

THE LOWER NINTH WARD has always been the city's poorest and least racially diverse neighborhood. Prior to the storm, it was home to the marginally employed, and very poorly paid, faceless workers that kept the city's service industries running. They made beds, washed dishes, dug ditches, stocked shelves, and did whatever it took to put food on their tables. The children of these hard workers didn't always want to work so hard for so little money. This attitude led to drug dealing and escalating crime in the neighborhood in the years proceeding Hurricane Katrina. Gang turf battles had killed or wounded hundreds of people. The de facto moat formed by the Industrial Canal made it possible for the city's white majority population to consider the problem of the brutal Black on Black violence to be contained. To be perfectly honest, it allowed many of them to imagine a day when the Lower Ninth Ward might finally kill itself off.

Katrina physically flushed everyone from the neighborhood. This gave rise to both a new hope for the community and a shaming of those who wanted to keep its law abiding and hard-working residents from ever returning. Repatriation had been the central issue of the 2005 mayoral election. The vast majority of homes lost to the storm were family owned, but poorly insured. It took efforts by groups like Make It Right and the Musician's Village to get the rebuilding process started. It also took activists and loudmouths like Esther and Lionel Batiste to keep it moving.

The new home Miss J, Esther, and Lionel Batiste stay by on Deslonde Street is built like a fort against future storms. The thunderstorm I drove through to get to their house seemed determined to test the floodwalls that the Corps of Engineers insisted on patting itself on the back about. They had rebuilt every broken section of floodwall within a year, and proudly proclaimed that they were "as good as" the ones that had failed so spectacularly. I was driving the bistro's Ford Raptor pickup truck because my low-slung Cadillac coupe doesn't have the ground clearance to handle even the city's normal street flooding. This storm was expected to last for days and was going to make a mess.

The Batistes' living quarters are twelve feet above ground level and built atop thirty five foot deep pilings. Only a place to park their ancient Crown Victoria and a storage shed are at ground level. The primary construction materials are storm-resistant masonry and steel. The metal roof is lined with solar panels. A lot of attention went into every aspect of its durable construction, but almost none into making it look like the shotgun house it replaced.

Lionel Batiste opened the door a crack when I knocked. I stepped past the lanky twenty-five year old and looked around the open-concept interior. The Batiste's interior decorating appeared to have been handled by one of the local buy-on-credit furniture stores that advertise on late night television. A heavy sectional sofa and glass and bronzed-metal coffee table faced the living room's black metal TV stand and flat panel TV. The dining room table had metal legs and chairs with plastic cane-look seatbacks. The art on the walls only qualified as "art" because the pictures were in metal frames. Each room reflected the Batiste family's tastes and budget, but the decorating hardly conformed to what the architect in mind.

"Your aunt asked me to come talk to you about someone trying to buy your house." My explanation lessened the scowl on Lionel's face.

"It's all good. Let Cooter in," Esther shouted from behind him. "We don't keep the only good NOPD cop in the city standing in the rain."

"I work for the State Police, not NOPD," I explained to Lionel.

"That's supposed to be better?" I felt confident in assuming he had a bad history with the police in the past. A disturbingly high percentage of the city's young men have criminal records full of misdemeanors simply because they caught some cop's eye the wrong way.

"Not really. I just want to be sure you hate me for all the right reasons." I hoped a combination of sarcasm and honesty might get me through the interview.

“Cop’s a cop,” Lionel muttered and let me past. I finally understood why we had never spoken when he dropped by the bistro to see his aunt. He had absolutely nothing to say to me.

Esther Batiste was in the kitchen. She is a heavy-set woman in her sixties, with Type-2 diabetes and kidney problems. She pointed to the counter separating the dining room from the kitchen. I took a seat on one of the tall wooden stools while she rummaged around in a stack of papers next to the refrigerator. Lionel sat down at the dining room table behind me. He sat so I could sense he was staring at me and had positioned himself so I had to turn to address him.

“This is what they sent us.” Esther handed me a large envelope. She flashed her son a reproachful look. My taking the time to come here and listen to their concerns obviously did nothing to change Lionel’s opinion of policemen in general.

I studied the large white envelope before I emptied its contents on the countertop. It was sized so the contents could lie flat, which made them seem a bit more formal and intimidating. The logo beside the return address was a square red box with the letters CSA and the words ‘A Holding Company’ in bold white letters. It was likely a shell corporation. The return address was printed on the envelope with an elegant, dark grey font. The address was on the forty-third floor of a building in Mobile, Alabama. I had been in Mobile in the past year and could remember no building anywhere near that height. This was likely a letter-drop address meant to further conceal the actual nature of CSA.

The contents of the envelope weren’t much help. There was a very cleverly written letter of introduction about the company and its mission. Even the company’s mission statement failed to explain their real purpose. CSA Holdings billed itself as a real estate investment group looking for opportunities to develop not just homes but entire communities. I wondered if they were buying here to be able to show a loss to offset some far more lucrative development’s profits.

The holding company’s cash offer was two hundred and sixty thousand dollars for the Batistes’ home and lot. It seemed like a great deal of money for a three bedroom home in this part of town. It also sounded like a once in a lifetime opportunity for the family to move to a much nicer part of town. It did not seem like an intelligent investment for experienced real estate investors make. I could see nothing to be gained by the holding company in making an offer to buy the Batiste’s home, much less their entire neighborhood.

“What do you think?” Esther barely let me put the packet back together before she wanted my opinion.

“I think it is the best offer you will ever get if you want to sell.”

“Well, we don’t.” I knew this without Lionel’s telling me so.

“Your sister told me that the company wants to buy all of the houses the Make-It-Right Foundation built.”

“That’s right. Everyone on this street got one of these,” Esther confirmed. “They all came to me to see what we should do.”

“What did you tell them?”

“To do nothing at all. I wanted to find someone who could find out what these people are really after.”

“Is anyone else buying renovated houses in this neighborhood?”

“Yes, but that’s some other company.” Esther said this as though she understood there were implications in the fact that the offer made on her home was only made on the homes the Make It Right Foundation had erected. There were only sixteen homes on this street. Three more were under construction. Brad Pitt’s pet project had a long ways to go to get to the hundred and fifty houses that had been promised. Still, buying just the finished homes at the price being offered was going to cost CSA well over three million

dollars.

"Can I borrow this?" I pointed to the packet. "I need someone better at the business end of this to give me an opinion. I'm with you, though. It doesn't make any sense for someone to spend this much money to buy these houses."

"You don't think they're worth that much?" I had stepped on another trap in Lionel's mine field.

"I think they are worth far more than that to the families living in them. I also think the same amount of money spent on the other side of Claiborne would buy a lot more houses. If they really want to buy a community and not just houses they should be spending their money somewhere over there."

Lionel couldn't find a way to attack that tactful response.

"Did you ever find out what happened to your daddy after the storm?" Esther changed the subject on me. Ralph is my father's name.

"I found someone that said he died pulling folks out of the East right after the storm. I don't think we'll ever find his body." This was my practiced response to the question. What I actually found out was that he was shot by a private security contractor who later joined the FBI. The combination of me exposing the agent's crime, and his death shortly thereafter in a suspicious car accident, had made an enemy of FBI Special Agent in Charge Michael Conroy. I was sure that Chief Avery's current problems were related to all of this. "I remember he always said the Batistes were his favorite 'Angry Black Women'. Supposedly, you two could raise a ruckus when you felt you needed to be heard."

"True dat!" Lionel finally found something to agree with me about.

"I guess I should be glad that I'm not the one making you mad about trying to buy your house." I tried to joke.

"Lionel and me be mad already," Esther said. She waved for me to follow her around the corner to the living room.

The wall usually reserved for family pictures had been transformed into what looked like a situation room from my military days. White boards dotted with post-it notes and handwritten comments covered the wall. A piece of plywood set atop a pair of two-drawer file cabinets served as a desk. A computer, monitor, and printer competed for space with stacks of file folders. I looked over the materials without touching anything.

"What's all of this for?" I finally had to ask. All of the materials were about the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. There were newspaper clippings, official reports, Freedom of Information documents, and lots of photos clipped from magazines and newspapers.

"Lionel's writing a book about the Convention Center. There's lots of books out there about white people during Katrina, but nobody wants to hear about the time Black folk spent in that place. It's time somebody stepped up to the plate and told the story. Nobody wants to know what they done to us then, and what they are still trying to do to us."

"What are they still trying to do?" I only meant to show I was listening.

"They want to get rid of everyone that ever lived here or over in the Treme," Lionel was the one giving voice to this familiar story line.

"What makes you think anyone is still trying to kick you out?"

"They been buying up houses along the levee all the way back to the Quarter. They fix the houses up and sell them for a bunch more money than they paid for 'em. Folks can't even afford to rent a home here no more."

"Who is this 'they' you keep talking about? Can you give me a name? Is it companies like this CSA Holdings or do you mean somebody specific, maybe somebody local?"

I figured one or the other of the pair had at least one name to spit on the ground.

"How about Alex Boudreaux?" Lionel was still doing the speaking. I was vaguely aware of the guy, and that he had been flipping houses by the score since the storm. I'd seen his name on the bistro's reservations list. My sister graduated a couple of years after him at

Tulane law school. She thought him to be unusually greedy and shallow.

“You know the Government and City Council wanted to keep us from moving back here after the storm. People still be trying to keep us from moving back. Now the city started in to bulldozing people’s houses if they ain’t moved back yet.” Esther was beginning to show her legendary anger.

“I do remember that being an issue.” Most of the mayoral candidates in the election held just months after the storm advocated rebuilding the city on a far smaller footprint. The only candidate who wanted the whole city back was the incumbent mayor, and he was always going to be remembered for his ‘Chocolate City’ comments.

“I think offering to buy our house is part of a bigger plan to get rid of everyone down here once and for all,” Esther said in a calmer voice.

“I’ll look into it, but I gotta tell you what I wanted to tell your sister. Buying houses is not against the law. Paying too much for them definitely isn’t.”

“Maybe not,” Esther said and nudged me towards the door. “But what ought to be illegal ain’t always a crime, neither.

