

The Yellow House
By Sarah M. Broom

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This is more than the story of a life. More than the story of a family. More than the story of the ravaged wake of hurricane Katrina. And, much more than a house itself. This is Sarah M. Broom's powerful memoir THE YELLOW HOUSE. As you read her flowing thoughts, you will discover not only her intimate relationship with a structure that held her family and friends together but what it came to symbolize to her and her family after it was laid waste post natural disaster. Once tethered to the ground that sustained them, Broom investigated, through extensive research and by interviewing members of her family, what the Yellow house stood for both literally and figuratively.

From the start, the house was sinking in the back. *It needed to be built back up.*

For fifty dollars a load, dump trucks arrived with gravel and rocks and stones. No one was exempt from the work. Mom pushed wheelbarrows back and forth from the front to the back over a temporary bridge made from boards that Simon laid down, her feet and legs muddied. Boy neighbors who saw her said she was a beauty out there, working so hard, inspiring everyone else.

"It was cold," neighbor Walter Davis remembers. "Her nose was running. She would roll up with that barrow, unload that barrow, going back and forth there. My dad and them said, 'Get out there and go help.'" They lent a hand, but she stayed there working, too.

After the family had moved in, Simon Broom planted two cedar trees at the front near to the ditch between the yard and an unpaved Wilson Avenue. The trees, the same height as six-year-old Eddie, were spaced so that you walked between them onto a long dirt pathway leading to the front door. Simon cemented the path, then painted it an ugly taupe more beautiful after it faded.

Ivory Mae made a camellia- and magnolia-filled garden that ran from the front of the house along the side. She planted mimosas—rain trees, they called them, for how they grew pretty pink flowers that fell in such scattered bulk you could sweep them all day and not be done. She planted gladiolas, the way she had seen her mother, Lolo, do. And pink geraniums.

The land did not refuse her advances. She kept going. She laid out a row of shrubbery that ran the entire length of the house, 160 feet. Facing the street, underneath the big front window, she planted cactus trees, as if setting a trap.

Ivory and Simon hung narrow black metal numbers on the front of the house in a crooked vertical line:

4

1

2

1



The screened-in porch existed only briefly, long enough for a few nights out there sipping Old Grand-Dad. Mr. Taylor, an electrician and one of Simon's best friends, was there a lot, smoking his cigars. He was a short wrinkle-faced man, a white version of Sammy Davis Jr. in navy-blue Dickies. Mom would be holding a cigarette, taking puffs from time to time, not even inhaling, the thing burning down to a nub in her hand.

The porch was converted into an extension of the living room, with beautiful French windows that opened out. Mom hung heavy satin curtains that she'd sewn, curtains that she changed out in the winter and spring when the house was remade.

It was beautiful because that was my first house that I actually owned. Everything was new then. The house was my beginnings. I made it new with Simon's help and my own skills. Brand-new furniture, the one time everything was new. And brand-new carpet. Bright yellow carpet of all things. Why in the hell were people with a thousand children getting yellow carpet. They would be pretty, but it would be a lot of work trying to keep them up. When the rugs dirtied, Simon rented a carpet cleaner from K&B drugstore off Chef Menteur.

Mom had already started collecting French provincial-style pieces from Barnett's, *a place that sold real nice furnitures. You put so much money down and you would pay maybe fifty or sixty dollars a month. Every time I paid that off I'd get something else.* The couch was wide with yellow brocade fabric with hints of gold and *the prettiest legs.* Its two matching slipper chairs sat in each corner of the room. *And just like my mother I had that big gold mirror that sit right as soon as you walk in the door.*

You walked in and saw you reflected back.

Karen's baby bed was set up in the living room on the perch, a slightly raised and thus stagelike area where the screened-in porch used to be. Karen, like every child who was born to Ivory and Simon, slept in the baby bed until she was so big the bed broke down. Ivory Mae felt her and Simon's bed in the room next door could become dangerous. *We*

could smother them, you know, if they was sleeping and you were having sex and all.

When people tell you their stories, they can say whatever they want.

When Ivory and Simon were both feeling good, after bourbon and a small party usually, Ivory Mae spoke about buying the yard in between the two houses, the strip of land that still belonged to Della Davis, who paid taxes on it from California. Mom dreamed of converting her narrow house into a double with a porch and a center hall.

I always dreamt I would have this house that was so pretty. It was gonna have a nice front yard, a big backyard. Three bedrooms. A sewing room. I always pictured a front room that had a window with a little seat running across it. I could see myself just sitting up on the couch with my foot up. I was gonna have these pillows at my back. I'm reading a book, just sitting there looking at the rain, at anything. It wasn't a big ole house, just a nice house.

In those years, it seemed Simon was always adding on: to the house and to the family. Not yet with kids, but with dogs. Mostly collies. Beauty was coal black but missing a tail; there were Jack and Butch, *dogs that looked at you like they was old men*. For them, a silver chain-link fence went up, alongside the house in the space between 4121 and Ms. Octavia's house next door.

No one ever saw Simon Broom cry until the first time one of his dogs died. *He'd weep like one of them children had died. Big grown man all tore up and crying like a baby. I'd have to get him right again.* The dogs were buried in the backyard, out by the septic tanks, close to the back property line; on the other side of the fence were cottages full of people living.

Their immediate neighbors, Octavia and Alvin Jarvis, had one daughter, Karen, whom they obsessed over and thus ruined. Karen bore three children: Herman, Rachelle, and Alvin.

Octavia Jarvis was sister to Samuel Davis Sr., who lived in the house next door to them, two houses down from Ivory Mae's new house. When

Samuel Davis and his family moved to Wilson Avenue in the summer of 1963 from a one-bedroom apartment complex with the kitchen and bathroom in the hallway, he and his wife, Mae Margaret Fulbright, already had seven children. Samuel's house was a solid square with slate siding and two doors on the side. It was one big room, formerly part of a military hospital that had been moved to Wilson, but much larger than what they'd had before.

The Davises were also neighbors to Ms. Schmidt, a tall, thin gray-haired white woman who wore thick white cotton socks all the time, for her diabetes. "Ms. Schmidt was uptown," Sam Davis Jr. says. "Her home was uptown. Next to us, she had money."

Her house, a white two-bedroom cottage with a hallway, was separated from the rest of the street by a tall wooden fence that marked a land of no return, especially for boys playing ball. "She took every ball we ever had," my brother Michael says.

"She was just mean to be mean," says Joyce, Sam's sister. "You'd go up on that porch and knock on that door. 'Get off my porch! What you knocking on my door for?' Now once in a while you might catch her in a semi-good mood. That's when she'd finally give you that ball back."

She had two pecan trees, one that sat back by the garage, another closer to the street. She didn't mind the children picking the short, fat pecans that fell near the garage, "You had to work to eat those," Sam Davis remembers. But the ones on the tree closest to the front were the kind you wanted, long and thin and off-limits.

Ms. Schmidt had a garage double the size of her cottage, where she parked her beige early model Ford. As soon as her car turned onto the street from Chef Menteur, she was nearly at her drive. Her universe, therefore, did not consist of much except her house and Mr. Spanata's land, a complex of persimmon groves on two narrow plots, and several houses that faced inward, a small village arranged to mimic his native home in Italy.

up as if a hurricane were coming. Mayor Victor Schiro arrived that afternoon and proclaimed that one had in fact come. The Beatles were, he said, an "English storm." He said, too, that they played music "on a cousinship with jazz, the jumping, danceable historic art form which New Orleans has contributed to world culture," before presenting each member of the group with a key to the city and designating that day, September 16, 1964, Beatles Day.

While Beatlemania erupted just down the road, barely a person on the short end of Wilson Avenue knew it. Around the same time fainting girls were carried off in ambulances, Napoleon Fulbright was jumping down from a freight train that moved along the Louisville and Nashville Railroad tracks at the edge of Wilson, his guitar flung over his shoulder. The older Davis children were running down the block toward the tracks to meet their uncle, Mae Margaret Davis's brother, joined along the way by Michael, Eddie, Darryl, and a tottering Carl, all of them yelling "NAPOLEON!"

"We'd be so happy when he came," Michael says.

"CALDONIA! CALDONIA! What makes your big head so hard!" Napoleon Fulbright, who also went by the name Moti, sang his favorite tune that night, lit by campfire in the Davises' yard, his shadow flitting around the dark block. Napoleon was a man caught in a loop: either crying and singing or singing and crying, arriving in a town or leaving for elsewhere.

He was a hobo and a wino if you were judging by looks, a master carpenter and railroad man by trade. During his stays, he picked up work around town, taught Walter and Sam carpentry, and did renovations around his sister Mae Margaret's house. She'd want a hall here, a wall there.

He cried, the stories go, because he'd gotten involved in the occult and had tried to put a hex on someone, but that backfired, didn't go where it was supposed to, making Napoleon a man forever unseated. From that point on, it is said, he couldn't abide any one place for too long.

The mobile homes outnumbered the houses on the short end of Wilson, but the houses pulled rank. Ours was directly across from Oak Haven's horseshoe drive, paved with broken clamshells that stabbed bare feet. My

brothers, led by Michael, played a game of running their bicycles as fast as they could through the U-shaped drive, white tenants yelling out, "Nigger" as they went. The word seemed extended, floating like a blimp; you could still hear it as you flew out of there and back across the street to the side where you belonged.

The houses were ordered inside and out by the standards of the times and so were the children. The adults wore titles in front their names—Miss, Mrs., Mr., Sir, Ma'am. No one knows what would have happened if you failed to address an adult in that way, because it never happened. Children belonged to each other but not to themselves. The street seemed to know when someone deserved chastisement and any parent could oblige. When one did, everything held quiet for a time.

From the time they were small boys, Michael and Darryl went around cursing. When this memory is revived today everyone laughs because, of course. When Simon Broom could no longer stand it, he decided Michael, as the older of the two, needed a spanking.

Go cut a switch.

Michael returned dangling a substandard twig.

"Mr. Simon went out there and cut a branch off a tree and beat that negro with it," Sam Davis Jr. recalls now. "What tripped me out, it wasn't that he got beat with a switch, this dude got beat with a branch."

Everyone knew, too, the ferocity of Mr. Samuel, Sam and Walter's dad. He had a reputation for slowly cueing up his punishments. He'd lean the weight of himself to one side of the doorsill and start to talking about what the Bible said.

"Honor your father and mother . . ." Mr. Samuel always began.

"I hate to do this to you, son. I really do.

"So that your days may be long . . .

"But after what you did. It just can't be avoided.

"So that all may be well with you . . ."

It took him a long time to come round to the action. "When Dad whupped, he whupped the whole house, he whupped everything in the house," says his son Walter Davis now.

The older children lorded over the younger. Sam and Walter Davis were the elder by three and four years over Eddie and Michael.

Sam often designed entire summer days, marching the Davis and Broom boys in single file like young army recruits all the way down the Old Road where Mount Pilgrim Church was, chanting military cadences as they went. Naturally, anyone who got out of line would be disciplined.

Along the way, the smaller boys fished for crawfish in the ditches along Old Gentilly Road where, if you weren't careful, one of your car tires might find itself. They'd drop nets into the ditch and pull up buckets and buckets of crawfish for boiling.

Michael and Darryl would often break off along with JoJo, the Davises' youngest boy, to climb over the railroad tracks into the woods where they wandered for hours, fishing and falling into bodies of water formed in the last rains. On the way back, they picked blueberries along the train tracks.

There were ditches everywhere you looked. "It was like we were the rural part of New Orleans," Walter Davis said. One fall, at the start of third grade, his teacher at his black elementary school, McDonogh 40, asked how many students had left town. One kid had gone to Los Angeles, another to Chicago. Walter raised his hand and said he'd traveled to Gentilly, referring to his family's move to Wilson Avenue. "Boy, I said if anybody left town," the teacher said.

"I'm sitting there thinking, 'We didn't leave town?'" says Walter now. "That's when I found out that the East was part of New Orleans."

The women stayed home while the men and boys worked, except for Mae Margaret, who worked small jobs without her husband, Samuel Davis, knowing, beating it back to home before him, ruffling her hair and slipping into a frock. Mr. Samuel worked close to the Industrial Canal at American Marine Shipyard, which in 1967 built the largest aluminum oceangoing commercial ship in world history. Two hundred twenty-six feet at a cost of \$1.6 million, but still, Samuel Davis never earned enough to own a car. When he died it was on the job, pumping out a barge.

Simon Broom had begun his work at NASA for the contractor Mason-Rust as a groundskeeper and maintenance man, which meant he tended the plant's 832 acres, painting, grass cutting, and repairing whatever needed it. His niece Geneva, the daughter of his sister Corrine, worked at NASA, too, but in a lab. He could see her through the narrow window in the lab door wearing a white hazmat suit.

The older boys mimicked the men and found work on the short end of the street or in its vicinity.

Walter and Sam had as some of their hustles cutting grass, landscape design, and washing the trailers in Oak Haven, many of which, unlike the houses, had air-conditioning so that "when you opened the door that cold air would run out of there." Walter knew because he'd gotten familiar; his employers would offer him Coca-Cola in six-ounce glass bottles. In time, he'd also clean the trailers' insides, which is how he worked a vacuum for the first time. One tenant offered him corned beef with chowchow relish. He was thinking he had it going on and that life couldn't get better.

Sam Davis was on the way to Spee-D Super Market on Chef Menteur one day when a Gypsy family who were living across the highway on Chef next to a greenhouse stopped him. "They asked me to get something from the store for them. That was gonna be a nickel or a dime. I said, 'Yeah, I'll get it.' They said, 'You wanna make some more?'" They had me cut the grass. Said, 'You wanna make some more money?' I said, 'Yeah!' They had a chicken out there in the yard, they had a goose out there in the yard, they had a lamb out there in the yard. Look, everything that was in the yard died that day. They wanted me to kill it. Said, 'Grab the chicken, kill the chicken.' I tried. I was running around after that chicken. I did want to catch the chicken. I could not catch that chicken. Old lady ran over there, I don't know how she got that chicken, grabbed that bad boy, swung it up, broke its neck, came down with it, took a hatchet, chop. This is all one move, martial arts stuff. I said, 'I want my money.' Well here's how they paid me. All that stuff was walkin' round out there in the yard, they gave me a big ole plate of all that stuff. That's how they paid a brother. I went home. I was mad. I gave that plate to my mom. She

didn't have no problem with all that stuff dyin'. She was from the country. Mama tore that up."

This story sounds outrageous but around the same time an advertisement appeared in the *Times-Picayune's* Lost section: "ANYONE knowing the whereabouts of either Gypsy or Spanish people with a large tan-and-white collie, please call WH 5-3775."

The first year they lived in the not-yet-yellow house, Simon and Ivory Mae threw parties in the backyard for every holiday or birthday, or any other excuse. The liquor was stocked and stored in the shed at the back of the property. Simon would spend the entire morning cutting the grass, setting up tables and chairs. His friends from NASA would come and so would members of the various social and pleasure clubs to which he and Ivory belonged. All of the neighbors knew to appear.

Ivory Mae loved entertaining. She prepared the food herself: stuffed eggs, potato salad, and fried catfish. Sometimes, she pulled vegetables from her small garden. They had begun growing tomatoes and okra on the land.

Friday was a recurring holiday, too: Mom would either take the bus to meet Simon at Schwegmann's Super Market across the Danziger Bridge on Gentilly Road, or he'd come to the house to retrieve her. They dressed nice to go to the store because chances are you'd run into people you knew. Inside, they'd start off holding hands, Simon's entire salary balled up in his pocket. One full basket led easily to two. Simon knew everyone—if he didn't know them he would soon—and was always stopped in the aisle having conversations. *The ice cream and thing be melting in the cart he so busy talking.*

Simon Broom built a wooden bridge wide enough for the car tires to roll over the ditch into the land close to the side door of the house where the children would run out and unload the bags.

From time to time, Simon set up a projector in the backyard, turning Fridays into movie night for anyone who wanted to come watch Hollywood fantasies—horror like *The Last Man on Earth*, which the children loved, and *Mary Poppins*—the side of the house becoming, for a night, the greatest movie screen.

VI

Betsy

"*Book*," says Eddie. "It was like a movie, OK?" He was six then.

"It was pitch-black, nighttime," says Deborah, who was eleven.

Nineteen sixty-five. Tail end of a notably mild hurricane season. It rained so hard the yards between the houses flooded—standing water for three days—but that was normal. This mid-September storm was erratic, busybodied; it seemed not to be able to make up its mind on where to go. "Wandering Hurricane Betsy, large and tempestuous," the newspapers said.

The house was full of babies. Karen was not yet one; that birthday was two weeks away. Carl had just turned two. Michael was five. Darryl, four. Valeria, eight.

Simon had been called by NASA to join the emergency crew piling sandbags, but that was just in case. He expected to get right back. And anyway, Uncle Joe was staying at the house then. He was in between loves. No one knew the details, but some woman had put him out, or he had left some woman. Neither scenario was unusual for him.

"We all went to bed," says Deborah.

Last she knew, the hurricane had turned, was headed to coastal Florida.