

The Aspirin for Paul

I caught up with Helen, Paul and Francis in the French Quarter just barely a month ago. I was on the journey that I am still upon, that of looking for my next place in the world. I was passing through as part of my cross-country job searching trip, and I was curious to see how New Orleans and these dear friends there were doing in the wake of Katrina.

They drove in to meet me in the midst of a traffic jam typical to the bustling French Quarter. Helen and Paul were...Helen and Paul. Anyone reading this who knows them will affirm that there is no adequate way to describe the shower of positive energy that these two individuals radiate around them. Right away Helen greeted me with an indescribably delicious mint chocolate brownie she had brought. Yummy.

Helen was particularly excited to introduce me to their beautiful son Francis since we hadn't yet met. She was also curious to hear about the progress of Tevah and Jonah as she knew that I had just been down in Texas visiting with my sister Airlie and her family. She and Paul talked about how they couldn't wait until they could get their two families together again. Who would have thought that they would be getting together again so soon and under such horrific circumstances? It disgusts me.

We soon wrestled free of the traffic as we headed into the neighborhoods most affected by the floods for a look around. While they had been there many times before, Helen and Paul were eager to explore the area, looking for signs of renewal.



Helen was excited to see so many new RVs coming in, which were clear signs that the neighborhood was finally turning a corner.



Helen was keen to point out some of the lines on the windows and walls where the water level had remained at high levels for so long. In many areas of the 9th Ward, it wasn't possible to see such lines at all because the water had stagnated over the roofs. While explaining the devastation, Helen and Paul (with prodding) mixed in anecdotes about their own epic trials and tribulations. In their proprietary light, sing-songy rhythm, they told me about Paul saving their cats, their refugee existence after the storm, dealing with their flooded house, the challenges that Paul had faced with his private clinic, and the wonderful work that he was doing in a clinic that served the underprivileged.

Truly internalizing the gravity of the challenges they had been living through was made more difficult by the fact that they told their stories in a completely upbeat manner, like describing a delicious bowl of ice cream.

The other reason it was hard to take it all in was because a pain was building in my head that was becoming difficult to ignore. I had felt a ring of discomfort when I first arrived into town, but I had hoped that a belly full of Coop's pasta would set everything straight. No such luck, and the tide of pain continued to slowly rise.

Meanwhile, the ever-effervescent couple bubbled around me with their hopes for a renewed city. Helen was particularly keen to show me the colorful houses that had been built by Habitat for Humanity which had been built to house musicians who had lost their way in the storm.



It was partly because of Helen's fervor for this one true bright spot in the New Orleans landscape that I decided to take their picture there. I felt that the bright colors of the houses were in some ways indicative of, and connected to the enthusiasm that Helen and Paul were bringing to the city.



I needed to get down the road that night but knew that I would not be going anywhere if I could not push back the incessant pain. As the sun set, we stopped for aspirin at their home that was the future sight of the tragedy that would unfold.

Seeing the two cats who had survived through two weeks in their flooded home gave me a sense of awe. They seemed so relaxed and content for what they had gone through. Then there was the room for Francis, full of toys, full of the beginnings of education. Animal pictures. When we entered the kitchen, I met Rosie the pig for the first time. I was taken aback because I sure didn't expect her to be that big. Helen was my tour guide

through the house, embellishing the story of each room while explaining how they had set up a temporary life for themselves. And talking of a brighter future.

I was weak with discomfort when Helen handed me the aspirin. I barely steadied myself to make it back out and to the car where Paul and Francis were waiting. They drove me back to my car and we took this picture right before parting company just a month ago:



Stupidly, I tried to drive out of town, but realized it would be dangerous for me to be on a highway in the state I was in, perpetually looking for a possible place to puke, so I pulled over to the side of the road in the outskirts of the French Quarter and did what I could to sleep until Helen's aspirin could work its magic. Blissfully, when I "came to" perhaps an hour later, the brunt of the pain had subsided and I was able to finally leave town.

Now in my mind the aura of peace that I felt at that time--like coming back to life-- is now combined with a slow motion replay of Helen handing me the aspirin in their house with a big Helen grin on her face and her hope that a child's aspirin would do the job. It is a moment that still feels strong, transcendental, timeless. That aspirin is one simple gift that I will always cherish when I think of Helen.

It is shocking to even contemplate the passing of such a peaceful angel of optimism. When they took her, it was not just a life: they dimmed a shining beacon of hope for New Orleans and everywhere beyond it. I consider it selfish to call her my friend, because I

see Helen as being more a friend to the world than just for me. The world is a less-happy place without her and I will miss her dearly.

Paul, thank God you are still here with us, because it would have been more than the world could bear if we had lost you both. Thanks to Helen, we have come to know you here in Columbia and for that introduction I can say that we are grateful. You are two unusually brightly shining stars and for me offered the hope that two people in life can find their truly perfect match no matter how much they dance to their own drumbeat. The two of you formed a union of two people more perfect for each other than the world rarely sees. The pain, injustice and sheer outrage I feel from Helen being taken from you can only be mollified by the knowledge that you were so fortunate to have had as much time together on earth as you did. How you will cope with her passing is more than I can contemplate.

No one blames you for what happened. You are a hero for saving Francis and doing everything you could to protect your family in the face of evil.

We all inadequately try to find the best way to describe the unusual sense of joy that the two of you have imparted on the rest of us, making us feel like the world is a happier place than we once thought it could be. I don't want to lose that. Paul, please be strong. We need you and Francis to somehow rejuvenate the purity, the fun and the joy that has been robbed from us all. You will be in my thoughts as you find your new path in life.

Please let me know if there is any way that I can help, even if it is just an aspirin.