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## **Silent Nights on the Gulf Coast**

**By JOHN GRISHAM**

Charlottesville, Va.

IN the harrowing days after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the shellshocked and homeless survivors strung up tents and tarps wherever they could find standing shelter, anything to hide from the sun. Now, four months later, many of the tents remain: in the front lawns of once fine houses now gutted and unlivable, in small clearings between mountains of rubble, beside camping trailers too cramped for entire families, on concrete slabs wiped clean by the storm surge, even in the living rooms of houses with few walls but intact roofs. The sun is no longer the problem: instead, the most desperate of the hurricane's victims have stuffed tents of every imaginable make and model with Salvation Army blankets and mattresses to try to stay dry and warm.

There is the dismal feeling that some of these tents may not be so temporary. One tent city built by the Army, dubbed "the Village," sits in the center of the small town of Pass Christian, some 30 miles west of Biloxi and at ground zero for Hurricane Katrina and its assault on the Gulf Coast.

The Village is a gloomy grid of 70 tents, 10 numbered rows of seven each, housing about 150 people - old, young, black, white, poor, middle-class, some so ill that their tents are marked "Oxygen in Use." After four months, some of the shock of loss has worn off and the people go quietly about the daily challenges of securing a warm, private shower, washing whatever clothing they have left, and hoping that their children do not fall ill.

They are grateful for the dry bed and the free food. Everyone knows someone who is worse off, or dead. With tens of thousands of Mississippians displaced and living with families or friends around the country, the residents of the Village at least have their children with them and they are close to home.

A handful of tents are decorated for the holidays, but it seems almost cruel to ask a young mother what she's planning for Christmas.

"We're leaving," she says without hesitation. "Getting out of here for a day or two."

All who are able plan to leave and find a relative. Last year, they were stringing lights and wrapping gifts and waiting for Santa. This year, the great Christmas wish in the Village is to finally get a trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Indeed, one reason the place exists is the backlog of homeless people who need trailers. When FEMA closed the shelters and stopped paying for motel rooms, something had to be done. Thus, the tent cities.

Don't ask why it's taking so long to get a trailer because there is no answer. More than 24,000 temporary housing units have been delivered, but 10,000 more are needed. The delays are maddening. A woman in the nearby town of Nacaise went to the FEMA office on Aug. 30, the day after the storm, and requested a trailer. She did the paperwork, answered all the questions. She is epileptic; her daughter is diabetic; her husband needs back surgery; their situation is urgent, and she has explained all this to FEMA many times. Four months later she's still waiting. Her story is not unusual.

A FEMA trailer is 8 feet wide, 30 feet long and 7 feet high. It has a bedroom, a kitchen/living area and a bathroom. It is equipped with a refrigerator, stove, heater, toilet and shower. A set of bunk beds can also be used as a storage area or pantry. The residents are required to furnish their own television, and the best place to put it is on the kitchen table.

There is no washer, dryer, bathtub or microwave. The trailer sleeps eight, supposedly, but the eight need to be very small and very fond of one another. That's why it's not unusual to see a pup tent or two pitched beside the trailer, probably occupied by the mom or the dad or both, regardless of how chilly the night might be.

The first one I examined was in Waveland, a small town hit so hard that there's virtually nothing left. A woman was inspecting her new trailer, thrilled that it has finally arrived. She and her family had been waiting for weeks, living with friends, counting the days. I confessed that I had never been inside a FEMA trailer, and she eagerly showed me around. It didn't take long. The two of us created a crowd.

We talked about the holidays. She said she certainly planned to put up a tree. "Not sure where," she said as she looked around the claustrophobic living room.

A FEMA trailer is too small for a Christmas tree, so those who can muster enough spirit set them outside, either under an awning or tied to the trailer hitch. Driving around in the evening, I found it heartening to see a few tiny trees and some colorful lights. They illuminated the trailers and threw dim shadows on the ubiquitous rubble. Otherwise, the nights are very dark and quiet along the Coast.

Late one evening in Biloxi, on a desolate street two blocks from the beach, I saw a trailer with a small Christmas tree beside it. I stopped and said hello to the man inside. He gave me a very brief tour of his new quarters - home to him, his wife and their dog. Outside, he showed me the ruins of the house they owned for 32 years. It was built on land 20 feet above sea level. Pointing to his friend's badly damaged house across the street, he described how the flood's water mark could be seen on the second floor, 22 feet higher.

"What will you do for Christmas?" I asked.

"We won't stay here," he said. They planned to visit a relative a few miles away and try their best to celebrate.

I asked him how long he expected to live in the trailer. His answer was vaguely tied to an insurance dispute, and maybe litigation. I asked about the quality of the trailers. "Not bad," he said.

There are mixed reviews about the reliability of the trailers, with some complaints about leaky roofs and cheap door hinges. Frankly, though, the people are so happy to have them that they're willing to overlook the flaws.

You see the trailers everywhere. They sit in the driveways of destroyed suburban homes, jacked up on blocks with sewer pipes running out and water hoses running in, power cords dangling from makeshift poles. They dot the countryside, sitting sadly where real houses once were. They're packed together by the hundreds in overnight settlements, newly flattened areas carved from pastures that were quickly leased by farmers to the government. In these FEMA towns, with so many highly stressed people living on top of each other, officials worry about tension and crime.

As with the tents in the Village, you look at the FEMA trailers and wonder how temporary they really are. No houses are being built. Many of those damaged will remain untouched while the great debate with insurance companies over wind damage versus water damage is played out in court. Many months will pass before there is significant new construction.

Unlike New Orleans, where the floods were heaviest in the poorer neighborhoods, the Gulf Coast experienced damage that cut across social and economic lines. Hurricane Katrina did not discriminate here. Wealthy

people now dwell in FEMA trailers that are exactly the same size as the ones handed out to those who were living in subsidized apartments.

When it's warm enough, the trailer people spend as much as time as possible outside. Porch sitting, a way of life, is still carried on, though radically modified. Tarps and awnings are affixed to the trailers and provide cover. The families and neighbors gather in folding lawn chairs and chat deep into the night about their lives before the storm and about the struggle to get through another day and find some measure of normality. There is guarded talk of the future.

The defiance that came so naturally in the aftershocks of Hurricane Katrina has gradually yielded to weary determination. Four months have passed with little improvement, and the challenges ahead are forbidding.

Mississippi's governor, Haley Barbour, has said his state needs \$34 billion to rebuild. The state's annual budget is about a 10th of that, with virtually nothing set aside for such emergencies. The bold promises made in the heat of the moment after the storm have so far been pathetically empty. Congress has so far authorized nearly \$100 billion for emergency relief and cleanup, but only a third of that has hit the ground.

Not lost on the people here was the recent rush to pass more tax cuts for the rich. And a question often heard is, "Why are we spending billions to rebuild Iraq and not a dime down here?"

There is a fear of being forgotten by the government. Washington is preoccupied with a war and its glut of messy side issues, and attention will soon turn to the midterm elections. There is also the very real fear of being forgotten by the press. The satellite trucks and cameras have long since gone. If the news media forget, then so will the people with the money in Washington. Pollsters are already noting the rapid decline in the disaster's importance on the national radar screen.

THE fear of being forgotten is soothed somewhat by the seemingly inexhaustible waves of church folks, students, retirees and private relief workers who've dug in and done the dirty work. Tons of food, clothing and supplies continue to pour into the region. Countless hours have been spent hauling debris, cutting trees and patching roofs. The volunteer spirit of the American and Canadian people lifted the Gulf Coast from its knees and continues to sustain it.

But volunteers cannot build bridges, ports and highways. New infrastructure will require lots of federal aid, and Congress has been slow to respond.

Americans have short memories. Life moves so fast and one catastrophe shoves away the last one. The horrible images from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are fading. A year ago we watched in disbelief when a tsunami hit Southeast Asia and killed more than 150,000. We sent checks and food and two months later we'd practically forgotten about it.

The tragedy of Katrina will worsen if the Gulf Coast is forgotten. People can't survive in tents. And FEMA trailers aren't meant to be longtime homes.

If there is a common Christmas wish from this torn land, it is simply this: Please don't forget us.

John Grisham is the author, most recently, of "The Broker."