

# NAKED

Stripped by a Man and Hurricane Katrina

**A Memoir**  
JULIE FREED

## LANDFALL

*Monday 29 August*

*6 a.m. - Katrina made landfall on the Mississippi coast as a strong Category 4 storm, with sustained winds of nearly 145 mph and predicted coastal storm surge of up to 28 feet.*

My first panic attack struck. Heart pushed from my ribs and the arteries throbbed in my throat. My pounding chest was visible through my T-shirt. Katrina's winds raged outside the little brick building. It was 9am, and I needed to go lay down to try to catch my breath. Laura said she would watch Genoa. I lay on my sleeping-bag on the floor. The ceiling fan slow and hypnotic rotated above me. Rhythmic loud ticking of the pull cord whirred. My right arm cradled my head, the other hand on my stomach. The coffee still on my tongue, but my mouth was dry, my hands clammy. My heart raced faster. Radio voices faded in and out.

*Do not leave your home. If you have not evacuated yet, do not leave your home. Widespread flooding across the entire area, anything south of I-10 is dangerous ...*

We were south of I-10. The night before, we looked out the back door to see I-10. All traffic was east bound. Now the interstate was empty. The skies were bright but heavy gusts of wind lifted the gutters of our little refuge. More radio voices.

*Reports of tornadoes and touch downs in ... (static) ... we are currently on a generator, and we're going to stay with you as long as we can, giving whatever help and information ... shelters are open at the following locations, but again if you are safe and not in immediate danger, stay put until this thing is finished ...*

Spinning, I replayed my last conversation with Conner.

“Julie, I think you’re all going to die. The Army Corp has predicted the whole coast will be flooded. Everything south of 10 will be gone. You’re all going to die! I’m so worried about you. I don’t even know where your life insurance policy is. And I don’t know anything about our home insurance.” Deep breaths.

I wondered what he was doing in Miami Beach. I wondered how my family was coping. Were they all watching the same news? A radio voice came across again. Barely audible, he broadcasted from a multi-level parking garage on the beach. The winds blew, and waves crashed loud. Between the background noise and static, Jim switched the radio off. I heard him say bleakly, “Enough for now.”

I tried to relax. One year old Genoa asked Laura to color with her while she played in a cardboard box. Giggles, and the dog romping around the two of them. I felt guilty as I tried to rest.

My heart beat on the outside of my ribcage. Jim entered the one bathroom across from where I lay. This was doing me no good. Replaying, rethinking, rehashing, regurgitating. Done, I needed distraction.

The power went out.

I sat up, took some deep breaths, and evaluated. I had the Baby Bjorn with me. I could strap Genoa to my chest and swim out if needed. Sweetie would fend for herself and I could tie her leash to me while she swam beside us. We were across the street from a fire house that had a generator going with their lights on. Plenty of brawny men and women were there to help us if needed. I took a deep breath, my breathing still short. My Genoa would be okay.

My whirling mind only made my heart race faster. I stood. I’d rather be sharing small talk and nervous jokes with Jim and Laura. It

was light outside so we could see the trees being pinned down by wind and small flying debris.

The winds howled. The gutters lifted. All the windows were boarded up but we opened the back door and saw I-10 in the distance, with not a car in sight. We were on high ground a mile or so from the Gulf of Mexico. Many times the storm seemed to subside completely, but then picked up again. Katrina rained and raged around our little house from early morning until almost 4pm.

Jim and I itched with impatience to get back to our houses and assess the damage. Since the storm had been ebbing and flowing all day, it was hard to tell if it had fully passed or not. We waited 20 minutes and decided Katrina was finished. We were ready to head back home. We snickered about whether we should bring our house keys or not. Perhaps the doors were blown open anyway? We shrugged and brought them.

Laura, Jim, Genoa, and I piled in their car and started driving south. Business signs were beaten by the wind, overhangs at gas stations mangled or forcefully removed. Debris covered the street, but it didn't seem too bad. Genoa fell asleep minutes after we pulled away.

We drove about half a mile and came over a small hill to meet Paix Bayou, a waterway parallel to the Gulf. Peninsulas in both directions covered with homes facing both north and south on both sides of the large bayou, stretching almost half mile wide. Large beautiful Mediterranean mansions, Southern antebellum homes - all under water. The waves crashed up the sides of the bridge we were about to cross. This was no longer Paix Bayou. It was the Gulf of Mexico. The Bayou had been engulfed. The raging waves of water seemed to be receding, but it was hard to tell anything when former landmarks were not visible.

We looked at ravaged houses. Entire homes were torn from their foundations. Walls ripped away exposing two floors. The private spaces - bedrooms, bathrooms - were on display without permission. That someone might have drowned, might be up the street - Genoa might have one day gone to school with their child. That someone could be me. The pain I felt was deep anguish and sadness.

Clothing strewn about and appliances floated in the water. Laura saw a bar stool she thought was theirs, but we were still over a mile from our homes. The private lives, the secrets of others, floated in the water before me. The chairs used for family dinners where everyone knew their place, the front porch swing where Papa sat, the chair

Mama used to sit in and read to the children, the stepping stool used by generations at the kitchen sink, the fishing rods that Grandpa used. Naked. Suddenly we were naked. Everyone was naked. Lives exposed. I could see it all. I felt I should not be looking.

Parts of homes, parts of lives, floating, exposed for all to see. My family had always been so private and protective of our world. Katrina was hyper exposure, a complete revealing.

We three sat up as close to the car windows as we could. Jim leaned over the steering wheel as if in a race, yet he drove with extreme caution. He gripped the wheel, his hands' veins visible. He moved with caution and precision. Waves splashed onto the bridge as we crossed. The wind hammered us; full gusts felt inside the SUV. Giant veils of wind-driven water developed in the distance. Trees and marsh grass moved in its wake before reaching us. Amidst the chaos and reorganization of our world, there was a rhythm. Katrina's deep pulse beat heavily. We opened the car windows slightly and inched forward

The air tasted delicious. I swallowed and felt her deep inside me, filling me up. She was full of energy. We were explorers in her world. She led us. The ominous excitement frightening and invigorating, teased us forward. We moved with care; we were respectful and vigilant. We knew we were not in charge. Jim was a protector, a business leader, a strong man, kind, and reverent, but like all of us, he was a follower now. He made sure we wanted to go forward, especially with Genoa in the car . . .

## CONTACTS AND LINKS

[FreedNaked@gmail.com](mailto:FreedNaked@gmail.com)

[JulieFreedAuthor.com](http://JulieFreedAuthor.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/julie.freed.180>

[@JulieFreed](#)

<http://www.pinterest.com/juliefreed180/>

book trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCQ-KqYDmj8>