

It doesn't seem that long ago, not for me anyway. But for my teenage daughter, it was a lifetime ago.

The Saturday afternoon before Katrina hit, I loaded up my little blue Honda with as much as I could fit, enough of my and my little girl's clothes for a week, her special blanket, books, dolls, and stuffed animals. With not much room left for my stuff, I used a black plastic contractor bag so I could shove it into the front seat. I had grabbed a lot of different things. I had grabbed music CDs from my dad's old shelf, CDs collected over the years, mostly New Orleans music. I shoved an armful of the discs in the black plastic trashbag atop my wrinkling clothes.

As we drove away from our little New Orleans East home headed west, I looked into my rearview mirror and noticed the Eastern sky was looking pretty ominous. I guess it was a lot for a 22 year old single mom to deal with, but I knew I could handle it. My boyfriend had left me before my daughter was born, my mom had moved to Michigan to be by my dad's sister, but she let me stay in the house, and I was happy. I liked our life, I liked our neighbors, I liked our home. I told myself Yeah I can do this.

I decided we'd head out to evacuate to San Marcos Texas; that's where my pastor's family lived. The church in Texas set us up in a tiny apartment outside of town; you know the kind of apartment building that was converted from a one-story motel, but it was nice enough. I felt safe there and I was grateful, as more and more info poured in from home... I knew that our house was destroyed, and that our City would be forever changed.

In the evenings, my little girl and I sat on one of the rocking chairs they had placed facing a nearby field that seemed to go on forever. The nightly symphony of crickets and frogs always lulled my daughter to sleep in my arms, but for some reason their song fueled my homesickness. I missed New Orleans and I longed to be home so badly that it hurt.

During the day, comfort came in the form of my dad's CDs - the music of home. Daddy had loved Jazz Fest so much. And most of the CDs were from artists we'd hear when he carried me on his shoulders year after year in the hot Fairgrounds sun - year after year, until he died.

It became a routine, our daily dose of home, to spend hours of each day playing our CDs - we had the Meters, Mem Shannon, Little Freddie King, Irma Thomas, Dr John - to remind us of what home sounded like. My daughter and I would spend our days dancing and singing in harmony with the artists and the songs we loved. We laughed singing Bluesman Mem Shannon's "Don't Talk About My Mama." My daughter would jump for joy on the sofa as I performed Dr John's "Such a Night.".... But always together we'd sing our duet of the Meters' "Mardi Gras Mambo."

Our years in exile passed slowly. School occupied my daughter, and I worried that New Orleans would become a distant memory to her. My job in the school cafeteria helped distract me some but honestly my homesickness had caused a seemingly permanent ache in the pit of my stomach, or was it in my heart?

I was determined to keep my internal compass pointed to home. I made a promise to myself and to my child that we would go home someday. The tapestry of our lives, or rather the patchwork quilt of our lives, was always to be the colors of New Orleans, and her music was the thread that held our dream together.

From our tiny converted motel apartment in a dry land to a rented shotgun in Old Algiers, our lives are once again being shaped by water and wind and as always, music.

Being back here feels as natural as a cool breeze blowing through my sixteen-year-old daughter's hair. We hear the calliope music playing on the river, this is where we belong. On this particularly cool February afternoon, the sun is as bright as it could ever be, it warms us. My daughter still has her school uniform on, we sit close together, lulled by the rhythm of the squeaky chain on our porch swing.

The distant sounds of the Landry-Walker marching band are getting closer. They're practicing for Mardi Gras parades; our street is on the route of their marching. The band turns onto our street and my daughter squeezes my hand and lets out a joyful giggle. Other neighbors are on their porches now too. We wave to each other; the band stops in front of our house for a tune. The brass section is taking their turn now, it's a Mardi Gras number.

As the band marches on, I can feel my heart beat in unison with the tempo of the bass drum. The music of New Orleans sustained us during our exile; our souls were nurtured by the sounds of home.

It dawned on me, that on this day, in this New Orleans neighborhood, that this high school band has played the finale of our exile. We are finally home.