

THE NEIGHBORHOOD



WHEN YOUR WHOLE LIFE IS DESTROYED, CAN ANYTHING EVER BE THE SAME? SHOULD IT BE? WHEN THE STORM CAME, AND NATURE REACHED RIGHT INTO NEW YORK CITY—BREEZY POINT, QUEENS—AND LEVELED WHAT HAD UP TO THEN BEEN A PRIVATE URBAN BEACH PARADISE, IT REVEALED BOTH BREATHTAKING INSTANCES OF ORDINARY HEROISM AND THE OLDEST IMPULSES OF THE HUMAN HEART.

BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF RIEDEL



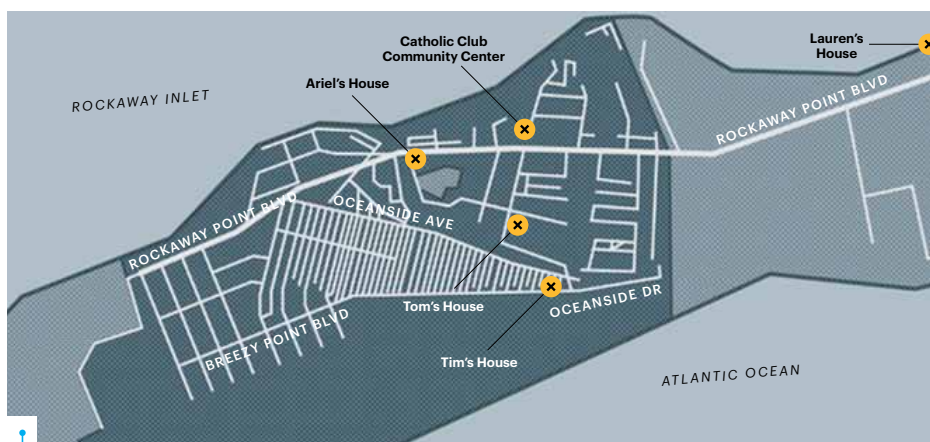
THE ENTIRE PENINSULA
WAS ENVELOPED BY
A FLASH-FLOODING
OCEAN, AND THEN
CAME THE FIRE, WHICH
DESTROYED 111 HOMES.
PHOTOGRAPHED ON
DECEMBER 8, 2012,
FIVE WEEKS AFTER.

When the surge hit, Tim Beirne had to abandon the security gate. High tide was scheduled for eight-thirty but the water started coming at seven and came so fast he and a few others decided to take two cars and head for higher ground. Tim got in the passenger seat of one of those big Ford pickups and minutes later the water was coming up over the window. Ahead of them, a Ford Explorer full of people lifted up off the ground and started floating away. Desperate people were jumping into the bed of his pickup, throwing their kids in. ¶ Lauren Willis was hiding out on the second floor of her parents' little bay-side bungalow when she got a call on her emergency radio, the chief saying, *I need an EMT right now down at the Cath Club*. She came running down the stairs barefoot and was immediately waist high in water. At the

Catholic Club, she found a diabetic in the first stages of shock, completely oblivious to where he was. She gave him five bags of glucose and half a gallon of orange juice and cookies and tried to keep him stable as the storm devoured everything outside.

Eddie Valentine was at the firehouse, all his trucks set up and ready to go. Here at Breezy Point, the "Irish Riviera," a tiny pencil of sand sticking into New York Bay just south of Coney Island, the western-most tip of the Rockaway barrier islands, there were 2,837 houses to protect but only a few hundred people left in them—most had obeyed the evacuation order. But the firemen couldn't have expected the volume of water and how fast and hard it came in. They were





yelling *Pull the trucks out!* but by the time they got suited up, the Zodiac fireboats were already floating off their trailers. All they did was unhook them and tow them out to the body of water that was formerly main street. Just then, the lights went out from the point at the western end of town all the way down, just *tch-tch-tch-tch*.

Still manning the phone lines, Tim relayed a distress call to Chief Valentine: *Old woman in a one-story house, water rising.* The chief sent out the boats, putting his son Michael in command. They grabbed some rope and life vests and headed out into eighty-mile-an-hour winds and a current strong enough to move cars.

Off Beach 207th Street, water was starting to rush down the sidewalks when Tom Dolan splashed across to check on his elderly neighbors. They had a one-story house and water was already coming in their back door but they didn't want to leave. They didn't want to believe what was happening. Tom yelled, *Mr. Wright, I'm gonna be back in five minutes, and you guys gotta come.* He ran back home and his own generator was already underwater so he muscled it on the deck, but by then the water had reached the deck so he muscled it onto the picnic table. Back to the Wrights, water bubbling up through the floor now. It was game on, no time to mess around. Tom picked up Mrs. Wright and stepped in water to his hips. She said, *Oh, my bum's getting wet!*

Lady, if that's all you have to complain about we're in good shape.

He put them up on the second story of his house along with his in-laws and went to check on another elderly couple down the street. The water was up to his shoulders now. Cars floated by. Waves were breaking on people's houses.

Then the fire started, and there was nothing they could do. Breezy Point lives in blissful isolation from New York City, a gated co-op community accessible only by bridge and a long narrow road, one of the keys to its unique character. But the Breezy Point fire trucks were disabled and the city fire trucks could not get there. An hour passed and the fire kept growing and another hour passed and another and around midnight, five full hours after the fire began, the city fire trucks finally started to arrive, putting their hoses right into the ocean water in the streets in a "drafting" technique most of the firemen had only heard of. The rest of the Breezy Point volunteers climbed into the shovel of a backhoe for a ride to the fire and Tom Dolan joined them, pulling hose. Finally forty fire trucks came with tower ladders that could throw out phenomenal amounts of water, but it was like a garden hose shooting into a bonfire. The streets went down one by one, Ocean, Fulton, Gotham, Hudson, Irving and Jamaica.

Ariel Fahy was in her house with two dogs, watching the water come up the steps. The current was too strong to risk an escape but when embers the size of dinner plates started flying toward her house, she grabbed the dogs and started walking anyway, water up to her neck. She held her cell phone above her head. The dogs swam.

The neighborhood was gone.

OPPOSITE PAGE: TIM BEIRNE AND ARIEL FAHY. TIM WAS WORKING THE GATE THAT NIGHT, AND ARIEL HAS HELPED DISTRIBUTE DONATIONS SINCE. THEY MIGHT PULL UP STAKES FOR A WHILE OR FOR GOOD, MAYBE GO TO NEBRASKA. ABOVE, BREEZY POINT, AN URBAN BEACH PARADISE MORE VULNERABLE THAN ANYONE KNEW.

What remains of a neighborhood when the neighborhood is gone?

The following Sunday, with the storm still in their faces, the citizens of Breezy Point return to stand ten deep in the doorway of their church, holding candles because the generator would drown out the sermon. It has been a week of no heat, hauling water in buckets like pioneers, five people dead in Rockaway nearby, half a million people on Long Island without power, sitting in "warming buses" to beat the chill, the power companies snarled in chaos and incompetence. Down in Washington, conservatives were already balking at Governor Andrew Cuomo's request for \$6 billion in economic aid. But the priests take their ritual positions at the altar and three angelic children in white gowns carry the cross down the center aisle and a visiting bishop steps forward in his miter and robes. *Do not abandon your hope because only hope sustains us*, he tells them.

After the service, they wander out to the burn site. *This was our back deck*, says Russell Johnston. *That was the bathroom. This was the kitchen.*

Now it's just singed cinder blocks, the charred remnants of a boiler and stove and a staircase that goes nowhere.

His sister Bridget waited out the storm across the bay, listening to the FDNY scanner. She's carrying a scrap of her front porch. *We want a piece of something*, she says.

Here's his wife, Shannyn, a slender brunette who spent her childhood summers nearby in a bungalow her grandparents bought in the 1940s. She reaches for his sleeve. *Babe, the smell is getting to me.*

Russell's sister Jacqueline was flooded out, too. Eight of them are living in Grandma's house on Staten Island now, the in-laws staying in Brooklyn.

Here's Brian Lang, who lost his own house and his mother-in-law's down on the corner and his sister-in-law's up one block. They're all camped out together in a house in Windsor Terrace and his daughter said, *Try to find one of my American Girl dolls.* And he found one in the wreckage! Its arm is burnt but he's going to send it to the American Girl Doll Hospital and they'll fix her right up.

More neighbors appear, hugs all around. *How's the family? Anything I can do for you, brother?*

As long as you're walkin' around and shaking hands. That's the important thing.

The day after the storm, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Senator Chuck Schumer came to Breezy. Ariel cried on Schumer's shoulder,

THE WAY THE PRIEST SEES IT, THE STORM HAS RAISED A GREAT MORAL OPPORTUNITY. LOOK AT THE GUYS FROM SANITATION BREAKING THEIR BACKS TO CLEAR OUT THE WRECKAGE. THAT UNION'S 75 PERCENT BLACK, HE SAYS. LOOK AROUND YOU—THESE ARE PEOPLE YOU WOULDN'T LET LIVE NEXT DOOR TO YOU.

and Tim told Congressman Bob Turner, who lives at Breezy, that he was sorry about his house. But the politicians left along with the fire trucks and for the next few days, with the entire East Coast reeling from death and destruction, Breezy Point was left to itself, to generators and coat drives. There was no Red Cross, no FEMA, no cell service. Their radios didn't work, there was no way to get out. With the Rockaway and nearby Bay Park sewage plants both damaged, millions of gallons of raw sewage was floating into the bay. Looters hit a couple of houses, taking mostly jewelry, sparking dark mutterings about "the savages from East Rockaway." The only outside help was a group of firefighters from Virginia who arrived the second day, one of them with his seven-year-old son along. They hooked up generators in the community center and Catholic Club, which made life begin to seem civilized again.

Everyone takes pictures of the flags, fire-tattered and spotted with cinder holes. That's Rich's house. He's a Marine. That flag was in the house and it did not burn. And the woman who owns that plot found just two things intact in her wreckage, an American flag and a baseball glove. Everyone tells the story of Sheila Scandole, whose husband was killed on 9/11. Her house is at the edge of the burn zone, singed but still standing. *Almost as if her husband had something to do with it, you know?*

They talk about how things used to be. Never had to lock your doors. On Bayside you could look off your deck and see sand and water and the City of New York gleaming like Oz in the distance. Everybody was a child or grandchild of the original group of cops and firemen and teachers who built the first collection of summer bungalows, putting narrow walks between the houses instead of streets and pushing their little carts to the grocery store. Picnics, softball, long days at the beach. Mardi Gras, when the crazy foot parade would march down Oceanside and everyone would come over to Rich's house to watch.

So what we did today, we cut out all the Sheetrock.

How'd it look behind there?

Wet.

The thing is, everybody responds differently to having their life destroyed. For some people, a disaster exposes fault lines that have been there, deep fissures that tell them nothing can or should ever be the same. Others want to reclaim the lost ground and recreate life just as it was, without delay. Count Tom Dolan among the second group. A block from the burn site, Dolan is wasting no time and has already reduced the bottom floor of his house to floorboards and sticks. The basement is a couple feet deep in water, piles of sand scattered around like pods of some invading alien spore. Tom is on his knees ripping up the plywood subfloor, exposing the beams and the basement below. *I was just trying to get some ideas about how we're gonna tackle the floors,* he says.

The water came up so hard some of his subfloor is actually bent from the upward force. *I think I gotta go down to the beams.*

Dolan's a chief in the city fire department, a lean and rangy forty-four-year-old who runs triathlons for fun and once swam around Manhattan for charity. He spent ten months at the ruins of the World Trade Center. He has saved people in fires and floods. His father worked

for the Sanitation Department and taught him a simple philosophy of life: When things get tough, pick up a hammer.

What are you doing with the water bucket?

I'll bring this back with some tap water for the toilet situation. You gotta think of these things now.

They work all day, brothers and cousins and neighbors, taking out the kitchen and the subfloor. Occasionally they pause for comic tales about Tom, who once got bored on a five-hour cruise and jumped off into the East River, swam to shore, and took a cab home. When he did the charity swim around Manhattan, he refused to quit and refused to quit and ended up in the hospital for three days with hypothermia. He doesn't feel pain like ordinary people, his brother Kevin says. And stay away from him on competition days!

It's been dark for a while before they start to plan their next move.

Thomas, what time in the morning?

Nine o'clock.

Late day, huh?

I'm worried about school.

No, no, your kids don't have school. It was announced on the radio.

All right, so be here by seven-thirty.

I'll bring the coffee.

In those first few days, random people come by and drop off food, beer, cigarettes. By the third day they have everything they need. By the end of the week, volunteers are pouring in from all over the country. Like this guy named Chris who just shows up one day and says, *What do you want done?* He comes the same time every morning, eight sharp, they don't even know his last name. And Dave McPherson, who runs a charity in Colorado, borrows a big fifth-wheel trailer and loads it up with generators and shovels and hoses and a big pump and four fifty-gallon drums of gas, drives in from Colorado and parks near the gate and starts talking to a widow who looks overwhelmed. A few minutes later they're pumping out her basement, which is the most depressing thing you've ever seen—three or four feet of water and insulation





OPPOSITE PAGE: MEG AND TOM DOLAN AT MASS THE SUNDAY AFTER THE STORM. THE DOLAN HOUSE WAS A BLOCK OUTSIDE THE BURN ZONE, AND TOM WASTED NO TIME IN STRIPPING HIS FIRST FLOOR DOWN TO THE FLOORBOARDS, GETTING READY TO REBUILD. ABOVE: AN AERIAL SHOT OF THE CATASTROPHIC FIRE.

and drywall and trash. Then they discover the glory of the big pump, a ferocious machine that sucks out even the wet insulation and broken

Sheetrock. They move to another house on the street, then another.

The funny thing is, the Breezy people are a little standoffish about being helped. They all notice it. *I'm not sure they're used to seeing people helping people just for the heck of it*, McPherson's wife ventures.

But the Breezy standoffishness goes deeper than mere suspicion of outsiders. In general, the people of Breezy Point have mixed feelings about being helped. The usual explanation is that they themselves are a community of first responders, firemen and policemen, conservative and self-reliant people who, though proud of their own role in American government, tend not to be fans of big government programs. Too bad for them, this now includes the National Flood Insurance Program, already \$18 billion in the red after Katrina and tracking to receive two hundred thousand new claims in a matter of months. Since private insurers refuse to cover coastal flooding and the entire coast of America is now basically a socialist program, the citizens of Breezy Point submit their claims in a kind of amnesia and continue to think of themselves as people who don't take handouts.

With even the best of intentions, the mental jujitsu can be habit-forming. Tom Dolan, for example, made such a huge pile of wall-board and insulation and floorboards that the street cleaners bulldozed it onto the sidewalk. He was moving it back for the sanitation pickup and some guy came by and said, *You need help?* And he said no automatically and then he realized, Hey, *I do need help*. He can admit it if he stops to think. But in his mind, it still feels wrong. In his mind, he is still the guy who helps others. Isn't that a good thing?

Other times, the impact sneaks up on you. Lauren is taking in donations at the Catholic Club, the diapers and gummy bears and ramen coming in an overwhelming stream of civic generosity, when suddenly a realization hits her. *I have nothing*. She's taking in donations for the people in need and pretending she's not a person in need, but she *is* a person in need—and just when she needs courage the most, the kindness of strangers humbles her.

She puts down a bundle of diapers and walks away.

In the days after, climate scientists are less cautious than ever before, openly blaming warmer oceans and changing arctic wind patterns for the storm's awesome intensity. The largest Atlantic hurricane on record, Sandy grew to a thousand miles across just before hitting the East Coast. It killed a total of sixty-four people in New York, another thirty-seven in New Jersey, more than two hundred people altogether. An estimated \$71 billion in damage would make it the second-most-expensive storm in recorded history. Much of that damage was centered on New York City itself, where subways and tunnels experienced epic flooding never before seen. Just three days afterward, with lower Manhattan still blacked out and schools and subway lines still closed, Mayor Bloomberg said, *In just fourteen months, two hurricanes have forced us to evacuate neighborhoods—something our city government had never done before. If this is a trend, it is simply not sustainable*.

And then he endorsed Obama for reelection. *I want our president to place scientific evidence and risk management above electoral politics*.

And so just like that, Breezy was becoming a large issue in a global struggle. It was biblical, what happened here, the wind, the water, the fire. People built cities in the first place as bulwarks against the natural world, their structures creating the illusion of being stronger than the earth. No one had ever seen this kind of destruction in the largest city in America. This brand of wholesale devastation was for places like the Gulf Coast or Bangladesh. But the weather had reached right in without much regard for the designs of man. Pictures of the conflagration at Breezy Point flashed around the globe and became the image of the aftermath for the entire world.

But even the largest issue starts as a matter between neighbors, and in the days that have passed since the storm, the prevailing issue in Breezy Point is whether Breezy Point—up to then the secret refuge of a select few New York families—will ever again exist.

Five days later, the Breezy Point presidential polling site opens for business. The voters show up in a steady stream, cheerful and determined. *It's all part of the recovery*, a woman named Virginia explains.

To get to the polls, which have been moved a couple miles because of damage to the usual polling place, the voters have to walk past a house with a ten-foot sign that says **HOUSE OCCUPIED, OWNER ARMED**. Right out front, a sanitation crew is shaving down a giant pile of debris. They greet one another with hugs and hearty slaps on the back and stories about where they're riding out the evacuation until the power gets turned on and the rebuilding begins. But the community warmth seems to stop at the borders of the neighborhood. *You want to know bluntly why I voted?* a grandmotherly woman asks. *To get that asshole out, that's why. To get America back to what it's supposed to be.*



I don't like Obama, says another nice elderly lady. *I think we need to get back to our values.*

That's pretty much the consensus until Tom Dolan shows up, looking rugged in his work pants and a brown work jacket. He spots a neighbor. *Hey, Angie, how you doing babe?*

I got out in time, before the storm.

Angie is about ninety years old, so this seems like a prudent move. Tom grins. *Next time, take the Wrights with you!*

Tom is registered as an independent and doesn't like to think of himself as partisan in any way, just a reasonable guy who looks at the evidence and makes up his own mind. He voted for Obama last time. But this time, the evidence is pushing him a different way. *We gave the man a shot and all he did was come up with a bunch of failures*, he says. *I'm all for giving someone else a shot.*

Up comes his father-in-law, Congressman Bob Turner, arm held out for a handshake. A gregarious, straight-shooting New Yorker from the old school, Turner helped produce the Phil Donahue show before scoring an upset victory as a Republican running for Anthony Weiner's seat. He's disappointed with the government response those first few days, especially the gas shortage. *This is a tough community*, he says, *we're coming together, we're helping one another, we have a self-sufficiency about ourselves. But there are a few things we can't do for ourselves, and one is get gasoline and get those pumps working.*

A neighbor stops. *I'm sorry for your loss.*

Turner's house was in the burn zone. *That's okay*, he says, *it's just stuff.*

But there was some good stuff there last week!

From the standpoint of self-interest, it might seem odd for a neighborhood that has just been devastated by a natural disaster to vote for a candidate who wants to cut funds for disaster relief. Given the strong position taken by their powerful and popular mayor as well as the steady increase in ugly weather events, it may seem odd to vote for a political party that has spent the last decade denying the existence of climate change. But Breezy Point is an exceptional place, where some realities are heightened. More people from here died on 9/11 than from any other community. Walk along the beach and all the benches have brass plaques with different names and the same date. The community bonds, the extended clans, the summer sports, the flags everywhere, it's more America than America. But such bounty comes at a cost, a

priest from the local Catholic Church explains. *To live in this co-op, you have to get letters from three people who live in the co-op supporting your effort to buy. So there are no blacks here. There are no Hispanics here. This is a white Irish-Catholic community, 90 percent.*

The Brooklyn DA has a house down here, the priest says. After the Crown Heights incident in 1991, when a black kid was struck and killed by a Hasidic motorist, Al Sharpton brought a group of citizens to protest Brooklyn DA Charles Hynes's failure to get an indictment in the case. Sharpton saw the DA's residence as a kind of community political statement, calling the area an "apartheid village." Sharpton gathered his friends in the street and chanted:

Hynes, Hynes, have you heard?

This is not Johannesburg!

The way the priest sees it, the storm has raised a great moral opportunity. Look at the guys from the Department of Sanitation breaking their backs to clear out the wreckage. That union's 75 percent black, he says. *Look around. Look at who saved your sorry little rear ends—people you wouldn't let live next door to you.*

Now, with everyone still reeling from the blow, is not the time, and these are not the words he would choose in a more temperate moment. But he hopes he has the courage to preach on this.

Nine days after the great storm, another storm hits. This time the meteorologists are predicting sixty-five-mile-an-hour winds and water three or four feet deep in the streets of Breezy. A large police van blocks the road, doubled by a police car on the exit lane. *There's not much to see*, they shout. *Everybody's pulled out, even FEMA.*

Snow comes down in white flopping sheets. The last mile is completely black, no lights, the snowflakes thick in the headlights. Another big police van sits at the gate with spinning lights and lots of police cars and trucks pulling out.

Even on a normal day Breezy Point feels more like an army base than a gated community, an impression amplified by the military feel of the community center and the Catholic Club, matching one-story buildings with a halo of government-issue green. It's been like that since the 1960s, when the original group of families pooled their money to buy the land under their summer cabins and establish the co-op. But tonight an EMS truck waits all night with its engine running, adding a sense of urgency and vigilance.

Inside the community center, the emergency crew considers the night's possibilities. *With five-to-eight-foot waves—*

People are going to get water in their basements.

It's good that it's cold, 'cause the mold won't spread as quickly.

Ariel says at least it's snow, it's not rain. Her house, like so many here, was soaked halfway up the first floor, so mold is the thing now.

I feel like snow is a little early, Lauren says.

It's a little absurd, Ariel says.

Lauren is twenty-five, Ariel twenty-one. Both are tomboys, gruff and sardonic, children of cops. They have taken control of the onslaught of donations. Trucks are constantly bringing in tons of things that have to be sorted and hundreds of people have been coming in with needs, especially cleaning supplies and tools and garbage bags.

Socks are big, Tim says.

Boots.

Butterfly stitches.

Lauren did a couple of those today. Nails in the hands, nails in the feet.

In a movie, this would be the rebuilding-the-defenses montage, a period of pause and drift. The last week has been tough, the last holdouts are settling into a new reality, Lauren's parents' house was just a tiny bungalow squeezed between two other bungalows on the bayside, but it was right on the sand. Sitting on her back deck at night, she could see the towers of Manhattan gleaming across the water. On day two Lauren went back to look. Completely destroyed, the porch torn away, foundation collapsed. She has been sleeping here ever since, a twenty-four-hour volunteer who does anything that has to be done. *You have to be strong for the people around you,* she says.

Tim, a big lumberjack of a guy with a Falstaff beard, was living with his parents while studying psychology at Brooklyn College and doing stand-up comedy in Manhattan clubs. His basement apartment was flooded and all his possessions were destroyed. *It's kind of freeing, like in a Buddhist way,* he says. He and Ariel have been sleeping upstairs ever since, on the sofa in front of the wood-burning stove.

They go outside to smoke cigarettes, standing in front of the fire barrel. Tim calls it a little hobo fire but it reminds Lauren of the Christmas tree sale every year, when they burn the tree trunks and drink cider.

Across the alley at the Catholic Club, Chief Eddy Valentine says they're getting into the groove, didn't expect the snow but it's a lot better than rain. Seated with him around a round table loaded with ashtrays and packaged snacks are the brave young volunteer firemen who were out in the Zodiacs last Monday, Michael Valentine, Brandon Reilly, Jimmy Morton, Mike Kahlau, and Brian Doyle—but they won't continue unless the names of the others on the shift that night are also included: Chris Healey, Pat Cusack, Jim Healey, Danny Young, Nick D'Amato.

Yes, they were scared shitless. *Unbelievably so. You think about it later. After the fire and a couple hours sleep, you go, What the hell were we thinking?* Running on adrenaline, taking crazy risks, but it paid off. Doyle was counting in his head and he figures he rescued twenty-three people, plus various dogs and cats. *It's an unbelievable feeling, man.* And they saved all of Ocean Avenue too, because they spent hours soaking that pink house across the narrows, just soaking it down so it wouldn't catch, huge embers just raining down on them. And the news cameras don't do the whole thing justice. You just saw two houses and not the whole scale of the thing across a hundred homes.

They've been here ever since, sleeping in the firehouse and wearing coats donated by SEAL Team 4. By day they unload the truckloads of water and soup and diapers that are pouring in from all over the coun-

try. A Bronx firehouse is here cooking free food and other food trucks are scattered in the little shopping zone, some a gift from local businesses and some funded by the city. At night things get quiet, the firemen on duty play board games and the ones who are off duty drink beer.

They're turning down interview requests. Nobody wants to be singled out. *It's not about us. Any one of our guys woulda done it.*

Those are my two brothers right there.

They're all my brothers. Even though they're not related. I hate 'em like real brothers.

A couple of them go out to take showers. When they come back twenty minutes later, everyone wants to know, how is this thing called a shower?

What was it like? What was your first orgasm like?

That good?

Better.



OPPOSITE PAGE: WITH THE OCEAN ALREADY DOING ITS BEST TO WIPE BREEZY POINT OFF THE ROCKAWAY PENINSULA, FIRE BROKE OUT AT THE PEAK OF THE STORM. ABOVE: THE HOUSES THAT WERE SPARED THE FIRE WERE ENGULFED UP TO THE RAFTERS, AND MANY HAD TO BE CONDEMNED.

Two weeks after the storm, an engineer from Hydro-Québec stands in the burn zone yelling French at a guy up on a pole. A man from Boston is working for the city government, posting notifications of all the codes the homeowners have violated by allowing their houses to be reduced to burning cinders. He's very sorry. They upset people. But it's required paperwork, government rules. A lady waiting for her insurance man just got one foot of water, she hasn't ripped out the wallboard. *It's on my list.* Another man stands in front of his house, waiting for his insurance man. He has six feet of water in the basement. The plump black woman running a demolition crew comes in from New Jersey by bus, which takes an hour and a half. *That lady there, she's helping her sister, she says I can't look at you, every time she looks at us she cries.* A couple on the beach walk tries to figure out how their neighbor's deck ended up four houses down, knocking over their house. They have no flood insurance and heard FEMA won't give much more than \$30,000 for the structure. *We can't rebuild on that.* Two men in hardhats walk by and one says, *You gotta think this is gonna be a mini construction boom here.*



LAUREN WILLIS HAD LIVED IN THIS HOUSE ON THE BEACH SINCE SHE WAS TWO, AND SHE WAS PLANNING TO STAY AND MAKE HER LIFE HERE, BUT THE RED STICKER ON HER DOOR MEANS HER HOME IS CONDEMNED. SHE WAS TAKING IN DONATIONS FOR DISTRIBUTION AT THE CATHOLIC CLUB, THE DIAPERS AND GUMMY BEARS AND RAMEN COMING IN AN OVERWHELMING STREAM OF CIVIC GENEROSITY, WHEN SUDDENLY A REALIZATION HITS HER. *I HAVE NOTHING.* BELOW, LAUREN'S NEW INK.

Money makes a difference, not always a good one. In the narrow alleys of the original village, the streets teem with family and friends who have poured in to help those who help themselves. But out on the west side, where the houses are bigger and more widely spaced, there's less damage and also less life. Most of the houses are dark and silent, second houses anyway, their owners waiting on insurance. A handful of professional crews work on some of the fancier houses in their white moon suits. There are fewer flags.

Anger is flaring. Out in front of the community center, a medic named James tells stories about evacuating old-age homes. Over in Rockaway, he went up thirty-four-story buildings by the stairs. Worked the Bellevue Hospital transfer too, and the thing that amazes him is that the people walking by on the sidewalk will hand you sandwiches and thank you for the great job you're doing, but the people you're trying to help—the actual people you are trying to help—will get angry and cuss you out. At one of the old-age homes, an old lady told him, *Get your hands off me, nigger.* If people don't want our help, James says, *I'll just take my happy ass back to Georgia.*

Sixteen days after the storm, Tom put carpenter's paper down to protect the steps and Meg Dolan stands among the boxes and furniture. *I can't really think straight, she says. I never know what I'm doing. I have a hard time making decisions because everything is all over the place.*

Downstairs, Tom's cutting pieces of underfloor out of corners and closets with a Skilsaw. Now that he's had time to think about it, he says, he doesn't want to be in this story. Breezy is supposed to be this great secret place. *I don't want to be the one—hey, look at Tom, he brought attention to it.*

But he's too decent to stop talking. He wants to get the kids swimming again. Swimming is important to him. When he was a kid, he would go to Brooklyn College every day and swim for hours. And

that's what you do, you keep doing things that you do.

So many people are still in denial, he says. Like one woman whose house was right next to the fire, there was definitely water on the first floor. They cut open a small spot in the closet and it was all wet and moldy, but her husband was actually a victim of 9/11 and she's got two daughters and no help, so a couple of guys showed up and they worked till the basement ceiling and walls were down. They took the sand out in buckets.

Tom does not consider that he might also be in denial, but a few minutes later his buddy Jimmy Morgan shows up. *You can't rebuild the exact same way, Jimmy says. This could happen next week, two months, two years from now. We've got to use concrete, slabs, some kind of different type of insulation that doesn't turn into cotton candy.*

Jimmy's a fireman too, recently retired, and he's known Tom for twenty years. But they have different opinions on climate change. Tom sort of accepts climate change in principle but says it's been going on for a billion years and we've only been monitoring it for 150. Jimmy says that's bullshit. *Change is happening and we've got to prepare for it.* So he thinks some company might want to partner with them on a model disaster-ready home. *There's gonna be companies who want to come out here and fix someone's house to show what they could do.*

Tom gets a stubborn look on his face. *That won't be my house, he says.*

Why not?

I can't start over. I'm not starting over.

But what about corrugated steel? Jimmy says. *Then you wouldn't have to replace your floor next time.*

At times like this, inner qualities emerge, choices are made, and a history is written. Jimmy enjoys the infinite possibilities, the play of com-



THE MAIN ISSUE IN BREEZY POINT ISN'T CLIMATE CHANGE, IT'S WHETHER BREEZY POINT WILL EVER AGAIN EXIST.

plexity, but he's a little slower about getting to work. That will affect his choices and destiny and ripple out into the world around him.

But Tom doesn't want to be distracted in that way. He looks around the house with a grave expression. *It's a mess*, he says. *There's so much to be done*. You can feel his need to fix things, his urge to put the world in order. He's relentless, a triathlete of recovery. But this attitude will ripple out into the world too, and the effects will not always be so positive.

Never at the community center, Lauren's trying to fill out unemployment forms on her laptop. And FEMA forms too, so much paperwork in a disaster, all so confusing. You ask yourself, Do I really need to do this one? But FEMA's paying \$31,900 to people who lost their primary residence, so she has to apply for that.

A man approaches her. "I was told that Martin would be signing for the four tents we just brought over?"

"He just actually stepped out. What do you need signed?"

The truth is, this is what she wants to do right now, sign this document and live here at the community center with the hurricane cots and huge piles of donated Huggies. She wants to pass out water and sort clothes. She's the opposite of Tom Dolan, she doesn't want to get back to ordinary life. This is another choice that will ripple out into the world, a choice a lot of people are making in different ways.

The Marines have arrived. They set up their tents on the beach and start cutting through debris, clearing roads, cleaning out homes. They run from one job to another. They'll run a mile and turn around and run back. If you offer them a ride, the lieutenant says *No, no, let them do their thing*. That's exciting too, the sense of mission and shared sacrifice.

Still, Chief Valentine told her she had to take a break. So she went down to North Carolina for two days, saw some friends, took showers, and slept. But all the time she was thinking, *My family needs me. The community needs me. There's nothing for me in North Carolina*.

Even her parents are here. They were worried about her so they flew up from Florida, they're staying at the Cath Club too. She put her mom in charge of inventory control.

Today, she was supposed to go back to work. She's a janitor at a high school in Brooklyn. Her brother works there too and her boss is another sand person but the school felt as far away as North Carolina. *It's just not the right time for me to go back to work*, she decided. *Everything's still such a mess. The power's still off. They're saying May now, six months away, it's incredible. And FEMA hotels are few and far between and everybody's car is destroyed. You can't rent a car anywhere from Massachusetts to Philadelphia*.

She got a tattoo when she was away, she says, holding out a wrist with four cursive black words written across the pale skin:

This Too Shall Pass.

Net midnight down at the Catholic Club bar, with red plastic cups and cigarettes burning in the ashtrays, the subject they've been avoiding comes up once again. Walking the fire scene in scuba boots. Hearing water pour in the cracks of the door. The

dogs going crazy. The person who said *Gotham Walk is on fire*.

I am literally reliving that night as we talk about it, Ariel says.

Shut up, a vollie says.

You shut up, you were in Florida.

I was not. I was in the firehouse.

Ariel wipes a tear.

Midnight passes, then 1:00 A.M. People just don't want to go to bed, and not just because the first person to pass out drunk must always endure "flight training" with air horns and flashing lights. Finally Tim and Ariel get up for the walk to his parents' house. An eerie silence rules the streets. All the black windows look dead and the floodlights up high on generator poles wash the streets with the white light of some futuristic plague zone.

Tim's deck is intact, stacked high with palettes of water.

Inside, the house smells moldy. Though he sprayed the basement with bleach and put duct tape over the door to try to keep the smell down, Tim might fit into Tom Dolan's people-in-denial category. But upstairs there's little visible damage, big sofa and dining table and high-tech freestanding fireplace all intact.

It's cold too, cold as the night outside. Tim lights a Duraflame log. Soon the fire starts to smoke into the room.

You put too much wood in there, that's what's happening, Ariel says.

Usually they watch a few minutes of *The Walking Dead*, but Ariel tends to get nervous. What if somebody tries to get in?

Nobody's gonna rob an occupied house when there's two thousand unoccupied houses.

Drew might walk in.

Drew's looking for jewelry and weed in unoccupied houses.

Despite dark fears about savages from East Rockaway, most of the looting seems to have boiled down to a local kid named Drew who has been making trouble in Breezy Point for years—he's such an iconic personality in the neighborhood that two people came to the same Halloween party dressed as him.

There's also a grandma in a wheelchair who sells pot to kids, Tim says. They call her Deals on Wheels.

Tim doesn't mind saying these things because he's a renegade atheist and a short-timer headed off to Nebraska soon. Ariel's feelings are more complicated. She was seventeen when her mom packed up and moved out of Breezy Point, leaving her with a shell-shocked dad and two little sisters to take care of. Going to college in the city opened her eyes some more, and oddly enough so did working security at Breezy—the shareholders were so rude, so exclusive. *This is for me and my friends and nobody else*. Then her cousin started dating a black guy and the ugly truth was undeniable. *I can't be around that*, she says. *I know what it is to be in Brooklyn and the city. I know what real life is*.

But she'll stick by her dad until he gets out of the Catholic Club and back into the house, at least. That might be Christmas, maybe a bit longer. *I'm his baby*, she says.

After Thanksgiving, *The New York Times* says flood insurance rates are going up as much as 25 percent, and that there are going to be expensive new regulations and requirements for rebuilding, too. Soon, coastal living itself might become "a luxury only the wealthy can afford." Most of Breezy Point is in a state of suspended animation, the population relocated, people with little reason to come down and every reason to settle their kids into new routines.

And now, at 7:30 on a Saturday morning, Tom Dolan is going to join them.

That's the biggest truck you got? Jeez, that's not even bigger than my Suburban.

The Neighborhood

This is Jerry, Tom's brother-in-law, who was in the mezzanine of Tower Two on 9/11. He figures God saved him so he could look after his family. Jim and Kevin are here too, which is even more impressive when you know that Kevin lives sixty miles away. But the crazy rental situation means that Tom only gets to keep this little fifteen-foot truck till 2:00 P.M., so they hustle down beds and desks and dressers and an Ivanka-level dollhouse with efficiency and dispatch—until Kevin puts his foot through a loose piece of plywood and plunges thigh-deep into the basement.

Thank God you missed your nut sack, Tom says.

Uh, I didn't.

When the truck and cars are loaded they head up the Belt Parkway to an elegant older section of Kew Gardens, big brick houses off a leafy park. Sometimes Meg tells Tom, *Let's just get some floors down and the walls up and we can move in while we're finishing the kitchen.* But the reality is, the kids are in new schools and they can't move into a town without power. Or neighbors.

Congressman Turner's already there, parking his car as the brothers pile out and start unloading.

That's for the girls' room, the second floor. Which side?

Top of the stairs.

In the kitchen, the congressman and his wife set up a carton of coffee and a box of doughnut holes. Turner figures he'll live in Kew Gardens for at least a year while his house gets rebuilt, maybe longer. It'll be spring before all the demolition is finished and the regulations finalized. That's when the real rebuilding will get started, when you'll see who gives up and who fights on.

By December, the clerks finally finish cleaning out Deidre Maeve's Supermarket. *All the perishables perished*, Desiree says, *it smelled horrible.* Ariel got a job as a security guard at Madison Square Garden. Somebody puts up a sign at the gate that says *SHARE THE LOVE*, and the sermon at St. Thomas More is about the lessons of disaster. *We know what's important to us, we are ready for action, we're ready for that second coming, our perspective has changed.*

But Lauren is still sleeping on a cot at the Catholic Club. Yesterday, her mom signed the demo papers on her house. Now she's paying her childhood home a last visit. *OMG, this is going to be fun*, she says.

I'm quitting Facebook in January, Tim says from the backseat.

That's impossible.

I have to, I hate it so much.

Cut left through the dump, go around that ditch. There's a boot in the middle of the street for some reason, never mind.

Like, I've come to hate all of my friends because of Facebook. They're really fun when we're hanging out but on Facebook—this isn't the person I know! I hate you!

The narrow alleys around Lauren's house

are still piled with sand. In the white light of the floodlight towers, she picks her way around chunks of porch and strewn cinder blocks. *That was my porch*, she says.

The house itself is tiny, a cozy little cottage right on the sand. No boardwalk, no path even, the water is maybe a hundred feet from her back door followed by the broad expanse of Jamaica Bay and Coney Island and New York Harbor and Manhattan. Her parents moved to Florida so this was going to be her little piece of heaven, but they had no flood insurance and not even homeowner's insurance because her parents let the policy lapse when they moved to Florida. Now there's a red sticker on the door. No one can live here, ever again.

I moved here when I was two years old, Lauren says to herself.

A cat meows pitifully. It's Sylvester, her neighbor's tom. *Come come come, kitty.*

In the cold and dark, standing between the buildings, Lauren dissolves into sobbing. She calls her mom on the phone. *Mom I can't do this, I can't do this*, and her mom says, *You'll be fine. Just keep looking at your wrist.*

But she doesn't cry in the Catholic Club.

I know, Sylvester, come here baby.

She just isn't ready to go back to work. Her mind and her body are just not there. Everyone says get back to your regular routine, but her regular routine was waking up in her own bed and getting in her own car. And there she is cleaning up after these kids who don't even care, cleaning up after all these brats who sit around getting high in staircases while other people are completely out of their homes.

So she said to hell with it, she quit. She has been sort of looking for an apartment. FEMA said they'd pay her rent, which is a help. She knows she has to get on with it. But for now, let's just push open a window screen so the cat can get inside, then go back to the Catholic Club to get some cat food.

And lo and behold, a stranger at the Catholic Club is unloading an entire truck of cat and dog food. And the stranger seems to want nothing, he's just happy to unload his stuff. Can you believe it? This is exactly the kind of thing she was talking about, the thing that makes this disaster life so compelling, magical moments when people are lifted out of ordinary life.

She grabs a bag of cat food and heads back to the house. *I know the place I want to be and I live there*, she says. *I'm not going to let the storm kick me out of it. I don't want to be that person who gives up.*

Five weeks after the storm, Jimmy Morgan comes into Tom's house and shouts, *I'm done!*

You know *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Jimmy had *Fifty Shades of Mold*. He was cleaning debris from under his house and there it was, my God, fuzzy green stuff everywhere. But he bought a spray. And come Monday, he's meeting a guy from a company called Forever Board. There's also a product called WonderBoard. It is the waterproof wallboard of his dreams!

Tom doesn't seem too impressed. *I still don't understand what you're gonna do with the outside of the Wonder Board*, Tom says.

It's concrete! If something happens you scrape it off and paint over!

Tom's all for new ideas, but he still doesn't see the point of this. The boiler still won't be waterproof, nor the car on the street, nor the furniture.

He was at the Breezy Point co-op's first poststorm meeting in a high school in Brooklyn. Outsiders were not invited and a media request received the answer: Absolutely not. Despite the outpouring of generosity from their fellow citizens, in fact, from FEMA to the Sanitation Department to the army of volunteers to the actual military, they wouldn't even give out the phone number of the co-op's chairman. *It's a private number*, the office manager said peevisly. *Would you want me to give out your private number?*

The same peevisly note appeared in a neighborhood paper called the *Rockaway Point News* in an editorial about how little the co-op generally gets for the \$5million it pays every year in taxes.

But Tom doesn't care about all that. The bitter politics interest him as little as WonderBoard. What he cares about is the subfloor in his dining room. That's the first sign of new construction in Breezy Point. He and the guys were in here till 10:30 at night. Isn't it beautiful?

FEMA gave him just \$700 for his boiler and the estimate on repairing his house is \$140,000, so he'll have to extend his mortgage another fifteen years or so. But the more he can do himself the cheaper it is. Mike down the block and Danny and Ray on the next street, they're in there working. No point in standing around being idle.

This beam has to come out—see the rot? Termites.

Kevin has piled cinder blocks to hold a jack that, they hope, will jack the floor up enough to slip in a new beam. "Bang a Gong" is playing on the radio.

*You got the teeth of the hydra upon you
You're dirty sweet and you're my girl.*

Tom squats and peers along the board. *Can you see the arm moving?*

There's too much weight.

I don't know what you're seeing but I'm getting a lot of separation between this board and that board.

For a half hour, they bang and struggle. It should have been easy, Tom says, but they don't have the right tools. What they need is a five-ton jack. Jim could probably bring one from his shop, but that would mean waiting. Maybe one of these rapid-response trucks will have a jack. And that's the important thing right now, not theories about global warming or the priest's sentimental ideas about perspective, but whether the rapid-response truck has a jack. Tom believes that all the talk about rebuilding Breezy "better than before" is romantic. The signs that say *MAKE BREEZY STRONGER*, the idea that they were "victimized," that there is some kind of grand moral struggle at work, this is not the way he thinks. It's really quite simple. They've been through a terrible disaster and they have to get back home. The kids need to get back in their beds.

During the storm, after he got the Wrights into a bed upstairs, Tom wondered if the sheets were clean. Then he remembered the Wolfes had stayed over, too, and went to their house through water that rose above his shoulders, opened the door, and called out, and Mrs. Wolfe said, *You didn't open up the door and let the water in!?* Another neighbor wouldn't even open up the door—they were talking through the window like he was some kind of burglar. And later he watched the fire grow from three houses to dozens and finally, when the pumpers came, his buddy Billy remembered that his aunt and uncle lived on Jamaica. Tom and Billy rushed over, climbing over submerged cars, and found Billy's aunt mopping the floors and Billy's uncle setting out candles. The biggest fire of their lives was a block away, and they were settling in for the night.

That is the way of life Tom Dolan is dedicating himself to preserving, a world that turns away from the world outside. Things may change, there may be huge global economic implications, the ocean and the climate may get the last word, but right now the kids are getting a little anxious, fighting over who owns the crayon box, and things have to be put in order. This is what Tom knows, this is what he does. It is his great virtue and, if the worst does happen, may also be his downfall. He's like all of us, the best of us. He will not rest until his own daughters are sleeping in their own beds in their own house with their old friends nearby, and everything is just like it was before.

Is that too much to ask? **18**