

“X Codes”

By: Arnecia McGlory

Darrien guided the Ford pick-up in silence, calculating the distance of the rubbish on the abandoned street ahead of them. His thoughts filled with memories. Shoulder to shoulder Mardi Gras and festival attendees holding drinks, whistling, mingling, laughing, dancing, partying – enjoying the offerings of pleasure and entertainment. The many women he’d wined and dined. The outings with friends that earned the Vegas-like mantra of what happened on Bourbon Street stayed on Bourbon Street. The first beignet he’d eaten with his grandparents from Café du Monde on the front porch of their home. Powdered sugar sticking to his eight year old button nose. The gentle way in which his grandmother raised his chin and wiped the confectionery crumbs from his face with a napkin moistened by a glob of her spit. Darrien preferred his grandmother’s beignets over Café du Monde’s, but theirs were the next best thing.

“A mandatory evacuation order is hereby called for all of the parish of Orleans. The Superdome will serve as a shelter of last resort.” Mayor Ray Nagin announced the fear-filled morning before the city’s destruction.

In a matter of hours, the city home to his lifetime of memories was ravaged by the angry temperament of Mother Nature. Roaring, raging winds and unrelenting pellets of rain down-pouring and destroying the cityscape. Nineteen hours to depart a lifetime. 1,140 minutes to gather belongings and move with no guarantee the home left behind would still be in existence.

The Army Corp of Engineers designed levees, built upon permeable soil, which lacked the fortitude to withstand the heavy storm surge. As a child Darrien had watched

the scenarios play on PBS and the History Channel broadcasts, prophesizing that if the levees ever broke, New Orleans would become the modern day Atlantis. But no solutions were ever put in place.

Darrien shook his head as the crisp December breeze rolled off Lake Ponchartrain and into the cracked window of the pick-up. Four months post-Katrina and the devastation lingered as if no efforts to restore the less affluent section of the city had begun, let alone considered. Reflecting over how the city once boasted vibrancy only depressed him more. The chilly whispers of what had transpired forced him to break the silence inside the truck.

Darrien never took his chestnut brown eyes off the road when he asked, "A'ight, so who's the best fighter of all time?"

Velch fidgeted in the passenger seat, uncertain of the day ahead. His long, pudgy fingers fiddled with the top of the three layers of clothing he wore. He watched the sky illuminate in shades of orange and pink. The path ahead held a familiarity of a place that once had been home, had served as the well-known stomping grounds of his youth. But now the strewn about pieces of lives mirrored the aftermath of an angry pit-bull that had gotten ahold of a full trash bag and ran rampant down the street, leaving hunks of random home ware here and there, muddling what once was.

The two men drove by the shore of Lake Ponchartrain staring at several boats floating on their sides like schools of dead fish. Cars rested in peace underneath the bridges of the causeways, mold and algae covering the windshields. Dead things wafted in the air. Darrien rolled up his window.

"It's too early for that, bruh," Velch leaned against the window.

“Too early, huh? Man hell naw! You better entertain me. You the reason we late in the first place, and all they had left at the depot was this busted up truck with no radio or damn CD player.” Darrien mashed the accelerator, causing a loud whinny. The hitch jostled the FEMA sponsored trailer attached to it. Some family would have this large white metal unit installed on their property while awaiting repairs to their home.

“Can you drive?”

“I can drive better than you can get somewhere on time.” Darrien straightened the wheel.

“Man whatever. Tell ya old lady stop blowing up my phone at two and three in the morning trying get this good jug and maybe then I can get up on time.” Velch laughed at his comment. A shit eating grin plastered across his face, revealing an open-faced gold tooth.

“Fuck you Velch!” Darrien stomped the brakes, thumping Velch’s head against the window he’d so comfortably rested on.

“Old non-driving ass. Quit playing so damn much.”

“Say somethin’ else about my old lady and you gone get hit in the mouth. Ya heard me?” Darrien’s bulky hand strangled the gray wheel as he pressed the accelerator and steered the truck back into motion.

The streets had to be navigated like an obstacle course – broken glass, uprooted trees, rotting corpses, flipped over cars, toilet seats, and other wreckage cluttered the road.

“So answer the question – best fighter.”

Velch shifted his tall, thin frame in the seat. He was meatier than a beanpole, but a lightweight in comparison to Darrien’s muscular physique. Velch crunched his legs and slid towards the middle, away from anything Darrien could possibly use as a weapon. He took a

deep breath of air, which caused his chest to stick out. He stated, with firm authority,
“Tyson, bruh.”

“Tyson?”

“You heard me say it.”

“Mike Tyson?”

“Yeah, you want me to be a broken record? I said it once.”

“You fuckin’ crazy! Ain’t no way Mike, ear-biting-cuz-he-gettin’-his-ass-whupped, Tyson is the best fighter.” Darrien took his eyes off the road. He curled his lip and raised an indignant eyebrow.

“You losing all your cool points, and the day ain’t even started yet. Ali the best fighter hands down.” Darrien slowed the truck and weaved around broken tubs and severed branches.

“I’m not about to deal with your shenanigans for the next twelve hours. It’s cold. We got these trailers to install. And I still ain’t got my first check for this job yet.” Velch folded his arms over his chest.

“My check ain’t came either, but they said next week fa sho.”

“Oh okay. Tell me something. Shit, it’s already been three weeks. I don’t work for free.” Velch rumbled. His face contorted at the facts.

“But on another note, whatever happened to that broad I put you on? Melanie’s friend.” Darrien grinned. Melanie had had some lovely lady lumps.

“Oh man, I thought I told you about Tiana.” Velch perched on the edge of his seat.

“Nope, you ain’t told me nothing.”

“Bruh, that girl was a freak,” Velch rubbed his palms together and continued, “Man, so check it. I took her to this club out in Baton Rouge. I don’t even remember the name of it, but it was packed with a bunch of fine broads too. Then we went to the Waffle House.”

“The Waffle House?” Darrien chided incredulously.

“That’s how she played her hand. I wasn’t coming off no real cash. Shit, times is hard. So anyway, she was wearing this tight pink dress, like it was spray-painted on her or something. It was cut low in the front. Titties spilling all out like, ‘come get me.’ It was short too. I could see upper thigh. Mmmh,” Velch licked his lips at the mental picture. “Just as thick and toned as she wanna be. Like she ran track or something. And mami had an ass you could sit a drank on. Hell, a whole bar.”

The two men pounded fists and shared a laugh. “I’m telling you I know beaucoup dudes be trying to step to her. But I ain’t let that phase me.”

“Oh yeah?” Darrien laughed and shook his head, eyes ever present on the chaotic stretch of road ahead.

“Not at all,” Velch chuckled then continued, “So she was already kinda drunk from the club. And you know how I roll.” Velch brought both hands to his chest. “I had my flask on me,” he then lifted his left hand and clutched an invisible container.

“She was like pour some in my coke. So I did. The conversation was flowing. We laughing and joking, just having a good time. Then she slid closer to me in the booth. She started massaging my leg under the table and kissed my neck. By then I’m hyped. So I say let’s just get this food to go and head back to the house. She was like cool.”

“Hey, you see this shit?” Velch shifted his gaze to the road to see what had caught Darrien’s attention. Darrien pressed the brakes evenly before they got too close. In the

middle of Robert E. Lee Blvd laid a yacht, starboard side up. The once vibrant white color had been tainted and speckled an algae rich green.

“That’s a big ass boat.”

“Hell yeah.” Darrien shifted the truck into park and got out to take a picture with his Razr. He flipped the phone open as the rubber soles of his anti-shock boots crunched against the pavement with each step.

Velch grabbed the receiver to radio in the out-of-water whale of a ship.

Darrien held up his device, steadied his thumb over the middle button, and snapped about seven pictures vertically. Then he turned it to the side.

“So you’re a photographer now?” Velch called from the passenger side of the vehicle. He stood with the door ajar watching Darrien. The vessel, a luxury resort on the water, catered to the famous and well-to-do. Black script read *Screaming Nauti*.

The boat had been the talk amongst frequent partiers. Word of mouth travelled fast about how wild the activities were. No cameras of any sort and no panties either. The owner bragged that a single trip on the ship would seal the deal for any lonely person.

Darrien responded to Velch with a raised middle finger. “I betcha the dude this belonged to never thought his boat would literally see land like this.”

“Not at all. I swear we see some of the craziest shit around here,” Velch said as he rubbed his lightly stubbled chin, the after-five shadow ever apparent against his butterscotch complexion. The two got back into the truck.

“Yeah we do. Yeah we do.”

The two were silent for a moment as Darrien shifted the truck into drive and steered around the wreckage. Velch massaged his temples as he watched the boat fade away in the oversized, side view mirror.

“How long do you think it’s going to take to get everything back to how it was?”
Velch’s eyes widened, exposing his inner calamity. He picked at his clothing again, this time noticing a stain on his left pant leg. He opened the glove box in search of a napkin.

Darrien turned into a neighborhood, driving slowly past houses in varied states of decomposition. Water stains against the sides of the structure, lingering branches, slithering snakes, broken windows. But the design common to each of the homes was the spray painted crosses on the front. The men stared at the X codes. In their thirty minute orientation for the FEMA relief project, they were given a quick overview of what they meant.

The x code, sometimes inside a circle, was an indicator that the home had been checked for survivors. The general public referred to them as Katrina Crosses. The top part of the X contained a number dash another number which represented the date the home was checked. The number below the X told how many dead were found. The left of the X contained numbers and letters for the teams that checked the homes. The quadrant to the right contained letters NE for Not Entered or some other shorthand note.

Some houses had multiple X’s in black, red, and blue. The varied water lines gave an onlooker the sense of how long it took for the water to recede before the actual structure could be properly searched. The explanations created ranging degrees of discomfort amongst the potential workers. Darrien and Velch had locked eyes from across the

crowded room and shook their heads as the orientation leader clicked through the montage of death projected on the screen.

“Shhh. Man. With our uncoordinated government and the amount of money it’s gone take...we’ll be lucky if it ever gets back to how it was.” Darrien stared resolutely at the chaos around them. Uprooted palm trees and broken maples. Crushed turtle shells and large trails of fire ants along the roads and homes.

“But finish your story though,” Darrien shifted the subject not wanting to be broken by the desolate scene.

“So here’s the fucked up part. We get back to the house,” Velch leaned in, as if mesmerized by her tits spilling out of that tight dress again, moving his hands with each word, like he was auditioning to be in a hip-hop video. Velch’s lip curled in anger as Darrien glanced over to see his decaying excitement.

“Now all night she’s been dropping hints about what she’s gonna do to me.” Velch slapped the air with his hand gestures.

“Saying she can suck a grape through a straw. A fuckin’ straw, bruh!”

“Man, hell no,” Darrien chimed in disbelief.

“I’m telling you. When we were in the club, she started sucking her drink and making her cheeks go in like a fish. I was excited then, but I had to play my cool. You know I love a head monster. She looked like a fucking vacuum or something was in her cheeks.”

Darrien erupted in laughter as they pounded fists again. “Come on now.”

“So I’m gunning it back to my house, hoping the police don’t catch me. She starts rubbing on the front my pants. I tell her wait till we get to the house.”

Darrien guffawed and turned left at the next stop sign. He double-checked the address on the work order to make sure they were headed to the right place to deliver the trailer.

“I finally pulled up to the house. I’m fighting to get the key in the lock because she started rubbing on the front of my jeans again. She like oh youse a big boy. She giggling and shit. As soon as I get the door open and we walk inside, she drops to her knees, pulls my trunk out and starts rocking. We don’t make it past the foyer.”

“Damn, it was like that?” Darrien’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Yup! She still had her dress on. She was going to work, titties bouncing like crazy.” Velch moved his hands to his chest and extended them a good distance out, dancing in his seat to emphasize how they jiggled.

“Then she started taking a little more down at a time like she was trying to deep throat it.” Velch moved his large hand back and forth like he was caressing her head and guiding it in a slow dribble.

“Next thing I know, this bitch throws up all over me!” Velch threw his hands in the air, crossing them at the forearms to ward off further disaster.

Darrien erupted in laughter and steadied the truck.

“That crap was all over her. All over the floor.”

“Hell no! Are you fucking serious?”

“D, man, if I’m lying, I’m flying, and I know you don’t see wings on me. It was orange and yellow and brown vomit all over everything.”

“Brown?” Darrien looked puzzled.

“Must have been the Jack and coke. And the smell bruh,” Velch flinched. His upper lip curved and covered his nostrils. He continued, “I almost threw up my damn self after that.”

Darrien chuckled hard and swerved lightly. “So what happened next?”

“I drug her to the shower and turned the water on. She was like 'I'm so sorry; don't be mad at me.' I was speechless.” Velch shook his head.

“I gave her some of my old clothes and dropped her off at home. I had to call some old hype to finish me off.” He propped his right arm against the window and leaned his head in his hand.

“So you got all in her belly huh?” Darrien cracked into laughter again.

“Man, I am done messing with broads that can't hold they damn liquor.” Velch shook his head in disgust.

“Too bad fixing all of this,” Darrien waved his pointer finger in the air, “isn't as easy as mopping up a Technicolor yawn.” He chuckled again and brought the truck to a halt. They'd reached their destination.

Both men exited the truck, sliding on their work gloves. Velch walked over to the trailer and began unhitching it. Darrien knocked on the door of the home while clutching a clipboard under his left arm. He informed a petite, older woman they were there installing her trailer. The woman had grime and dust on her face. She'd been sorting through the remains of her belongings. Two teenagers crowded behind the woman at the door as Darrien held the clipboard for the woman to sign for receipt of the trailer and advised that she would have to sign again once the installation was completed.

The men worked calmly as the hours quickly rolled by. They spoke not one word to each other, in sync with the process of mounting and leveling the trailer. They mostly made

eye contact and used hand signals to coordinate next steps. They passed a cordless power drill back and forth, tightening the posts for setup.

Velch grabbed the spirit level. He walked around the inside of the trailer watching the bubble in the yellow fluid balance inside of two black lines. Darrien followed behind ensuring the plumbing and electrical fixtures were connected and functional after Velch gave him a thumbs up.

With a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle of antiseptic, the two worked monotonously, sanitizing the trailer, removing foreign pathogens in preparation for the displaced family to occupy this makeshift home. Velch returned to the truck while Darrien had the woman sign the paperwork again. Darrien then handed her a yellow carbon copy for her receipt. The woman hugged Darrien and handed him two bottles of water.

“Thank you very much,” she said as tears trailed down her face. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. The kids held the same tattered expression.

“I just don’t know how we’re going to...without...” her voice trailed off as the woman broke down in front of Darrien. He placed a gentle hand over hers.

“He was right there when the water came in. He saved me. I grabbed hold of the bannister as he gripped the boys. The water just kept gushing in. Once the boys wrapped their arms around the bannister too, the water snatched him back. I reached for him with my other arm. Nothing was holding him more than his sure will. He trudged forward, water up to his waist. But the cur-current was too strong,” she fell to her knees in a series of heaving sobs. The taller of the two teens rushed over to his mother’s side. The other froze in place, unsure of what to do. Darrien and the tall boy helped the woman to her feet and

into a lawn chair. Her petite frame leaned against the two men for support. A heartfelt tear escaped Darrien's eye.

Silence overtook the trio. The smaller teen broke his pose and sat at his mother's feet while the older boy walked away to get a bottle of water.

"I couldn't hold on to him," the woman whispered. "The current ripped twenty-seven years of marriage apart, stole the love of my life, the father of my two precious children." She rubbed the top of the young boy's head. The oldest boy untwisted the thin cap on the water and passed it to his mother. Darrien placed his hand on the woman's shoulder. Without a doubt she was Creole. Her light complexion flushed crimson. As her chest heaved with the realization, "I'm a single parent now. A single parent," Darrien wrapped his arms around her and the children.

"I wanted to swim after him, but letting go meant leaving my babies."

"It's going to be hard, but you guys still have each other and that's what you have to focus on," Darrien offered. The family sobbed in silence. The woman nodded.

Once back in the pickup, Darrien revved the engine and headed out of the neighborhood. He passed a bottle of water to Velch. "What took so long?" Velch asked.

"Her husband is one of the missing. They were separated when the levees broke and he was swept away," Darrien repeated mechanically, his eyes still watery. He wondered what he would have done if fate placed him in the same position, having the person he thought he would spend forever with torn from his arms as he and their children stared in disbelief. Would he be able to go on?

In a sense, he was glad his parents had the means to get to Lake Charles to stay with friends, ecstatic that he could still see their faces. It was a selfish thought. He knew many

were not so fortunate. His neighborhood alone had people dispersed, dead, and unaccounted for. He shook his head.

“Damn,” Velch said.

Darrien navigated the truck to the gas station then back to the depot to pick up the next trailer. “We have two more to setup today,” he said regaining what was left of his composure.

“That’s a lot and a little. A lot and a little.” Velch took a sip of water and stared at the many destroyed homes as they rolled by, wondering how things would all come back together.

“So I’d like to change my answer,” Velch said, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Oh yeah?” Darrien cleared his throat. “Who you got now? I already gave you the right answer anyway.”

“George Foreman,” Velch grinned. Darrien shook his head and furrowed his brow.

“Hear me out though. If a man can make a burger taste like it came off the pit without all the work, he had to be the champ,” Velch defended his position.

Darrien laughed, “I don’t even know why I let your fool ass continue this conversation. Ali knocked Foreman out.”

Velch chided, “Ali can’t make no burger.”

Darrien shook his head, “I’m not even gone respond to that.” The two laughed and headed off to the next address, restoring their city one trailer at a time.