

In The Eye

a collection of writings

edited by Katherine Tracy

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THE GRIS-GRIS CAT

Joseph Andriano

I don't mean to wish it on anyone; I just don't want it here.

That's what so many of us dwellers in hurricane alley seem to say, knowing our good luck will be someone else's bad. And we don't say her or him although the things are given names in alternating genders; we say It because that's what it is, a Thing that can shape-shift from blob to lethal whirlpool, only to morph into a gorgeous galaxy—as seen from the orbiting GOES. I know its beauty is an illusion.

Please God, keep the Thing away from here.

I never whisper that, at least. Nor do I go to church and pray for remarkable providence because I am ever mindful of Mark Twain's bitter point that if I pray to God to keep the Thing away, I'm really praying for it to swallow somebody else's house, tear off other people's roofs and hurl giant water-oaks into *those* folks' living rooms. If I ask God to guide its course away from my little lot, I am asking the deity to choose some other sucker to target and torment. I leave the Lord, or Lady, alone.

We've just been lucky, that's all.

One thing about luck, you wait long enough, it does run out. That's why part of me wants to get the hell out of here. But my roots are much deeper than those of the water-oaks that have fallen all around us, on our fence, on our deck, on our driveway, but never on our heads, house, or cars. My wife Gail thinks as long as we have Gris-Gris we're living a charmed life. I remind her it's not just she and I but this whole town. Lucky Lafayette. All around us is devastation. But our turn is bound to come.

Let's ride it out, and hope to hell it doesn't ride us out.

It's so difficult for us to leave; we have three cats that are such a hassle to take anywhere we actually pay extra for a home

vet. We cannot imagine evacuating with our cats; we would rather be run over by that freight train the riders-out always say they hear when the thing comes. But if it's a Category 3 and the eye is in the Bay only twenty miles south of us, and if it looks like we'll be in the dreaded northeast quadrant, then I will gladly put up with cat piss and shit in the car. But then again, says Gail, by the time we know it's coming right for us, the interstate traffic will be so bad that, well, we're on pretty high ground here, we don't have to worry about storm surge. The bathtub is beginning to look like a better place than the car. Let's stay home. I remind her of the two giant loblolly pines in the front, the great live-oak in the back; will they withstand the monster's fury?

So I closely monitor the progress of the storm. I have bookmarked several weather sites; I surf among them; I watch the blob become a whirlpool. In infra-red the thing becomes a buzz-saw, white-cold around the ragged eye, bloody red teeth inching our way. It's a Cat. 5 in the middle of the cauldron Gulf. The high definition visible photo gives the more benign illusion of a distant galaxy, breakers in the Gulf its lovely nebulas; its spiral arms so tenuous they must be harmless. But the water vapor image dispels that illusion. The eye is now a black hole, and the Thing is almost too scary to look at, a ghostly white Kraken, its feeder bands giant-squid legs of suction death.

Hey Jon, what's the story down there? Is it the Big One or what? My brother's e-mail reminds me, yes, there is a story, and yes it is always the Big One for somebody. *In this game of storm roulette*, I write back, *we have so far managed to draw a couple of blanks and get merely grazed by one bullet.* The story is not of a strong hurricane here; Katrina barely brushed by us, giving us nothing more than a cool breeze. The close call impelled me to run out and buy a portable generator, and when Rita hit us with sustained sixty mph winds—not even a Cat. One, but nonetheless a respectable tropical storm, producing plenty of debris—I was ready for the inevitable power outage. It lasted only three days, as opposed to the three weeks Lake Charles endured. And they're at about the same latitude, Gail reminds me. An even closer call.

Thousands have come here, I wrote my brother, *and as*

soon as they arrived the rumors started of car thefts and worse, there was even maliciously racist talk of murder and mayhem at the Cajundome, which is housing about 2500 evacuees (they don't want to be called refugees), mostly African-American. There has actually been no increase in crime whatsoever here since the evacuees arrived—even a slight decrease according to the sheriff. And yet “Shooters”—truly original name for a gun-store, don't you think?—has completely sold out their handguns. So you see, Sam, we've welcomed them with open arms and loaded guns.

II.

There's a Cat. 4 coming and we're in the middle of the cone.

Gail and I agree our luck has changed. The *reason* for the change is where we differ. I'm the skeptic who calls it mere chance, but Gail is convinced otherwise.

We are lucky enough to live on one of this town's only hills, rising away from the nearby Vermilion River. Storm surges and overflowing riverbanks are not our worry here. This neighborhood can stand up to twenty inches of rain without flooding. But it's thick with trees. I tried locating our house on Google Earth's satellite photo and saw only an ameboid blob: the canopy of loblolly pines and live oaks that shade our house but also serve as aimed projectiles swaying in the wind. After Katrina's deluge, our neighborhood's few unoccupied houses were quickly filled with evacuees.

A middle-aged couple from New Orleans who had lost their home in the storm rented the little house behind us, a cottage with “one-half” after the address number that was once a backyard garage, now expanded and nestled among camellias. They lived between us and the old gay cowboy from Texas named Roy, their landlord, whose gorgeous house faced the street one block up the hill from us. But this is not really their story, at least not entirely. It's really Gris-Gris's story. That's pronounced *gree-gree* in case you're not from around here. She's our gray cat, or was. I need to word that much more carefully, for this is what she taught me: she was never our cat, never anyone's; no cat is ever anyone's.

We met Gris-Gris when she was a kitten. The first sign of her presence was a definite decline in the lizard population on the ceiling of our open front porch. The night before I first saw Gris I said to Gail, "Have you noticed that there are fewer geckos?"

"Yes! I'm very concerned." Gail loves lizards; she even talks to geckos. "I bet there's a new cat in the neighborhood."

Circe and Calypso, the two cats we got right out of the litter, have never been outside, except when they were born underneath our vet's front stairs. They don't even try to go out; to them it's an alien environment. So, except when they get their shots, they are very low-maintenance animals. Gris-Gris, however, was another story. When we first saw her as a kitten, we thought she was a stray. She would just appear every day in our front yard, hunting around the huge pine tree ringed with dwarf gardenias, pentas and firespike where hummingbirds and butterflies liked to drink. Our property, with the half-wild gardens Gail creates, attracts many such creatures, so of course cats like to stalk by. We became part of Gris's daily rounds. We had no idea to whom, if anyone, she belonged.

Eventually she started spending more time at our house, especially since by now we both had fallen in love with her, giving her treats, leaving food out for her. She grew big for a female, with long gray fur and bright yellow eyes. When the sunlight caught her coat, it glistened an exquisite silver sheen, especially where the fur was short, almost like down—on her head, the bridge of her nose, and her paws. Her face was capable of expression ranging from sad-sack to demonic, and a goofy one in between that was the result of a missing fang. God knows what she had sunk her teeth into to lose that tooth. When she yawned you could see it as a sign that she was only half a predator.

One night when we were playing poker with a crowd of friends, she came into the house to visit. While our indoor cats hid from the noisy crowd, Gris-Gris gregariously made it known that she was accepting treats. I named her that very night because she seemed to appear by magic, and she brought me incredible luck at cards. She lay in my lap when I drew a full house, beating a colleague's flush. She was putting *gris-gris* on

my cards.

But then a few days later I heard a girl's voice yelling *Penelope? Penelope?* By this time, Gris was sleeping on our porch every night. A sullen teenager knocked on our door and asked if we had seen a gray cat.

So Gris was really Penelope, but she preferred to be Gris. She made it so clear that she would rather be with us that when the sullen teenager moved away with her single mother a few months later, they left the cat behind with nary a word to us. But we did not need to adopt the apparently abandoned animal; she had already adopted us. We got her spayed and took her in, for which our other two cats have never forgiven us. They were happiest every morning when we let Gris out, and angriest every evening when we let the fiend carrying all those alien odors back in. We always had Gris pretty well-trained to stay in at night. She seemed to enjoy our company; she came when called; she purred when petted; she stood like a meerkat on hind legs to eat treats from my hand—a trick our two house cats could never do, *would* never do because it was beneath their dignity. They always despised Gris-Gris, never accepted her, never even the least bit tolerated her. They hissed when she came anywhere near them. She and Calypso, our sort-of Siamese, got into hissy spitting fist fights regularly, but never seemed to hurt each other. Calypso loved only two people in the world (Gail and me), eschewing and sometimes scratching all others who attempted to pet her, and she loved only one cat, her black sister Circe, who loves everyone as long as they pet her ceaselessly. Gris loved to chase her around the house, just for fun, but she never actually attacked her. She was no challenge.

After several years of what seemed to be total loyalty and devotion to us, Gris-Gris failed to come home one night in mid-November. Gail was up well past midnight hollering for her all over the neighborhood. She showed up late the next afternoon shortly after I got home from work, and after I gave her some treats as rewards for coming home, I called Gail's office to let her know. Then when I went to check the mail, a Lincoln town car crept slowly up the street and stopped in front of my house. I recognized the evacuees who were renting the cottage behind us. The woman in the passenger seat said, "Hi. Do y'all own a

gray cat?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear, I guess that was your wife I heard calling her last night. What was that name she kept saying? Gigi? Gigli?"

"Gris-Gris."

"She spent the night with us," said the man in the driver's seat.

"We're sorry," said his wife, "we thought she was a stray. She has no collar."

"She hates collars, and we're always afraid she'll get it caught on something and get trapped somewhere."

"She's so sweet. She comes to visit every day. It's like she knows we could use the company."

"You must be giving her treats."

The man laughed. "She likes to hunt lizards in our yard."

"That's one of her best things."

"Sorry if we caused you some anxiety," said the woman. "It's just that we lost our cat to Katrina and yours is so friendly."

"It's okay, she can visit with you whenever you want. Just send her home when it starts to get dark."

"Great! Thanks." She extended her hand out the car window. "Linda Fiorello. This is Tony."

This couple renting Roy's cottage, I soon learned, were not among the desperate poor who had so little and now had nothing; they were moderately rich restaurateurs planning to return to New Orleans as soon as they could. They told me they were glad to be here, but it could never be home. While their restaurant was only slightly damaged, it reeked of mold and rotten meat. And their whole staff, from dishwasher to maitre d', was scattered in shelters, hotels, and the homes of friends and relatives all over the country. They had lost their large, well-insured house in Gentilly; its roof was the only part not submerged in the deluge. When they saw and smelled what was left after the waters receded they declared it a total loss. "I could never live in that house again anyway," said Linda Fiorello. It was several days after I met them; we were talking across my wooden fence; I on my deck, and she on her back stoop. Gris-

Gris was in her arms licking her hands lovingly. Linda looked like an aging hippie, with long gray-streaked brunette hair and very tired, dark-circled eyes.

"Be careful," I said, "Gris bites when you pick her up."

"Really? She's so friendly!"

"She's just tenderizing your skin so she can more easily nibble on it."

She stroked Gris's beautiful long fur. "I don't believe it."

"As long as you pet her gently," I admitted, "she won't bite."

She squatted down and gently released the cat, still petting her until she walked to the fence, jumped to the top and plopped onto my deck. "Sometimes she reminds me too much of my Mitzi." She was close to tears. "She drowned in our house, you know. We found her in our mattress box-spring when we went back to assess the damage. I have nightmares about it."

"I'm so sorry."

"She was gray too, but not quite as big as yours." She turned suddenly and ran into the house, apparently in tears she did not want me to see.

Gris-Gris was queen of the neighborhood, vanquishing any and all, male or female, who challenged her territory. Our house was her home base; she always came back. Gail even called her loyal. In the following weeks, however, we noticed that Gris was spending almost no time in our yard or on our porch. We usually had to lure her in by shaking a bag of treats or holding up the can of Reddi-Wip that Gail loved to let her lick off her finger, but shortly after she would grace us with her regal presence she would start howling to get out. She even started doing this at four o'clock in the morning, scratching at our bedroom door. It was becoming more and more obvious that she wanted to be elsewhere. Finally, in mid-December, she disappeared again. The morning after she failed to come home, I walked around the block to the Fiorellos' house and found that it was empty. I knocked on Roy's door and he answered, still in his silk bathrobe. "They moved out," he told me, "they went back to New Orleans."

"Were you here when they left?"

"No, why?"

"I think they took my cat."

"Gris-Gris? You think they took Gris-Gris? No, they wouldn't do that."

"Their cat died in the storm. She reminded them of her."

"Still in all, they don't seem like the type to steal somebody's cat. Well, Linda might, if she was off her meds."

"What?"

"Severe depression. Bipolar disorder too I think."

"Did they give you a phone number?"

"Yes, a cell. Just a minute, I'll get it. But be nice, okay? They've had such a rough time of it, you know."

I waited until I got back to my yard before I called. I could hear the woman's despair even in the way she said "Hello."

"Linda? This is Jonathan Andrews. Is Gris with you?"

"Who? I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number."

"Gris-Gris, the gray cat that's been visiting you the last month."

"We do have a gray cat, but her name is Mitzi."

"What? Mitzi died, you told me. Mitzi drowned in your house."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Andrews, but you're mistaken. We would never leave Mitzi behind. She evacuated with us. And she's right here."

"You can't do this to us. I can prove that's my cat! My vet has a folder on her. I've got years' worth of digital photos. How many cats look like her? And how many have a missing fang? Hello?" She had hung up, and when I called back I got a voice-mail greeting. "Listen to me," I recorded, "you won't get away with this. I'll come and get her back. You can't just take somebody's cat." But even as I said this I realized that the Fiorellos hadn't really taken her. I'm sure she leapt of her own accord right into the back seat of that cavernous Town Car. I'm sure she abandoned us just the way Penelope abandoned the sullen teenager and became Gris-Gris. She was Mitzi now.

I kept meaning to drive to New Orleans with a cat-carrier, show up at their restaurant, confront them about Gris, get her back somehow. But I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

The woman's quiet despair, the way she managed to block out the sight of her drowned and rotting cat in that box spring simply by convincing herself it had never happened, I couldn't hate her for that. And I've managed to convince myself that the Fiorellos did not steal my cat, she was never mine in the first place. They lured her away perhaps, but it was her decision. People only *think* they own animals. Just because we have bred the feral out of them and made them dependent on us, we think they belong to us rather than with us. Thank you, Gris, for teaching me that.

Gail has taken it very hard; she is devastated, claiming that Gris-Gris just stopped loving us. I don't cheer her up much by pointing out that the notion of cats loving is a pathetic fallacy, anthropomorphic wishful thinking. Cats don't love. Let her go. She's fulfilling their need. She wandered into our lives, and now she's wandered out, following people who need her more than we do.

"But she was our good luck charm. When she came into our lives everything got better." Even though Gail works for a defense firm, poring all day over legal briefs, discerning fallacies in the desperate arguments of sleazy plaintiff attorneys, writing brilliantly argued responses with irrefutable logic; she clings to this *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. It's true certain miracles seemed to happen to us after Gris-Gris came into our lives. For example, the night after a doctor told Gail she had a rare deltoid tumor in her abdomen, Gris-Gris spent a good half-hour purring on her lap and the next day she learned there was no tumor, only a hematoma she probably got from coughing too hard. It cleared up by itself. I had some bizarre intestinal infection that was thought to be acute diverticulosis, a sign of chronic diverticulitis, and when I kept Gris-Gris on my lap while burning with fever the antibiotics began doing their job. I later learned my guts were fine. And my blood pressure dropped significantly after only a week of successive nights with Gris on my chest, purring in phase with the beating of my heart. But that wasn't magic; it was symbiosis.

Gail, however, continues to insist that Gris-Gris had a way of warding off disaster. I cling to my skepticism even now, when I find myself in the middle of a cone of uncertainty. *Maybe it will fizzle to a Cat. 3, or maybe it will make a turn. I don't mean to wish it on anyone. I just don't want it here.*