing was made of brick, so my mother was confident we would be safe and could withstand anything with God on our side. Over the weekend, the winds picked up
rapidly. On Sunday, stores were being broken into and people were taking whatever they could. The streets slowly began to flood. However, people were still trying to get as much as they could from the stores. I received a few toys from a neighbor for me and my twin sister, Toi. By that time, worry began to enter my family’s mind. We had seen on TV the mayor urging everyone to leave as quickly as possible because this storm would tear the city apart. Yet, we remained.

Before dawn on Monday I woke up to thunder. I was sleeping on the sofa that night. I’m not sure why, but I also woke up to my mother’s voice. She was saying the power was out and would be for awhile. While the storm was passing, there was a lot of wind, lightning, thunder, rain, and water on the streets. When the storm was passing, there was no sunlight. The sky was grey all twenty-four hours of the day. We stayed inside because that was all we could do. I looked out the window but never saw much.

The aftermath, though, was the most significant part. Once the storm was over and the levees shattered, there was not much left of the city. We lived on the third floor of our building and had a big balcony. Standing on that balcony was hard. Below us were contaminated water, flooded cars, and an empty town. We yelled for help a lot because there was no way out. No one ever responded. No one was there. We couldn’t stay trapped in our house with no electricity or clean water. The next day, I went down to the first floor and the water was up to the porch steps. You couldn’t take one step down or else you would have to start swimming. The water was almost black, dirty and depressing. I heard people screaming for help not far away, but what could we do? We were miserable. I’m not sure how long we were in our house before someone finally came and got us. It was a rescue crew in a very small boat, a canoe, and they put as many of my family and neighbors as they could in at once and made trips back and forth to the Mississippi River Bridge. The Westbank closed their gates and were not letting anyone from our
side come over. So, what remained of the city of New Orleans was on that bridge, waiting for any kind of help. I remember holding as much as I could: some food, a blanket. My relatives did the same. It was hot on the bridge, and we walked for so long. Thousands of people were stranded, and the scene broke my heart. Buses were coming to take people, but they filled quickly. This part of my life was like a movie because everything happened so fast and suddenly. People lost their loved ones in the crowd and were screaming for them. I remember my mom making sure we stayed together. We boarded a bus and it brought us to a park somewhere. I may never know exactly where I was. Then we waited hours with hundreds of other people, outside during the night, to get on another bus, which brought us to Dallas. Once in Dallas, we stayed in Cowboy’s Stadium, their football stadium. It was like nothing you’d ever seen. The entire floor was filled with people, even the seats off the floor. We slept on cots, and even through all of this, my sister and I played a lot and never let our happiness fade. We were kids, after all. After the stadium, a rich family in Dallas took us in and we stayed there for a week. After that, we went to stay with my brother back in New Orleans. I tried to keep attending school and switched schools several times. Upon returning to my old house once the water was gone, the neighborhood was a ghost town. There was a certain smell, a smell I’ll never forget, a smell of emptiness, but also of damage. The whole city was grey, empty, and appeared as if it had been set up like that for a horror movie where some kids end up in a deserted, strange town. My kiddie view of the world was now gone.

Hurricane Katrina played a massive role in my life as I gained a new view and understanding of this world. I grew up very fast after that and got lots of responsibility handed to me. I couldn’t cry about my situation, despite my age. I didn’t see my mother shed one tear, so I couldn’t either. I had to put on my big-girl pants and ride the storm out. A lot of people left for
the storm, and whenever I tell people that my family and I stayed, I get a look of complete surprise. It is shocking for some to hear my first-hand story of Katrina and that I am mentally okay. This storm was one for the record books, and it’s also something I will always take with me. The experience was a huge means of learning and growing, despite the devastating circumstances. I didn’t let the storm get in the way of my future, and I never saw myself as a victim. I don’t blame my mom for anything. She did what she thought was right.

Without Katrina, I would have been a completely different person. I would have attended different schools, met different people, and led a different life. Growing up in the projects is something I have never hated. Just like Esch in Salvage the Bones, I had to start over at a young age, by my family’s side. Esch and I have a lot in common. We both were members of a single-parent household, didn’t live in the nicest parts of town, had many siblings, and had to grow up early. This storm definitely put my life on a new path, but this path has been one of many learning experiences, so I am grateful. I occasionally reflect back on the storm, but never with remorse. It was a stepping stone in my life that helped me become a stronger girl with a wider view of the world. I love the Seventh Ward, the projects, the ghetto; whatever you want to call it. That’s me, that’s who I am. Along with the storm, the place has been crucial in shaping me into the strong, passionate girl I am today. Though some people hate talking about their past obstacles, I don’t because I’m not afraid. I’m proud of what I went through and where I come from, even if it may be “ghetto.” Though the storm was insane and extreme, I’m glad I can say I am a survivor of it, and a warrior, because it aided me in many ways I can’t explain. Katrina was an unorthodox learning and growing experience because it isn’t common to hear people talk about one of their learning experiences in life being a deadly hurricane. However, I wouldn’t give this experience back for anything because it taught me a plethora of things about the world,
life, responsibility, rebuilding, and overcoming anything set in your way. Just because things seem like they’re put in your life to knock you down, they really could’ve been put there to help you stand stronger, taller, and braver.