

Out of Chaos, Hope – *Mr. White's House*

Day 2 & 3

It's mid-afternoon Sunday and we are moving along with Lizzie's home. Bob and I decide to take a short break and go find Mr. White's house over near the Disaster Recovery Center to find out what we have in store there. On the way over Bob tells me Mr. White is 84 years old and lives alone. He has managed to acquire some drywall through the network of friends and neighbors and needs some help with the installation. That is all we know except his house is not supposed to be hard to find since there are so few left on Route 604. Nevertheless we have to stop and ask at two places before at last we see a low brick ranch-style house that matches the description.

We pull up into the driveway in my truck far enough into the yard to get past the large mud puddles but avoiding the littered broken glass. Five dogs in the yard rush my truck barking with a show of hostile intent but a couple of hounds among them are tentatively waving friendly tails. A big brown female chow sits in stony silence as two of the black dogs that look to be her offspring bark with fur bristled. One of the black dogs hops on three good legs. One rear leg is badly crippled. I am particularly wary of his menacing demeanor. I take a gamble on the hounds that have come up to the door of my truck and crack it open enough to let the pregnant one get a good smell of my hand while I talk to her gently. She gives me a friendly look and lets me scratch her head. I tell Bob in spite of the barking they won't bite. I step out onto the muddy ground into a haze of mosquitoes that seem the size of black houseflies.

Amidst the mosquitoes and the barking dogs, Bob hails, "Mr. White! Anybody home?"

After a couple of minutes an old man hobbles towards us from the short concrete driveway to the attached double garage on the right side of his house. He stops for a few seconds and leans on the hood of a late model Toyota in the driveway at the garage door. He gives a loud shout to the crippled black dog to shut up. All the dogs more or less stop their barking and the crippled one sulks over to the front door of the house and sits uneasily in the grimy dirt.

I notice the hood of the Toyota is popped open and rests on its latch. All manner of debris, old bottles, broken glass, roof sheathing, limbs, and broken religious icons litter the yard. White PVC sewer pipe runs across the width of the front yard of the house from the left to the right and descends into the ground. Nothing is connected to the pipe now but at one time a trailer must

have parked to the left of the house. On the right beyond the garage sits another small white FEMA trailer. The same type of PVC pipe runs out into a tee on the other pipe in the front yard.

Mr. White wears an old flannel shirt and worn, tan kaki pants held up by a thin belt. His pants' zipper is broken. His forlorn and defeated form shows no hint of a smile at our appearance. In fact, there is hardly a sign of emotion at all in his empty face. The air of despair hangs so thick I almost can feel it. He looks as if he just waits for final release to end it all, fully inured to this misery.

“Mr. White, we are here to check out the job to hang the sheet rock on your ceilings and walls in a couple of days. We would like to see what the job looks so we can plan our work week.”

The doubt in his eyes tells us he's heard this before.

“Well, I'll try to show you. Come on in with me but you'll have to forgive my slow walk, my legs are about to lock up on me.”

We get his story in bits and pieces. He tells us part of it as we enter the garage. The mystery of the Toyota resolves. He tells us that he had bought it for his daughter after the flood but she had let it run out of water and overheat. The engine seized on the way back from Slidell. Money out the window.

We notice that the walls of the garage have been repaired with some paneling and the whole garage is filled with construction materials and the accumulated damaged items and treasures of forty years of family life. Mr. White apologizes for the look of the walls and windows of the garage.

“It used to be real nice but the water destroyed the walls. The guys who did my ceiling inside at least got these windows and some paneling back again.”

More of his story slips out as we walk into the house.

“I built the house in 1964 and raised my family here. My boys are gone and my wife passed away some years earlier. I'm here by myself now”

We follow him through his kitchen that is still under repair and stop just inside the adjoining dining room on the front of the house to survey. The interior is utterly devastated. The dogs have been living with him in the house since Katrina hit. The chaos before us, the smell of animals and dog urine daunts me. The state of the house does not appear to disturb Bob, but this

is his sixth trip to do this work. Since fall a year ago, I guess he has seen something like this on every trip.

Walking into the living room I realize we are standing on a terrazzo floor. I can tell it is wonderfully done and must have been beautiful in its previous splendor. Now it is filthy with the debris of the flood-damaged interior and accumulation of recent dirt. The house has empty for over a year.

Every wall and most of the ceilings are stripped down to the bare studs and rafters. Besides the sand, dirt and all sorts of filth Katrina's salt-water surge soaked the insulation and primed it for mold. After that baptism the mold and mildew explode behind the walls and ceiling in this hot, humid, swampland. Everything that was wet by the water had to be stripped from the houses as soon as possible. From Gulfport to New Orleans virtually every house between the Gulf and Interstate 10 and suffered this or a worse fate.

We walk further into Mr. White's home. The front room stretches almost a third the length of the house and has a really nice brick fireplace with a hearth about 18 inches above the floor. The hearth is covered with broken parts of wooden chairs, rusty tools, vases, trinkets and water damaged pictures that must have hung on the walls. They are all gritty black. None of it is salvageable. I notice a furry mass on the left side of the hearth amongst this debris. I give it a closer look and realize it is a decomposed body of a drowned large rat or squirrel, its skeleton lying in a perfect repose as one might find an old fossil in stone.

Our survey reveals that rather than drywall someone had screwed quarter inch Luan panels onto the ceiling in the foyer, the hall and two front bedrooms on the far side of the house.

"Mr. White, what in the world does the installer intend to do next?" Bob wonders aloud.

"I paid a contractor \$22,000 to drywall the ceilings and re-panel the walls of my home. After the fellow put up the Luan, his helper fell for a waitress at Turtle's and the two took off for parts unknown. After his helper disappeared, the fellow left for West Texas with what was left of my \$22,000 and has not been seen since. I don't have anything left to buy materials or pay someone to help."

I ask him not altogether joking if he'd rather we went and found the contractor in West Texas than do his ceilings. But even in my anger I know that is a quixotic idea.

We continue on our walk through the home. The further into the home we go the more our estimate of the time to put in the sheet rock grows. At least someone has run new wiring. Sixty-watt bulbs hang loose from the living room ceiling in temporary sockets.

“I have an electrician I’m lettin’ stay in my upstairs room and he wired the house for rent. Nobody is supposed to be living in the house though.”

Then the question comes that is always expected and awaited, if not demanded. It’s a question everyone seems compelled to ask, and one you sense the residents want you to ask. Perhaps it is a natural urge to find catharsis for the survivors and to learn a lesson in perseverance and hope for the helpers. Bob asks it.

“Mr. White, how did you wait out the flood?”

“I spent the time right here in the house. I went upstairs with five of my ten dogs. The ones you saw outside. The others got washed away and I haven’t seen them since.”

“How high did the water rise?”

He went to the front door and pointed up over the eaves of the porch.

“The water went right up to there, over the eaves. I went upstairs with the dogs as the water rose. It came up over the ceiling downstairs and into the flooring of my room upstairs where it finally stopped rising.”

Speechless and a little embarrassed for loss of words to say next, we keep walking into his home towards the far bathroom.

“If you can, would you please do the bathroom ceiling and walls in the bathroom beyond the foyer?”

We look into the bathroom. It’s a worse disaster than the other part of the house, disconnected plumbing and the toilet sits in the middle of the room. More debris, dirt, sand, mildew, mold, broken glass, and twigs litter the floor. What must have been the door of the bathtub enclosure lies broken inside the tub with all the grime and maybe ten or so dead cockroaches. They are far larger than my thumb; bigger than any I’d ever seen. It is just a God-awful mess.

I just want to sit down and cry over this terrible misery. This is such a deep hole for Mr. White to climb from. But by this time just our presence and conversation have eased Mr. White’s despair.

We find fifteen or so pieces of 4x8 drywall covered with plastic on the front porch, so the basic supplies are all here for us to use. We can use the money we brought for that for someone else.

“Mr. White, we will be back, some time on Monday after we finish working on Lizzie’s home. We’ll get started then but it might take us two days to get it all done.”

Mr. White gives us an anxious look.

“But, I won’t be back here until about one in the afternoon Monday. I’m the Quartermaster of the VFW post and have to be at the meeting to reimburse everybody for the beer and food. I don’t know what I’ll do if you come early. ”

“Monday after lunch is ok because the first thing Monday morning we want to finish Lizzie’s drywall. Our crew is at work on Lizzie’s house now. If the rest of our fourteen people coming in later today go directly to her place Monday morning we might get done with all her drywall by noon and be over to your place after lunch. I think it will work out just fine.”

Mr. White just stands there in his foyer without speaking, just listening to us with a face full of doubt and a crestfallen expression growing in his face. By the look in his eyes as we drive away, I don’t think he expects to see us again. On the way back to Lizzie’s Bob talks some more about all this.

“These people have been subjected even by well-intended people to all the scams, fraud and bad construction repairs that you can imagine. We’ve seen it all. We rebuilt a house in Bay St. Louis and found out it was a rental property and the owner sold it for a tidy profit a week later. The people in Pearlinton have homes here and are desperate for the help. This is where we are going to work.”

We do come back Monday afternoon, eight-strong. We set up and start working as fast as we can. Later in the day when I pull the Luan plywood off the ceiling I see the watermark about an inch short of the flooring of the second story room. Sure enough, Mr. White was right about the surge.

By the end of the day we have finished all Mr. White’s drywall and his bathroom. We now have two houses down and are a full day ahead of our anticipated schedule. Mr. White had spent

the little time when he wasn't in the doorway of his kitchen observing our progress at his kitchen table working crossword puzzles from a stack of Picayune newspapers.

We leave about 5:30 in the afternoon as evening darkness approaches and tell Mr. White that our people will come by and mud out the drywall and finish it all on Tuesday. Mr. White stands at his front door in clean clothes almost, but not quite prepared to risk beaming as he waves us a good bye.

God *is* good.