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We won't make Louisiana by nightfall. We've had trouble finding things. The raft could use a few doors, something to indicate where it begins and ends. We need other things: food, water, shelter, diesel. The Clemens business is overdone. What we need is action. Someone on a bullhorn.

The elderberry trees are in bloom. The long, dark fruit dangles above the river. Sour grass and chestnuts line the shore. Water moccasins hide below the surface. The crew holds a meeting to discuss chaos theory. A door floats by. The bosun spots its ornate brass handle. The crew holds another meeting to determine what they can't use. There's no action in the lock! the bosun yells.

The raft was built from the top down. First the idea, then the roof, the supports, stairs, windows, joists, pontoons. The engine charges a battery that powers lights at night. A collapsible camping chair doubles as an office. Three cargo buckets are for dishes. A tin can holds the silverware.

The river is silver in the morning, brown by day. At night it's blue and moonlit. Fireflies circle our mattresses. They want a peek, but there's nothing to see. Just some propane cylinders and adjustable wrenches. We move at noon. The bosun shouts to the bow. Trees shrug off dock lines. The Director commands the engines forward. It's inspiring how that woman can drive.

She won't leave us, I tell the bosun. She's got too much invested. It's hard to explain such things to such people. Even if she left, I tell him, everyone comes back. They go home and go about their beeswax, see that things are exactly the way they were before and they come back. Lefty smiles and goes to check on the rudders.

When you put an idea and a thing together there's a chain reaction. Like Spinoza and plastic. You have to get them hot to make them stick. Lefty understands this. He spends all day tinkering with the diesels. He's figured out a way to make them run on fear. But you have to get them

hot first, he says. Close to exploding.

A gale is coming. It's a dark spot on the horizon now, but the black winds and fat clouds are gathering. The crew holds a meeting to discuss the storm. They decide to ask it to leave. The Director requests a dialog about the lack of food. The crew objects. We can't keep chasing the things we need, a young woman blurts. The bosun hands her the door and retires to the salon.

The chop saw runs all night. Lefty hits his thumb with a jewelry hammer. A plastic cup of darts sits on the cutting board. The bread is gone. Drinking water, gone. The Director eats a handful of uncooked rice and hoists the mizzen sail. To the marina! she cries. The crew scrambles to their stations. The bosun prepares the jousting bikes. Lefty mans the bow with his grabbing machine.

The crew is silent as the raft drifts past the marina's breakwater. Gleaming white boats fill the slips. The deckhands leap onto the dock and secure the lines. The Director follows next in her bathing costume. She makes a beeline for the harbormaster. He's short and fat. He asks if the crew needs anything. Perhaps, the Director ponders, squeezing his arm. Do you carry biodiesel?

The crew searches for food while the harbormaster fills the tanks. The stores on Main Street are closed. Some of the windows are broken. There are hardly any cars. A crewmember asks a cop where all the people went. Inland, he says. Why? the boy asks. That's where everything is, he answers.

One of the girls on the boat tells a story while we wait. A long-haired boy joins in. They work as a team, one sketching the play-by-play, the other adding color. The story is about a delivery boy who carries goods downriver. He falls in love with a girl at one of his stops. She makes trinkets for him and he puts them on his dresser at home. One day he stops coming. The girl sits by the landing all night. In the morning she shrugs and goes home. She tells her father: I need to build a boat.

The storytellers go on for two hours. It turns out the delivery boy isn't who he thought he was. The girl is more than she thought she was. The river is always the same and that's the only thing they can count on. The storytellers are like soothsayers. When they talk about the weather, the weather changes. When they talk about people, the weather changes again. I've got a storm inside me, Lefty says. Stop looking for it, the girl replies.

The deckhands return from town with four loaves of stale bread. The Director orders them to cast off the lines. The harbormaster approaches and says the townspeople are upset. They want to know who's going to

pay for the fuel. The bosun holds a quick meeting. He suggests putting on a show. We could ask for food, he says. The vote is unanimous and the deckhands tie up to the dock again. Flyers are drawn up. The harbormaster distributes them around town. There will be singing, dancing and dramatics! the bosun yells.

For the finale, we transform the girl's story into a play. We write all night by lantern light. Does the girl build the boat? Does the boy save the trinkets? Does the river continue to do nothing? When you make up a story, the girl says, you have to fix the characters first. Then you take them apart and exchange their pieces. Love goes on the neck, fear between the legs. Strength comes from the shoulders. Pride hides on the backside.

We draw up the characters one by one. There's a mad one, a happy one, a dour one, an over-excited one. The ending is the hardest part. No one wants to know what happens. So we write the beginning over and over. There are twenty beginnings by the time we're finished and one beginning of the middle. The end will come, the girl says and winks.

The dressing room fills with gifts the day before the show. A case of Zagnuts, sea glass, thermal socks and wrestling shoes. There's a jar of bolts, a propane burner, a cheap chandelier. The Director's diamond ring sits in a glass box, next to the fuel tanks.

The sun rises and we go to bed. When it gets too hot we wake and swim. Mayflies float by on the surface. The Director hands out rice for breakfast and holds a meeting to discuss the show. Lefty says he wants the set to look like things look after you die. The bosun suggests making it look like when you come back. The Director says why not make it look like right now? We already have that, the girl answers.

We hold our only rehearsal that night. The deckhands prod the actors with sticks and lines. Some read from the script and some improvise. By midnight half the cast is asleep and we've got a show. The harbormaster asks about the ending. The Director tells him to be patient. Then she tickles him under the chin and suggests a case of champagne to celebrate. He climbs into his sedan.

Let them fall in love! he yells out the window. In your dreams, the Director smirks.

We make final preparations and schedule the show for eight the next night. The local police offer to provide security and the crew holds a meeting. They'll steal everything, Lefty argues. And try to make sense of us! a boy shouts. They'll talk us to death, the Director moans.

The cops come anyway and we set up the stage on the riverbank. We

hang a sheet between two poles for a backdrop and hook the lights to batteries. Lefty sets up two amplifiers and a microphone. The bosun puts on a sequined gown and pink heels. The camping chair holds cue cards. People begin to arrive at seven-thirty. The deckhands circulate with sparklers and chewing gum.

When the singing and dancing are through, the bosun sets the stage for the play. The set consists of two stumps and a navigational buoy on its side. Where'd you find that? the Chief of Police yells. It found us, the Director grins. The lights dim and a young girl walks onto the stage. With my eyes closed I can smell what country I'm in, she begins. And I can hear what kind of train is going by.

The crowd laughs. With twenty beginnings and one middle, the plot is like a board game. But as the story continues, the beginnings drop away and a possible ending becomes clear. Two deckhands are onstage for the final act. They are dressed in identical sailor suits. The audience is silent. Did you write the ending? one asks. I thought you were going to, the other says. Should we search for it?

The twins leave the stage and the storytellers walk on, holding hands. Lefty douses the lights. I have friends who surround me like guardrails, the long-haired boy says in the dark. The girl takes his hand and holds it to her heart. That thing that I saw, she says, it wasn't the end.

The two disappear over the riverbank and return with the cast. The crowd gives a standing ovation. They place cans of food at the actors' feet. The crew takes three curtain calls, then gathers the food and loads it onto the raft.

With the crowd still mingling, Lefty fires up the engines. The river is quiet and the current slow. The raft slips away and the crew wanders off to sleep. Lefty goes to the bow to check the running lights. He finds the bosun crying softly. There are no stars out. Just black water and the rumbling diesels.

Lefty takes the bosun in his arms and pats his head. That's how these things find an end, you know, he says. No, the bosun says, I didn't.

Porter Fox writes and teaches in Brooklyn, New York. His fiction and nonfiction have been published in The New York Times Magazine, The Believer, Outside, Narrative, The Literary Review, Northwest Review and Third Coast among others. He was nominated for a 2008 Pushcart Prize and was a finalist for the 2009 Robert Olen Butler Short Story Prize. He recently completed his first collection of stories and is working on a travel narrative set on the coast of Maine. He is a member of the Miss Rockaway Armada and Swimming Cities art collectives who he collaborated with on installations at Mass MoCA, the 2009 Venice Biennale and on the Mississippi and Hudson rivers. For more work, see www.writingofthedisaster.com.