

Katrina – Tales From the Front #3 – The Rhythm

Turkey Creek Community
Gulfport, Mississippi
Saturday, September 24, 2005
10:15 PM

The sky in the east begins to lighten.

The rhythm begins.

I slip out of bed, make my way to the front of the trailer, slip on my shoes and step outside. Still groggy, the early morning warmth and humidity wash over me like a wave. I finish my business to save capacity in the black water tank and climb back into the trailer, it gently rocking to my steps.

Steph appears from the bedroom, rubbing her eyes open for a sleepy good morning kiss.

A refrigerated coffee, some microwave instant grits, a piece of toast and I'm ready to face the day.

The sun block stings the blisters on the back of my neck where I forgot to apply it a few days ago. The bug spray burns the poison ivy covering my swollen arms. I flex my right hand. It's hard to make a fist for a little while. The swelling is the worst when I first wake up.

I slip off my shorts and step outside to retrieve my overalls, still damp from the previous day's sweat and rain. I lace up my steel toe boots, well scarred, soft and supple. Pulled from a box on the top shelves of the garage, they speak of many days of long, physical labor many years ago. Revived, they feel as soft as deer skin moccasins and as tough as their long wearing soles. I double knot the laces, knowing it will be well dark before they will be removed.

I check myself. Hat, ear plugs, glasses, billfold, keys, tractor keys, pen, sharpie and leather work gloves, still soft and wet with sweat from yesterday, tucked into the back pocket of my Carhart bib overalls. I am ready.

I walk to our pickup across the yard of the Turkey Creek family who are providing power and water for our donated travel trailer. I open the tailgate and unlock the cable securing the chainsaws, tools and gas. I drag out the toolbox to free up access to the Stihl saws, carefully stacked together. I pull the 361 out and sharpen the chain, then the long bar 440 and do the same. I plop both down on the ground and top off the bar oil and the pre-mix gas. I check the chain tension and adjust it on both saws. The Orchestra is tuned and ready.

I fire up the Kubota tractor and pull it up to the back of the truck. I put the long bar 440 along the back of the bucket and spoon in the 361 against it. I toss in the three log chains in the opposite corner and stick the 6' pry bar across the bucket down into the chain. Next comes 100 ft. of woven rope, 8 lb. sledge hammer, plastic wedge, 1 gallon pre-mix gas can and the gallon jug of bar oil. The all important, live giving cooler of iced bottled water comes last, propped across the saws.

The sky is light enough now for the sunglasses that provide my eye protection so I pull them down off my cap and over my eyes. The world beyond arms length snaps into focus. I add some throttle and move down the street. We cleared three homes of downed trees yesterday. We'll see what today brings.

I pick up where we left off. The next house in line.

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The saws are cold, so I use full choke. It's down on the ground, my foot on the rear handle base to hold the saw down. Left hand on the top handle, I push in the decompression button with my left thumb. Two pulls with my right hand and one hit. I flip to half choke. I push the decompression button back in. With two pulls the saw fires up at full tilt. I blip the throttle and we're in business.

With the saw on the ground, I put my ear plugs in, the plastic loop connecting them keeping them ever-ready around my neck. They make a slightly liquid sound as they seat into my ears and I enter my private, quiet world. It's just me, the hurricane blasted trees and the saws. My job is to cut the trees out of people's homes, garages and yards. Anything that comes between me and that mission is a bad thing.

The internal music begins. The rhythm pulses in my brain.

The day has now begun.

This home has a tree blocking a handicapped ramp. We don't usually do anything in the air, but we make an exception here. I slowly ride the tractor's bucket up into the air to gain access to the pine snapped off and hanging 15' above the ground that is blocking the ramp. I make a bottom cut to control the fall. I make a top cut with the long bar 440, all 15 lbs. of saw held at head height. This operation calls for careful control of bucket height and position to the tree by Steph on the tractor. The saw spews sawdust and chips as far back as Steph at the wheel. Bathed in a fire hose stream of wood chips, she holds her eyes tightly shut, listening for my shouts to position the bucket and the tractor. I steady myself with my feet spread in the bucket, my calf wedged against the back edge. The saw works down through the suspended remnants of the tree, hanging at a 110 degree angle from the still vertical trunk. It groans and creaks. I feed in the saw sparingly, playing the break point. I call for the tractor to move back a few inches. I need to separate myself and the bucket from the thousands of pounds of suspended pine. I touch the chain against the remaining inches of wood. Snap! Silence for a tenth of a second, then the ground shakes and the bucket sways as the pine hits the ground. Steph slowly lowers the bucket, simultaneously adjusting the tilt to keep me level.

The rhythm plays on.

Another tree down. This one in the back yard across the fence, through the garage. I start with the 361, a great balance of power and weight. Starting at the base of the fallen tree, I limb off everything, working outward. I free all the main branches of the tree of all small limbs and growth, then start on the major limbs, one by one. If the limb is suspended, with the weight pulling it downward, I start with a small bottom cut, then a straight top cut down to a controlled break and fall. If the limb is bottom loaded, heavily pressured with the weight of the fallen tree on it, I start with a small top cut, then a long pull of an upward cut, the butt of the saw wedged against my thigh for leverage. This tree has a large 15" branch, heavily bottom loaded, supporting the entire weight of the fallen tree. I make a top cut to control the break, then a long hard pull from the bottom, the saw riding and bucking into my thigh. I know this slice will add to the polka-dotted collection of silver dollar bruises on my thighs from these cuts. It is of little concern. This family has lost everything, my bruises mean nothing. The limb pops free, the tree settles down into the ground. I put down the 361 and pick up the 440 long bar to cut up the massive trunk into pieces the tractor can handle.

My earplugs in, the rhythm plays on. There is only one beat - the earth pounding tempo of fallen trees dropping and lives being restored.

The house next door. Four trees down. Limb each one. Slice up the trunks. Steph blades out the brush then drags out the logs with chains. 361, then 440, the symphony plays. I cut, Steph clears. Sweat pours out, the rain comes down, mercifully cooling in the 100 degree heat and 90 percent humidity.

In early afternoon I catch myself making stupid mistakes, my energy fading. This is dangerous territory. Stupid mistakes with chainsaws are not a good thing. A short break for lunch, some ice water over my head and down my back and I feel revitalized. I must be careful with overheating. Last week I got caught out with no cold water on a job site and was nearing the edge, lying in the shade but losing ground fast when Gary pulled back in with the cooler of ice water. It was too close.

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Ear plugs back in, two quick pulls, the saw springs to life. Another house, or what is left of it. More trees. More cuts. Life is simple, reduced to the basic elements of the hierarchy of needs. Food, shelter, heat. It doesn't go much beyond that. We've been without hot water since we arrived here in Gulfport, and have made do. Simple work, simple goals, and a simple life. The saw sings, the rhythm plays on.

Another widow cries tears of joy, sobbing out her thanks. Another crippled man drags brush to help us. Another woman in her 50's works with us in the driving rain to clear her home and property. Another young father who pulled elderly neighbors from their flooded homes during the hurricane yanks huge logs for us.

We ignore our open blisters, our cuts, bruises and scrapes. Our challenges are trivial. These people, every one, lived through 12 straight hours of 150 mile per hour winds. Homes that did not flood in hurricane Camille and remained dry when hurricane Georges parked over their community for 72 hours dumping monsoon rains were in three to eight feet of water during hurricane Katrina. No one had flood insurance. These people lost everything, the unstoppable mold consuming their soggy walls and what remains of their belongings. I have only one way to push back against the devastation. I put in my earplugs and start the symphony. Another home, another tree, another cut. The rhythm plays on.

The sky begins to darken. We load the saws, chains, pry bar, gas, sledge, wedge, oil and cooler back into the bucket. The tractor chugs slowly back to the trailer. Wearily, I load the gear back into the pickup and snap the padlock closed.

Another five homes' yards cleared. Another inch of progress in the coming miles of the journey of recovery for this community, this city, this state, this region.

We peel off our sawdust caked, sweat soaked clothes and take a cold shower. We eat lightly, not feeling much hunger, then slip into bed. Steph attempts to read, but makes it only a few paragraphs. I wake often, the tightness of my swollen arm and heat rash covering my upper body making sleep troublesome.

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