

ORPHANS OF THE STORM

By

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September, 2005:

"What do you think we should do? Where can we go?" Pastor Jorge Cardenas, my brother-in-law, turned to me, his brow creased in concern. The two of us stared at the flattened-out road map on the carpeted stage floor at '*Church on the Rock*', in Katy, Texas.

Some others who were at the just-finished Wednesday-evening service on this September 21, 2005 evening were still milling around, talking about the subject that was foremost on everyone's mind: '*Hurricane Rita*', the monster storm offshore in the Gulf of Mexico that was churning toward the Texas coast as a '*Category-Five*' hurricane. With memories still fresh of '*Hurricane Katrina*' that had just devastated New Orleans a few days earlier, no one wanted to stay in Katy, Texas, just west of Houston. In two days the storm was supposed to strike the coast to the south and west of the town, then move inland.

"If the storm is supposed to go north after it comes to land, then the people who go toward Dallas will be in heavy rain for days," I said, "I believe we should go toward the west." I pointed at a spot on the map. "Cecilia and I went to Fredericksburg last year---it has a lot of hotel space for a small town and would be out of the way of the storm . . . if we go '*west*' instead of north, the hurricane will pass us by and we can get back sooner."

By now, others were crowding around. "We're going with you," Sunni Kumar said. His wife, Helen, who stood with an anxious look on her face, holding their newborn daughter, gazed about at the others, who were nodding. Everyone was worried about the storm.

Pastor Jorge stood up. "We are going to Fredericksburg," he announced to the others, who looked relieved to have a plan to escape the oncoming storm. "Let us all meet at the church at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

A half-hour later, another little group was staring in consternation at a television screen as the Houston TV weatherman (whose dog usually made the forecasts) was telling his viewers that the "*Category-Five*" hurricane would pass right over Katy in about thirty hours with sustained winds of 171 miles per hour and 220-mile-an-hour gusts! Based on what had happened in New Orleans and along the Mississippi and Alabama Gulf Coasts with Hurricane Katrina, staying in Katy was out of the question. "We are leaving, too!" Chiqui Alcozer told her husband, Tony, "this is too scary, now."

"I have to finish putting the plywood on the windows," Tony told her, "we will go a little later than the others." Not everyone agreed with him, but he was firm.

At home, Cecilia logged onto the Internet's reservation websites. All had the same unwelcome information: "No Vacancies" were the rule everywhere in north Texas. In fact, the nearest available accomodations, according to some sources, were in El Paso, 750 miles away!

Undeterred by this, Cecilia called the "Fredericksburg Inn", where she and I had been the previous summer and pleaded with the reservations clerk. Four rooms were still available (for one night only), that Cecilia reserved in a hurry with a credit card.

At dawn the next morning, Bobby, our son, called to say he was headed west on "Interstate 10": the "Katy Freeway", that he described as a madhouse. With him were his wife, Mitzy; their daughter, Rebecca; Mitzy's parents, Carlos and Martha Acosta, and Mitzy's brother, Santiago. At seven, he called again to say they had only gotten as far as Katy Mills Mall, about five miles farther on, and had already used half a tank of gas! Cecilia talked him out of turning around; he said he would press on. Not long afterward, he called once more to report that they were on the "Old Highway 90" that paralleled the freeway, and were making better time.

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At eleven o'clock our five-vehicle caravan pulled out from "Church on the Rock", in the eastern part of the Katy area. We skirted "Katy Mills Mall", and headed westward on "Old 90", where the traffic soon became bumper-to-bumper. The molasses-like procession was barely creeping along---after an hour, we had only gone the seven miles to Brookshire, where complete gridlock became the order of the day. Adding to the misery was the heat, which, according to the radio, was the hottest day on record for the date. One report said it was 103 degrees. After two more hours of sweltering stop-and-go, we had made it only twenty miles to the outskirts of the town of Sealy, where the old highway joined up and ran alongside the freeway. By now, some of the other vehicles around us were beginning to stall from overheating and from running out of gas. The radio said emergency fuel trucks were on the way. After several hours on the road, people were relieving themselves beside their stationary cars. All around, embers were flaring.

By now, it was obvious there were no longer any advantages to being on "Old 90"---the freeway vehicles seemed to be moving faster. I led the way onto the first available entrance ramp and the "Church on the Rock" caravan joined the soon-to-be-famous freeway traffic mob leading out of Houston. We thus became part of what was later deemed to be the largest mass-evacuation in American history.

As soon as we were on the westbound freeway, traffic began running *eastbound* on the westbound feeder lanes our cars had just vacated. The Highway Patrol were re-routing eastbound lanes to allow westbound traffic, and the eastbound traffic was now using the westbound feeder. Although it looked confusing, the traffic flow smoothed out and moved faster..

In about another hour, we reached the "Highway 71" exit that led toward Austin. Around that time, our group's vehicles became separated. We learned by cellphone that, although we were no longer together, everyone was still headed in the right direction. Soon after turning up Highway 71, we came onto another line of slow-moving vehicles. Dozens of cars, were mobbing a fuel yard, and the line had backed up onto the highway.

Cecilia, Adolfo, Yolanda and I, plus our dog, Kelly, who was along for the adventure, finally reached Fredericksburg at about 8:30 PM, the last vehicle of our group to arrive that night. By the end of the next day, there were in Fredericksburg a total of thirty-eight storm refugees from Church on the Rock.

At check-in that first night, the desk clerk at the Fredericksburg Inn reminded us that our reservations were good for *one night only*, and were for a mere four rooms. *A quartet of rooms for a dozen or more different families* Sorting out the sleeping arrangements made for some interesting sleeping combinations of families. To further complicate matters, in addition to our dog, there were several other pets along for the trip, all of whom ended up in the same room, tended by a willing teenager.

The next day, Friday, Cecilia managed to convince the inn manager to give us three of the

four rooms to our group for several more nights. The fourth room wouldn't again be available until Saturday night. As Cecilia, Adolfo and Yolanda, plus myself, were in the fourth room, we were the "odd-man-out" for Friday night.

After many telephone calls, we found a family several miles out of town with a spare couple of rooms they would let us use for one night without charge(!). After a late dinner, we arrived at the isolated rural location about ten miles south of Fredericksburg. The owners were already asleep, so we crept into our quarters. The next morning, we met our benefactors for the first time, a retired Navycouple who served us breakfast (again, free---those people were terrific hosts for some desperateguests). In the late morning, we bid our hospitable new acquaintences farewell and drove back to town, where the desk clerk at the Fredericksburg Inn told us they had a suite available for us at the regular room-rate for the next several nights.

In the late-morning everyone piled into vehicles and headed north seventeen miles to "Enchanted Rocks State Park" While we drove along, radio news reports said that the hurricane had changed course and was lashing southeastern Louisiana. Meantime, all we felt, under a clear blue sky, was a gentle breeze.

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As it turned out, we rode out the storm in fine fashion---at the last moment, the hurricane had indeed veered toward the east, sparing Katy and most of the Houston area. We were in Fredericksburg until the following Monday afternoon, during which time we ate (and drank) well and checked out all the boutique stores in and around the old German-founded town. On "Enchanted Rock" we even held a service of thanksgiving at an oasis-like clump of trees clinging onto the side of the huge granite monolith (the third biggest block of granite in the world after the "Rock of Gibraltar" and a granite mountain in "Zion National Park" in southern Utah). It could be said it was "Church on the Rock on the rock". On the way home, we went exploring in a deep underground cave and topped-off the trip with a feast at an Austin restaurant.

As for our dog, Kelly, even she seemed to have enjoyed her trip to Fredericksburg. "Kelly's Excellent Adventure", in its own way, had matched our own.