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In the Ripples, Two Men Salvage the Memories

By [JAMES BENNET](#)

NEW ORLEANS, Sept. 12 - An unlikely pair of second-story men has taken on a stirring mission in the urban swamp of New Orleans.

With a crowbar and a flat-bottom boat, the two have been helping people break into their own homes and steal back from the city's most audacious looters - the falling water and rising mold - some reminders of what was: an inherited painting, a homemade quilt, a colorful print made by a child's hand that has since grown much bigger.

"Here's what I've learned," said the captain, Ramsey Skipper, a building contractor whose own home is underwater and whose wife and two children have taken refuge with family members near Houston. "This chapter is over. It was a beautiful chapter in our lives. So it's important - for the kids, especially - to have something to remember."

Mr. Skipper has also learned more prosaic lessons, like how to use a grinding jerk to free a boat that has run aground on a car. He shifts all passengers to the stern and guns the reverse. "Look at the antenna," he muttered after one grounding, nodding at the telltale stalk.

He has learned that body bags, with their tubular shape and many handles, make "the best transport bags ever" for belongings, fitting right through a window.

Mr. Skipper's bowman is Laurent Guérin, a 46-year-old French-born freelance photographer who lives in Taos, N.M., and came to New Orleans to photograph the destruction. Mr. Guérin wound up, for the most part, setting his Leica cameras down to help.

"You have to be a U.S. citizen first, and a photojournalist after," he said.

To break into John Peuler's house on Louis XIV Street, Mr. Skipper pressed the bow between the white columns of the front portico. Then Mr. Guérin crouched in the bow and put a lifejacket on one shoulder. Mr. Skipper, 41, put a foot on the life jacket and grabbed the iron rail of the portico roof to haul himself up. He smashed a window, then unlocked and opened it. At other houses, when no window was in reach, Mr. Skipper clambered onto the roof, ripped off a ventilator, and wriggled his 6-foot frame through the

hole.

After Mr. Peuler, 53, also scaled Mr. Guérin, he began ransacking his own bedroom. Standing nearby, Mr. Skipper spoke of how his passengers set their priorities for salvage, performing a kind of emotional triage.

"If we only kept the things we truly loved in our homes," he said, "we'd have so much space."

Mr. Peuler's sun-filled second floor seemed untroubled. But down the stairs, furniture floated in inky water a few feet from the ceiling. Above it, mold was silently climbing roofward.

On his first visit to New Orleans, Mr. Guérin, who worked in [Iraq](#), has learned a little more about American culture.

"There are more guns here than in Baghdad!" he cried as he helped remove Mr. Peuler's hunting shotguns.

Mr. Guérin and his captain named Skipper have been working the water-logged Lakeview neighborhood, where homes recently fetched from \$200,000 to more than \$1 million. Mr. Skipper believes thousands of houses will have to be erased.

On their trips together, with the boat's depth meter oscillating from 2 to 13 feet, Mr. Guérin kept an eye out for hazards like downed wires and submerged fences. With a boathook he pushed aside a sailboat, the Lucky Split, that blocked an alley.

Mr. Guérin debated with Mr. Skipper over which streets were clear, pronouncing with relish names like Fleur de Lis and Marshall Foch. Mr. Skipper replied in his own, soft accent, also derived in part from Mr. Guérin's native country. They called each other "man." Mr. Skipper grew up boating in [Louisiana's](#) bayous and bays, and Mr. Guérin off the Brittany coast.

Blue-and-white street signs project just above the water, lending a jarring note of seeming coordination to the radical reshaping of the cityscape. Before the levees were repaired, tides swept Lakeview. Over the weekend, the water was impounded, still and smooth, and it formed a dark mirror for the houses, trees and sky.

"There's almost a certain beauty to it," Mr. Guérin mused. "It's very strange."

By Monday, a current pulled the water like a sheet southward, toward the pumps. The propeller was now striking some curbs as the crew ferried Dr. Leo Seoane, 36, to his house on Canal Street to find his family cat, Sharpie. The water had already drained from his elevated first floor, and Dr. Seoane and the crew entered easily.

"Oh my God," he gasped, as he looked inside his home.

A front window was smashed and Sharpie was gone, hopefully taken by an animal rescue group plying these waters. Inside, on one door, a poster showed Yoda raising a hand in a warding gesture. "This room protected by the Force," it declared. "But, sadly, not cleaned up by it."

The flood had gotten past Yoda and into the room of Dr. Seoane's two little boys, but he happily scooped up an untouched teddy bear and an Obi Wan Kenobi action figure.

His mood brightened as he collected possessions like a wedding picture and a baptismal outfit. He pressed Mr. Guérin to accept a surviving bottle of Lafitte Rothschild. "You make a Frenchman very happy," Mr. Guérin declared, before surreptitiously returning the wine, slipping it among the other salvaged items.

With the water falling fast, the two men suspended their mission Monday so Mr. Skipper could visit his family. He was arranging through Lutheran Church Charities for three more flat-bottomed boats, and he was urging an [Arkansas](#) National Guard unit to use high-clearance trucks to carry the boats and fresh crews over shallow patches.

With the outboard off, the only sound in Lakeview is the keening of dying homes; some alarm systems, falling back on their batteries, are still trying to warn departed owners that the electricity has failed. An acrid smell rises from the water.

Mr. Skipper learned the value of collecting mementos after returning to his own house, which he built, to retrieve belongings like his 7-year-old daughter's tea set. His wife had seemed depressed, he said, but lit up after he told her what he had done.

But emergency officials then pressed Mr. Skipper and Mr. Guérin to use their boat to help retrieve bodies. Mr. Guérin described how the men tore a vent off one house and saw the body of an elderly woman in the rafters. The two decided they could be of more use to the living.

Mr. Guérin moved in with Mr. Skipper in nearby Metairie, in the home of Mr. Skipper's pastor, Bradley Drew, 43. Mr. Guérin delights in informing Mr. Drew over drinks that God does not exist and that each man is all alone.

"That's tragic, man," Mr. Drew, unpersuaded, finally said toward midnight Saturday.

But Mr. Drew has learned something from the Frenchman: He wants to find a wasp-waisted espresso pot like Mr. Guérin's, which brews coffee the pastor loves.

To those who came to the improvised landing at Veterans Memorial Boulevard, longing for their homes,

Mr. Skipper spoke matter-of-factly, with his granite self-assurance. He told people with one-story houses that they could probably salvage nothing. That was his message to one young man who hoped to retrieve a parrot he left before the storm.

Yet there was no doubting the depth of Mr. Skipper's feeling for his neighbors. He repeatedly expressed frustration that emergency officials had not helped residents salvage belongings, and he accepted nothing but thanks for the risks he ran. He knows how it is.

"It's O.K., I've done my crying already," he said on Saturday, as he stared from his second-floor landing down at the water and mold consuming his home, on General Diaz Street. "At least, I think I have."

Then, with evening coming on, he agreed to make a last stop, on Memphis Street, at a home belonging to an old friend of a reporter's: One more scramble up a pitched roof; another rough passage through a vent hole into thick, moldy air that burned in the throat; a sweat-soaked stuffing of too-few surviving treasures into garbage bags, and back out on the roof.

Half a moon had risen in a darkening lilac sky, and Mr. Skipper worried whether he could beat the gathering dusk to Veterans Memorial Boulevard, more than a mile away.

Swerving around signposts and wires, he opened his throttle all the way, trusting that he knew where the cars and Dumpsters lurked. Astern, the wake lifted the heavy, purple water in slow waves that caught dimming images of the lightless houses and then crashed against them.

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