

V I N T A G E

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# Zeitoun

DAVE EGGERS

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DAVE EGGERS  
ZEITOUN

Dave Eggers is the author of six previous books, including *What Is the What*, a finalist for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Award and winner of France's Prix Medici. That book about Valentino Achak Deng, a survivor of the civil war in southern Sudan, gave birth to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, run by Mr. Deng and dedicated to building secondary schools in southern Sudan. Eggers is the founder and editor of McSweeney's, an independent publishing house based in San Francisco that produces books, an eponymous quarterly journal, a monthly magazine (*The Believer*), and *Wholphin*, a quarterly DVD of short films and documentaries. In 2002, with Nínive Calegari he cofounded 826 Valencia, a nonprofit writing and tutoring center for youth in the Mission District of San Francisco. Local communities have since opened sister 826 centers in Chicago, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Ann Arbor, Seattle, Boston, and Washington, D.C. In 2004, Eggers taught at the University of California–Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, and there, with Dr. Lola Vollen, he cofounded Voice of Witness, a series of books using oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world. A native of Chicago, Eggers graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in journalism. He now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and two children.

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# ZEITOUN

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DAVE EGGERS



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All author proceeds from this book go to the Zeitoun Foundation, dedicated to rebuilding New Orleans and fostering interfaith understanding.

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*For Abdulrahman, Kathy, Zachary, Nademah,*

*Aisha, Safiya, and Ahmad in New Orleans*

*For Ahmad, Antonia, Lutfi, and Laila in Málaga*

*For Kousay, Nada, Mahmoud, Zakiya, Luay, Eman, Fahzia,*

*Fatimah, Aisha, Munah, Nasibah,*

*and all the Zeitouns of Jableh, Lattakia,*

*and Arwad Island*

*For the people of New Orleans*

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The Zeitoun Foundation

Acknowledgments

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*... in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime .*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

*To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail*

Mark Twain

This is a work of nonfiction, based primarily on the accounts of Abdulrahman and Kath Zeitoun (pronounced “Zay-toon”). Dates, times, locations, and other facts have been confirmed by independent sources and the historical record. Conversations have been recounted as best as can be remembered by the participants. Some names have been changed.

This book does not attempt to be an all-encompassing book about New Orleans or Hurricane Katrina. It is only an account of one family’s experiences before and after the storm. It was written with the full participation of the Zeitoun family, and reflects their view of the event.



On moonless nights the men and boys of Jableh, a dusty fishing town on the coast of Syria would gather their lanterns and set out in their quietest boats. Five or six small craft, two or three fishermen in each. A mile out, they would arrange the boats in a circle on the black sea, drop their nets, and, holding their lanterns over the water, they would approximate the moon.

The fish, sardines, would begin gathering soon after, a slow mass of silver rising from below. The fish were attracted to plankton, and the plankton were attracted to the light. They would begin to circle, a chain linked loosely, and over the next hour their number would grow. The black gaps between silver links would close until the fishermen could see below, a solid mass of silver spinning.

Abdulrahman Zeitoun was only thirteen when he began fishing for sardines this way, a method called *lampara*, borrowed from the Italians. He had waited years to join the men and teenagers on the night boats, and he'd spent those years asking questions. Why only on moonless nights? Because, his brother Ahmad said, on moon-filled nights the plankton would be visible everywhere, spread out all over the sea, and the sardines could see and eat the glowing organisms with ease. But without a moon the men could make their own, and could bring the sardines to the surface in stunning concentrations. You have to see it, Ahmad told his little brother. You've never seen anything like this.

And when Abdulrahman first witnessed the sardines circling in the black he could not believe the sight, the beauty of the undulating silver orb below the white and gold lantern light. He said nothing, and the other fishermen were careful to be quiet, too, paddling without motors, lest they scare away the catch. They would whisper over the sea, telling jokes and talking about women and girls as they watched the fish rise and spin beneath them. A few hours later, once the sardines were ready, tens of thousands of them glistening in the refracted light, the fishermen would cinch the net and haul them in.

They would motor back to the shore and bring the sardines to the fish broker in the market before dawn. He would pay the men and boys, and would then sell the fish all over western Syria—Lattakia, Baniyas, Damascus. The fishermen would split the money, with Abdulrahman and Ahmad bringing their share home. Their father had passed away the year before and their mother was of fragile health and mind, so all funds they earned fishing went toward the welfare of the house they shared with ten siblings.

Abdulrahman and Ahmad didn't care much about the money, though. They would have done it for free.

Thirty-four years later and thousands of miles west, Abdulrahman Zeitoun was in bed on Friday morning, slowly leaving the moonless Jableh night, a tattered memory of it caught in a morning dream. He was in his home in New Orleans and beside him he could hear his wife Kathy breathing, her exhalations not unlike the shushing of water against the hull of a wooden boat. Otherwise the house was silent. He knew it was near six o'clock, and the peace would not last. The morning light usually woke the kids once it reached their second-story

windows. One of the four would open his or her eyes, and from there the movements were brisk, the house quickly growing loud. With one child awake, it was impossible to keep the other three in bed.

Kathy woke to a thump upstairs, coming from one of the kids' rooms. She listened closely, praying silently for rest. Each morning there was a delicate period, between six and six-thirty, when there was a chance, however remote, that they could steal another ten or fifteen minutes of sleep. But now there was another thump, and the dog barked, and another thump followed. What was happening in this house? Kathy looked to her husband. He was staring at the ceiling. The day had roared to life.

The phone began ringing, today as always, before their feet hit the floor. Kathy and Zeitoun—most people called him by his last name because they couldn't pronounce his first—ran a company, Zeitoun A. Painting Contractor LLC, and every day their crews, their clients, everyone with a phone and their number, seemed to think that once the clock struck six-thirty, it was appropriate to call. And they called. Usually there were so many calls at the stroke of six-thirty that the overlap would send half of them straight to voicemail.

Kathy took the first one, from a client across town, while Zeitoun shuffled into the shower. Fridays were always busy, but this one promised madness, given the rough weather on the way. There had been rumblings all week about a tropical storm crossing the Florida Keys, a chance it might head north. Though this kind of possibility presented itself every August and didn't raise eyebrows for most, Kathy and Zeitoun's more cautious clients and friends often made preparations. Throughout the morning the callers would want to know if Zeitoun could board up their windows and doors, if he would be clearing his equipment off their property before the winds came. Workers would want to know if they'd be expected to come in the day or the next.

"Zeitoun Painting Contractors," Kathy said, trying to sound alert. It was an elderly client, a woman living alone in a Garden District mansion, asking if Zeitoun's crew could come over and board up her windows.

"Sure, of course," Kathy said, letting her feet drop heavily to the floor. She was up. Kathy was the business's secretary, bookkeeper, credit department, public-relations manager—she did everything in the office, while her husband handled the building and painting. The two of them balanced each other well: Zeitoun's English had its limits, so when bills had to be negotiated, hearing Kathy's Louisiana drawl put clients at ease.

This was part of the job, helping clients prepare their homes for coming winds. Kathy hadn't given much thought to the storm this client was talking about. It took a lot more than a few downed trees in south Florida to get her attention.

"We'll have a crew over this afternoon," Kathy told the woman.

Kathy and Zeitoun had been married for eleven years. Zeitoun had come to New Orleans in 1994, by way of Houston and Baton Rouge and a half-dozen other American cities he

explored as a young man. Kathy had grown up in Baton Rouge and was used to the hurricane routine: the litany of preparations, the waiting and watching, the power outages, the candles and flashlights and buckets catching rain. There seemed to be a half-dozen named storms every August, and they were rarely worth the trouble. This one, named Katrina, would be different.

Downstairs, Nademah, at ten their second-oldest, was helping get breakfast together for the two younger girls, Aisha and Safiya, five and seven. Zachary, Kathy's fifteen-year-old son from her first marriage, was already gone, off to meet friends before school. Kathy made lunches while the three girls sat at the kitchen table, eating and reciting, in English accents, scenes from *Pride and Prejudice*. They had gotten lost in, were hopelessly in love with, the movie. Dark-eyed Nademah had heard about it from friends, convinced Kathy to buy the DVD, and since then the three girls had seen it a dozen times—every night for two weeks. They knew every character and every line and had learned how to swoon like aristocratic maidens. It was the worst they'd had it since *Phantom of the Opera*, when they'd been stricken with the need to sing every song, at home or at school or on the escalator at the mall, at full volume.

Zeitoun wasn't sure which was worse. As he entered the kitchen, seeing his daughters bow and curtsy and wave imaginary fans, he thought, *At least they're not singing*. Pouring himself a glass of orange juice, he watched these girls of his, perplexed. Growing up in Syria, he'd had seven sisters, but none had been this prone to drama. His girls were playful, wistful, always dancing across the house, jumping from bed to bed, singing with feigned vibrato, swooning. It was Kathy's influence, no doubt. She was one of them, really, blithe and girlish in her manner and her tastes—video games, Harry Potter, the baffling pop music they listened to. He knew she was determined to give them the kind of carefree childhood she hadn't had.

\* \* \*

"That's all you're eating?" Kathy said, looking over at her husband, who was putting on his shoes, ready to leave. He was of average height, a sturdily built man of forty-seven, but how he maintained his weight was a puzzle. He could go without breakfast, graze at lunch, and barely touch dinner, all while working twelve-hour days of constant activity, and still his weight never fluctuated. Kathy had known for a decade that her husband was one of those inexplicably solid, self-sufficient, and never-needy men who got by on air and water, impervious to injury or disease—but still she wondered how he sustained himself. He was passing through the kitchen now, kissing the girls' heads.

"Don't forget your phone," Kathy said, eyeing it on the microwave.

"Why would I?" he asked, pocketing it.

"So you don't forget things?"

"I don't."

"You're really saying you don't forget things."

“Yes. This is what I’m saying.”

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But as soon as he’d said the words he recognized his error.

“You forgot our firstborn child!” Kathy said. He’d walked right into it. The kids smiled at their father. They knew the story well.

It was unfair, Zeitoun thought, how one lapse in eleven years could give his wife enough ammunition to needle him for the rest of his life. Zeitoun was not a forgetful man, but whenever he did forget something, or when Kathy was trying to prove he had forgotten something, all she had to do was remind him of the time he’d forgotten Nademah. Because he had. Not for such a long time, but he had.

She was born on August 4, on the one-year anniversary of their wedding. It had been a trying labor. The next day, at home, Zeitoun helped Kathy from the car, closed the passenger door, and then retrieved Nademah, still in her carseat. He carried the baby in one hand, holding Kathy’s arm with the other. The stairs to their second-floor apartment were just inside the building, and Kathy needed help getting up. So Zeitoun helped her up the steep steps, Kathy groaning and sighing as they went. They reached the bedroom, where Kathy collapsed on the bed and got under the covers. She was relieved beyond words or reason to be home where she could relax with her infant.

“Give her to me,” Kathy said, raising her arms.

Zeitoun looked down to his wife, astonished at how ethereally beautiful she looked, her skin radiant, her eyes so tired. Then he heard what she’d said. The baby. Of course she wanted the baby. He turned to give her the baby, but there was no baby. The baby was not at his feet. The baby was not in the room.

“Where is she?” Kathy asked.

Zeitoun took in a quick breath. “I don’t know.”

“Abdul, where’s the baby?” Kathy said, now louder.

Zeitoun made a sound, something between a gasp and a squeak, and flew out of the room. He ran down the steps and out the front door. He saw the carseat sitting on the lawn. He left the baby in the yard. *He’d left the baby in the yard.* The carseat was turned toward the street. He couldn’t see Nademah’s face. He grabbed the handle, fearing the worst, that someone had taken her and left the seat, but when he turned it toward him, there was the tiny pink face of Nademah, scrunched and sleeping. He put his fingers to her, to feel her head to know she was okay. She was.

He brought the carseat upstairs, handed Nademah to Kathy, and before she could scold him, kid him, or divorce him, he ran down the stairs and went for a walk. He needed a walk that day, and needed walks for many days following, to work out what he’d done and why, how he had forgotten his child while aiding his wife. How hard it was to do both, to be partner to one and protector to the other. What was the balance? He would spend years pondering this conundrum.

This day, in the kitchen, Zeitoun wasn’t about to give Kathy the opportunity to tell the

whole story, again, to their children. He waved goodbye.

Aisha hung on his leg. “Don’t leave, Baba,” she said. She was given to theatrics—Kathy called her Dramarama—and all that Austen had made the tendency worse.

He was already thinking about the day’s work ahead, and even at seven-thirty he felt behind.

Zeitoun looked down at Aisha, held her face in his hands, smiled at the tiny perfection of her dark wet eyes, and then extracted her from his shin as if he were stepping out of soggy pants. Seconds later he was in the driveway, loading the van.

Aisha went out to help him, and Kathy watched the two of them, thinking about his work with the girls. It was difficult to describe. He was not an overly doting father, and yet he never objected to them jumping on him, grabbing him. He was firm, sure, but also just distracted enough to give them the room they needed, and just pliant enough to let himself be taken advantage of when the need arose. And even when he was upset about something, it was disguised behind those eyes, grey-green and long-lashed. When they met, he was thirteen years older than Kathy, so she wasn’t immediately sold on the prospect of marriage, but those eyes, holding the light the way they did, had seized her. They were dream-filled, but discerning, too, assessing—the eyes of an entrepreneur. He could see a run-down building and have not only the vision to see what it might become, but also the practical knowledge of what it would cost and how long it would take.

Kathy adjusted her hijab in the front window, tucking in stray hairs—it was a nervous habit—while watching Zeitoun leave the driveway in a swirling grey cloud. It was time for a new van. The one they had was a crumbling white beast, long-suffering but dependable, filled with ladders and wood and rattling with loose screws and brushes. On the side was the ubiquitous logo, the words ZEITOUN A. PAINTING CONTRACTOR next to a paint roller resting at the end of a rainbow. The logo was corny, Kathy admitted, but it wasn’t easy to forget. Everyone in the city knew it, from bus stops and benches and lawn signs; it was as common in New Orleans as live oak or royal fern. But at first it was not so benign to all.

When Zeitoun first designed it, he’d had no idea that a sign with a rainbow on it would signify anything to anyone—anything other than the array of colors and tints from which clients might choose. But soon enough he and Kathy were made aware of the signals they were sending.

Immediately they began getting calls from gay couples, and this was good news, good business. But at the same time, some potential clients, once they saw the van arrive, were no longer interested in Zeitoun A. Painting Contractor LLC. Some workers left, thinking that by working under the Zeitoun Painting rainbow they would be presumed to be gay, though somehow the company managed to employ only gay painters.

When Zeitoun and Kathy finally caught on to the rainbow’s signifying power, they had a serious talk about it. Kathy wondered if her husband, who did not at that point have any gay friends or family members, might want to change the logo, to keep their message from being

misconstrued.

But Zeitoun barely gave it a thought. It would cost a lot of money, he said—about twenty signs had been made, not to mention all the business cards and stationery—and besides, all the new clients were paying their bills. It wasn't much more complicated than that.

“Think about it,” Zeitoun laughed. “We're a Muslim couple running a painting company in Louisiana. Not such a good idea to turn away clients.” Anyone who had a problem with rainbows, he said, would surely have trouble with Islam.

So the rainbow remained.

Zeitoun pulled onto Earhart Boulevard, though a part of him was still in Jableh. Whenever he had these morning thoughts of his childhood, he wondered how they all were, his family in Syria, all his brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews scattered up and down the coast and those who had long ago left this world. His mother died a few years after his father passed on, and he'd lost a treasured brother, Mohammed, when he was very young. But the rest of his siblings, those still in Syria and Spain and Saudi Arabia, were all doing well, extraordinarily so. The Zeitouns were a high-achieving clan, full of doctors and school principals and generals and business owners, all of them with a passion for the sea. They had grown up in a big stone house on the Mediterranean, and none had strayed far from the shore. Zeitoun made a note to call Jableh sometime that day. There were always new babies, always news. He only had to reach one of his brothers or sisters—there were seven still in Syria—and he could get the full report.

Zeitoun turned on the radio. The storm that people were talking about was still far down the Florida coast, moving slowly west. It wasn't expected to make it up the Gulf for another few days, if at all. As he drove to his first job of the day, the restoration of a wonderful old mansion in the Garden District, he turned the dial on the radio, looking for something, anything, else.

Standing in her kitchen, Kathy looked at the clock and gasped. It was all too rare that she got the kids to school on time. But she was working on it. Or planned to work on it as soon as the season calmed down. Summer was the busiest time for the business, with so many people leaving, fleeing the swamp heat, wanting these rooms or that porch painted while they were away.

With a flurry of warnings and arm movements, Kathy herded the girls and their gear into the minivan and headed across the Mississippi to the West Bank.

There were advantages to Zeitoun and Kathy running a business together—so many blessings, too many to name—but then again, the drawbacks were distinct and growing. The greatly valued being able to set their own hours, choose their clients and jobs, and be home whenever they needed to be—their ability to be there, always and for anything relating to their children, was a profound comfort. But when friends would ask Kathy whether they, too, should start their own business, she talked them out of it. You don't run the business, she would say. The business runs you.

Kathy and Zeitoun worked harder than anyone they knew, and the work and worry never

ended. Nights, weekends, holidays—respite never came. They usually had eight to ten jobs going at any one time, which they oversaw out of a home office and a warehouse space on Dublin Street, off Carrollton. And that was to say nothing of the property-management aspect of the business. Somewhere along the line they started buying buildings, apartments, and houses, and now they had six properties with eighteen tenants. Each renter was, in some ways, another dependent, another soul to worry about, to provide with shelter, a solid roof, air-conditioning, clean water. There was a dizzying array of people to pay and collect from, houses to improve and maintain, bills to deal with, invoices to issue, supplies to buy at the store.

But she cherished what her life had become, and the family she and Zeitoun had created. She was driving her three girls to school now, and the fact that they could go to a private school, that their college would be taken care of, that they had all they needed and more—she was thankful every hour of every day.

Kathy was one of nine children, and had grown up with very little, and Zeitoun, the eighth of thirteen children, had been raised with almost nothing. To see the two of them now, to stand back and assess what they'd built—a sprawling family, a business of distinct success—and to be woven so thoroughly into the fabric of their adopted city that they had friends in every neighborhood, clients on almost any block they passed—these were all blessings from God.

How could she take Nademah, for instance, for granted? How had they produced such a child—so smart and self-possessed, so dutiful, helpful, and precocious? She was practically an adult now, it seemed—she certainly spoke like one, often more measured and circumspect than her parents. Kathy glanced at her now, sitting in the passenger seat playing with the radio. She'd always been quick. When she was five, no more than five, Zeitoun came home from work for lunch one day and found Nademah playing on the floor. She looked up at him and declared, "Daddy, I want to be a dancer." Zeitoun took off his shoes and sat on the couch. "We have too many dancers in the city," he said, rubbing his feet. "We need doctors, we need lawyers, we need teachers. I want you to be a doctor so you can take care of me." Nademah thought about this for a moment and said, "Okay, then I'll be a doctor." She went back to her coloring. A minute later, Kathy came downstairs, having just seen the wreck of Nademah's bedroom. "Clean up your room, Demah," she said. Nademah didn't miss a beat, nor did she look up from her coloring book. "Not me, Mama. I'm going to be a doctor, and doctors don't clean."

In the car, approaching their school, Nademah turned up the volume on the radio. She caught something on the news about the coming storm. Kathy wasn't paying close attention because three or four times a season, it seemed, there was some early alarmist talk about hurricanes heading straight for the city, and always their direction changed, or the winds fizzled in Florida or over the Gulf. If a storm hit New Orleans at all, it would be greatly diminished, no more than a day of grey gusts and rain.

This reporter was talking about the storm heading into the Gulf of Mexico as a Category 4. It was about 45 miles north-northwest of Key West and heading west. Kathy turned the radio off; she didn't want the kids to worry.

“You think it’ll hit us?” Nademah asked.

Kathy didn’t think much of it. Who ever worried about a Category 1 or 2? She told Nademah it was nothing, nothing at all, and she kissed the girls goodbye.

With the thrump of three car doors, Kathy was suddenly and definitively alone. Driving away from the school, she turned the radio on again. City officials were giving the usual recommendations about having three days’ worth of supplies on hand—Zeitoun had always been vigilant about this—and then there was some talk about 110-mile-per-hour winds and storm surges in the Gulf.

She turned it off again and called Zeitoun on his cell phone.

“You hear about this storm?” she asked.

“I hear different things,” he said.

“You think it’s serious?” she asked.

“Really? I don’t know,” he said.

Zeitoun had reinvented the word “really,” prefacing a good deal of his sentences with “Really?” as a kind of throat-clearer. Kathy would ask him any question, and he would say “Really? It’s a funny story.” He was known for anecdotes, and parables from Syrian quotations from the Qur’an, stories from his travels around the world. All of it she’d gotten used to, but the use of “Really?”—she’d given up fighting it. For him it was equivalent to starting a sentence with “You know,” or “Let me tell you.” It was Zeitoun, and she had no choice but to find it endearing.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Are the kids at school?”

“No, they’re in the lake. My God.”

The man was school-obsessed, and Kathy liked to tease him about it and any number of other things. She and Zeitoun spoke on the phone throughout every day, about everything—painting, the rental properties, things to fix and do and pick up, often just to say hello. The banter they’d developed, full of his exasperation and her one-liners, was entertaining to anyone who overheard it. It was unavoidable, too, given how often they talked. Neither of them could operate their home, their company, their lives or days without the other.

That they had come to such symbiosis continually surprised Kathy. She had been brought up a Southern Baptist in suburban Baton Rouge with dreams of leaving home—she did so just after high school—and running a daycare center. Now she was a Muslim married to a Syrian American, managing a sprawling painting and contracting business. When Kathy met her husband, she was twenty-one and he was thirty-four and a native of a country she knew almost nothing about. She was recovering from an unsuccessful marriage and had recently converted to Islam. She wasn’t even vaguely interested in getting married again, but Zeitoun had turned out to be everything she had not believed possible: an honest man, honest to the core, hardworking, reliable, faithful, devoted to family. And best of all, he very much wanted Kathy to be who and how she wanted to be, nothing more or less.

But it didn't mean there wasn't some fussing. Kathy called it that, their spirited back-and-forth about everything from what the kids ate for dinner to whether they should enlist a collection agency to help with a particular client.

"We're just fussin'," she would tell her kids when they heard the two of them. Kathy couldn't help it. She was a talker. She couldn't hold anything in. I'm going to speak my mind, she told Abdul early in their relationship. He shrugged; that was fine with him. He knew that sometimes she just needed to blow off steam, and he let her. He would nod patiently, sometimes thankful that his English wasn't as quick as hers. While he searched for the right words to respond with, she would go on, and often enough, by the time she was finished, she had tired herself out, and there was nothing left to say.

In any case, once Kathy knew that she would be heard, and heard to the end, it softened the tone of her arguments. Their discussions became less heated, and often more comical. By the kids, when they were young, sometimes couldn't tell the difference.

Years before, while Kathy was driving and fussing about something with Zeitoun, Nademah spoke up. Strapped into a car seat in the back, she had had enough. "Dad, be nice to Mom," she said. And then she turned to Kathy. "Mom, be nice to Dad." Kathy and Zeitoun stopped cold. They looked at each other, and then, in unison, back to little Nademah. They already knew she was smart, but this was something different. She was only two years old.

After she hung up with Zeitoun, Kathy did what she knew she shouldn't do, because clients no doubt needed and expected to reach her in the morning. She switched off her phone. She did this every so often, after the kids had left the car and she'd turned toward home. Just to have that thirty minutes of solitude during the drive—it was decadent but essential. She stared at the road, in total silence, thinking of nothing at all. The day would be long, it would be nonstop until the kids went to bed, so she allowed herself this one extravagance, an uninterrupted, thirty-minute expanse of clarity and quiet.

Across town, Zeitoun was at his first job of the day. He loved this place, a magisterial old house in the Garden District. He had two men on the job and was stopping by to make sure they were there, that they were busy, that they had what they needed. He jumped up the steps and strode into the house. It was easily 120 years old.

He saw Emil, a painter and carpenter from Nicaragua, kneeling in a doorway, taping off baseboard. Zeitoun snuck up behind him and grabbed his shoulders suddenly.

Emil jumped.

Zeitoun laughed.

He wasn't even sure why he did things like this. It was hard to explain—sometimes he just found himself in a playful mood. The workers who knew him well were unsurprised, while the newer ones would often be startled, thinking his behavior a bizarre sort of motivational method.

Emil managed a smile.

In the dining room, applying a second coat to the wall, was Marco, originally from

Salvador. The two of them, Marco and Emil, had met at church and had gone looking for work as a team of housepainters. They'd shown up at one of Zeitoun's job sites, and because Zeitoun nearly always had more work than he could handle, he'd taken them on. That had been three years ago, and Marco and Emil had worked for Zeitoun consistently since then.

Outside of employing a number of New Orleans natives, Zeitoun had hired men from everywhere: Peru, Mexico, Bulgaria, Poland, Brazil, Honduras, Algeria. He'd had good experiences with almost all of them, though in his business there was an above-average rate of attrition and turnover. Many workers were transient, intending only to spend a few months in the country before returning to their families. These men he was happy to hire and he'd learned a fair bit of Spanish along the way, but he had to be prepared for the short-notice disappearances. Other workers were just young men: irresponsible and living for today. He couldn't blame them—he'd been young and untethered once, too—but he tried whenever he could, to instill in them the knowledge that if they kept their heads down and saved a few dollars a week, they could live well, could raise a family doing this kind of work. But he rarely saw a young man in this business who had an eye to the future. Just keeping them in food and clothing, chasing them down when they were late or absent—all of it was exhausting and occasionally disheartening. He felt, sometimes, as if he had not four children but dozens, most of them with paint-covered hands and mustaches.

\* \* \*

His phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and picked up.

"Ahmad, how are you?" Zeitoun said in Arabic.

Ahmad was Zeitoun's older brother and closest friend. He was calling from Spain, where he lived with his wife and two children, both in high school. It was late where Ahmad was, so Zeitoun worried that the call might bring grave news.

"What is it?" Zeitoun asked.

"I'm watching this storm," he said.

"You scared me."

"You should be scared," Ahmad said. "This one could be for real."

Zeitoun was skeptical but paid attention. Ahmad was a ship captain, had been for thirty years, piloting tankers and ocean liners in every conceivable body of water, and he knew as much as anyone about storms, their trajectories and power. As a young man, Zeitoun had been with him for a number of those journeys. Ahmad, nine years older, had brought Zeitoun on as a crewman, taking him to Greece, Lebanon, South Africa. Zeitoun had gone on to work on ships without Ahmad, too, seeing most of the world in a ten-year period of wanderlust that eventually brought him to New Orleans and to his life with Kathy.

Ahmad clicked his tongue. "It really does seem unusual. Big and slow-moving. I'm watching it on the satellite," he said.

Ahmad was a technophile. At work and in his spare time he paid close attention to the weather, to developing storms. At the moment he was at his home in Málaga, a beach town on the Spanish Mediterranean, in his cluttered office, tracking this storm making its way

across Florida.

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“Have they begun evacuating?” Ahmad asked.

“Not officially,” Zeitoun said. “Some people are leaving.”

“And Kathy, the kids?”

Zeitoun told him they hadn’t thought about it yet.

Ahmad sighed. “Why not go, just to be safe?”

Zeitoun made a noncommittal sound into the phone.

“I’ll call you later,” Ahmad said.

Zeitoun left the house and walked to the next job, one block over. It was often like this—multiple jobs in close proximity. Clients seemed so surprised to work with a painter or contractor they could trust and recommend that through referrals and in rapid succession Zeitoun would get a half-dozen jobs in any given neighborhood.

This next house, which he’d worked on for years, was across the street from the home of Anne Rice, the writer—he had not read her work, but Kathy had; Kathy read everything—and was as stately and gorgeous a home as existed in New Orleans. High ceilings, a grand winding staircase descending into the foyer, hand-carved everything, each room themed and with a distinct character. Zeitoun had painted and repainted probably every room in the house, and the owners showed no signs of stopping. He loved to be in that house, admiring the craftsmanship, the great care put into the most eccentric details and flourishes—a mural over the mantel, one-of-a-kind ironwork on every balcony. It was this kind of willful, wild, romantic attention to beauty—crumbling and fading beauty needing constant attention—that made this city so unlike any other and such an unparalleled sort of environment for a builder.

He walked in, straightened the drop cloth in the front hall, and made his way to the back of the house. He peeked in on Georgi, his Bulgarian carpenter, who was installing new molding near the kitchen. Georgi was a good worker, about sixty, barrel-chested and tireless, but Zeitoun knew not to get him talking. Once Georgi started you were in for a twenty-minute discourse on the former Soviet Union, waterfront property in Bulgaria, and his various cross-country motorhome trips with his wife Albena, who had passed away years ago and was greatly missed.

Zeitoun got in his van and the radio assaulted him with more warnings about this storm called Katrina. It had formed near the Bahamas two days earlier and had scattered boats like toys. Zeitoun took note, but thought little of it. The winds were still many days from being relevant to his life.

He made his way to the Presbytere Museum on Jackson Square, where he had another crew working on a delicate restoration of the two-hundred-year-old building. The museum had been a courthouse long ago and was now home to a vast and extraordinary collection of Mardi Gras artifacts and memorabilia. It was a high-profile job and Zeitoun wanted to get it right.

Kathy called from home. She had just heard from a client in the Broadmoor neighborhood. Zeitoun's men had painted a window shut and someone needed to come unstick it.

"I'll go," he said. Easier that way, he figured. He would go, he would do it, it would be done. Fewer phone calls, no waiting.

"You hear about the winds?" Kathy said. "Killed three in Florida so far."

Zeitoun dismissed it. "This is not the storm for us," he said.

Kathy often poked fun at Zeitoun's stubbornness, at his unwillingness to bow before any force, natural or otherwise. But Zeitoun couldn't help it. He had been raised in the shadow of his father, a legendary sailor who had faced a series of epic trials, and had always miraculously survived.

Zeitoun's father, Mahmoud, had been born not far from Jableh, on Arwad Island, the only island off Syria, a landmass so small it didn't appear on some maps. There, most boys grew up to be shipbuilders or fishermen. As a teenager Mahmoud began crewing on shipping routes between Lebanon and Syria, on large sail-powered cargo boats, bringing timber to Damascus and other cities along the coast. He had been on such a ship during World War II, sailing from Cyprus to Egypt. He and his shipmates were vaguely aware of the danger of Axis forces targeting them as potential suppliers to the Allies, but they were astounded when a squadron of German planes appeared on the horizon and bore down on them. Mahmoud and the rest of the crew dove into the sea just before the planes began strafing. They managed to detach an inflatable lifeboat before their ship sank, and were crawling into it when the Germans returned. They were intent, it seemed, on killing all the crew members who had survived. Mahmoud and his fellow sailors were forced to dive from the dinghy and wait underwater until the Germans were satisfied that the crew had all been shot or drowned. When the surface seemed safe again, the sailors returned to their lifeboat and found it full of holes. They stuffed their shirts into the gaps and paddled by hand, for miles, until they reached the Egyptian shore.

But the story Mahmoud told most often when Zeitoun was growing up, the story he told when forbidding his children to live on the sea, was this one:

Mahmoud was returning from Greece on a thirty-six-foot schooner when they ran into a black and tortuous storm. They sailed through it for hours until the main mast cracked and dropped the sail into the water, threatening to drag the whole ship into the sea. Without thinking, Mahmoud climbed up the mast, intending to free the sail and right the hull. But when he reached the crack in the mast, it gave way completely, and he fell into the ocean. The ship was traveling at eight knots and there was no chance of turning it around, so the crew threw what they could to Mahmoud—a few planks and a barrel—and in minutes the boat was gone into the darkness. He was alone at sea for two days, with sharks below and storms above, clinging to the remnants of the barrel, when he finally washed ashore near Lattakia, fifty miles north of Arwad Island.

No one, including Mahmoud, could believe he had survived, and thereafter he vowed never to take the chance again. He quit sailing, moved his family from Arwad onto the mainland, and forbade his children to work on the sea. He wanted good schooling for them all.

opportunities apart from fishing and shipbuilding.

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Mahmoud and his wife went looking all over Syria for a new home, a place far from the water. They spent months traveling with their small children, inspecting this town and that house. But nothing seemed right. Nothing, that is, until they found themselves inside a two-story home, with enough room for all their current and future children. When Mahmoud declared that this was the place for them, his wife laughed. They were facing the sea, not fifty feet from shore.

There, in Jableh, Mahmoud opened a hardware store, sent his sons and daughters to the best schools, and taught his boys every trade he could. Everyone knew the Zeitouns, all of them hardworking and quick, and they all knew Abdulrahman, the eighth-born, a young man who wanted to know everything and who feared no kind of labor. As a teenager, he watched the tradesman in town whenever he could, studying their craft. And once they realized he was serious and a quick learner, they'd teach him whatever they knew. Over the years he learned every trade he could get close to—fishing, ship rigging, painting, framing, masonry, plumbing, roofing, tile work, even auto repair.

Zeitoun's father would likely be both proud and bemused by the trajectory of his son's life. He hadn't wanted his kids to work on the sea, but many of them, including Zeitoun, had. Mahmoud wanted his children to be doctors, teachers. Zeitoun, though, was too much like his father: first a sailor, then, to provide for a family and to ensure that he lived to watch them grow up, a builder.

Zeitoun called Kathy at eleven. He'd freed the window in Broadmoor and now was at Home Depot.

"You hear anything new?" he asked.

"Looks bad," she said.

She was online. The National Hurricane Center had upgraded Katrina to a Category 2. They had shifted the possible track of the storm from the Florida panhandle to the Mississippi-Louisiana coast. The storm was crossing southern Florida with winds around ninety miles an hour. At least three people had been killed. Power was out for 1.3 million households.

"People here are worried," Zeitoun said, looking around the store. "A lot of people buying plywood." The lines were long. The store was running low on plastic sheeting, duct tape, rope—anything that would protect windows from the winds.

"I'll keep watching," Kathy said.

In the parking lot, Zeitoun looked to the sky for signs of the coming weather. He saw nothing unusual. As he pushed his cart to his van, a young man, pushing his own cart full of supplies, approached Zeitoun.

"How's business?" the man asked.

Probably an electrician, Zeitoun figured.

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