



The three sisters in the Baton Rouge shelter after Katrina—Marianne, Suzie and Diane.

Katrina's Three Sisters

BY DENNY TAYLOR / PHOTOGRAPHY BY TARO YAMASAKI

Suzie is sitting in her wheelchair in the corner of the River Center Shelter in Baton Rouge. It's five weeks after Katrina and she is still there. "She's had to take her legs off," Diane tells me. "She has lesions on her stumps and they are bleeding."

"They're bleeding a lot," Suzie says. "They keep bleeding."

I met Suzie and her sisters one week after Katrina. Their house was in New Orleans Parish in the section known as Lakeview. "Ground zero," Marianne had called it. Suzie was sitting, as she is now, in her wheelchair in the corner with her two sisters, Diane and Marianne. She was so thin you could almost see through her. Four weeks later, the translucent whiteness of her skin is fading away. Her face is ashen and she looks so malnourished I'm visibly shaken. Diane and Marianne are looking at me. They are both haggard and there are dark circles beneath their eyes.

"You came back," Diane says, trying to smile.

"We're still waiting," Marianne tells me.

"I was hoping you wouldn't be here," I tell them, smiling at Suzie.

There are fewer people in the shelter now, approximately 1,000. When it first opened there were 4,500. It was a different place then. Bodies everywhere. A moving sea of cots. Everyone in motion. Even under blankets evacuees seemed to be twisting and turning, writhing in misery with Katrina. The shelter was filled with people desperately trying to go places, out of the auditorium where everyone was living, up the broken escalator to join the long lines at FEMA, and past the military checkpoints guarded by soldiers with M-16's if they wanted to enter or leave the shelter. Getting back in was harder than getting out. Tagged evacuees passed through the metal detector, sometimes searched and often questioned.

In the entrance hall a sign "Out Process Here!" was taped to a table and "Directions to the Baton Rouge Bus Terminal" taped to a wall. There was talk of checks and help from the government but no one I met had been told they would receive any money. Everyone was looking for someone. There were walls filled with hundreds of messages on little cut up pieces of paper. I've left out last names and telephone numbers but the first names are real and so are the messages.

"Raymond, age 56. Urgent. Call Christina. Christina wants to know where is Denita?"

"Sadie, 90 years. New Orleans. Please call Elmore."

"Hilder, age 89. Please call Lasandra of Pelugerville, Texas. Will pick you up."

"Aldolfo. Age 79. New Orleans. Please call Harry. Looking for you!"

"James. Please call Dominique. Your brother is at the Dallas Convention Center."

"Jaimia. Call Mertle. Are you with your family? Please call. I'm in Virginia. Is your brother OK?"

Evacuees stood in front of the wall of messages looking for loved ones or the names of someone that they knew or just reading them and paying their respects.

CNN had a suite upstairs and so did FOX. In the entrance hall evacuees, were being interviewed by reporters, with cameras tight to their faces, and microphones so large they could pick up every sigh, every cry, even the slightest intake of breath by those who whispered stories of what happened to them when Katrina struck.

At that time, Red Cross volunteers were in the area where the evacuees were and still are sleeping to stop the reporters and camera crews from pursuing them, as the cable news channels vied for the most sensational of sensational stories for their round-the-clock coverage of the disaster.

"They get in," one worn out, red-eyed volunteer had told me. "They want stories of people dying in attics."

Now the camera crews have moved on. The story of why evacuees are still living in the shelter five weeks after Katrina is of no interest to them, but the story of the three sisters has consequences for everyone who lives in America.

Now, the huge glass entrance hall in the shelter looks like an abandoned movie set. The tables with donated books and

toys for children have gone. The piles of used clothes that nobody really wanted have disappeared. The notices of shelter rules and regulations and bus routes out of Baton Rouge that were taped up have disappeared.

The walls that were filled with messages about missing people are now bare, even though there are still more than 1,000 people living in the shelter, and many of them have lost contact with their families and friends. I wonder if Christina found Denita or if Sadie called Elmore. Sadie's street address was in the Ninth Ward which doesn't exist anymore. I hope Elmore found her. Will we ever know? Is there any other re-



The three sisters' house in Lakeview, New Orleans Parish, c. late 1970s or early 1980s. Snapshots from the family album survived Katrina's flooding.



The sisters' house one year after Katrina.

cord of their search except on those cut-up pieces of paper? Do we care that we don't know?

When I go back five weeks after the shelter opened a grim-faced soldier tells me he's had enough. Only the old and the very young, the sick and the very frail are left in the shelter,

and checking their tags and searching them seems to serve very little purpose other than to remind us how close the shelter is to being a detention center.

A Red Cross volunteer says she is ready to go home. Tired and on edge, the volunteers are no longer first responders. There's a difference between providing emergency aid and long-term care. In the beginning, they were creating the rules. Now they are trying to follow them. Operations, logistics, facility administration, registration, transportation and relocation, missing persons and food services, the procedures that were created three weeks ago now seem incomprehensible.

Some of the volunteers cover their Red Cross badges when they speak. One volunteer says working in the shelter is different than she expected it would be. In a low voice, hand over badge, she says, "There is so much more we could do to help them."

I tell Diane, Marianne and Suzie that I have brought a friend to meet them. I explain that Taro Yamasaki is a photographer and that because he has his cameras with him the Red Cross would not let him come in. Photographers are not allowed into the area where families are living, and it's difficult to get permission.

"Maybe tomorrow," I say. "Do you need anything?"

There's an uncomfortable moment as Diane and Marianne look at each other. "Diapers," Diane says. "We need diapers for Suzie and Marianne."

"OK," I say.

"It's a long way to the bathroom," Marianne tells me, then she shrugs, "I'm getting old."

"What kind?" I ask.

"Suzie needs ones with tabs," Diane explains. She nods her head at Marianne, "She wears pull ups."

"Do you need anything else?" I ask.

"Can't think of anything," Diane says. Looking around at their beds and boxes.

It's late and I don't stay long. Outside it's growing dark and Taro is waiting. I try to tell him about Suzie, how sick and emaciated she is, how thin her sisters have become, and how desperate and scared they look. I tell him about the conditions in which people are living. "It's worse than a refugee camp," I say, thinking of the camps I have visited and the one in which I stayed. "No one should have to live the way they are living."

Taro tells me he has been told to come back tomorrow and he will be allowed to take photos of residents in the shelter if they give permission. But the following morning he receives a call. The media liaison for the Red Cross has looked at his Web site and she tells him he will need clearance from Washington before he can take photographs in the shelter.

"Washington?" I say to Taro. "Why would you need permission from Washington?"

Privacy is a real issue, especially after CNN and FOX ran amok with their cameras when the shelter first opened. But now? Now? Is that really the issue? What about censorship? The military has such a large presence in the shelter but if close ups of evacuees are the only photos allowed no photographs can be taken of them.

We wait, Taro backing up his photos on multiple hard drives while I download my audio recordings and catch up with my notes. I try to resist thinking of the River Center Shelter as a high security installation even though there are road blocks and a military convoy parked outside. It's not supposed to be like this, not here in America.

The telephone rings early in the afternoon. Taro's in. He will be allowed to take photos for thirty minutes, but only close ups of the evacuees and then only if they give him permission. We hurry out and pick up some diapers on the way.

When we get to the River Center, Terry, a Red Cross volunteer, is assigned to Taro. Terry is an actor who works as a paralegal in New York. I am wearing the Red Cross badge I was given when I visited the shelter just after Katrina. At the military checkpoint a soldier looks at it as I put my notebook and audio recorder on the table. I follow up with the four bags of diapers which, I think to myself, give me a different kind of protection than that for which they are intended. Then Taro begins to take everything out of his many pockets and the table fills up with his cameras and lenses and other photographic equipment.

"See you in a minute," I tell him, as I pass through the metal detector.

Inside I walk past the rows of cots. The lights are on and the loudspeaker is blaring. The lights never go out and announcements are made throughout the night. Even so there is a hush, no laughter, no loud conversations. In the shelter life as we know it does not exist. People only go through the motions of living. There are soldiers on patrol in battle fatigues where families are sleeping.

The sisters are not there. Their beds are carefully made and their belongings neatly arranged. I put the diapers on the floor between their beds and ask the woman sitting on the next bed if she knows where they are. The woman's name is Sherry and she is from the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. She tells me the sisters are in the bathroom and that they will be gone for hours.

"Sometimes they're in there for three or four hours," she says.

I talk with Sherry for a while. She is in the shelter on her own and she has lost touch with her family after the hurricane. She says she was rescued by a neighbor and her brother, and that she was flown to River Center by helicopter.

"The man upstairs came and got me," she explains. "The steps were away from the house so the foundation had moved. The back shed, that was gone. There was no more shed. I couldn't get my clothes because the water was in the house but I made it to get my medicine."

"They didn't want my feet to touch the water so they picked me up and put me in a canoe," Sherry tells me. "Him and my cousin Danny was by the side of the canoe in all that nasty water. They took me to the airport in a helicopter and they brought me here. I haven't got no answer from FEMA yet."

Taro arrives with Terry and I introduce him to Sherry. He talks to her for a few moments and then asks if he can take her picture. It is easy for Taro to get lost in his photographs and I am worried about the time. He has been given a "long" half

hour but it's still a problem. We want to spend time with other residents in the shelter but Taro also wants to meet Marianne, Diane and Suzie.

"I'd better go and see if I can find them," I tell him. "Can we leave and come back if I can't?" I ask Terry.

Terry agrees. The women's toilets are between the food distribution center and the medical unit on the opposite side of the shelter. I get a bag of diapers and the three of us head back towards the entrance and Taro and Terry wait for me there.

The toilets are similar to those at any airport, rows of stalls, rows of wash basins, bright lights, big mirrors, public, not private. Two women are standing talking in the entrance. Inside there are more women in front of the sinks and some standing by the stalls. One woman is leaning on the door of a stall, her eyes are closed and she is holding her stomach. Two women are with her and seem to be taking care of her. Someone is coughing, deep and bronchial, then spitting. A woman is cleaning and there is a strong smell of disinfectant.

I see Diane standing in the entrance to the handicapped stall. The door is ajar and Suzie is in her wheelchair inside. I smile at her but try not to invade the only private space Suzie has in the shelter. Diane looks at the bag of diapers and she says they are the right ones. I tell her that Taro has been allowed to visit the shelter. She asks if we can come back to see them because Suzie will be in the toilet stall for at least another hour. I have watched Suzie wash her hands. Slowly and methodically she cleans each finger with water soaked kitchen towels. Diane wets the towels and gives them to her. She inspects each finger before cleaning another and when she has finished she starts cleaning her fingers again, one finger after another. I understand how such complicated ablutions in a public toilet can take forever.

I tell Diane we'll come back later and quickly find Taro. We decide to leave. Terry says she will meet us in the entrance to the shelter in about an hour. Outside I feel an odd sense of liberation. How does it go? Give me liberty? And liberty and justice for all? Well not all. Maybe not at all. Over gumbo and a sandwich we discuss what we will do when we go back.

We are concerned that Taro will only have thirty minutes. My Red Cross volunteer status from my first visit means I can go in unaccompanied and stay. We decide that I will go in while the soldiers search Taro's camera equipment. If the sisters are not there I will talk with other residents and try to arrange for Taro to start taking photographs as soon as he arrives. We are interested in learning more about what's happening to families with children, but that's another story.

When I go back in the sisters are not there and I start talking with parents and their children, grandparents and grandchildren. I speak with a mother of a three year old who is pregnant and close to giving birth, and to a grandmother in a wheelchair who needs oxygen to breath and whose granddaughter has cerebral palsy and is also in a wheelchair.

Taro arrives with Terry and I introduce him to the families who have been talking with me. I have listened to them and audio recorded their stories. Working with families in this way as an ethnographer is always intense. It's a privilege when they share their lives with me. When I leave I try to stay

in touch, share what I write and help anyway I can. I have images as well as words that I carry with me but when Taro takes photos I see them a little differently. Their stories are on their faces in the way they look into his camera. He talks with



Suzie at 13 or 14.



Suzie at about 16

them as he takes their photos, speaks to them by name, and then, for a moment, a brief and fleeting moment, they share with him their hopelessness and helplessness, and their anger, grief, and pain. But in this moment of absolute wretchedness they also share their resilience and determination, their passion for life and, most visible of all emotions, their deep love for their children and grandchildren.

In the corner Suzie, Diane and Marianne are back and I hurry over to greet them. Time is running out. It's almost six o'clock and Taro has been here a lot longer than he was supposed to be. The sisters have been watching him and they smile as he comes over to meet them. They tell him it's okay

to photograph them and he begins taking photos. I stand with Terry and watch, conscious of the connection he makes and of how seriously Suzie, Diane and Marianne take this opportunity to record what is happening to them.

On the other side of the shelter lines are forming and people are collecting boxed dinners. Every so often Marianne looks over at the lines before concentrating again on Taro's picture taking. Suzie is turned in her wheelchair and she stares at the camera motionless and with silent intensity. Somehow she manages to gather up all her strength to portray the indignity she feels at being in the shelter, but she also manages to share something special from deep inside herself.

Taro takes photo after photo unaware of time or the dinner line. Marianne glances across the shelter and reluctantly I interrupt the process to ask her if she needs to get their dinners. Marianne says they will stop giving them out soon and that she usually has to go through the line twice because they will not let her take more than two dinners. She has to go back for the third and she sometimes doesn't get back in time to get one.

"I better go," Marianne says, "before they close the line."

Taro stops taking pictures and I go with Marianne. She has difficulty walking and as she hobbles along she tells me she is having trouble with her legs, especially her hip joints and knees which have started hurting. On the way we talk about what they are going to do.

"We're going to have to try to make a decision," Marianne says.

"Are there options?" I ask. "Do you know what your options are?"

"We can get a grant but it's not enough to repair the old house," Marianne tells me. "I don't know what we are going to do."

The food distribution is about to close. There are only three people in front of us. Marianne is given two dinners and I say she needs three and I will carry one. On the way back I open the box.

"Lima beans?" I ask, not sure.

"Lima beans," Marianne says. "So we have to do something."

"Lima beans, white rice and white bread," I say. "Can Suzie eat this?"

"I've got some carrots," Marianne says, shaking her head in answer to my question. "I can give her a can of carrots and I think we've got something else."

"How often does this happen?" I ask.

"It's like this everyday," Marianne tells me. "At lunch we had hot dogs and she can't eat those."

"What happens if she eats lima beans?"

"Gastric disturbances," Marianne says. "They know she's got Crohn's."

When we get back to the sister's corner Taro offers to run out and get some food for Suzie, but Diane is already looking in one of their bags for the can of carrots. I speak with Terry about the problem. I tell her this is a medical problem, Suzie has Crohn's and cannot eat the food.

"She is malnourished," I tell her. "She's wasting away."

"I'll check into it," Terry says. "It's not my department but I'll check it no matter what."

I decide to go to the medical center and Taro and Terry accompany me. We walk around the edge rather than between the beds and pass the National Guard outpost halfway around the shelter. I nod and walk on thinking that this might not be the kind of rapid deployment of the armed forces that they had in mind when they signed on.

The medical unit is in the corner diagonally opposite where the sisters are living. There are seats and a table. Inside the room behind the table the medical records and supplies are kept. I speak with a paramedic in a blue shirt who tells me to talk to the dietician. I tell her this is a medical problem and that I want to speak with a doctor. She says there are no doctors in the shelter.

"Who's in charge?" I ask.

She gets up and goes into the back room.

Terry says Taro has to leave.

"I'll wait outside," he tells me, knowing that I won't leave without speaking with someone who can help Suzie.

Eventually a Red Cross volunteer comes out and speaks with me. She tells me that there are no doctors at the shelter and that the medical center is closed. She is also about to leave.

"We are trying to help," she tells me in response to my refusal to leave. Then, when it is clear that I am not going anywhere she invites me into the back room. To break the tension I ask her where she is from. She tells me and I tell her I used to live in the same part of the country. She says her best friends live in the same place and mentions them by name.

"I wrote a book about their son," I tell her, and we start talking about our mutual friends.

She goes over to where the medical records are kept and gets Suzie's folder. There is one piece of paper inside it with three or four hand written lines half way down the page. That's all. Suzie has been seen once and has received no medical treatment since she has been at the shelter. "We know she has Crohn's," the Red Cross volunteer says, as she reads.

Another volunteer come in and she introduces me. He is a physician's assistant from Pennsylvania. He too looks very tired and says he is about to go home. He looks up Crohn's in his organizer and searches for information about dietary restrictions. While he's searching I tell him about Suzie, how thin she is, about her need for a bland diet, about the lesions on her stumps, about her sisters, their story.

"Her sisters say she can eat chicken," I tell him, "but no pepper."

"There is no dietician," he says, closing his eyes and looking even more tired. "I can write a prescription for a bland diet but I don't think it will make any difference." He gets out a prescription pad, writes, tears off the sheet of paper and hands it to me. "Give it to the person in charge of food preparation," he tells me. Then he says he will try to get Suzie into a shelter for evacuees with special needs which has been set up at a hospital.

"Don't separate her from her sisters," I tell him. "It's important that they stay together."

"No," he says. "Her sisters would go with her."

"I have to go now," the other volunteer tells me, "but I

promise I will do everything I can to help Suzie and her sisters."

We swap e-mail addresses. I thank them both and leave feeling hopeful. It takes some time to find the person in charge of food preparation. He also tells me there is no dietician assigned to the shelter, then adds they don't have the capability to deal with special dietary needs.

"It's a medical emergency," I tell him. "Suzie is sick. She can't eat the food and she is chronically malnourished."

"I'll see what I can do," he says, looking concerned.

I thank him and he sticks out an elbow. "Food preparer's handshake," he explains and I put out my elbow and rub it against his hoping the food preparer's handshake brings the sisters good luck.

Before I leave I go back and tell the sisters about my conversation with the physicians assistant and the head of food services and I ask them to let me know if anyone follows up. Marianne has a cell phone and I write down the number so we can keep in touch and I say goodbye. Outside I find Taro and tell him what has happened.

Think about it. Five weeks after Katrina there is only minimum medical care, not even triage. Suzie has a chronic medical illness. She is starving to death. You would think that America would have the best medical care in the world when disasters happen, but there is no coordinated medical response for these types of disasters. There is no model for long term medical care. There's no central coordination of catastrophe relief. They should be receiving the best care that we can give them but the reality is that they cannot even get diapers.

I tell Taro that when I first talked with Diane, Marianne and Suzie they had showed me their photograph album. "I wish we'd had more time," I say. "There are photos in it of Suzie before she was so malnourished. There's one of her holding a big red heart on Valentines day and of the three of them opening Christmas presents. There's also a photo of their house and their dogs. I didn't mention the dogs when I talked with them today."

"I could have photographed the album," Taro says. "You better do it. They're not going to let me back in. See if you can take them out of the album and photograph them. Turn the flash off."

The soldiers have got used to my coming and going and I quickly pass through the checkpoint. It's quiet in the entrance hall but in the shelter the bright lights remain on and the loudspeakers drown out any conversations that might be taking place. Between announcements blaring out I explain that I've come back to ask them if I can look at their photos.

"Show her mama's picture," Diane tells Marianne.

"This is Mama," Marianne says as she unwraps a photo in a silver frame. "This is when she was at her desk years ago."

"She's beautiful," I tell them, and the woman in the picture is beautiful. She has on a flowered dress and she is wearing pearls. The three sisters are smiling, lost somewhere in their memories.

"Show her daddy," Diane says.

Marianne puts the photograph album in front of me. "He's

in here," she says. "We had nine books. This one's the only one we've got. Daddy died two years ago. Then our little dog died. Then it snowed at Christmas in New Orleans."

I take photos of the photos with the lights in the shelter reflecting on the plastic film. I didn't try to uncover them. Even so, as I write, I am looking at them and listening to the audio recording of Marianne telling me about them.



Suzie in rehab, before Katrina.

The little dog that died looks part Poodle and part Schnauzer and is in several pictures with an aging golden retriever. They talk about their dogs and I ask them about the puppy that they got a few months before Katrina.

"He was part Great Pyrenean, part Australian Shepard," Marianne says.

"Have you heard anything?" I ask.

Marianne shakes her head and doesn't look at her sisters.

The first time I visited the shelter Diane told me when Katrina struck they had let the dogs out because they couldn't take them with them. She said they had told the Golden Retriever to take care of the puppy, but they didn't know what had happened to them. Then Marianne had started crying.

"Don't," Diane had said sharply, putting her hands up as if trying to stop her. Then more gently, "Don't."

This time there were no tears, just sadness. Marianne shows me a picture of her late husband and then of her cousin's first

grandson, baby Zachariah. The photos seem magical, full of life and love and deep affection. Suzie looks happy with her arms around a big heart shaped box of Valentine's chocolates, and so does Marianne in a blue dress holding a big bunch of flowers. There's one of Diane in a pink blouse smiling at the person taking the photo. The photo was taken two years ago but she looks much younger. There is a photo of Marianne smiling and relaxed in a white blouse, and one of Suzie looking lovely in a red sweater sitting with her father on the couch. Some photos were taken in the kitchen and there is one of two large apple pies with buttery crusts just waiting to be eaten. There are pictures of the three sisters opening Christmas presents and sitting around the Christmas tree, and one of their father dressed as Santa Claus standing in front of the fireplace where all their stockings are hanging.

"I take a picture of this tree every year," Marianne tells me, pointing at a tree covered in blossom. "I used to love that tree," she says. "Now it's gone."

I look at the picture of their house, painted white, and the lawn surrounded by pink and yellow flowers, and the a white picket fence, and the ramp for Suzie.

"There's nothing left," Marianne says. "It's all gone."

Suzie is looking up at me from her wheelchair. Her pain and suffering are on her face, but her dark eyes are steady and she looks old and wise. She has seen America in a way that most of us have not.

"Write about what's happened to us," Diane says.

I nod. "I'll send you what I write and Taro's photographs," I say. "Take care of yourselves."

Outside I get in the car. "This is a social disaster, not a natural disaster," I say to Taro as we drive away. I'm overwhelmed by the fragility of human existence. Thirty years of working with families who are poor and homeless, with men and women who are in prison, and, more recently, with families living in war-torn countries has not prepared me for the suffering in the shelter.

Taro is quiet. He has worked as a photographer in war zones and spent ten days with prisoners on death row in a maximum security prison, but he too is deeply affected. "Come on. Let's get something to eat," he says. "If we can find some place that is still open."

Anchovies and tomatoes and no cheese. The only place we can find serves pizza. I look around. There's a woman in a wheelchair eating with her family. Diane, Marianne and Suzie could have been in here. I eat while Taro drinks a beer. We talk about the sisters. Their story. Try to figure it out. I tell Taro about the picture in a silver frame of their Mama in her flowered dress and pearls and of the loving way they spoke about their Daddy.

When the sisters first showed me the album they told me their father received \$100 as part of the GI Bill after the Second World War. He used the money to buy the land in Orleans Parish and then he built a two roomed house on it. Over the years he added rooms as his family grew. Suzie, Diane and Marianne were born in the house.

Since they lost their home Suzie, Marianne and Diane have been forced to live in a military zone where armed soldiers

patrol. Their civil rights have been taken away, they have been tagged, searched and questioned. They spend twenty fours a day under bright lights with loudspeakers blaring and they have no privacy except when they go to the toilet. They are given food they cannot eat and when they are sick they receive very little medical assistance. What's happened to the three sisters helps us to understand how vulnerable we are. Their story is our story it's just told a little differently.

Seven weeks after Katrina the sisters are leaving the shelter.

"I can't talk. They're moving us," Marianne says when I phone to tell her I've been writing about her and Suzie and Diane. "They just arrived and are taking everything right now."

"Where are you going?"

"We don't know," Marianne's voice is strained. "They haven't told us. I have to go,"

When I call back the next day Marianne is at the supermarket. "They shocked us yesterday," she says. "We didn't know what was going on." We've got a trailer with the handicapped group at the hospital," she says, "with a ramp for Suzie."

"How is she?" I ask, thinking the Red Cross volunteers in the medical unit must have followed through.

"Not good," Marianne's voice is strained. "She'll be all right once I get some food in her."

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"We're trying to hang in," she says.

In February, another phone call. "We've got a house in Baton Rouge," Marianne tells me. "We moved in Saturday. This is going to be it for a while. It's in Baton Rouge. Unpacking is the worst." I can hear dogs barking and ask about them. "That's Max and Ginger," Marianne says. "They found us. That's our dogs!" Marianne talks quickly recounting the story. We laugh. It's an impossible storybook story. I call Taro. In addition to our work with children and families in Louisiana after Katrina, much of our time is spent working with children and families living in regions of armed conflict in the Middle East. We are both thirsty for good news. Max and Ginger lift our spirits. "I'd like to photograph the three sisters with their dogs," Taro says. "I'd like to see them," I say. "I hope Suzie is okay."

In August Taro and I return to Louisiana to visit the three sisters. They are living in a quiet neighbor hood in a small stucco house which Marianne calls "old time stuff," and there's a ramp for Suzie leading up to the front door.

"The nurse just left us," Diane says, greeting us, as she wheels Suzie into the tiny living room. "Ready? Here we go. Let's see if we can squeeze in together." Suzie is bent over but she looks up and smiles. She is still painfully thin and seems very frail.

After the greetings Marianne picks up their story from when we last saw them at the shelter. Immediately I pick up the difference in the conversation. At the shelter the Marianne and Diane spoke little. Their voices were flat. Phrases and words and an occasional sentence carried what they wanted to say. Now their voices were filled with emotion. Sometimes laughing, often sad, they talked, telling us what had happened to them.

"When we got to the trailer FEMA said we didn't exist,"

Marianne says, her eyes open wide, "as Americans we did not exist." She frowns. "I said, 'I have no wheels how do you think we got here? With the wheelchair and no car? Come on!'" Marianne continues, "We were in number 6, and I kept calling FEMA, and they said the trailer didn't exist. They said there was no trailer. There was no us. It was odd. It took three months to get it sorted out and get the mail keys."

"After the shelter the trailer was nice but I said, 'we've gotta get out of this trap'," Diane tells us.

"We started looking for a house." Marianne says. She explains that they met the landlord of the house in which they are living when they were looking at another house in the neighborhood. "'You came up from nowhere,' he said. 'I was just getting ready to put the house in the paper.'" Marianne laughs, "He said, 'Somebody is on your side.'" She stops laughing. "I said, 'There was actually a place where a family could go fishing and have picnics, where you could go boating and it's gone. It's gone.'" There's a quiet moment when nobody speaks, and then the dogs start barking out the back, and Taro asks if they can come in.

Marianne opens the kitchen door and the dogs rush in and run around wagging their tails. "Be nice Max," Diane says. "Max! Be nice." "Here Ginger," Marianne says. "Ginger is Suzie's dog," Diane tells us. Suzie smiles and tries to raise her head to watch the dogs as they sniff and lick us.

Taro takes photos.

"We were looking for a new puppy to get our mind off things, even though we were in a bad situation in the trailer park," Marianne says. "Anyway Diane was looking in the newspaper and she said, 'There's a description fitting our dogs,' and, I said, 'You're going to keep on talking about it until I call aren't you,' so I called."

"I'm excited about the dogs," Diane says, her whole face is lit up. She tells us that the man who found them told Marianne that one of the dogs was a Labrador and Marianne had told him that they had lost a Golden Retriever.

"The man says, 'and there's a puppy that don't leave his side.'" Marianne tells us. "Now I'm thinking a little butterball, maybe about three months olds, a fur ball that's all fat, because that's the way we left him."

"He wasn't no bigger than this," Diane says, cupping her hands, making a ball the size of a dinner plate.

"And he's talking about a puppy about the size of this chair with long legs," Marianne says.

"So," Diane continues, talking rapidly, her voice rising and falling, with one word tumbling over another, "she says, 'The dog's name is Max and the puppy's name is Ginger.' And she says, 'Call them,' and the man says, 'Here Max! Here Ginger!' and he says the dogs come running up, and I say to Marianne, 'That's impossible!'"

"And the man says he couldn't keep them," Marianne says, picking up the tempo of the story. "He said, 'We'll bring them.'" "And I said," Diane continues without skipping a beat,

"Well, we'll take them. The two dogs are lost so even if they are not ours we'll take them.' So he brings the two dogs to the trailer."

"I said, 'Hi Max!'" Marianne says. "'Max is that you?' And

Max's tail was going like this. And I said, 'Max?'"

"Max!" Diane says, as if she is back at the trailer. 'Hi Max!'"

"Ginger?" Marianne says, back there too.

"Marianne said, 'Come look at Ginger!'" Diane continues, "And I said, 'That's Ginger?' And we took them inside, and Ginger went under Suzie's wheelchair like he used to, and Max was walking around us as if he was home. And the man takes his elbow and he hits the lady that was with him in the ribs, like this, and says 'That's these peoples dogs!'"

The man who found the dogs lived in Walker, about seventy five miles from Lakeview where the three sisters lived. Diane says, "He said they just arrived at his place one day. They were all dirty from the water, I expect, but they had been shaved and their toe nails cut."

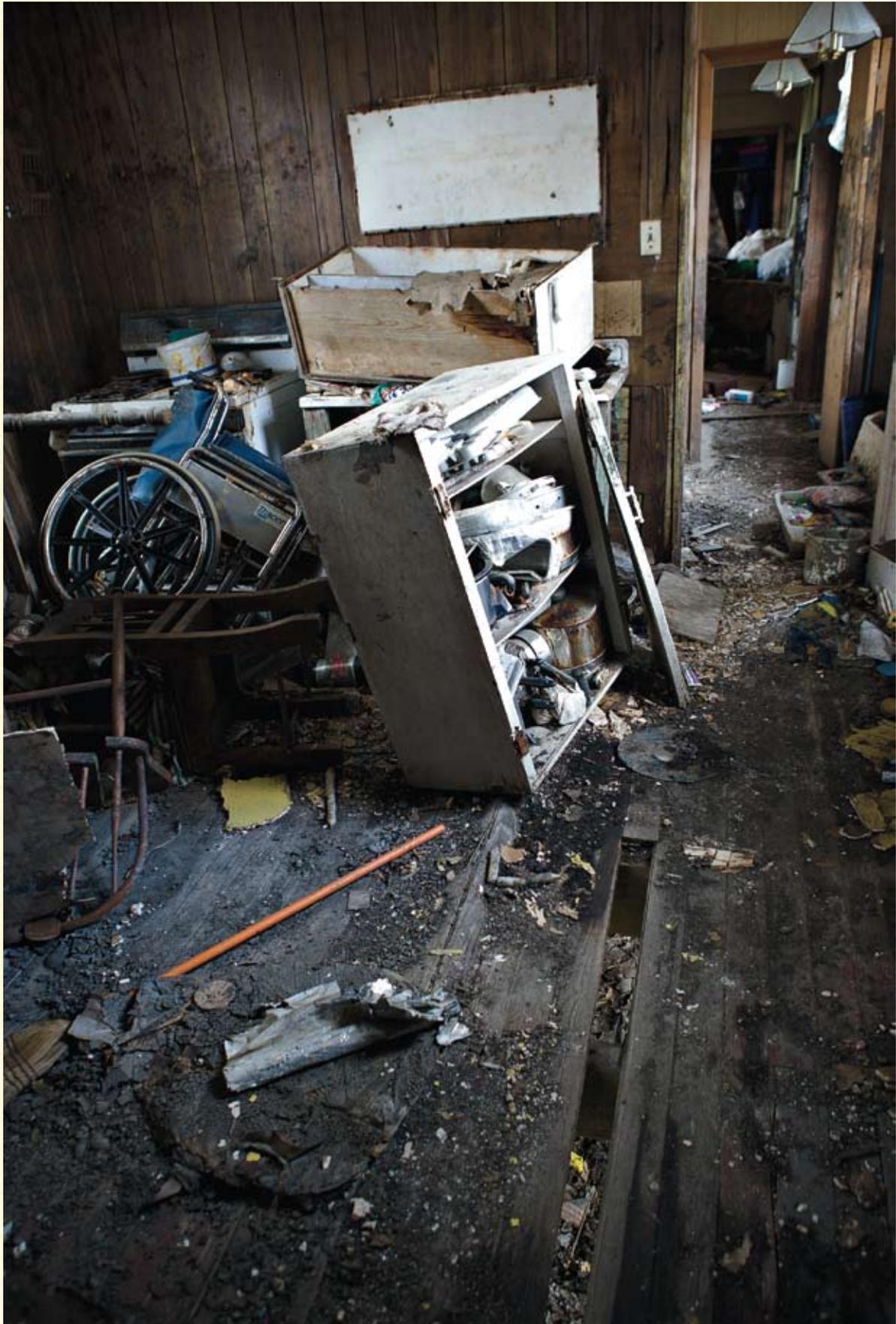
"We thought we would be gone for three days," Marianne says. "We threw knuckle bones for them under the house."

"I told Marianne if my two dogs don't find us they have died, and they found us," Diane says, looking happy, then sad, remembering what had happened to them. "They showed pictures on the TV and we could see there was fifteen feet of water in the house. I think we had a tidal wave from the gulf. We were lucky. I give credit to the ambulance drivers, they kept going back and forth. One would drive and the other would sleep and they kept going back and forth. We were the lucky ones we got out."

Before we visit the three sisters, Taro and I drive to Lakeview to find their house. It's thundering and lightning, and the street on which they lived is once again under water. Every house was destroyed by Katrina. One house lifted off its foundation sits crumpled but still upright just across the road from where Diane, Marianne and Susie lived. It's raining hard and we sit for a few minutes looking at their house. Nothing has changed since Katrina left.

"A sad little place," Taro calls it, and it is sad. The house looks lost, forlorn, as lonely as a house can be. I remember the photographs in the albums that Marianne and Diane showed me in the shelter, and their stories of their family. At first the house seems too full of memories for me to go inside, but I follow Taro in. Long and thin, the house has just three rooms, and it is musty and moldy, but filled with familiar things. There's the Valentine's Day red heart pillow that Susie clutches in one of the photos. In the kitchen, her wheelchair is tossed, crumpled and broken, against the stove, and her artificial leg, clad in stocking and shoe, is standing, almost, as if propping up the dryer, that is so precariously tipped. In the bedroom the three sisters clothes, Marianne's blue dress, Suzie's red sweater, hang in the closet. Some clothes are neatly folded on the shelf and seem inexplicably untouched by the storm. When we visit them Marianne says that they all slept in that back room. Even when their father was dying of cancer, and continually having seizures, and when Suzie had her legs amputated, and got an infection, they all slept there. Life was not easy in this house, but the sisters' love for the place still seems to fill each room.

"You can see the grass through the floor boards," Taro tells me as we walk back to the car. Later when he is back in Michigan and looks at the photographs he finds there is a small



"You can see the grass through the floor boards," Taro tells me as we walk back to the car. Later when he is back in Michigan and looks at the photographs he finds there is a small American flag on the grass beneath the house and he send me an e-mail with the photo attached. Although just by chance the flag looks as if it is supposed to be there.

American flag on the grass beneath the house and he send me an e-mail with the photo attached. Although just by chance the flag looks as if it is supposed to be there. It reminds me that the three sisters' father bought the land and built the house with the money he received from the GI Bill after the Second World War. "America, was different then," I think he would say, if he knew what had happened. I think he would wonder why this country, that he loved so much, did not take better care of his three daughters.

"I'd like to go back to where we were at," Diane says, as Taro takes photographs. "I guess we would go back to New Orleans. Daddy's grave is on Canal Street but the cemetery came out okay."

"We'd like to go back but there is nothing there right now," Marianne says.

"It would take years for people like us," Diane says, looking worn out.

"They keep saying they are pumping millions of dollars into the city," Marianne says. "Like the guy from the Ninth Ward on the TV. He said, 'Look around. Don't you think if I had seen any money I would start doing something?'" And the man who come to fix the doors. He said, 'Where's the money? I ain't got no money. Where is the money?' He said he got a family to feed. And I said, "'Millions of dollars? Where? I haven't seen any.' They say they are shipping millions and millions of dollars into New Orleans but I haven't seen any."

Diane goes into one of the bedrooms and comes back with photographs. "These are real old," she says. "This is when I was in first grade. 1958." Taro and I look for her in the rows of children. She points and we look closely at the lovely little girl who is smiling at the photographer. "These are school pictures of Mama." Diane says. "These are all old. That's mama when she was young. Here she's in the French Quarter. This is on her birthday." Taro takes photos of the photos.

Diane shows me a picture of Suzie when she was a young girl. She is slender with long black hair. I try to take in every detail of the picture. I want to know Suzie. There is a gentleness I feel when I talk with her, but she says very little and I try not to press the conversation when we speak. "After mama's death she went into shock," Diane tells me. "She was really young. I was in my early twenties. Marianne was in her teens. She was nine or ten years old. She went into shock. Just like from the storm. She was depressed after mama's death. Then she got Kronos. They amputated her legs a few years ago. We just try to take care of her you know."

"This is the tree out front," Marianne says, showing us another photograph and then another. "This is the house the way it used to look. We had azaleas, and an apple tree, and a Japanese plum tree out the back."

"That's daddy with his tomatoes," Diane tells us, holding out another photo for us to see. "He had bell peppers and eggplants. Here's daddy and uncle Mike working on a car." She looks up. "I'd like to go back."

"It could happen again," Marianne says.

"It could," I say, thinking of the levees and the Federal Government's refusal to strengthen adequately to withstand a catastrophic storm. On the day we visit Lakeview the only

place we can find to eat is a dilapidated little eating place right next to Lake Pontchartrain where the levee breached. It is still thundering and lightening when we arrive and I take off my shoes and splash quickly through three or four inches of water to get inside. The restaurant is filled with locals talking about Ernesto. At the next table an officer from the US Army Core of Engineers, is eating a bowl of gumbo. He says it looks as if Ernesto is heading towards New Orleans and he talks about the Core's preparations for the storm. It's Saturday and he said the storm was expected to arrive Thursday. He told Taro and I to leave town before Tuesday because if the storm hit there would be no way for us to get out.

"Why are you so relaxed," Taro asks him. "I'm not," he says. "I'm churning inside." I listen as he talks to a man who comes up to him while he eats and asks him if the levees will withstand the storm. "We have to do this very carefully," the soldier tells him. "We have to ramp down and catch up, ramp down and catch up. Under perfect conditions?" he shrugged. "It takes months and we're trying to do it in several days." Ernesto does not come but the fragility of the situations remains.

"I don't know what we are going to do," Diane says.

"Something is going to get short," Marianne says. "Suzie and I got disability but we have to buy diapers and we don't get the food stamps.

"In the shelter," Diane says, "maybe because I was trying to survive, I was stronger than I am now. I had more strength in the shelter."

"I know I was stronger," Marianne says.

We say goodbye to the sisters and Taro promises to send them photographs. We will visit them again and try to help Suzie get a new wheelchair. She spoke very little while we were there but when Diane said she needed a new wheelchair Suzie did say,

On the plane back to New York I read in the *Economist* that Congress has taken ten months to appropriate \$7.5 billion in federal aid in disaster relief but a private company will dispense the funds. When we follow-up with other families that we met just after the hurricane, they tell us that no one has received any money yet. In the Ninth Ward we are told there are no tax breaks and no mortgage forgiveness. The bills for electricity and gas still come in even though there is no electricity or gas. One family we visit is rebuilding. The mother and father work during the day and work on rebuilding their house at night.

But the sisters? What will happen to the sisters? To Marianne? To Diane? To Suzie? There is a "Courtesy Notice" stapled to front of their Lakeview house from the "City of New Orleans, Bureau of Code Enforcement." The notice refers to a City Ordinance "to establish a remediation for the demolition of properties damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Under threats of "penalties," Marianne, Diane and Suzie must "gut and board," "renovated and rebuild," or "elect voluntary demolition" and "complete the remediation" "no later than August 29, 2006." I talk with Marianne on the telephone when I read the notice and the following Monday she called the Bureau of Code Enforcement. She says she has been given



Diane, Marianne, Suzie with Ginger and Max.

an extension. But it is an impossible situation. In the Ninth Ward we are told if the City demolishes a house a lean is put on the property. As I finish writing this paper I cannot imagine what will happen to the sisters. There are no words of

hope I want to share. The story they tell about their dogs is wonderful to read, but their story? What about their story? It's the story of so many families in New Orleans, a social catastrophe much bigger than any storm. ■