MANY RIVERS to CROSS

a novel by

Thomas Zigal

Fort Worth, Texas
For the people of New Orleans

Those who survived,

and those who perished
This is a work of fiction inspired by actual incidents that took place during the first three days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in late August 2005. As sources of this story, I relied on fieldwork in New Orleans, personal interviews, email exchanges, blogs, online written and video reports, documentary films, and many hours of television and newspaper coverage. I am indebted to the authors of several outstanding books and articles about the hurricane, especially those by Douglas Brinkley, James Lee Burke, John Burnett, Joshua Clark, Michael Eric Dyson, Dave Eggers, Jed Horne, Tom Piazza, and Chris Rose.
Monday,
August 29, 2005
The two men expected to encounter state troopers on
their way into the city. But once they’d passed through
the blinding rain of Baton Rouge and climbed up onto
the long elevated stretch of Interstate 10 over the bayous, they saw
no traffic ahead, only an endless maze of limbs blown across the road
from the tops of marsh trees still swaying in the wind. They were the
only fools trying to get into New Orleans. National Guard, Red Cross,
emergency rescue vehicles, not a trace of them anywhere. The radio
was reporting that the levees had collapsed in at least three places,
and the city was filling with water from Lake Pontchartrain and the
canals. Citizens were being warned to seek higher ground, which
meant attics and rooftops and the upper stories of parking garages.
No one in their right mind would venture into a city built six feet
below sea level after the eye of a category three hurricane had
slammed ashore only a few miles to the east, near Slidell and the
state line. But Dee had called her father in Opelousas to say that
water was rising in the streets of her Gentilly neighborhood, where
she lived with her two small children, and she felt trapped and des-
perate. She was a strong young woman, but he could hear panic in
her voice.

I’m sorry I was so hardheaded, Daddy, she’d said on the phone that
morning. Hodge had asked her to leave the city on Saturday, after
the governor had declared a state of emergency. Hodge’s home in
Opelousas was less than a three-hour trip into Cajun country in the
southwest part of the state, and he urged her and the children to
come and stay. But she didn’t take this storm seriously. She’d left
New Orleans during hurricane alerts in years past, and they’d usual-
ly turned out to be false alarms, the eye veering down to the Texas
coast or curling back on Florida. Last year, during the Hurricane Ivan scare, she and the kids were on the road for fourteen hours, bumper to bumper. All New Orleans suffered was a little rain and wind.

By the time the mayor had issued a mandatory evacuation on Sunday morning, as Hurricane Katrina took dead aim on the city, the highways were gridlocked in the somber August heat. We were scared to be in that line, she'd admitted during her telephone call. I saw some thugs drag a man out of his car. Only two vehicles ahead of her. One of them pistol-whipped the poor man as he begged for mercy. They stole his car and left him bleeding on the side of the road. When she heard another gang of loud young thugs prancing around the cars behind her, project teenagers looking for vehicles to carjack, it was more than she could bear. Her seven-year-old daughter, Ashley, was crying and couldn't catch her breath, so Dee pulled the little Toyota out of line and rutted her way across the grassy median. Speeding off down an empty lane in the contraflow, she headed back into the city.

Don't worry, sugar, Hodge had told her. I'm coming to get you and the kids. Stay calm till I get there. You still have that Smith & Wesson I gave you? Don't be afraid to use it if you have to.

Hodges Grant guided his old GMC pickup and boat trailer through the obstacle course of scattered limbs on the interstate, the bald tires hydroplaning over a slick wet mat of green leaves that unfurled ahead as far as the eye could see. It was midafternoon on Monday when they crossed over the spillway and entered the city. The rain had let up, but the sky was still gray and ominous, a cauldron of clouds boiling northward. Although Katrina had moved inland and was now battering the Mississippi pines, its tailwinds were still blowing debris across the roads here in New Orleans. Power lines were down everywhere, like a jungle of sagging vines. He could see a piece of the swollen lake off to the left, the slate-gray water as choppy as the open sea.

Duval spoke for the first time in nearly an hour. He was listening to a pocket-sized radio plugged into his ear. “Radio says the cops can
gank anybody’s boat they want,” he said. “Only got five boats in the entire New Orleans police force.” He looked at the older man behind the wheel. “Mayor says cooperate if the police want your boat.”

Hodge grunted a laugh and shook his head. He was a tall, rawboned man who had shed twenty pounds since the heart attack last year and felt better than he had in a long time. He was two years shy of his sixtieth birthday and had fought in Vietnam as a Marine leatherneck, which felt like another man’s life now, something that had happened to a young blood he hardly remembered anymore. All he cared about right now was his daughter and two grandchildren. They were stranded in a flooding neighborhood, and he was coming to pick them up and take them back to his farm outside Opelousas, where they would be safe. Nobody was going to stop him, not New Orleans police or National Guard or God Almighty himself. Nobody was going to confiscate that fourteen-foot johnboat strapped down in the trailer behind them.

“It might get heavy,” he told the younger man, the father of Dee’s children. Hodge had come close to knocking this homeboy around a few times, back when Duval first walked out on her and the kids. Player had a weakness for other women and street rock, or so Hodge had heard. But he needed Duval now. He needed a second pair of arms in case they had to paddle the johnboat. He needed somebody who’d grown up in this crazy doomed city and knew the streets. And he needed somebody with a cell phone. Hodge didn’t own one, didn’t have much use for it on the farm.

“Keep your head up, son,” he told Duval, “and we’ll make out all right.”

The interstate ran as straight as a razor through the suburbs of Kenner and Metairie, where white folk had fled decades ago to live in big ranch-style homes and send their kids to safe white schools. Towering light poles along the freeway had toppled in the hurricane wind, and Hodge slowed his pickup to swerve around them and the scattered glass. He had never set foot in those shopping malls he
could see from the road, their parking lots now knee deep in murky water. The roof had been ripped off a Sears department store and large sheets of plate glass hung like broken teeth in a row of nearby businesses. A huge billboard sign had keeled over onto the new cars swamped in a dealership lot. As they approached a freeway interchange where the exit ramp trailed off into a shallow lake of neighborhoods, Hodge could see a score of people stranded on the overpass, shouting and waving at the truck in desperation. They wanted out of this city by any means possible.

“Poor bastards,” he said to himself. “Where the hell is the police?”

“Saving they own sweet ass,” Duval said with a smirk.

A mile farther on, the long white sawhorses of a police barricade lay splintered and strewn across every lane. “I guess it’s coming up,” Hodge said.

“Say what?” Duval asked, removing the earpiece.

“The end of the line.”

Hodge slowed down when they reached sight of an ornate old cemetery whose gothic white mausoleums rose like church spires out of the flood. Lights were flashing above a New Orleans police cruiser parked sideways in the middle of the interstate. He downshifted and tapped his wet brakes, testing them. When they drew closer, they could see that the vehicle was unoccupied. Its windows had been smashed and one of the tires was gone.

“Must be cutthroat owchere,” Duval said, “if the Man cain’t take care of his own ride.”

Hodge stopped the truck, stepped down out of the cab, and stomped his work boots on the wet pavement, restoring the circulation in his legs. The rain had settled into a fine mist that swirled around him in the trailing winds of the hurricane. He understood now that the police car was a warning sign, like a human skull impaled on a tall spike. He gazed past the white cruiser and saw that fifty yards away, the interstate disappeared like a boat ramp into the
floodwaters. Farther in the distance, the shadowed cityscape of
downtown New Orleans stood grim and powerless in the rainy gray
gloom. You couldn’t get there from here.

He looked over at the fifteen-foot concrete safety wall that bor-
dered the highway. It protected the nervous white people of this
neighborhood from traffic noise and wandering drunks. “You know
where we’re at?” he asked Duval through the driver’s window.

“Fucking Metry,” the young man said with a weary sigh.

“Can you find Gentilly from here?”

Duval ducked his head and peered out his window, then stared
at the windshield wipers sweeping back and forth. “S’pose so,” he
said.

Hodge had no idea if Duval was up to this, but there was no
other choice. He wished to hell he knew how to find his son, PJ. Pops
Junior. Big strapping street-smart warrior who would’ve watched his
old man’s back on this mission. But PJ was somewhere in the system
now, and Hodge had lost track of where.

He opened the door and crawled behind the steering wheel. “I’m
gonna drive back down the road apiece and leave the rig in that nice
white neighborhood over there,” he said. “And cross our fingers it’s
still there when we come back with Dee and the kids.”

Duval folded his arms, incredulous. “That the plan?” he asked.

“Leave the ride way out here in Metry?”

“Unless you got a better suggestion,” Hodge said.

He turned the pickup around and drove the wrong way on their
side of the interstate, in no danger of oncoming traffic. There was a
breach in the lane divider where a fallen light pole had crushed the
concrete wall. Hodge guided the truck slowly over the broken slabs,
the cab rocking as if in rough water, scraping bottom, the trailer drag-
ging like dead weight behind. After some delicate maneuvering, the
tires gripped smooth asphalt on the other side, and within minutes
they had exited into the dry suburban streets north of the freeway.

Veterans Highway was an older commercial strip, less highway
than broad boulevard, the east-west thoroughfare through Metairie before the interstate was built. Veterans now sprawled with fast food joints, used car lots, drive-in banks, drive-thru daiquiri stands, and chain motels, an anywhere four-lane through an anywhere suburb. A Jefferson Parish patrol unit was parked on the side of the road ahead, its overhead light spinning in the blustery gray haze. Two uniformed deputies wearing yellow rain ponchos were standing near a drainage ditch, looking at something in the weeds. When they drew their weapons and began firing, Hodge stopped the truck.

“What the fuck they doing?” Duval said, reaching for the duffel bag on the seat between them.

“Be cool,” Hodge said, grabbing Duval’s hand so he couldn’t get into the bag. They both knew what was in there, tucked under the grocery sack and flashlights.

“We in Jeff Parish, man,” Duval said. Metairie and Kenner, white as rice. “Hope it ain’t some niggah taking a deuce in that ditch.”

Hodge waited, the old motor idling in a rackety rhythm. When the deputies holstered their guns, he put the truck in gear and rolled ahead, no more than twenty miles per hour, a law-abiding citizen driving cautiously through a school zone. He had heard that the cockeyed sheriff of Jefferson Parish had once tried to set up checkpoints in Metairie to stop black people from entering the white neighborhoods. This wasn’t a good place for a black man to get crosswise with the authorities.

As the pickup crept past the patrol car, Hodge could see the alligator lying in the wet weeds. At least five feet long, big enough to eat your poodle. One of the deputies nudged it with his boot to see if the creature was still alive. They’d put six rounds in it, by Hodge’s count.

“God dayum,” Duval said, craning to see the gator. “You s’pose we gonna run into many of them bad boys out there?”

City boy, grew up in the St. Bernard Housing Project. Hodge laughed at him. He’d dealt with his share of gators while fishing in the Atchafalaya swamps. “That’s what the paddles are for,” he told Duval. “Swing fast enough, they won’t take your arm off.”
In another block they’d reached the Seventeenth Street Canal and the final boundary of dry land. Hodge hit the worn brakes and the pickup skidded to a halt. They sat in silence, watching the current flow from north to south across Veterans Highway, rushing downhill toward the bottom of the bowl, somewhere miles away in Mid-City. Earlier that morning he’d listened to reports about this canal on television. Surging storm waters had broken through the earthen levee up near the Old Hammond Road bridge and the marina, only two hundred yards from Lake Pontchartrain, and the lake was pouring into the well-to-do Lakeview neighborhood.

Hodge realized he was clenching the steering wheel so hard his hands had lost color. He let go, dropping them into his lap. They were parked on a slight bank above the canal, watching debris swirl in the floodwater ahead, tree limbs and driftwood and bobbing garbage barrels and what looked like jagged sheets of aluminum siding. Off on the right, a radio tower as tall as an oil derrick had tumbled into the stream, its satellite dish clinging by a long cable. There was water as far as he could see. And somewhere out there, his daughter and her children were fighting their own battle to survive the rising tide.

“See if you can reach Dee on the cell phone,” he said to Duval.

Duval pulled the phone out of his baggy shorts and speed-dialed the number. To his surprise, the call went through. “Dee!” Duval shouted, his small wedge of face showing signs of life for the first time on this trip. “You okay, baby? How the kids?”

“Give me that,” Hodge said, ripping the phone out of his hand. “Dee, honey,” he said, “tell me what’s going on. Are y’all safe?”

“It’s bad, Daddy,” she said, her voice warbling the way it always did when she was fighting back tears. Hide the fear was something her mother had taught her. God bless that fine woman. Be strong, girl. Hold your head up and don’t let them see you thisaway. “The street’s flooded and water might come in the house,” she said. “We might have to go up in the attic.”

“You have an ax, darlin’? Or a baseball bat?”
She was still his baby girl, thirty years old or not. This was tearing his heart out.

"LaMarcus has that bat you gave him for his birthday," she said.

"Take the kids and that bat and a water jug and the Smith & Wesson with you up in the attic. Do it now, sugar. The water’s rising awful fast."

"I’ve got to go check on Tante Belle next door," she said. "Poor old lady can’t get around anymore."

"No, Dee, take care of yourself and the children. Don’t worry about nobody else right now. You hear me? Get up in the attic right away!"

"Where are you, Daddy? Do you have your boat?"

"I’ve got the boat and we’re fixing to put in. I don’t know how long it’ll take us, baby, but we’re coming. You can count on that. We’ll be there before you know it."

"I love you, Daddy," she said.

He could hear her catching her breath, fighting the tears, and his own lungs burned now, he hurt so bad for her.

"Stay strong, girl," he said. "Do like your Momma always told you. Keep your smarts and everything will come out all right."

In that moment he saw a terrible image of them drowned in their attic because he hadn’t got there quick enough.

"Before you hang up," Duval said, angry that Hodge had taken the phone from him, "let me talk to my kids."

"Make it quick. They don’t have time to waste," Hodge said, handing him the cell. "We gotta get this boat in the water."

Hodge was angry, too. If you love those kids, he thought, why aren’t you there with them? Why did you treat their mother like you did and walk out on them when they were babies? He was angry, but he couldn’t let the anger own him. They had a job to do.

While Duval was talking to LaMarcus and Ashley, telling them to be brave and listen to their Momma, Hodge swung the truck over to the Wendy’s parking lot and backed the trailer down to the churn-
ing water. When he got out of the cab, he noticed the Jefferson Parish patrol car approaching slowly through the blowing mist, its spotlight trained on the pickup. “Get off the phone and give me a hand,” he said, tapping the glass. He didn’t have a good feeling about that patrol unit. He thought it best to get busy and launch the boat as fast as they could.

He and Duval were standing in ankle deep water, sliding the long johnboat off its rollers, when he heard car doors slam.

“Hey, there!” one of the deputies shouted at them. “What y’all up to?”

Hodge looked up and waved at them with his free hand, smiling friendly. He didn’t want trouble. “Afternoon, officers,” he said, hanging onto the guide rope as Duval loaded the duffel bag into the boat. “Helluva storm, ain’t it? Saw that gator you bagged. Wonder how it ended up way out here?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing, chief. Can I see some ID?”

The two deputies were white men who looked to be in their late thirties. Dark blue caps, water dripping off their bills, yellow ponchos streaked with rain. Hodge couldn’t see their hands, which made him uneasy.

“Just drove in from Opelousas,” he said. “My daughter and her two kids are in trouble over by Gentilly. House is flooding. We’re gonna go pick ’em up and take ’em back home.”

“Lot of water between here and Gentilly,” the deputy said. He was a short stout man with a thick neck and ruddy complexion. He had no eyebrows, or so it appeared to Hodge, and that gave his eyes a crazed and piercing intensity. “I need to see some ID,” the deputy said. “Just wanna make sure y’all are who you say you are. We’ve had reports about looting in the city, and we don’t want it to get started out here.”

Hodge glanced at Duval and saw what these white cops saw. A young hip-hop niggah wearing baggy basketball shorts and hundred-dollar Nikes, his black face hidden in a hoodie. Banger written all
over him. Duval stared back at Hodge with a slight shake of the head. *Don’t let them run my ID.*

Fucking Jesus, Hodge thought. Outstanding warrants for God knows what, the dumbass. He tossed the guide rope into the boat and leaned close to Duval, speaking in a low voice with his back to the deputies. “Push off and crank the motor,” he said, “but stay close in. I may have to swim for it.”

He turned and walked up the wet pavement toward the officers with a broad smile on his face, reaching into the back pocket of his camo fatigues to produce his wallet. “Gentlemen, I don’t want to be rude,” he said, handing his driver’s license to the deputy who had asked for it, “but we’re in a hurry to find my daughter and grandchildren. They’re not but seven and nine years old. I’d appreciate it if you’d let us be on our way.”

The deputy gazed up at the cap Hodge was wearing. Marine Corps insignia, *Vietnam Veteran* embroidered below the eagle and globe. Hodge had worn it on purpose, hoping it still meant something in this country.

“We’ve got a serious situation in Old Metairie. Seniors trapped in their homes,” the second deputy said as he wandered over to cup his eyes and peer through the pickup’s passenger window. He was nearly as tall as Hodge, maybe six-feet-two, and sported a well-trimmed black mustache. Olive complexion, Italian heritage or a Cajun from out Hodge’s way. “Boss says we need more boats. He’s given us an order to go out and find some.”

Hodge knew about Old Metairie, the wealthy folk on the other side of the interstate from here. Manors hidden in live oak lanes, country clubs, long green fairways, lawn jockeys painted pink so they wouldn’t offend the help.

“I’m sorry, officer, I can’t give up my boat,” he said. “I built that thing with my own hands when I come back from the Nam.”

Took him a month to get it right. Fourteen feet of fir plywood, a handful of galvanized screws, fiberglass tape, and Epoxy glue, not much more than that. Except for the planing and sanding and three
coats of deck paint. Fishing was his solace in those early months after
the war.

“We’re really not asking for your permission, chief,” said the
deputy holding Hodge’s license.

At the sound of the first crank, the three of them turned. The
johnboat was floating aimlessly a dozen yards out in the floodwater,
Duval kneeling over the motor. He gave the rope another yank and
the old Mercury outboard sputtered again.

“Yo, dawg!” the tall deputy shouted, jogging toward the water
with his hand gripping the pistol holstered underneath his poncho.
“Bring that boat in!”

Duval didn’t look up. He pulled the rope again and the motor
coughed. Hodge could smell gasoline in the air. Homeboy had flood-
ed the engine.

“Me and my son-in-law need to be going,” he said to the deputy
standing beside him. Son-in-law was far from true, but it sounded bet-
ner than baby daddy crackhead that knocked up my daughter twice. “Can
I have my license back?”

The deputy reached under his poncho and withdrew a pair of
handcuffs. “You can step over here by the cruiser, chief,” he said,
“and put your hands behind your back.”