

What Can You Spare?

“Can you spare a dollar? I’ll use it to fill my tank, go back for more folks.”

“Sorry, sir. We have nothin. Nothin at all...Not no more.”

Alvin Broussard smiled. “Dat’s fine, dat’s fine.” He clasped the hand of each man, woman, and child, steadying the clacking of their knees as they crawled out of his tiny aluminum boat and onto a larger craft captained by soldiers. “Stay dry, and God bless.”

“You too, sir. You too. Thank you so...” Their babbles of gratitude were drowned as Alvin reignited his engine, ferrying off from the West Bank and back toward the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Hundreds were still stranded. Sweat drenched, pocked and swollen with Mosquito bites, dehydrated and starved.

He flat refused to taxi corpses, even if their loved ones sobbed and begged. That would leave him with less space and time for those passengers who carried nothing but their lives, a few photographs, and the occasional dollar. The soldiers would collect them when the flood receded. Most, that is. Those who drowned in the streets might be swallowed by the Gulf — lost but not forgotten. Not by Alvin. They’d meet him in his dreams.

He passed another. An old man — maybe obese, maybe just bloated, most likely both. The body was face down and tied to a telephone line. Many people were able to stay above water that way, but not all. Not this one. Perhaps he was homeless; perhaps he was still waiting in line to evacuate or gain entrance to an over-crowded shelter when the levee blew; perhaps he thought himself a good swimmer, or lucky, or protected by God. He no longer had a voice to tell his own story, so Alvin could only guess.

He came across another inhabited rooftop: a mother with five children. Alvin had five children too, awaiting his return on the West Bank, untouched by flood — *always, always*.

Home of the French Quarter; home of hotels and jazz clubs. Blessed be the West Bank. And when God failed to keep the waters at bay — when the levees were primed to burst on both sides of the city — dynamite finished the job for Him. Alvin was grateful for the security. He spared what he could for those who weren't as lucky. But it was *never, never* enough.

He whisked the woman and her brood to safety. She was wide-eyed and silent the whole way, offering him only a close-lipped smile at the end of their journey. Alvin didn't ask her to spare anything. He knew from her thousand-yard stare that she'd lost it all — all she had ever had and perhaps more than that.

It wasn't till later that Alvin saw she robbed him. Pilfered the few bucks and puddle of coins in the donation jar under his seat.

The empty jar weighed heavy in his hand. He dunked it into the brackish floodwater and filled it to the brim. He poured its contents over his head, cooling down and rinsing the dirt and sweat from his brow. His already burning eyes felt like they'd melt out of their sockets and run down his cheeks like tears. Or were those just tears?

Alvin had enough gas in the tank to make two more rounds. After that, he'd return home, kiss his wife, hug his kids, and fish their rainy day fund out from under the mattress.