

The Last Supper and Long Goodbye - Karaoke in the Bayou

Day 7

I awake Friday morning at about the same time, 5AM. After lying in my cot a while, I quietly get up and tip toe to the front door with shoes in hand. I open the door outside and look out east towards the gulf and behold the most spectacular sunrise I've ever seen. Nearby clouds hang high in the sky over the coast. The low sun in the horizon lights their underside, them giving them a most intense bloody red hue and intricate texture. This vista is painted in the sky behind a very tall dead pine across the playing field at the far side of the school yard. I hurry to my truck and get my camera, shooting several images. I go inside immediately and tell one of the others now awake that they are missing a great sunrise. In the few minutes it takes to get back outside, the sun has moved just high enough that the whole painting is gone save my first photographs. I think back on the full moon that heralded me into Pearlinton, leaving on this day of a beautiful sunrise and about all I'd seen the last six days. Would these experiences fade as old memories, as those clouds in this sunrise? What a way to begin my last day here!

Today we have to complete Mr. Blackwell's job and get over to Larry's. After breakfast more than half of us head over to Mr. Blackwell's, the rest to Larry's home. We finish up Mr. Blackwood's drywall by lunch and headed for the Recovery Center to get a sandwich so we can move on to Larry's work and get it done before dinner.

When I drive into Larry's yard, someone behind the rear of the house is swinging a sledge. It is Larry moving the rear wall more closely back into plumb on its concrete pad. Bob and the crew have mostly completed the front bedroom. Most of what remains is a narrow backroom runs the length of the bedroom at its rear. Its outside wall was the object of Larry's attention with the sledge. Katrina really skewed this room. It is narrower at one end and the walls and ceiling aren't square. The guys are going to have to carefully measure and hand cut every piece of drywall.

Our problem is how to finish the front room within the time we have allowed to make dinner tonight. I don't see how we can finish it all and do it well. I jump into the fray and start working on the front bedroom. By 3:00 we have all the drywall set in the front room.

Our mudders have come to Larry's from Mr. Blackwell's and are encouraging us to get out of the way so they can work in the front room. Larry and his wife hover about, but soon

she leaves. We started hand-piecing the back room. Bob and Tim work the walls from one end and we start the ceiling from the other end.

We finish the ceiling and get out of Tim and Bob's way. I decide I'll quit now and head back to clean up before dinner at Robin and Jimmy's. Again, I'm in the way. But as I leave the house Larry's wife drives up. She gets out of the truck with a 12-pack and their black lab leading the way. The old dog comes over and I work on its ears gently as Larry's wife walks up and asks, "Want to share a beer with us? You guys have been working so hard."

Frankly, at 5PM, all I want to do is head back to the Recovery Center and clean up but how can I resist her offer without insulting both her and the dog. I take a beer, go back to my truck and get my camera. Larry and his wife are standing besides the folks still working in the front room. She glows with happiness over our work and offers beer to anyone who'll take one. I shoot a few pictures and talk a while, and then I take my leave to head back to the Recovery Center.

As I finish my shower at the DRC, most of the folks are coming in from Larry's. By the time everybody cleans up it is almost six thirty. We head over to Jimmy and Robin's in the van and a couple of cars, thirty minutes late.

Jimmy and Robin's home is a cool location. They sit at the head of a bayou and can get in their bateau and make it all the way out to the Gulf to drop some crab traps or fish with Jimmy's friend Jack whenever they want, and have a neat nature trip at the same time.

Jimmy managed to board up the house and head out ahead of the surge. He waited it out at the hospital in Bay St. Louis where he worked. When the flood hit Jimmy stood at the windows on an upper floor of the hospital and watched Katrina drown Bay St. Louis block by block. Robin had taken her daughter and son to Iowa to wait it out. Jimmy made it back to Pearlington and home as fast as possible after the surge receded. The house still stood but was totally ravaged. The barn suffered no serious structural damage. What he worried about the most was would he have that job, and what was he going to do about the house. Almost no one had water, electricity or shelter. For weeks everybody cooked outside and slept wherever they could find shelter, tents, just out in the open or in shells of houses.

While Jimmy stands over the pot in the barn boiling some more crab I talk to him about the flood. He tells me he got back to his house ahead of the search crews, thankfully. He

drove into the yard and looked upward towards a faint cry. In a pine 20 feet up was “cat woman,” a 75-year-old neighbor with her dog clinging to a limb that she had managed to hold onto after her, her dog and home washed away.

Jimmy coordinated disaster recovery goods and supplies for 6 months, worked 6AM to midnight, non-stop. He quit 4 times only to be convinced to stay on in spite of the stress and his stent and pacemaker. Fountain City spent a lot of time the first few trips repairing Jimmy and Robin’s home, thus the unbreakable bond between them.

We find ourselves after dark on this warm Fall Friday evening standing on the rough hewn oak floors of Jimmy’s barn with Katrina’s watermark 10 feet up on the wall. Larry Randolph and his wife, Jamie and Pat, Jimmy and Robin, her daughter, son, numerous relatives, and folks helped in the past are here. A CD player fills the room with loud music. A table holds steamed crabs piled high. Another holds special beverages. Gumbo simmered on the stove in the house. Lizzie scurries about setting up speakers, amplifier and placing her karaoke catalogs on another table. And of course, she solicits singers with her smile. Tonight, you’d never know of their suffered grief from Katrina. This is their “thank you” to us.

Towards mid-evening people warm up to the karaoke. Robin’s young daughter and friend sing their favorites, several times. Lizzie works everyone in the crowd to sing. Larry in a deep bass voice does a great performance. I think it is Merle Haggard and then Johnny Cash. I close my eyes and imagine Haggard and Cash are right here singing. Some of us sit around egging others to sing. Bill and Angela from Fountain City finally succumb to the crowd’s encouragement and do the duet, “I got you Babe” with goodhearted laughter all around. Robin’s son then sings “Proud to be an American,” ending on his knees with arms out raised to a great crescendo of applause.

I just sit back in a chair in the background of all this, nursing a beer, soaking up all this scene of fellowship and thinking that this isn’t your typical karaoke bar scene. Here with friends we share thanksgiving, graciousness and plain speaking honesty. I have more than a little regret and worry that tomorrow by this time I’ll be back in Chattanooga. Late in the evening, we all leave Jimmy’s place and return to the Recovery Center to pack and hit the sack.

Saturday morning at 7:00AM our team has our long goodbye. We gather out front of the Recovery Center, suitcases and bags long packed and stowed, food stored, given away or disposed. We linger. Several of us pose the group for a last photograph out front of the Recovery Center but that is not really needed as a remembrance. Bill asks me to offer a prayer of thanksgiving and guidance. Afterwards, we shake hands, exchange warm embraces and leave one-by-one in our cars and trucks. For the whole eight hours' drive back, I keep thinking, Home, exactly where is it? Pearlinton surely seems like home to me.