

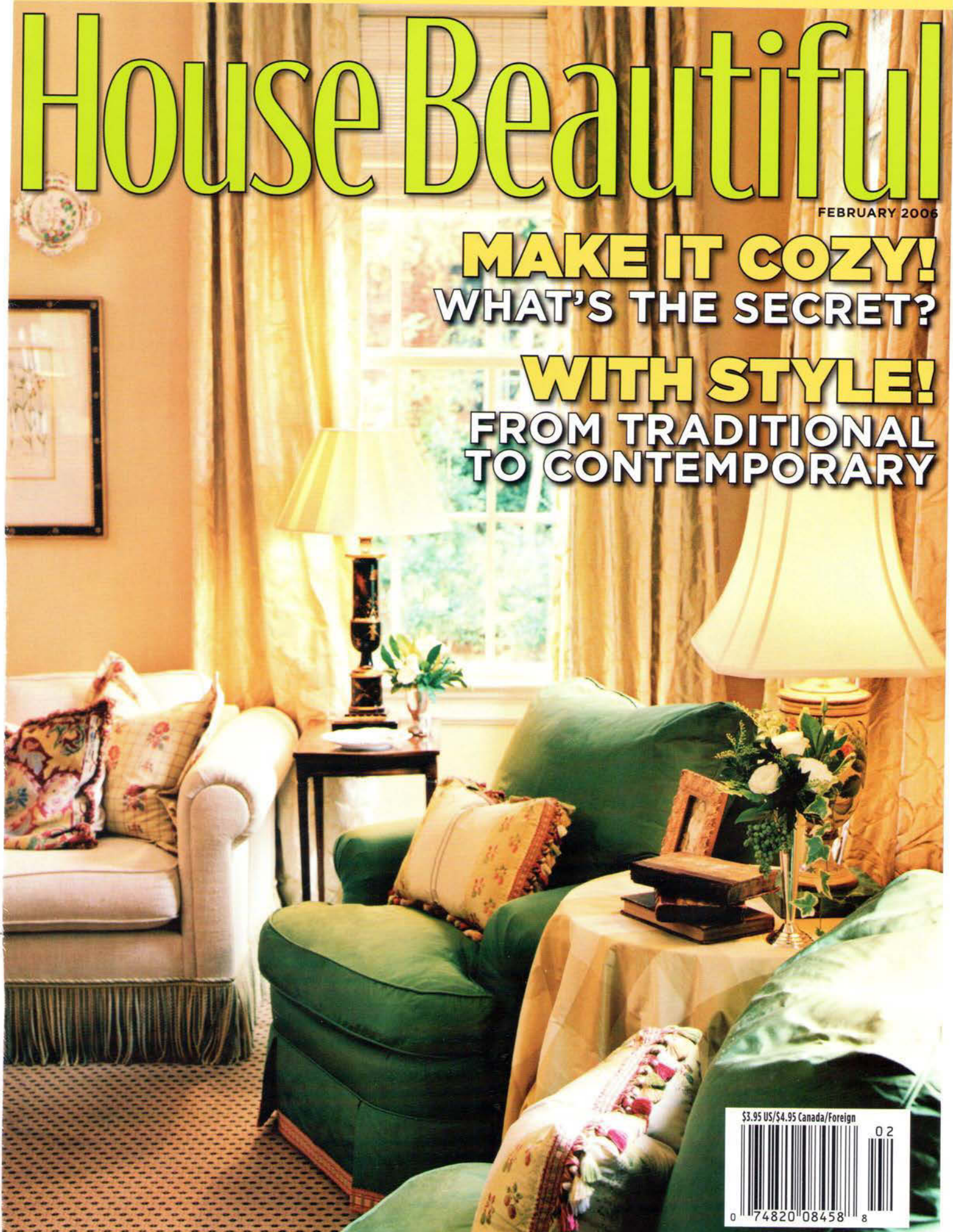
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Storm Warnings

To leave or not to leave? As Hurricane Katrina approaches, Patrick Dunne has to decide whether he is ready to abandon his home and his city

BY PATRICK DUNNE

PANIC AND THE WIND were unrelenting, but Hurricane Katrina was still far from shore. Running away from home never much appealed to me anyway, especially not now.

I did it once when I was eight and whatever my intended destination—which I suppose was Mexico, since that's where Papa always headed when his siblings exasperated him—I got no farther than a few regret-strewn blocks. It was Sister Xavier, a leathery-faced nun who spent most days in a mud-stained wimple, picking bugs off her hydrangeas, who discovered me settled underneath the convent porch. She seemed not in the least surprised, but issued two

dire warnings while giving me a drink of water. If my plans included living there, she said, beware of spiders whose bedroom it became when night was falling. The other was to avoid at all costs attracting the attention of Sister Adrian, who showed no mercy to runaways. I soon crept home because I missed my grandmother and had a lively curiosity about lunch.

Running away this time was even heavier with regret and shame than all those years ago. As a child of hurricane

country, I came to know the thrill signaled by a red flag raised on the bay front. Somehow it also summoned up deep pride and gratitude for a household that seemed able to weather anything. Flight was not in our vocabulary, nor fear nor hurried unconsidered plans. Nurtured on tales of a grandfather who had organized relief when the 1919 storm and tidal wave nearly wiped away our Texas town of Corpus Christi, I sensed that my own father knew the ropes. Store water; wrap chunks of ice in sheets and sawdust; cook for a week; fold bedding for dependents needing shelter; fill lamps with kerosene; but above all, sense the power of nature. To insure that last imperative, there were plenty of excursions to the sea wall to marvel at the waves. My mother never objected and kept a stack of handkerchiefs soaked in ice water to keep our tempers cool during the humid, breathless days before the storm.

These preparations suspended normal life, calling everyone into a different role. I frankly loved it. Battening down, waiting, watching, secretly hoping for a good storm. How bitterly I regretted the occasion when, as the wind mounted, my father chauffeured the local bishop to a cliff, where with cope and cassock flapping madly he blessed the waters. The holy water came back to sting us in the face, but grace prevailed and the storm took an unexpected turn and hit some more deserving town due north.

This time, for the first time in my adult life, the threat posed by a hurricane seemed palpable. Usually the last to do so, we boarded up our shops earlier than most. We encouraged the timid who wanted to evacuate early and tried not to feel superior. Even the day before, with our resolve firm, we helped friends nail close some doors that looked down into



PAUL COX

the placid, ancient garden of the Ursulines. The French Quarter was sublimely quiet. A marvel, really, when it wasn't trying to imitate itself. The colors old plaster walls took in that pre-storm light was heartbreaking. It was hard not to kiss the buildings as we bustled past.

A few people leaned over balconies to wave, comrades in determination. We lit some candles in St. Louis Cathedral, petitioning mercy. The statue of Our Lady of Deliverance held out her crown of roses and smiled sweetly to the girl caught in flames at her feet, but was she listening? New Orleans has an odd pack of protectors: Our Lady of Prompt Succor, who saved us from the English in 1812; and St. Expedite, who saves us now from almost every other thing, except of course ourselves. His name is found in no official canon, but has been venerated here since this statue was rescued more than a century ago from a crate left unaddressed on the wharves—the only marking being “EXPEDITE.” A crop of candles burns continually before him, often wrapped with scraps of paper bearing petitions, both sacred and profane. I've left a few there myself from time to time.

A crackly call came through from a friend in bayou country. “Don't worry, I threw the (tarot) cards—fine news! The Three of Cups—what was once good will cause pain, but then a new beginning.” The clouds were moving faster.

As usual on a Sunday, Clarence, our handyman, tied his bicycle to the tree and came through our batten gate. By then we had begun to make our own small garden flat. He helped haul old iron chairs out of harm's way, and clay pots were brought into the dining room. “No need to water now, I s'pose?” When I asked if he was leaving town, he pointed to the bike and laughed. “Can't get far with that,” he said. I made him promise to come by once the storm passed. We still had time to cook and fill bathtubs and check batteries before things got bad.

Then two friends appeared grimly at our door. “We're leaving, everyone is ordered out,” they said. “You've got to go!” One of them had weathered every storm with us, and I counted on his Creole sense. His decision made me feel uneasy. I wavered at first, and then conceded.

Shutters slammed shut, French windows locked; the slave quarter of the house was closed up. Room by room the house went dark. Familiar things disappeared into the gloom. No place in the whole world gets darker than New Orleans in the afternoon with all the blinds closed.

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More than daylight was shut out—breath and certainty dimmed. Old houses are prone to hurl their accusations. I reckon that's because they've had more experience at the thing. Reproach settled heavily in chairs. I wanted one last look but wasn't sure what to look at. I settled for just stroking the back of my mother's favorite chair. We each grabbed a few things for the road: our bulldog, Clovis, and his food; water to survive and for drinking in small silver tumblers, since they wouldn't break; an address book of friends. It was sparse packing, even for an overnight. I was the traitor who finally slammed and locked the door before ducking into the getaway car.

No one spoke as we rolled down the old boulevard, Elysian Fields. There were people sitting out on cutwork porches of dilapidated houses with fixed stares, but there wasn't any dancing going on. For a town that can make a party out of funerals, the mood was somber.

Our road was long, without real perils although plenty were imagined as the roads filled up with water. It was comfortable by comparison, and ended unexpectedly in a lovely house that gave us shelter when we could go no farther. Our hostess thought of everything: midnight snacks, smooth sheets. She knew what storm mania was and mothered us. Her own house had been pounded just a year ago. Her gentle spaniel welcomed Clovis, her ghost stayed quiet and let us sleep. We stayed until winds from the storm's edge calmed down, and then moved on to a little cottage called Sweet Beach that good friends had given us as refuge. New Orleans was just across the Gulf, and we hid our eyes from one another when Randy Newman's song made us feel too sad.

Here there have been night skies never contemplated in New Orleans, the hum of waves, dawns that left me despairing of ever grasping color. One by one we tracked friends, found new open hearts, scrubbed floors that belonged to us only by virtue of our nervous tread, tried on routines for size and changed them, forgot the date and how to knot bow ties, grieved and sputtered and worried and sometimes even called the cottage home. We learned what it means to miss... that city.

When each night I gathered back our friends from far-flung places into the even stranger settings of my dreams, our reunions often happened to the jazz of Frenchmen Street or food-slinging operettas in favorite restaurants. A few familiars were condemned to shoveling snow off the roof of the Cabildo, one of the main buildings on Jackson Square, or chipping ice for Sazeracs from the tipped bronze hat of the Andrew Jackson statue. The balconies were sometimes dressed for Lent, and masks floated on colored water. Uneasy images, but not once did these nocturnal escapades leave me longing for the French chairs shut up in our dark rooms. I guess they were asleep. ●