When I first saw Lionel Petrie, he was standing on the second-story porch of his house, at the junction of Desire Street and North Bunny Friend, in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. The house was built of wood, with white siding and peach trim. Petrie, an African-American with salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache, appeared to be in his sixties. A large Akita was standing next to him, ears perked vigilantly. The two of them looked out from across the fenced-in expanse of the front yard. Petrie was clearly an organized man: a painter’s ladder was dangling from the railing of the porch, and a clutch of orange life vests hung within reach of a fibreglass canoe that was tethered to the house. The canoe bobbed on the surface of the stinking black water that filled the street and had engulfed most of the first floor of the house. The spiked parapet of a wrought-iron fence poked up about eight inches above the waterline, etching out a formal square that separated the house from the street.

Petrie’s house was different from those of his neighbors, most of which were small brick row houses, or rundown clapboard houses that had deep porches flush with the street. His was set far back in the lot, and had a self-possessed air about it. Near the fence, in what must have been the driveway, the hoods of two submerged cars and a truck could be seen.

I was seated in the back of a four-person Yamaha WaveRunner that was piloted by Shawn Alladio, an energetic woman in her forties, with long blond hair, from Whittier, California. Eight days had passed since Hurricane Katrina made landfall, and Alladio was out on a search
for trapped survivors and for what rescuers were calling “holdouts”—residents who didn’t want to leave their homes—in one of the poorest and worst-hit parts of the city, the Ninth Ward, in eastern New Orleans.

Alladio maneuvered the WaveRunner so that we were alongside Petrie’s fence, and, after calling out a greeting to him, she asked him if he wanted to leave; he waved politely in response, but shook his head. She told him that the floodwater was toxic and that he would soon become sick. He said something in reply, but we couldn’t hear him because of the rumble of the WaveRunner’s idling engine. Alladio turned the ignition key off.

Petrie explained that his wife and son and daughter had left the city by car, heading for Baton Rouge, the day before Katrina hit. He didn’t know where his family was now, and, if he left, they wouldn’t know where he was. He said that he intended to wait for them to come back, and for the waters to go down.

Alladio told him that the authorities were not allowing people to return to this part of New Orleans, and that it might be a month before the waters receded. He listened carefully, nodded, and replied that he had stocks of food and some water; that he’d be all right—he’d wait. He patted his dog’s head. “Thank you, but I’ll be fine,” he said. Alladio tried again. “I can promise you that you will not see your family if you stay here,” she told him; it was much likelier that he would pass out and die from the fumes from the water.

He asked whether she would promise that he would be able to join his family.

Alladio paused, and said to me quietly, “I can’t promise him that. If I turn him over to the authorities, like the other evacuees, he could end up anywhere in the country.”

Turning back to Petrie, she asked, “If I drive you to Baton Rouge myself, will you come with me?”

“You would take me yourself?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I promise. Today, when I am done with my work, I will take you there.”

Petrie took a step back on his porch. He raised his head thoughtfully and asked, “Can I take my dog with me?”

“Oh, God,” Alladio said under her breath. “I hate this.” Then she said to him, “I am so sorry, Mr. Petrie, but, no, they won’t allow us to take out animals. You will have to leave him here.”

Petrie gripped the railing of the porch and leaned over again, in a kind of slow, sustained forward lurch, his head down. Then he nodded and said, “O.K.”

Alladio told Petrie to prepare a small bag with his essential belongings, to say goodbye to his dog and, if he wanted, put out some food and water for him. She would be back in an hour to pick him up; in the meantime, she needed to see if there were more people who needed
evacuating. He said, “O.K.,” and waved, and went back inside the house. The dog followed him.

Alladio had arrived in New Orleans on Saturday, September 3rd, with a team of California rescue workers and a small flotilla of donated WaveRunners. She and her team were loosely attached to a task force sent by the State of California, but were mostly on their own. We had met at a staging area underneath an elevated section of Interstate 10. As I arrived, evacuees were being brought out of the water to a slightly raised stretch of land where railroad tracks ran under the highway. A boat came up and deposited an elderly black couple. Rescuers carried the woman, who was wearing a denim skirt, a T-shirt, and gold earrings, and sat her down on a fallen telephone pole. She rocked back and forth, with one hand raised, and murmured, “I just want to tell you—thank you, Jesus.” Her husband walked over unsteadily to join her. They had stayed at home until just before the hurricane, and then gone to their church. As the water rose, they took refuge in the choir loft. They stayed there for eight days, drinking the water the storm washed in. “We were down to our last two crackers,” she said. Another man was brought over, shaking, and speaking incoherently. The only words I could make out were “I’m still alive.”

After putting on chest waders to protect ourselves from the fetid floodwaters—which Alladio warned me were “really gnarly”—we set off by boat from Interstate 10. Alladio wore a yellow marine safety helmet, camouflage pants tied at the ankles with drawstrings, and a tight black athletic shirt emblazoned with the logo “Liquid Militia.” I asked if that was her organization’s name, and she said, “No—it’s my clothing line.” She and a partner had recently begun selling “aquatic sportswear,” but her main business was training people in the use of WaveRunners. (“This is not a Jet Ski,” she had informed me, a little schoolmarmishly. “That’s a common mistake people make; this is a sport-utility vessel.”) She had named her company K38, after a spot on the Pacific Coast of Baja California—“Kilometer 38,” she said—where her father had surfed in the nineteen-fifties. Alladio had trained lifeguards, firemen, and “big wave” surfers in water safety and rescue, she said, but since 9/11 she had found herself doing more with the military, working with specialized U.S. Navy units involved in counterterrorism.

We passed cargo yards, electrical pylons, and houses with tar-paper roofs that had water halfway up the windows, and other houses that were completely submerged. When we came to the intersection of Louisa Street and Higgins Boulevard, the street signs were at eye level and the traffic lights were barely above the surface of the water. We passed a house with a shattered plate-glass window. Peering down into the living room, I saw a sofa floating near a framed photo of Muhammad Ali standing triumphantly over Sonny Liston. At a community swimming pool, a lifeguard seat poked just above the waters. We passed a rowboat carrying two white men
and being towed by a black man with dreadlocks, up to his neck in water. Later, we saw them again; all three were in the boat now, and were paddling with broken street signs.

It was a clear, hot day, and the floodwater smelled strongly of oil and raw sewage, and stung the eyes. There were other smells, from islands of rotting garbage, and, intermittently, as elsewhere in the city, the smell of death. Helicopters had been clattering overhead all morning, some of them dumping buckets of water on house fires that had broken out everywhere. Scudding columns of brown and gray smoke shot up from half a dozen points around the city. The towers of downtown New Orleans were visible in the distance.

Until the nineteenth century, the Ninth Ward was a swamp, and, even after it became home to a black and immigrant white community, and was drained (in that order), it was periodically devastated by flooding. During Hurricane Betsy, in 1965, it was hit harder than most of the city, and was underwater for days. The neglect of the Ninth Ward by the city government was notorious; well into the twentieth century, it lacked adequate sewers and clean water. The Norman Rockwell image that the Ninth Ward inspired was that of the first grader Ruby Bridges, a tiny black girl in a white dress, who was led to school by federal marshals past jeering white crowds—a chapter in a violent desegregation struggle that divided the city in the nineteen-sixties. In the next decades, many of the white residents of the Ninth Ward left; by the time Katrina hit, almost all the students in the school that Ruby Bridges integrated were black.

At 2037 Desire, a block past Petrie’s home, three people stood on the second-floor porch of a large wooden house: a bulky young woman in a white blouse, with dyed orange hair, and tattoos on one arm; a young man with copper skin in a lilac polo shirt, smoking a cigarette; and an old man who was bare-chested except for a pair of red suspenders. The ground floor was flooded and a sign above it said, “Winner Supermarket—ATM Inside.” Alladio hailed them and repeated the argument that she had made to Petrie. The young man said that his name was Theron Green, and that he and his father, Alfred Green, the old man, and his fiancée—Trinell Sanson, the tattooed woman—were fine, and were planning to stay. They also had a friend inside the house, they said. Theron Green spoke in a thick local accent, and his eyes were alert and suspicious. He was clearly anxious for us to leave. “We feel comfortable, safe in our own house here,” he said. “Anyway, I don’t want no looter motherfuckers coming here.” Alladio told him that there would soon be forced evacuations, but Green was adamant. “I’ll wait till they force me out, then,” he said. Trinell Sanson said, “We’re fine. If it gets too bad, we’ll catch the helicopter.” As we moved off, Green called out to Alladio, telling her that there were some people up the street who wanted to be rescued.

We found them a block farther along Desire. Alladio was able to bring the boat right up to the porch: the front steps had disappeared into the water. A young man named Tyrone Williams said he had thought he could stick it out. Two other men emerged from the house and leaned on
the porch railing, followed by a mentally disabled woman wearing a purple T-shirt and clutching a plastic bag. Williams explained that the woman was Detre, the sister of one of the other men, Cordell West. The third man said that his name was John Singletary, and that he was eighty-seven years old. “Born in 1918,” he announced. “I been through a long time, but I never saw something like this.” He had come to Williams’s house after his own house, on the next block, was swamped. “I got a good Cutlass there, runs good, and my sister lives in Amite”—just seventy miles away. Alladio asked why he hadn’t left before the storm. Singletary shrugged and laughed. “Old crazy fool,” he said. “Should’ve went but I didn’t.”

While we waited for Williams and the others to get ready, a large high-wheeled dump truck with a dozen or so Louisiana State Police officers in it—all white men, carrying guns and wearing surgical gloves—came sloshing slowly down Desire. They maneuvered the truck toward the house until the water got too deep. One by one, the evacuees were transferred from the porch to the WaveRunner and then to the bed of the dump truck. An agent took Detre’s plastic bag and tossed it into the truck’s bay. One of the officers threw me a can of fluorescent-orange spray paint. He told me to spray a large X on the façade of the house and the date “09/06” in the top cleft of the X, “LSP,” for Louisiana State Police, at the left, and, at the bottom, “4-live”—four people recovered alive. When I was done, the truck headed slowly toward the evacuation point under Interstate 10, and Alladio and I returned for Lionel Petrie.

Alladio warned me not to get spattered by the floodwater. “The people who have been in this are going to get sick,” she said. The Environmental Protection Agency had teams out taking water samples to check for toxins, and the rumor—apparently unfounded—was that entire districts were so contaminated that they would have to be razed, along with hundreds of thousands of vehicles. The people who lived there might not realize it, she said, “but once they leave they are never going to see their homes again.” Occasionally, she circled messes of floating debris, looking for bodies. “You may not even recognize them at first,” she said. “They’ll usually be round.” If a body got caught on something underwater, there might be bubbles rising from the gases in the corpse. We eased past a flooded pickup with a strand of yellow police “caution” tape looped around it; the windows were fogged, so we couldn’t see in, but Alladio figured that the police had found a body in the cab, and had marked it.

We passed groups of dogs that had been left behind; some stood on the roofs of submerged, smashed houses, others were stranded on flotsam; they looked emaciated and listless, as if ready for death. The dogs were not being shot, Alladio said: “If Americans saw National Guardsmen on television shooting dogs they’d raise a huge fuss.” Around the corner from Tyrone Williams’s house, a pit bull, a Rottweiler, and a tiny Pekinese looked attentively at us as we passed by. The pit bull looked as if it might lunge, and we gave it a wide berth. As the boat
crossed another avenue, we spotted a dog trying to swim, its head just above the water. It was struggling. “If I had a gun, I’d shoot it,” Alladio said.

When we returned to Petrie’s house, he was packed and waiting for us on the second-floor porch, dressed in slacks, a fresh unbuttoned shirt over a T-shirt, and a Marine Corps baseball cap. He leaned down to his dog, took both its ears in his hands and caressed them, and then told the dog to go inside. Petrie climbed into the canoe and began paddling over to us. The dog reëmerged on the balcony, appearing disconcerted and watchful. Petrie did not look back. He came alongside the fence and we helped him first with a bag and then with a little black case that he said had his wife’s Bible in it. “I know she’d want me to bring that,” he said. He climbed onto the WaveRunner behind me. Alladio gave the vessel a little power, and we began moving off.

As we made our way down Desire, Petrie looked around him at the devastation, his neighbors’ houses submerged in water. He said, “Oh, my God. I had no idea.”

I asked him why he hadn’t left earlier. “You tell yourself that the waters are going to recede, and when they don’t one day you say maybe they will the next,” he answered.

The waters had subsided somewhat after the initial surge, he said. Then he had noticed, as the days went by, that there was an ebb and flow to them, as if a tide were moving in and out. To his mind, the city had become part of Lake Pontchartrain. He had heard on the radio about the levees breaking. When the electricity went out, he had listened to the radio each night, but had turned it off after a little while, to save his batteries.

As we spoke, he seemed to be trying to make sense of his own reaction to the catastrophe. He had understood logically that he was stranded and in danger, and yet he had decided that his first priority was to remain and prepare the house for his family’s return: “Pretty crazy, huh? I even started repairing my roof.” About a third of the roof had been torn away by the hurricane, and he had worked for several days patching it up while the city lay underwater. During that time, other rescuers—police officers—had come and urged him to leave, but because of the way one of them had spoken to him (“It was pretty ugly,” he told me) he had refused.

When we passed Theron Green’s house, he and his father and his fiancée waved and smiled at Petrie. Green’s friend had now emerged. He held out an empty tin of dipping tobacco and said, “No Copenhagen?” As we went on, Petrie laughed, recalling that a few days earlier a man had appeared making his way down the center of Desire Street in water up to his shoulders. “And you know what he was looking for? A beer.” Petrie shook his head.

Petrie told me that he was worried about his aunt Willa Mae Butler: “She’s about eighty-two, and lives on Bartholomew Street. I’m worried that she’s dead, because this time she said she wasn’t going.”
As we travelled slowly back toward Interstate 10, avoiding debris and downed electrical lines, Petrie began calling out landmarks. He had lived in the neighborhood his entire life. As a child, he had lived on Louisa Street. He pointed to a building that he said was the primary school he had attended from kindergarten through eighth grade. Coming out onto the vast expanse of water that was Florida Avenue, Petrie gestured to a trailer across the road. Two days before Katrina, someone had murdered two men in that trailer, he said. One of them was a man he knew, who had owned a wrought-iron business. Petrie was also in the wrought-iron business; he was a fabricator and a welder, and he and the other man had made many of the fences and wrought-iron grilles for the houses in the neighborhood. “I made a pretty good living,” he said, and then added, “Things change.”

By now, he was reconciled to his rescue. “I think the good Lord sent you to me,” he said. “I am looking forward to seeing my wife!” Her name was Mildred. He was sixty-four and Mildred was sixty-one. They had married when she was seventeen and he was twenty. “Everyone said we wouldn’t last, but we’ve been together forty-five years, and this is the first time we have been apart.”

A few minutes later, Petrie suddenly remembered, to his distress, that he had forgotten to hide his gun before leaving the house. It was a .357 Magnum revolver, he said. “I meant to hide it, so the crazies wouldn’t get it.” He had spent his nights awake in the house, he told me, afraid that he would be attacked by the criminals in his neighborhood. In the past week, he had slept about two hours each night, a few minutes at a time. No one had come, although bodies had floated by. One had got caught on his fence, and he had sat there, watching it, waiting for it to drift away, for about two hours. He was about to get into his canoe and push it away with a stick, he said, when the current finally took it.

After we landed, Shawn Alladio went out on one more tour of the neighborhood to see if there was anyone else to bring in. While we waited for her to return, Petrie and I sat in my rented van in the shade under Interstate 10. Nearby, rescuers stripped down and washed in solutions of water and bleach.

Petrie spoke about his neighborhood. It had once been a good place, he said, but, beginning sometime in the early nineteen-nineties, it had turned bad. He blamed federal housing programs for concentrating young, jobless, uneducated people together in the same area. Those who weren’t bad turned bad, he said, and they had turned the others bad, too.

Petrie told me about his own children. Lionel, his namesake, forty-three years old, had been in the Marine Corps for fifteen years and served in the first Gulf War. He had been an aviation mechanic, but when he got out he couldn’t get a job, so he went back to school, at the University of New Orleans, where he was pursuing an undergraduate degree when the hurricane arrived. Lionel owned two houses, one just blocks away from Petrie’s, which he rented out.
Petrie’s second son, Bruce, who was thirty-eight, had also been a marine, had an accounting degree, and worked as a shelter supervisor for Girls and Boys Town. Bruce had driven out of the city with his wife and children before Katrina. Petrie smiled when he spoke of his daughter, Crystal, who was twenty-one. She was studying nursing in New Orleans. Lionel had driven her and their mother out of the city.

Petrie hadn’t gone to college; he got hired at a shipyard right after high school. After a couple of years, he decided to train as a welder. “For a year, I went to welders’ school from 8 a.m. to noon and worked at American Marine from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. Got my certificate as a certified welder around 1962. I went to several places looking for a job as a welder, but never got hired.” When, in 1965, Petrie went to apply for a job at Equitable Equipment, near his home, he saw white welders being hired even as he was told that the only openings were for laborers. He contacted the local N.A.A.C.P. and filed a complaint with the newly formed Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. “They took an interest in my case, and I was the first black to be hired as a skilled worker by Equitable,” he said. “I would sit down to eat my lunch and the white guys would go sit somewhere else. I didn’t care—I was just there to do my job.” After working for a decade at Equitable, and then at Kaiser Aluminum until 1983, when it shut down its Louisiana operations, he decided to set up his own business, Petrie Iron and Construction. He didn’t have insurance, though, and he figured that he’d lost everything.

Later that evening, Alladio drove Petrie and me to Baton Rouge in a rented pickup, towing her WaveRunner behind her. She had been told that forced evacuations would begin soon, and that the operation would shift toward law enforcement. She was leaving the next day.

In his exhaustion, Petrie had not been able to remember any telephone numbers, but, as we drove along, cell-phone numbers for his son Bruce and his daughter came back to him. I handed him my phone, and a minute later I heard him say, “They’re in Memphis!”

When he hung up, he said that his wife and daughter were staying in Memphis at a cousin’s house. Lionel had already found some temporary factory work. Bruce was staying with his wife’s family, in Kentucky. Willa Mae Butler, Petrie’s aunt, was alive and in Texas. Bruce was going to look on the Internet for a flight for his father from Baton Rouge to Memphis.

A little while later, as we drove into the night, Petrie said reflectively, “I don’t know if I want to go back to New Orleans—seeing it how it was, I don’t think I do.” He doubted, from what he had seen, that much of it could ever be rebuilt. “The first thing I picture now is the water I saw when I was coming out,” he said.

A few minutes afterward, Bruce called back to say that the next available flight was in three days’ time. Alladio suggested that we try the Greyhound station instead. It was already late when we arrived at the scruffy little bus station in Baton Rouge, full of refugees from New Orleans. I joined a long line of people waiting for information and tickets. Half an hour later, it
had barely moved. A man and a woman were arguing, and when the stationmaster called for passengers for Houston, I heard the man tell her, “I don’t care what you say—I’m getting on that bus.” After he left, the woman leaned against a pillar and wiped her eyes. A tall man with a stack of religious tracts was reciting Psalms from memory, and a woman made subdued sounds of agreement or said, “That’s right,” in a rhythmic cadence. Two policemen patrolled the station; there were a number of young men who looked street-wise and seemed to be loitering among the waiting passengers.

Around midnight, Bruce called again. He had resolved to drive down from Kentucky to get his father. He would leave shortly with his wife, Donna. Lionel Petrie would wait for them in the Greyhound station. Bruce thought that if he and Donna took turns driving they could make the trip in twelve hours. They were there by noon the next day. ♦

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