

Braving Home

Dispatches from the Underwater Town,
the Lava-Side Inn, and Other Extreme Locales

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FOR MY GRANDMOTHERS—
NORMA AND ESTHER

Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration.

—Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*

Introduction

The Bad Homes Correspondent

EVERY JOURNALIST has a niche—it's inevitable—and I was just a few days into my career when I stumbled upon mine. It started as a running joke at the office: I was the magazine's Bad Homes Correspondent. The production department quipped about changing my title on the masthead. I laughed it off, but some of the older writers definitely thought there was something wrong with me. "Did you grow up in some sort of dysfunctional household?" a senior editor asked. No, I told him. "Well, there's got to be something in your past that makes you interested in these stories—you *ought* to think about it."

The magazine I worked for was the *New Republic*, and my coworkers were a mix of policy wonks, art critics, and political junkies. I was none of these, and instead of trying to pass as one, I set out to write a different kind of story; yet every time I did, it ended up being about some outlandish and often hellish place inhabited by a handful of stalwarts who refused to leave. Iron-willed, unfearing, and utterly immovable, these characters captured my imagination. They were the nation's toughest home keepers, and I was their aspiring chronicler. It was an odd niche of journalism, if you could even call that, but it grew on me quickly.

It all began my first week at the magazine when a friend from college sent me an e-mail message with a rather cryptic lead: "Looking for a story? How about an old coal-mining town in PA where the whole place is cooking like a giant BBQ?" Initially, I thought it was a joke, but after doing some research, I discovered that this bizarre little town *did* exist. Its name was Centralia, and its coal mine had been on fire for almost forty years. Sinkholes had swallowed back yards, clouds of carbon monoxide had enveloped homes, and a network of smoldering coal veins continued to warm the earth like rewired-up heating tubes in a giant electric blanket. Eventually, Centralia was evacuated and the government claimed ownership of the town, but a handful of residents defied their eviction notices, and the town's aging mayor, Lamar Mervine, vowed there would be "another Waco" before he'd relocate.

The following Thursday, while the rest of the magazine's staff mused over D.C. politics at our weekly editorial meeting, I pitched my very first story, a dispatch about a burning town that nobody wanted to leave. An awkward moment of silence came over the room. Finally, an editor spoke up: "Sounds interesting!" The following weekend I was in Centralia, chatting with Lamar Mervine himself. "I have no reason to relocate at all—I like it here," he told me from the comfort of a living room that wasn't legally his, while sitting in a well-worn recliner, gazing out the window at a mist of white smoke. Lamar's wife, Lana, nodded her head in agreement. "Besides," she added, "where would we possibly move to?"

Sitting with Lamar and Lana, sipping tea from a cup resting in a chipped saucer, admiring a collection of cheerful knick-knacks and dog-eared Centralia scrapbooks, I felt oddly at home. Something about the Mervines seemed familiar, even endearing. Lamar bore a vague resemblance to my own grandfather, with his stubbly chin, thick glasses, callused workingman's hands, and that same slightly melancholy, unfocused gaze of a workaholic ill at ease with the prospect of rest. Lamar had labored most of his life in the coal mines beneath Centralia, paying off his mortgage in seven-hour shifts of unremitting darkness, and even now, without a deed or any legal claim to show for what he had earned, Lamar remained proud. His house was more than an asset or a piece of real estate, more than mere clapboard and cinderblock—it was an extension of his own life.

Later that day, as I said goodbye to the Mervines and headed back toward Washington, D.C., I tried

to stay focused on the story at hand. But as I cruised south along the Appalachians and down past Gettysburg, through a forlorn landscape of zinc mines, landfills, and falling-rock zones, I couldn't help but wonder: How many other Americans held fast to this ironclad sense of home? Who else was making this stand, doggedly refusing to leave the grueling environs in which they lived?

In the weeks after my Centralia article saw print, I began to look for leads on similar stories. This process involved a lot of digging, but I didn't mind, because digging was essentially my job. My chief responsibility at the magazine was researching and fact-checking. I spent hours, days, and weeks looking for correct spellings and exact dates. Being a quick fact-checker was always a point of pride among the office grunts like myself, and though it was an obscure and largely useless skill, I found it quite helpful in tracking down information on outlandish towns like Centralia. On my lunch breaks and in between assignments I searched for clues, and gradually I found them—reports of holdouts like Lamar living on lava fields, windswept sandbars, and desolate arctic glaciers. I spent Sunday afternoons combing the Web, using a smattering of search terms like “squatter,” “won't leave home,” and “people call him crazy.” I became friendly with the press office at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and I pumped them for ideas. It turned into something of a hobby. Some people collected stamps, others pressed leaves, I scavenged for strange and daring homes.

These holdouts formed a curious cast of characters—fiercely loyal, seemingly unfazed by danger—the sort of diehard Americans you'd see on the six o'clock news and promptly dismiss as nuts. Even when given an out, they refused to take it. Neither buyouts, nor threats of eviction, nor astronomical insurance rates, nor any amount of reasoning could uproot them. What was their motivation? Was it stubbornness? Was it fatalism? Or had they actually found some strange hidden paradise that the rest of us could not see? Despite the overwhelming drawbacks, home still held some transcendent value for these people, and I couldn't help but feel moved by their will to hold fast. I was impressed by the fierce pioneer spirit, clearly atavistic, yet proudly unyielding. They struck me as throwbacks to another era, when traveling of any kind was burdensome or downright dangerous and a person's world was often no more than a few miles in any direction. Home was not just a place but a way of life, a work in progress, something you built and rebuilt over the course of a lifetime, until at last, like the old-timers who went by geographic names—Francis of Middlebury or Jeremiah of Ipswich—home was simply *who you were*.

I grew up in Buffalo, New York, which is best known as a place that people like to leave. This never-ending exodus has created a bleak landscape of deserted factories, boarded-up houses, and crumbling train stations. As kids, my brother and I would drive along the windswept shores of Lake Erie and sneak into abandoned buildings where green moss carpeted floors, rainwater cascaded down stairways, and busted typewriters rusted firm against dank walls. On one of our later expeditions, when I was already in college, we were caught by an ancient, toothless security guard who then handed us over to the police.

“You graduated from high school?” the police officer asked me as I sat in the back of his squad car.

“Yes,” I told him.

“You in college?”

“Yes,” I said again.

“Where?”

“Yale.”

“Quit fucking around!” he barked. Eventually I produced my Yale ID, and this really threw him for a laugh. “What are you doing back in Buffalo?” he asked sympathetically, as if my life were clearly drifting toward ruin. “And why the hell are you over here?”

“I kind of like it here,” I told him. And I wasn't the only one. The area was still inhabited by a

handful of old-timers—retired factory workers and profitless shopkeepers who refused to leave. They were the ultimate Buffalonians, remnants of the city’s golden era, now holding on for dear life. Their homes existed outside the realm of city hall: effectively condemned, unpoliced and unplowed (which in snow-packed Buffalo is the kiss of death). My brother was so taken with them that he took a number of photographs and covered the walls of his Boston apartment with portraits of their tough, shadowy faces. And on quiet weekends, when I sometimes visited, these faces would stare me down, reminding me once and forever: *We never left*.

I come from a family with a long tradition of leaving places. My great-grandmother emigrated to America, returned home to Hungary, then emigrated to America once again. My grandfather was so desperate to get out of New York that in 1934 he took a job chipping paint on a giant freighter bound for California via the Panama Canal. My mother is an itinerant lawyer who practically lives out of a jet and is rarely in the same city for more than two days in a row. I’m no better. In the last several years I’ve lived in New Haven, Boston, Washington, D.C., Israel, India, and the Czech Republic.

In many ways being rootless has become trendy. It’s considered a privilege to go away to college, or better yet study abroad. Jobs that involve travel are viewed as glamorous. Ditching an office for a laptop has become the benchmark of freedom. Mobility has become an integral part of modern life, and, while not everyone is a jetsetter, the concept of a permanent home seems to be quickly vanishing. Nowadays, Americans are relocating at a staggering rate, even if it is just across town or into a neighboring county. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average American will move twelve times in his or her lifetime, about once every six or seven years.¹ Forty-three million people moved in 1999 alone.²

Perhaps none of this should be so surprising. Historically, we are a nation of people on the move: immigrants arriving by boat, settlers heading out west, freed slaves moving north, laid-off steelworkers going south, disenchanted lawyers relocating to the Silicon Valley, and displaced natives sandwiched everywhere in between. We pride ourselves as a “land of opportunity,” but no one likes to acknowledge the tacit implication that we are a nation of opportunists, largely willing to pull up stakes when it is advantageous to do so. How many of us would actually stick around if things got bad? In truth, how many of us would turn down a better job, or a bigger house, or a government buyout that spared us the ravages of nature? Unless, of course, home itself offers something inherently redeeming in its permanence—something that for me has never been more than a dull phantom limb ache, but for others holds some deep-rooted primal magic that not even the fiercest earthly torments can break.

As I continued working at the *New Republic*, word spread of my unusual journalistic niche, and soon friends and family were sending me leads on other “problem” towns from around the country. I researched many of these leads, and a few of them even developed into stories, but most of them I simply took home and filed away with my growing collection. Gradually, I filled a massive three-ring binder with hundreds of pages of research, overflowing with frayed maps and anecdotal histories. It was more than just a backlog of story ideas—it was an atlas of broken places, an inventory of the nation’s most punishing landscapes.

In idle moments, I flipped through my binder and wondered which locations would be the most interesting, dangerous, and inconceivable to visit. I also wondered what the inhabitants of these disparate places might have in common. Was there a “type” of person who refused to leave home? The U.S. Census Bureau shed some light on this subject. In its “Geographic Mobility” report for the year 2000, the Bureau compared the group traits of movers versus non-movers. As it turns out, the *least* likely types to move included the elderly, rural inhabitants, homeowners, and widows and widowers.³ With these demographics in mind, I was soon envisioning the painting *American Gothic*, with its eerily

depiction of a pitchfork-toting Iowa farmer and his daughter standing in front of a desolate farmhouse.

Eventually I turned to academia for more clues. As it turns out, ever since the 1960s, environmental psychologists have been trying to explain why certain people get so attached to their surroundings. There are a number of competing theories on this issue. Perhaps the most prominent of these is that of “place identity,” originated by Harold Proshansky at the City College of New York.⁴ Proshansky claimed that physical settings, and especially homes, provide people with an identity and a defining sense of purpose. Without these places, he asserted, people may feel lost or uncertain about who they really are. Unfortunately, Proshansky and his colleagues had little if anything to say about people who attach themselves to punishing places, or what *their* sense of purpose might be.

The journey chronicled in this book began as whimsy, as a pipe dream, as errant thoughts of finishing an investigation I’d barely begun. Yet it built momentum rather quickly. I made a short list of my top locations from my three-ring binder, and not long after, I bought a wall map and began tracing several possible travel routes. Next I took out a calendar and drew up an itinerary. Most of my destinations were afflicted by seasonal disasters, and I figured if I timed it well, I could hit each place in its fiercest, most defining hour. Of course the logistics of this grand journey were still extremely fuzzy—especially my means of financing it—but slowly a plan was forming.

My most immediate problem, other than money, was time. I couldn’t cram any of these visits into a single action-packed Saturday. I had tried this with Lamar Mervine in Centralia, and I ended up with a one-page article that barely scratched the surface. I wanted to experience these places, not just report on them. What I really needed was a few months. Unfortunately, the best I could muster was my one week of paid vacation time. It didn’t allow for the sweeping epic I envisioned, but I figured it was long enough for one good visit. It would be my trial run. My seven-day stab at the big question. And by some chance I made a breakthrough, perhaps I would find a way to continue on my journey.

The only remaining issue was where to begin. Eventually I settled on Princeville, North Carolina, a town situated on a dangerous floodplain. This was one of the places I had already written about for the magazine. Princeville was reputed to be the oldest all-black town in America, until September of 1999, when it vanished beneath a sea of floodwater that covered much of northeast North Carolina. Princeville was submerged for almost two weeks, and when the floodwaters finally receded, a national debate erupted over whether or not to rebuild this historic town. When I headed down south to cover this story for the magazine, it was a quick visit. I was in Princeville for just a few hours, and I didn’t see a soul on any of its mud-caked streets. There were no diehards, no holdouts—just a waterlogged town rotting in the late summer heat.

Rather disappointed, I returned to Washington, D.C. Yet even then, I had the nagging feeling that I had given up too easily, that in my haste I had missed something.

The Underwater Town

Princeville, North Carolina

THROUGHOUT THE FALL of 1999, newspaper headlines reported that the town of Princeville was empty completely abandoned, nothing but a “waterlogged Pompeii.”¹ During my own brief visit, I had come to the same conclusion. Yet little did almost anyone know, at the far end of town, one man remained—perched on a battered recliner, wrapped in a thick wool blanket, slowly reading his Bible. Thad Knight was the town’s only inhabitant. His house was gutted. His life’s belongings were lost. Yet there he stayed throughout the fall and into the winter, amid a forsaken landscape of wrecked houses, a seventy-two-year-old black man sitting in the frost.

“I guess people didn’t realize I was over here,” Thad told me months later. Apparently, this suited him just fine. Thad claimed to enjoy the solitude. If he got bored, or his bones grew stiff, he would stand up and trudge across his small half-acre of land. He said he knew the contours of every dip, every gentle slope—he could see them even with his eyes shut—and his intimacy with the terrain gave him comfort. When he tired of walking he stood for a while in the skeleton of his house and wondered whether it could be salvaged, whether it could somehow be repaired. Most days, that seemed doubtful and Thad returned to his chair to sit and read some more.

Around midday a relief truck from the Red Cross made a special trip to Princeville to deliver lunch to the town’s one resident. It was usually something cooked, like spaghetti, and Thad savored its smell and warmth. The afternoons were especially empty. Often the only sound was that of wind groaning through the holes in his house. His most dependable visitors were the packs of feral dogs who roamed the town scavenging for scraps of food.

Thad had survived the worst, this much he knew for sure. That September, Hurricane Floyd enlarged the Tar River and sunk the town of Princeville. The river starts in the highlands north of Durham, then drops a smooth 179 miles toward the coast below. Along the way it builds momentum and grows in size, and during hurricane season it often roars out of control. Two thirds of the way to the coast, the river wraps itself around a boggy stretch of land called Princeville, where it often skids off course—pummeling the town like a runaway truck.

Princeville is situated smack in the middle of a dangerous floodplain. By today’s standards, the location is far from ideal, but during the height of the Civil War it was a safe haven for a band of freed slaves who squatted there. Their makeshift home was protected by a troop of Union soldiers stationed nearby. Every so often, the freed slaves would gather around the Union camp and listen for news from the warfront. Then one day, in the spring of 1865, a Union officer scrambled to the top of an adjoining knoll and announced that the Confederacy had surrendered. These former slaves were officially freedmen, and to honor the occasion, they hallowed the ground on which the Union officer stood, dubbing it “Freedom Hill.”²

In compliance with federal policy, the Union soldiers advised the freedmen and women to return to their plantations to work for their old masters, but they refused to budge, opting instead to face the floods. Twenty years later, their weather-beaten refuge was still standing. Sufficiently impressed, the state of North Carolina drew up an official charter, and Princeville became the first incorporated black town in the state and quite possibly the country.* Back then, the concept of an all-black town was novel, yet many whites in the neighboring town of Tarboro quickly accepted it as a necessity—for it kept the former slaves across the river at a safe distance but close enough that they could be hired as farm hands, servants, and artisans. For the next century these two towns functioned symbiotically, facing each other across the river like matching bridgeheads, except for those inevitable occasions

when much of Princeville would simply vanish. At least once a decade Princeville's decidedly lower shores would sink beneath a deep expanse of murky river water, until 1965, when its residents finally erected a large earthen dike.³ The dike kept Princeville dry for more than thirty years, but in the end, was no match for Hurricane Floyd.

In early September of 1999, when Hurricane Floyd was still more than a thousand miles off at sea, weather officials were already getting nervous. With its roughly 150-mile-per-hour winds, Floyd was on the verge of becoming a category-5 storm.⁴ This is the highest possible rating, in fact, only two storms of this size had ever hit the United States in recorded history.⁵ Floyd grazed the Bahamas, lost a bit of momentum, then tore northeastward on a due course for Wilmington, North Carolina. Panic spread throughout the entire East Coast, and the largest evacuation in the nation's history commenced involving some 2.6 million people.⁶

On the night Floyd hit, Thursday, September 16, the main concern in Princeville was not the storm but the river, which had become bloated with rainwater. More than a hundred volunteers worked to fortify the dike with sandbags. Princeville's four police officers shoveled alongside local criminals whom they'd arrested many times before. Sometime after midnight, they received orders to stop. "The dike is about to break," yelled Captain Fred Crowell of the Princeville Fire Department. "Everyone has to leave as of now!" Crowell then got into the town's fire engine and made one last drive through town. In some places, where the dike was already crumbling, Crowell encountered more than four feet of water. "If I had opened my door, water would have rushed in," he later told me. Still he plodded onward, navigating his half-submerged fire engine through the town's murky streets, blaring his siren and honking his horn as he went. It was a last warning—like a sinking ship, Princeville was about to go under.

Thad Knight woke to the sound of his daughter knocking on his bedroom door. Frantically she told him about the dike, and together they stood for a moment on his front porch, listening to the distant clamor of the fire engines. As the sirens receded, their low-pitched yawns gave way to a steady hissing. At first Thad mistook this sound for the rustle of strong wind, but soon it grew fuller, like the distant roar of a waterfall. Then he felt it—a sweet, misty chill in the air. Finally he knew without a doubt: The river was coming. Princeville was about to flood. Not knowing how to swim, Thad quickly got into his car and drove toward higher ground.

As floodwater crested the top of the dike, Mayor Delia Perkins remained in the town hall, telephoning officials at the National Weather Service, pumping them for every last detail about the storm. Sometime between eleven P.M. and midnight, the phone went dead. A short time later, Mayor Perkins drove down to the river and saw that it was hopeless. The town was going to flood. Warily, she returned to the town hall for a few more hours to coordinate a final evacuation effort. At last, she could stall no longer. Perkins got into her car and drove toward dry land. Eventually she pulled into a parking lot and killed the engine on her car. It was a moment of realization, Perkins later told me. Finally she allowed herself to think of all the things she had not done—like grabbing her family photo albums, her collection of jazz records, or any of many things she had accumulated over several decades in Princeville.

Soon heavy black water was roaring into town, crashing through people's windows and bowling over tin trailers. Those who missed the fire engine's warning climbed into their attics, and when the water met them there, they punched holes between the rafters and climbed onto their roofs. Even as the water lapped against the rain gutters, some people refused to budge. One old man had to be hoisted out through a hole that rescuers drilled in his ceiling. By the following day, Princeville lay beneath twenty feet of water. Giant, frothing whirlpools spun through town, and rescue boats sped across them looking for survivors.

Many of those who escaped gathered in the parking lot of the Tarboro Kmart, and there they waited through the night. Shortly after sunrise, one of the town's commissioners, a woman named Anne Howell, contacted the police to see if it was safe to go back. "What's going on in Princeville?" she asked. "Commissioner Howell," said the officer awkwardly, "I don't know how to tell you this, other than . . . there is no more Princeville."

The town had all but vanished. One of the only remaining traces was the top of a church steeple, the tip of which poked through the surface of a sprawling river. Initially, many local residents speculated that Princeville would remain under water forever, slowly decomposing among the fish. Thad Knight, who was staying at his daughter's house during this time, doubted he'd ever see Princeville again. "I know how high the churches are in this town," he later told me. "And when I turned on the TV and saw that one steeple just barely coming through the water, I figured Princeville was gone." Yet just eleven days later, the Tar River receded and uncovered its damage. Houses were destroyed, as if whipped apart in a blender. They were cracked down the center, hemorrhaging limp, soggy strips of insulation and severed electrical wires. Many were swept entirely off their foundations, and one had actually been dumped onto the hood of a car. The insides were gutted; furniture, clothing, appliances, pictures and books were strewn over lawns and across bushes. Even the air was marked, hung with the stabbing odor of rotting pig carcasses and busted septic tanks.

When Thad finally returned to his house, he found a dozen or so unearthed coffins sitting on his front lawn. They had been uprooted from the local cemetery, a wildly overgrown place where freed slaves were buried. Thad's house was also wrecked, coated in mud and bits of debris from other houses. Moving back was not an option, yet Thad hated the thought of burdening his daughter any longer, so he joined the rest of the town's survivors in a giant displacement camp twenty-five miles west of town. There, several hundred trailers were assembled on an enormous field of gravel next to a women's prison. Thad agreed to sleep there, but not to live there, and each day he awoke before dawn and drove through the darkness back to Princeville. There he sat, alone beside the remains of his destroyed house—through October, November, and December—starting each day by watching the sun rise like an orange pyre over the town's broken rooftops.

As Thad single-handedly manned the town of Princeville, the town's officials bickered over a massive buyout proposed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It was an all-or-nothing arrangement: Everybody stayed, or everybody left. There were to be no partial deals. If FEMA was going to spend millions of dollars, it wanted the situation fixed once and for all. In this case, "fixed" meant bulldozing the town into a series of softball fields or something similar. For many former residents, this was an abhorrent thought. As one of the oldest black towns in America, Princeville was more than just a place, it was a piece of history. But in truth, it was a calamitous history, and now the government was offering an end to the town's torments.

The decision was left in the hands of Mayor Perkins and Princeville's four town commissioners. Each of them had a vote. Usually the decisions they made were routine matters of civic life: whether to adjust property taxes, approve a town fair, or test a sewer line for leaks. Suddenly the very fate of Princeville was on their agenda.

From the start, Commissioner Anne Howell wanted to rebuild Princeville, but she knew it wouldn't be easy. If the town accepted the buyout, FEMA would write everyone a check for the market value of their property; if they turned the money down, they would get nothing but a lot of dirt with which to rebuild the dike, one more time. The seriousness and finality of this decision weighed on Anne greatly. Sometimes in the evenings, as she stepped out onto the sprawling gravel parking lot of the displacement camp, she stopped for a moment to look eastward. Strange as it seemed, Princeville was just twenty miles away. If she could climb the roof of the nearby prison she might even be able to see it. The flood had washed away almost everything, but Princeville itself remained a fixed point on the

horizon.

Meanwhile, back in town, Thad Knight continued to sit patiently beside his ruined house. He was the town's sole keeper, and it seemed like a strange role for him to be playing. Thad had lived an inconspicuous life, attending church, providing for his family, just trying to get by. As a young boy he once stole a quick drink from the "white" water fountain, eager to see how delicious it might be, but was quickly disappointed by the familiarity of its taste. Almost from then on, Thad did what his family expected him to do: He dropped out of school to help his father break even as a sharecropper, and he continued tilling the fields even as all eleven of his brothers and sisters moved away. "I just want one Knight by my side," his father had said. And so Thad stayed, building a small house next to his father's on the edge of town.

As time passed, everyone seemed to slip away. Thad's seven children grew up, his marriage dissolved, and his father died early one winter morning. Now Thad was seventy-two years old and alone. No one was counting on him anymore, and he found himself following some strange inner compass. He would *not* live in a parking lot next to a women's prison. He would *not* be forced to leave his home.

I first met Thad while looking for a place to sleep. I'd spent the day walking around town, creeping through dank abandoned houses and wildly overgrown yards, trying to get a better feel for the place. Very little had changed since my first visit for the magazine. Debris still hung from the trees like strange ornaments: the head of a doll, a washboard, even a snorkel and mask dangled from twiggy limbs. It was now April of 2000—roughly half a year had passed since the flood—and still the town lay in ruins.

My plan was to find a dry stretch of flat ground and pitch a tent amid the vacant houses. Technical I was on vacation, and I figured that a bit of the outdoors would be both a cheap and refreshing reprieve from my cubicle life. Of course, my coworkers were baffled. "Princeville? Didn't you already cover that story?" someone asked me. "You're vacationing in a ghost town?" another inquired. In truth, I had been catching flack over Princeville ever since my first visit. Back then, my editor couldn't understand my reluctance to endorse the FEMA buyout. "Why should they rebuild, if they're just going to get washed away?" he asked me rather exasperatedly. This was a good question, and though I failed to come up with a decent answer and did not even know if there was one, I remained determined to have a closer look.

So one Friday afternoon in mid-April, I left my office in Washington, hastily packed a bag full of camping gear, and headed south toward Princeville. I could hardly wait to get going, though in my haste I had forgotten a few things. I had a tent but no ground tarp or sleeping mat. I brought books to read but no flashlight to read them with. Most regrettable was my food situation. By the time I reached Princeville, all I had left was a mangled piece of beef jerky and half a bottle of Hawaiian Punch. It was a sorry set of supplies, but the way I figured it, I needed some toughening up. How else was I going to make a good impression on all the diehards I wanted to meet?

Now dusk was approaching, and I still hadn't spotted a single decent campsite. Most of the ground was shrouded with dense vegetation, so thick I'd need a machete to clear the way. The few open spaces were nothing but rich beds of black mud. So I kept going, and eventually I came upon a trailer next to a giant rubbish fire. Twenty paces away sat an elderly man in his carport, thumbing through a book, apparently waiting out the last bit of light. He wore a thick pair of reading glasses, and their plastic arms flexed around the sides of his gleaming bald head. Even from a seated position, it was clear that he was a large man with a powerful build. His dress was formal: polished shoes, pressed slacks, a button-down shirt, and a pair of suspenders that barely fit around his barrel chest. As I made my way down his driveway he gave me a welcoming wave.

“How are you?” I asked awkwardly.

“Well, I’m still here,” he said with a quick flick of his eyes—two enormous pupils, greatly enlarged by the thick warp of his lenses. “At least for now,” he added, carefully prying off his glasses, then gently massaging the marks they’d left.

“You’re just about the only person I’ve seen all day,” I told him. This brought a smile to his face.

“Oh yeah? Well, sometimes folks ask me why I’m here. They say: ‘What are you doing over here? It isn’t going to change anything.’ And then I remind them: I’m *enjoying myself*.” He paused to wipe his brow of sweat. “Here, hand me my stick,” he said, pointing toward a rusted three-footed cane sitting on the chair next to him. I handed it to him. “Good,” he said. “Now you can sit down.” Then he patted me once on the shoulder in lieu of a handshake and told me his name was Thad Knight.

I took a seat in the green plastic lawn chair next to him, and he took off his baseball cap, as if to be polite. It was a blue denim hat with a large piece of duct tape across the front. Later, Thad explained that he’d gotten it free of charge from a lumber store in the neighboring town of Rocky Mount. The store’s name was stitched across the front, so Thad had covered it with duct tape because he didn’t want people to know that he’d been shopping “out of town.” He liked to keep his money within the community, but the flood had limited his options.

Together Thad and I sat in his carport and gazed out on a collection of pulverized houses, which were surrounded by sprawling beds of sludge that used to be lawns. The front of each house was now marked with a giant spray-painted “X,” indicating that it had been searched for dead bodies. For good measure, stapled to the front of each door was a sign reading, THIS BUILDING IS UNFIT FOR HUMAN HABITATION. THE USE OR OCCUPANCY OF THIS BUILDING FOR HUMAN HABITATION IS PROHIBITED AND UNLAWFUL.

“Are you thirsty?” Thad asked me.

“Sure,” I said.

Thad pulled himself up, walked down to the end of his carport, and picked up a container of bottled water. Apparently tap water was still not an option. During the flood more than a hundred thousand dead hogs and nearly a million dead chickens and turkeys had sat for weeks in a sea of stagnant water and even now the groundwater wasn’t reliable.⁷ Thad uncapped the canister and filled both of our glasses with water.

As we sipped our drinks, I asked Thad why he wasn’t in the displacement camp with everyone else. He looked at me like I was crazy. “That’s no place to pass time,” he said. Thad explained that the camp was so jam-packed with people that there wasn’t a moment’s rest. The noise was ceaseless. At night, strangers strolled and chatted outside his trailer, right beside the window where his head was resting. “I didn’t do much sleeping there,” he told me. During the day the camp buzzed with a din of quarreling over food handouts, secondhand clothing, and government-issue propane tanks. Thad said he had worked his entire life to escape this sort of squalor; in fact, so had generations of Knights before him. His great-grandparents had grown up in the cramped, dingy cabins of the slave quarters, which were somewhat infamous in this region. When Frederick Law Olmsted made his tour of the South for the *New York Times* in the 1850s, he described some typical quarters in the Carolinas: “The Negro-cabins, here, were the smallest I had seen—I thought not more than twelve feet square inside. They stood in two rows, with a wide street between them. They were built of logs, with no windows—no opening at all except a doorway.” The more luxurious dwellings (e.g., the sort that poor whites might also use) offered better ventilation, but the cost was privacy: “Through the chinks, as you pass along the road, you may often see all that is going on in the house; and, at night, the light of the fire shines brightly out on all sides.”⁸

When slaves of this region finally won their freedom, almost nothing was sweeter than the right to own their homes. In 1865 the head of North Carolina’s Freedmen’s Bureau wrote about this

phenomenon: “To be absolute owners of the soil, to be allowed to build upon their own lands, however humble, in which they should enjoy the sacred privileges of a home, was more than they had ever dared to pray for.”⁹ Buying land did cost money, something most freed slaves didn’t have, and again Princeville proved itself to be an oddly auspicious location—flood-prone land is cheap. Almost overnight, the old slave encampment began to resemble a fledgling town. Cabins were built along spacious streets, and they often had windows and wood floors.¹⁰ But even in Princeville many freedmen lived as tenants and squatters. For the Knight family, ownership would remain an elusive dream for the next century.

Thad grew up in a rickety sharecropper’s house, in which he could see the ground through the floorboards, and sometimes even a pack of hogs that came looking for shelter on cold winter nights. “My father tried to keep the hogs out,” Thad told me. “But it was difficult, so we got used to living with them.” As Thad got older, he dreamed of doing better for himself. “I used to drive by the houses where the white people lived and I would hope that one day I had a house with central heat and a bathroom,” he recalled. Eventually, Thad realized this would never happen unless he quit sharecropping. So, at the age of forty-two, with a wife and seven kids, Thad looked into a new job at the local textile mill. Initially his landlord forbade him to take the new job, but after consulting with the local justice of the peace, Thad determined that he was within his rights to take whatever job he wanted. He soon began working at the mill, where he did the night shift, from eleven P.M. to seven A.M. Then he worked a second job hauling cucumbers from eight A.M. to four P.M. He traded in his vacation for overtime work, and he got by on just four or five hours of sleep a night. After a few years he had saved enough money to take out a mortgage on a house. It was a modern house with central heat, indoor plumbing, and carpeted floors. When the builder asked Thad if he wanted a fireplace, the answer was immediate: No way. “I had central heat,” explained Thad proudly. “Why would I want a fireplace? I never wanted to chop wood again.”

Together Thad and I leaned up against his house. It was oddly conventional in its appearance, the sort of one-story prefab you’d expect to see in just about any suburban community. Yet the carport really distinguished Thad’s house. Here he had assembled a hodgepodge of odd furnishings—lawn chairs, doormats, blankets, a few rickety tables, and a massive wooden radio that no longer worked—all of it cluttered but lovingly arranged, like the parlor of a tidy castaway. In the carport Thad held court and received guests with elaborate formality, dusting off chairs, filling cups of water, flipping through the Bible for an appropriate passage to set the mood. Thad had transformed this mere parking space into a makeshift home, and together we enjoyed its simple amenities.

Home-keeping had become the driving force in Thad’s life. Thad told me that after the floodwaters receded he woke each morning before sunup and drove through the darkness toward Princeville. There was no self-pity, no blaming the dike or the government, no hopeless mornings when he hit the snooze button again and again. “I was there every day, rain or shine, watching the road and reading the Bible like it was my job,” he recalled. Of course, there were unpleasanties. His toilet, for example, was just a five-gallon plastic bucket that he brought with him each day. But according to Thad, anything was better than sitting in that cramped gravel parking lot of the displacement camp, staring glumly out the window, waiting for the next Social Security check to arrive.

After a week of sitting beside his destroyed house, Thad became convinced that he could handle more. He sought out the government official managing the displacement camp and asked him, “Can you move my trailer back to Princeville?”

“There’s nothing in Princeville,” the official told him.

“There is for me,” said Thad.

“I’ll think about it,” said the official.

Thad came back almost every other night to inquire about his request. He would drive back from a

long day in Princeville and head directly for the manager's trailer. "You should move your bed in here," the manager told him jokingly.

"If you don't get me back to Princeville, that's exactly what I am going to do," replied Thad. The manager turned him away some twenty times, but with each rebuff Thad only became more confident that he could really do this. Then one evening in late November, the beleaguered manager finally gave in. He promised to tow Thad's trailer back to Princeville but warned him that from then on he would be largely on his own. It was an odd victory, a go-ahead on a self-inflicted sentence of exile, but it would also be a homecoming, and Thad said he wanted to see it through.

The night of the move, Thad's children drove in from all across the county to help him settle in. A government truck pulled into the driveway, parked the small trailer in the shadow of Thad's wrecked house, and then motored away. The trailer's scant battery-powered lamp was one of the only lights in town. It would be another week before Thad had any real utilities. Eventually, he and his family lobbied their local power company (Edgecombe-Martin County Electric) to put Thad's property back on the grid. Getting running water was even trickier. First Thad had to convince the town of Princeville to turn his water back on, and when it finally came, the pipes at his house were so leaky that the whole building shot off spray like a giant sprinkler. Finally Thad called a plumber to put in new pipes so he could at least have use of his garden hose. On that first night in Princeville, however, he was essentially camping.

"Dad, I don't like this," one of his sons told him finally. His other children quickly agreed that it felt all wrong. "Are you sure about this?" his son asked him again.

"I'll be just fine," he told them. The moment had taken on the semblance of an impromptu ceremony, though no one knew what to do next. "Don't worry," Thad said finally. "Just go on home."

Reluctantly, the members of the Knight family said their goodbyes. As they readied to leave, Thad stepped into his trailer and locked the door behind him. Moments later, a small convoy of cars backed out of Thad's driveway and made its way down Greenwood Boulevard toward the bridge leaving town. From his trailer window, Thad watched the many taillights trace a road through the night. Soon a strange uneasiness came over him, Thad recalled, and he could not help but wonder what he had gotten himself into.

Hours later, as he lay in bed, Thad listened to the strange workings of the night—packs of stray dogs rummaging for food and a distant clatter that he feared was the sound of looters pillaging the town's empty houses. To calm himself, he recited one of his favorite psalms. He didn't have much of a singing voice. He rarely sang, even in church, with the support of a full choir—but tonight he sang himself:

*Come by here good Lord,
Come by here.
Somebody needs you Lord,
Come by here.
It's praying time Lord,
Come by here.
Oh lord, come by here.*

Thad repeated it over and over, until he finally fell asleep.

Thad was raised as a strict Baptist, but he wasn't always so observant. "I used to drink a lot of whiskey," he told me, with a shy chuckle. "I mean, *a whole lot* of whiskey." Apparently, in his younger years, Thad was something of a wild man. "Once I got into a car wreck and they charged me for driving while under the influence," he admitted. "But with the help of the Lord I got past that."

Basically, he gave up drinking, attended church more regularly, and eventually became a deacon. Yet his biggest religious transformation came after the flood, when he moved back to Princeville.—

“Somehow I felt closer to God over in that trailer,” he told me. Its cramped tin walls formed a dark intimate space, like a cave or a crypt, and its hot, breathy air was thick with an unending litany of prayers and psalms. When Thad awoke in the predawn hours he would often talk aloud, casually chatting with God, something he’d rarely done before. Now, in the most unexpected of places, Thad eased his way into a new form of observance, and it heartened him to think that an old man could change.

During the day Thad sat in his carport, reading a thick, large-print version of the Bible. He knew much of it by heart. He savored his favorite passages: the story of Daniel and the lion, and that of Noah and the flood. Again and again Thad pictured the image of the dove returning to the ark with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its mouth—promising that a new life, on dry land, was just ahead.

As winter approached, the ground became covered with frost, and later with snow. One morning the door to Thad’s trailer froze shut and he had to boil a pot of water to get it open. Another morning he opened his door to find a pack of dogs begging for food. He said he soon felt like a hermit, alone in the wilderness, battling the elements. Dusk became an eerie, unsettling time when the woods seemed to creep noticeably closer. Nights were long and often filled with claustrophobic dreams. Yet all was set right by those first frosty rays of orange light that reminded him with resounding certainty that he had done it—he’d made it through another night—and it gave him a pioneer’s rush.

Thad spoke in long, rambling monologues, often losing himself in the details of specific memories then tapering off into silence for a moment or two before starting again. During one such pause I interjected: “It’s hard for me to imagine feeling this way about any of the apartments that I’ve lived in.”

This set Thad off on a laugh. “Well, where’d you grow up?” he asked finally. “Where’s your real home?”

“Buffalo, New York,” I told him.

“Don’t you want to go back?”

“Sometimes—but mainly just to visit.” Thad nodded his head; it was clear I was quite a curiosity to him.

“So you travel around a lot, do you?” he asked.

“Yeah, quite a bit. This time last year, I was living in Israel.”

“You’ve been to Jerusalem?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Let me ask you,” he said cautiously. “Do people in Jerusalem still walk around in robes, like they do in the Bible?”

I thought for a moment. “Yes, some of them do—especially the Bedouin.”

“Oh,” he said with a nod of his head. He seemed pleased.

From the distance came the groan of a giant flatbed truck, and its headlights revealed the flat, dry terrain of Thad’s lawn. It was the best ground I’d seen all day. Before I had a chance to second-guess myself, I asked him, “Thad, would it be okay if I pitched a tent in your back yard and slept out here tonight?”

“Sure,” he said. “That’d be just fine.”

So I grabbed my backpack and set out to pitch my tent before it got too dark. As I rounded the back of the carport, I noticed something that brought me to a dead halt—graves, hundreds of them. Thad’s back yard spilled directly into the town cemetery. There was not even a fence separating the two. Some graves were just a few paces from the house. I now understood why the flood had left so many coffins on Thad’s lawn.

The far part of the yard turned into what looked like a marsh, so I stuck close to the house and found a nice flat spot. I'm not a terribly superstitious person, but as I raised my tent, driving stakes into the ground just a few yards from the first row of nearby graves, I had to suppress a creepy feeling. *Who camps between a swamp and a graveyard?* I felt like the clueless guy who gets gored in the opening scene of a B-grade horror flick.

Back on the carport, Thad and I continued talking about the flood and many other details of his daily life—from tips on avoiding snakes to the recipe for his favorite bean-based dish called “dandoolies.” Thad was very good-natured about all the questions I threw his way; in fact, all the attention seemed to amuse him. “Do you do this often?” he asked me quizzically.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Camp out in people’s back yards and ask them questions.”

“No,” I said. “You’re the first one.”

Thad shook his head and chuckled. “You know,” he said, “there *are* other folks you can talk to.” Of course, he was right. The story of Princeville was not his alone, and neither was the decision to stay or go. It was a town matter, a question of accepting or rejecting a FEMA buyout, and when it came down to it, Thad was as much a spectator as I was.

The question of the buyout was resolved on a Monday night in late November of 1999, roughly four months earlier. It was an emotional time; the flood was still fresh in everyone’s memory. Thanksgiving was just three days away, Christmas was around the corner, and the bite of being homeless was starting to make itself felt. Above all, people were tired of waiting. They wanted to know, once and for all, whether Princeville was for sale.

The vote took place in a parking lot across the river in Tarboro. Here stood a small trailer that served as Princeville’s temporary town hall. Inside was a conference table, a handful of chairs occupied by local officials, and a jumble of reporters and politicians packed in like commuters on a rush-hour train. By the time Commissioner Anne Howell arrived, the parking lot was swarming with television crews and spectators from across the county. In the weeks since the flood, Princeville had become the local media’s favorite human-interest story, and now everyone had gathered to watch the dramatic closing act. As Anne approached the front door of the trailer, people stepped aside. She was a large woman, consummately maternal. For her, the vote came down to family, simple as that. Princeville had always been a special place, not only because it had offered freed slaves a chance to own their own land, but because it became a place where families could finally stay together. “My family has been here for four generations,” Anne later told me. “Princeville holds us together.” It was clear in her mind that a buyout meant dispersion, and the prospect of reunions on freshly flattened softball fields didn’t hearten her at all.

Perhaps the worst moment for Anne came several months earlier when her sister-in-law’s casket was reported missing. She helped her husband fill out the seven pages of paperwork, detailing what her dead sister looked like. Miles away, in a warehouse filled with washed-up bodies, officials worked all day to find matches based on distinctive features: missing fingertips, a gold tooth, green shoes, a left breast prosthesis, a butterfly brooch, even the serial number on a pacemaker.¹¹ When nothing turned up, Anne tried to remain thankful that her eldest son was still buried. Several years back his coffin had been partially unearthed in another storm, but somehow it had managed to remain buried during Floyd. Determined to focus on the positive, Anne snapped a picture of his intact plot.

As it neared time for the vote, Anne took a seat around the conference table with the mayor and the town’s three other commissioners. “I was sitting there and sweating,” she later told me. “Even in the depth of winter that trailer was hot, and I think everybody was very tense.” There was a great deal of speculation about the vote. Nobody knew exactly how it would go. Anne felt most certain about

Commissioner Linda Worsley, who was a telephone worker at Sprint and a lifelong resident of Princeville. “I felt very confident that she was with me,” recalled Anne. She suspected that the two other commissioners, Milton Johnson and Frank Braswell, were going to vote for the buyout. This left Mayor Delia Perkins. “I knew she would have to be the tiebreaker,” said Anne.

Mayor Perkins sat at the far end of the conference table, a small woman with a broad, serious face. So much had happened since that night when she sat in the town hall, talking with officials from the National Weather Service until the line went dead. When Perkins first returned to Princeville, it was by helicopter, hovering above a maze of flooded streets. It was a surreal experience, Perkins later told me. From her airborne perch she watched the Coast Guard round up a small navy of floating coffins. Days later FEMA offered its massive buyout, and this appeared to be Princeville’s coup de grâce. But then, most unexpectedly, Princeville’s history finally started to do the town some good. Local and regional newspapers began to pick up on this story of history verses nature. Soon even the *New York Times* was running headlines like “Landmark for Ex-Slaves Felt Brunt of Storm” and “Town with Fabled Past Facing Uncertain Future.”¹²

Around that time, Princeville was visited by an assortment of public figures. First was Jesse Jackson. He ushered a large entourage into the waterlogged town hall, hoisted a dank American flag, and publicly demanded money for the town. The next day a photograph of Jackson hugging Delia Perkins hit the newspapers. Not long after, Al Sharpton arrived and alleged that the FEMA buyout was a racist sham. “If this was Valley Forge, imagine what America would be doing,” declared Sharpton. Soon there was a steady stream of visitors, including delegations from the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP, and the Nation of Islam. Money poured in from celebrities like Prince, Evander Holyfield, Tom Joyner, and Queen Latifah, not to mention sports teams like the Charlotte Hornets and the Carolina Panthers. President Clinton visited and formed the President’s Council on the Future of Princeville, chaired by the secretaries of defense, agriculture, commerce, labor, health and human services, and transportation.¹⁴

Despite all of this support, Mayor Perkins still had one major concern. The Army Corps of Engineers had made it clear: Dike or no dike, at some point in the indefinite future Princeville would flood again. This was the unavoidable reality of living in a floodplain. Now it was up to Perkins to weigh all of these factors. Finally, she called for the vote, asking all those in favor of rebuilding the dike to raise their hands. Milton Johnson and Frank Braswell sat motionless. Anne Howell and Linda Worsley raised their hands, and, a moment later, so did the mayor. It was settled: Princeville was rebuilding. There was a great deal of commotion, followed by a barrage of questions from the press. Mayor Perkins kept her comments brief. “Rebuilding is staying with your heritage,” she told one reporter from the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. “We plan to stay.”¹⁵

Outside, in a quiet corner of the parking lot, Sam Knight, Thad’s oldest son, dialed the number of the cell phone that they’d insisted Thad get. It was odd happenstance that Thad was whisked into the world of global communication out of his stubborn desire to live in utter seclusion. On that night, however, it came in handy. Excitedly, Sam told his father the news: *They voted for the dike—it’s all settled*. Thad was greatly relieved, though even then he had worries. His house lay in ruins. He had very little money saved and no income to count on other than Social Security. Perhaps most daunting of all, a very long winter lay ahead. Thad braced himself for the worst, and within just two weeks, it came.¹⁶

In the days that followed the vote, the Army Corps of Engineers hurriedly assembled a crew to rebuild the dike. Every moment counted. By June another hurricane season would be under way, and the town of Princeville lay unprotected. The decision to turn down the FEMA buyout was pivotal, but now two

equally important questions were on the table: Was it possible to build a better dike? And could it be finished on time?

The answers soon rested in the hands of a man named Prentice Lanier, the young builder who won the contract to rebuild the dike. In the world of government contracting, the dike was a modest project with a limited budget of roughly \$768,000, little of which Lanier would see himself. Essentially it was a repair job. FEMA said it would pay only to restore the dike to its preflood level. The old dike was just a wall of red clay, roughly two miles long and on average twenty feet high. It had worked well enough for thirty years—then came Hurricane Floyd, topping the dike by a solid three feet. Floyd was a massive storm—some even called it “the storm of the century”—yet it cleared the dike with ease, proving that there was plenty of leeway for a lesser storm to do the same.*

Determined to make the best of a bad deal, town officials began exploring ways to raise the dike further. Eager to help, the Army Corps of Engineers petitioned Congress for money to conduct preliminary tests on the benefits of a higher dike. Meanwhile, at the edge of town, Prentice Lanier began a double-speed effort—bringing in truckload after truckload of red clay—trying to reach a base level of thirty-seven feet by the first of June, in time for the hurricane season.

Several miles to the south, at the opposite end of town, Thad Knight was dealing with pressing concerns of his own. One day in early December, as Thad sat in his carport, he started to feel his feet swell and his chest tighten. “I didn’t think much of it,” he later told me. “I just figured I’d gotten too much fresh air.” But that evening, as he undressed for bed, Thad discovered that his feet were so swollen that he couldn’t take his shoes off. The tightening in his chest had also gotten worse, so he called his daughter Cynthia and told her that he was a little worried.

One of Thad’s sons soon picked him up, and together they met the rest of the family in the emergency room of Heritage Hospital in Tarboro. Thad waited to be seen by a doctor for about thirty minutes, until a nurse realized he was having a heart attack and rushed him into an examining room. His circulation was merely trickling, and his heart was skipping beats. The doctor quickly put him on blood thinner and sent him to the hospital’s intensive care unit, where he stayed for the next few days.

When Thad’s condition finally stabilized, his children came to the hospital to help him check out. The doctor explained that Thad needed a lot of rest and constant supervision. He was lucky to be alive and the last thing he should be doing was struggling to survive in the wilderness. So Thad’s children began discussing at whose house he would recover and how they’d move all his stuff. Finally Thad interjected and explained his intentions: He would return to Princeville. For a moment no one said anything. “We were shocked,” one of his daughters later told me. “Totally shocked.”

Eventually several of his children pushed him to justify his decision, but Thad was reluctant to explain himself. “He had just made up his mind,” his youngest son, Dennis, later told me. “There was no talking him out of it.” Finally the family reached a compromise: Thad would allow his twenty-year-old grandson, Tee, to live with him. Reluctantly, the doctor agreed. But when Tee showed up at his trailer later that night, Thad told him not to bother. Instead Tee agreed to join Thad for dinner every so often, and the arrangement became their little secret. “I’m still asking the Lord for forgiveness on that one,” Thad told me with a smile.

As Thad recounted this part of the story months later from the comfort of his carport, I found myself empathizing with his children. What was he trying to prove? Was this one last gasp against the indignities and helplessness of old age? Or was it precisely the opposite? There was something undeniably moribund about Thad’s vigil. Granted, he had reason to be proud. His house was a physical reminder that he had stayed by his father’s side, that he had given up sharecropping, and that he had raised his family to live a better life. Yet all these things were in the past, and now even the house itself was crumbling and empty—a final and irrefutable reminder that his life was just a shell of what it once was. Thad never admitted it to me, but it had to be very depressing at times. And on quiet

winter mornings, as he sat in a town that was all but dead, surrounded by several hundred snowcapped graves, wouldn't it be natural to think of letting go? Wasn't it possible that he had come home to die?

Thad assured me that this was not the case, but he conceded that during the winter death was occasionally in his thoughts, especially in February, when a work crew arrived to rebury the town's dead. Thad walked down the road behind his house to meet the crew. He offered them bottled water, and together they chatted as a backhoe dug deep holes into the frozen earth. The unearthed corpses were now entombed in giant steel "hurricane-proof" coffins. For years corpses had been popping out of the earth during bad floods, as if to express some belated desire to leave. "You don't have to worry about these things floating away," a crew member told him. These coffins were pure ballast. Thad watched the crew rebury them one by one.

That winter, the workmen were not Thad's only visitors. Occasionally, as people drove through Princeville, some of them stopped and asked Thad questions: *Are you all right? What happened to the town? What are you still doing here?* Glad to have the company, Thad would tell them his whole story, starting with the night of the flood. They would listen, and when he was done they would often hand him some money. Thad always protested, but they would insist, stuffing money into his coat pockets. By the end of the winter visitors had given him almost five thousand dollars in crumpled bills. Thad took that money and put it away. For the first time since the flood, it looked like he might have the means to rebuild his house.

By the end of winter, Thad was no longer the town's only resident. A handful of other people, including Commissioner Anne Howell, had also moved their trailers back into town. By springtime the rudiments of civilization had returned: working phone lines, streetlights on every corner, and lawnmowers trimming roadside grass. A makeshift mayor's office was even erected in the shadow of the old town hall. Slowly, life was returning to normal. Yet June was just around the corner, and repairs on the dike were well behind schedule. It rained often, and from a distance the dike came to resemble a giant, sloping pile of mud. For many it also carried an unshakable air of defeat. It was a broken fortification, a kind of earthen Maginot Line. Now, however, all anyone could do was hope that Prentice Lanier would fix it in time.

By the time I met Thad, it was already mid-April, and the air had warmed to a temperate sixty-five degrees. It was ideal camping weather; and as night finally fell, cloaking the town's landscape, I began to feel better about my tenting situation. At least the tombstones were out of sight. In the meantime I continued to sit with Thad in his carport, chatting about the flood and admiring the glimmer of unchallenged starlight.

When I had first arrived earlier in the evening, I hadn't gotten a good look at his house. The rubbish fire and Thad's government-issue trailer had blocked my view. Now that I'd committed to spending the night, however, Thad insisted on showing me around. He opened the side door to the house, and I was taken aback at what I saw—a completely restored interior. There were brand-new walls, floors, ceilings, fixtures, and appliances. The outside definitely needed a little work, but on second glance, I noticed that the windows, shingles, and rain gutters were also new.

"Isn't it amazing?" asked Thad. "Just like Noah and those Hebrew boys, I'm starting a new life." Thad explained that the house had been restored within the last month. A group of Mennonite volunteers from Ohio and Pennsylvania had done the work. They'd used some building supplies donated by celebrities, and when those ran out, Thad had bought the remaining supplies with his own money.¹⁷

The rebuilding process wasn't easy, explained Thad. Just two years before the flood, he had paid to have his entire house remodeled. He'd put in new floors, a new roof, and new furnishings. On the day the Mennonites tore out the floorboards, Thad paced about restlessly. He was still repaying the bank

for those slabs of wood—\$250 a month—and he'd have to keep repaying this "home improvement loan" for the next few years. Eventually Thad retired to his small trailer and turned up the volume on his transistor radio, drowning out the clamor of construction.

Now Thad was once again living in his own house, but he was far from safe. Hurricane season was just a few weeks away, and Prentice Lanier was more than a month behind schedule building the dike. Thad's early decision to rebuild had clearly put him at risk, and I had to wonder why he couldn't wait just a few more months until the dike was fully restored. Thad seemed to be taking one brazen risk after another. His life was quickly taking on the epic dimensions of the Bible stories that he spent all day reading. And as everything swung precariously in the balance, Thad told me that he had begun to taste Daniel's and Jonah's gnawing fear, Job's spiraling sense of loss, and Noah's cautious hope. "They almost felt like real people in my life," explained Thad. It was an intoxicating religious experience, a crowning test of his faith in self and God, and gradually even Thad's children were won over by his fervor and his apparently unstoppable momentum. Later in my stay Thad's youngest daughter, Cynthia, explained: "Dad kept telling us that God was going to work things out for him—was going to restore everything he lost—and after a while, we just stopped worrying."

As Thad and I finished out the evening on his carport, we marveled at the strange twist of events that had brought him here. It was an odd life, filled with renewed faith and strange new curiosities—like air-conditioning, cell phones, and sneakers. Thad had only recently discovered the comfort of sneakers. Currently he had two of his favorite pairs on display on the table at the far end of the carport: a pair of Saucony running shoes and a pair of Nike Air high-tops. "I never wore sneakers before the flood," he told me. "Now I have ten pairs." Apparently, during the relief effort, the town of Princeville was inundated with donations of sneakers.

"It's hard to go back to shoes after wearing sneakers," I told him.

"Yeah," he said, "but I think I have enough to last me a long time."

A cool breeze blew across the lawn, stoking the dying embers of the rubbish fire and sending a slight shiver up my back. It was almost time for sleep, which meant my returning to the graveyard. I needed to get going, but first I had to ask, "Does it bother you living next to a cemetery?"

"Oh, I don't worry about the people in the cemetery because those folks are bygones. It's the people out here you have to worry about," he said, pointing to a passing car.

Somehow I doubted whether that would calm me later that night as I returned to my tent to sleep with those bygones. Unfazed, Thad continued talking about the cemetery, explaining that all of the deceased relatives from his immediate family were buried back there—except his son Carlton, who had killed himself a few years before and was buried elsewhere.

"One day my son just went back over there and shot himself," said Thad, pointing with his finger to almost the exact location where my tent was pitched. "The thing is, he told his mother he was going to kill himself. She called me at the mill and gave me the message, but I said that he must be joking. When I finally came home, it was around this time of night, and some of the neighbor children told me that he had gone around back with my shotgun and they had heard a noise." Thad paused. "I never did know why he did it, or why he drove the eight miles from his house to do it over here."

I wasn't sure why Carlton wasn't buried in the graveyard with the rest of the Knights, and Thad didn't offer much of an explanation. In some cultures the corpse of a suicide is deliberately buried as far away from home as possible so that its ghost might not find its way back. Suicide ghosts are considered particularly restless because of the desperate state of mind in which they leave life. The Baganda tribe of Uganda buries a suicide's corpse at a distant crossroad; the Bannaus of Cambodia bury suicides in a far corner of a forest; and the Alabama Indians simply throw them into a river.¹⁸ No matter where Carlton was buried, however, it was clear that his choice to kill himself at home had a haunting effect. Every day, Thad couldn't help but glance at the spot where it happened, remembering

the excruciating details of the day he found him, again and again, until it seemed that Carlton's ghost had also made its way home.

There were other questions I had about Carlton's death, but somehow I didn't have the heart to ask them. Instead I sat quietly for a few more minutes, listening to the crickets and the sound of cars. Finally, I bid Thad good night and trudged back toward the graveyard, wanting nothing more than to fall fast asleep. But just as I was zipping up my tent, I heard a rather unsettling screech. I poked my head back outside and noticed for the first time that there was an old barn set back about a hundred feet in the woods, with a rusty door that looked like it would be swinging all night long. Just then, I heard what sounded like a pack of dogs barking in the distance.

Before I'd left the carport, Thad had invited me to stay in his guest room if the rain or wind kicked up. But I could see from my tent's screened-in moon roof that it was pretty much a perfect night. I lay sleepless for a good hour, and then I swallowed my pride, put on my shoes, and exited my tent. Moments later I was knocking on Thad's door. To my relief, he was still up. It was clear he knew what had happened. "It is a bit chilly out there," he said casually. "Come on in. I'm just making some hog head." He led me down a narrow hallway past a faux oil painting of Jesus, and into his guest room, where I would end up sleeping for the remainder of the week. Thad said good night, and I drifted off to the sweet, synthetic scent of new carpet and fresh paint.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of rain, and before I knew it I found myself thinking about the dike. The thought seemed to come with the weather; the two are inseparable in Princeville. It occurred to me that there should be a small gauge in everyone's house indicating the water level.

An hour or so later I was treading through a light rain to have a look at the dike for myself. On the way, I passed Glennie's General Store, one of the town's oldest business establishments. Now the two-story building was in shambles, and a backhoe was loading wreckage into a dumpster while three men looked on idly from the street. These three men made up the building's work crew, though calling them a "work crew" is a bit misleading, as I'm not sure I ever saw them do much work. In theory, however, they were in charge of gutting Glennie's and getting it ready to be rebuilt. Throughout my one-week stay in Princeville, I stopped and chatted with the crew, usually in the mornings, on my way back from buying coffee in Tarboro. Today their only real responsibility was to ensure that the backhoe didn't tear up the gas line leading to the pump in front of the store.

"My biggest worry is that snakes could be slithering all around in the store," said William, the leader of the crew. This apparently was the wrong thing to say around Arthur, the crew's one senior citizen, who was already quite uneasy about the whole arrangement.

"If I see a motherfucking snake, William, just one of those slithering motherfuckers, I'm out of here like that." William rolled his eyes. "And if they hit that gas line," continued Arthur, who was now on a roll, "I'll run the other motherfucking way, and I'm never coming back." Arthur had the highest rate of "motherfucker" usage per sentence I'd ever heard; it almost served as cadence, lending a pleasant rhythm to everything he said. Arthur talked for a while more, delivering an epic soliloquy on the dangers of the workplace and cracking us all up as the backhoe drew dangerously close to the gas pump.

When I mentioned that I was headed over to take a look at the dike, the crew seemed interested. "The dike, huh . . ." said William. "My mom is still too scared to go near the river or the dike. Doesn't trust it, and I don't blame her."

"Yeah, something about that dike doesn't look right," affirmed Arthur.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's not motherfucking high enough."

After saying goodbye to the crew, I continued onward through a steadily intensifying rain until I reached the dike. As I climbed up its muddy side, I struggled to keep from sinking. The clay had

become so damp that it was literally sucking my shoes into the ground. When I pulled them out, big chunks of the dike clung to my soles, turning my sneakers into platform shoes.

On the top of the dike I was relieved to find that it stood a good distance above the river, but as I headed down a bit farther, I soon discovered a number of giant gaps through which water could easily rush in. I continued walking until I found a parked tractor with a thirtyish-looking man in work boots and a hardhat standing next to it. I introduced myself. He shook my hand, gave me a hardhat, and told me his name was Prentice Lanier.

Reluctantly, Lanier agreed to give me a quick tour of the dike. As we continued along the bottom of a particularly long gap, Lanier told me more about the structure. He explained that in the thirty years since it was built, much of the original clay had washed away, significantly weakening the dike.

“Why don’t they make the dike out of concrete or something stronger?” I asked.

“Way too expensive,” said Lanier. “You know how much that would cost?”

“Why not make the dike bigger, then?”

“A lot of reasons,” said Lanier. He didn’t want to talk about it in detail, but later on that week I contacted a woman at the Army Corps of Engineers who gave me the rest of the story.

Apparently, members of the Tarboro Town Council got together and drafted a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers, objecting to any modifications on Princeville’s dike. The council members knew that if Princeville’s dike was elevated much higher, the Tar River would flood onto their shores instead. Not long after the letter, Tarboro’s town manager issued a clear warning in an interview with a local newspaper called the *Daily Southerner*: “We want Princeville to rebuild its dike—we just don’t want them to build it any higher.”¹⁹ And just to make this point perfectly clear, Tarboro’s attorney issued a thinly veiled threat to sue the town of Princeville if it didn’t heed this warning.

The threat was never acted on, but it didn’t need to be. For more than a hundred and thirty years, people in Princeville had been deferring to their neighbors in Tarboro. It was deeply ingrained in their past, and that wasn’t about to change now. Besides, Mayor Perkins was currently being threatened with impeachment by a band of disgruntled citizens, and the last thing she wanted was a lawsuit. She had no interest in battling with Tarboro, and to make this clear, she imposed a gag order barring any Princeville official from even discussing the idea.²⁰ The final blow came in the spring, when Congress denied the Army Corps of Engineers money to conduct preliminary tests on the effects of a bigger dike.²¹

By the time Lanier and I finished our tour, we were both in a sweat. I turned to Lanier. “Do you think this town is safe?” I asked him.

“Safe as it can be,” he replied.

“But would you live here?”

Lanier sighed—it wasn’t a fair question and we both knew it. Still, I waited for his answer. “We’re building a good dike here,” he said finally. “As good a dike as we can.”

I headed back into town through a steady rain, letting the water wash the clay off my shoes. By the time I made it back to Thad’s, a serious storm was brewing. Outside the sky was illuminated in a perpetual flicker of lightning—as if by giant stadium lights shimmering out their last bits of filament.

There would be no sitting in the carport tonight. Instead we sat in Thad’s living room, watching *Seinfeld* reruns and waiting for the storm. It arrived with a shotgun blast of rain, which hit the roof with startling force. Only intermittent bursts of thunder, which rattled off like nearby artillery fire, broke the beating of the downpour. The bombardment of noise drowned out the conversation on TV and left Thad and me looking at each other awkwardly.

“Do you still worry about flooding?” I asked finally.

“I think God will take care of us in the home we are in, just as he always has,” he told me. Thad’s

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