

THE TATTOO

THETATTOO@GMAIL.COM

MAKING A PERMANENT IMPRESSION SINCE 1994

VOLUME 12 No. 20

Katrina tossed us into a snow globe

By SAMANTHA PEREZ

The Tattoo

Sunday, Oct. 23, 4:13 p.m.,
Ponchatoula, Louisiana –

I live in a snow globe. The one there on your lovely windowsill during Christmastime. Warm sugar cookie smell from the kitchen, carols from the radio. Wrapped presents lie beneath a Christmas tree, green branches thick and decorated with silver ornaments. Be a good girl, a good boy, darling, Santa's watching you.

But so is Big Brother, just waiting for the moment to pick up the snow globe and shake it up. Shake, shake, and let the snow fall.

Cold fronts are coming down now, and it's freezing, even in our little camper. We use the heater when we have to, but we hate using so much propane. It's so cold, especially at night. I sleep next to the emergency hatch, and the cold air leaks in at night. I'm in love with the woman who sent me my navy blue jacket, and there are six wonderful blankets on my bed. Everyone yells. My parents fight with each other or with me. I fight back. It's hard living so confined and stressed and unknowing.

There are still no answers to questions we have, and Katrina has fallen from the news. My story isn't finished, but the media thinks it is. Just because the world has seemed to move on, it doesn't mean everything is back in its right place.

No, I still come home to a camper where I change my clothes there in my bed. I'm yelled at, and when I go to school, my close friends aren't there. Things aren't their real 'normal.' It's a twisted routine I've fallen into, along with everyone else.

Hello, dysfunction.

My mother's parents came and spent a few days with us, making space in the camper very tight. They're looking to find a trailer park to stay in nearby, maybe in Hammond. We looked at house trailers with them, and I'm excited. Real bedrooms! Mom and I called Dad, who was at work, and we were ecstatic about the chance of getting into the trailer park with our grandparents.

In the end, Dad and Mom fought over it for a long time. My dad didn't want to leave the land our friends are letting us stay on. It's safe here, he said, and we can't be sure that the trailer park would be safe.

We were all yelling and fighting for a long time that night, and I put on my headphones to tune it all out. But, as always, Mom agreed with Dad – staying here on this land would be safer. Maybe there would be a way where we could get a house trailer on this land, she told me. I'm not a fool. I know a house trailer can't make the turns to get here that easily.

I finally pushed my best friend too far. He won't even speak to me now, and I know it's my fault. He's been there for me for anything for so many years, but I know I hurt him a lot by things I've said recently or things I've done. But he was one of the few people I have ever trusted completely, and now I'm missing him. He won't even talk to me, and it hurts so much knowing that he's not there anymore. I know I pushed him too far, but this isn't simple. I'm tired of getting yelled at so much of the time, tired of coming home to a camper, tired of this new school.

I was needing him too much, relying on him too much. People have breaking points. There's no one that doesn't. I miss him, though, like crazy.

What everything comes down to now is simple – Incubus in my head, silence on my lips. When my parents fight, there's nothing that can be done. Sure, they're stressed and tired, but so am I. When I want my best friend back, there's nothing I can do. So, off I slip into my music, and it's instantly better. If these events have taught me anything, I know that nothing lasts forever. Kansas had it right: Everything is dust in the wind.

My home, my school, my senior year. My awesome friend Jenny Mae from Hannan, our lunch table where we laughed. My best friend who



Samantha Perez / The Tattoo

The camper that became our home after Katrina destroyed our house.

reached his breaking point.

Baby, yeah, step down! My room with my bed and my books. My coat that kept me warm when outside it was cold. And even before the hurricane, my relationship with Shelby. People – like fate – are fickle. Dust in the wind.

Better than watching Gellar bending silver spoons.

My stories on disks that lie on the floor, rusted and broken. My parents' patience.

The people you value will eventually stop taking care of you. In the end of things, each individual is alone to make decisions. We each have to fend for our own selves because, in the end, your lover or your best friend won't be there for you. You're alone to take care of your very own self. Good luck.

Sometimes when the yelling starts, I go running down my new, strange street. I like how, if I run fast enough, the tears fly backwards and splatter on the ground behind you. Splatter away that person you needed, that friend you never thought would hurt you. Splatter away loneliness. Splatter away sadness.

I am bottled, fizzy water.

Where people fail, art's there waiting, arms wide and open for embrace. Write away hurt. Music away anger. Draw away homelessness and misery. Speaking now from hard experiences earned, it's better that way.

People will hurt you, and when it comes down to the grind and grit of the tank's bottom, you are alone, standing there, hopefully on your own two feet. If not, you need to work hard to pick yourself up. It's not easy, and so many people won't think this is true at all, but remember – no one's good karma can last forever.

So art yourself away to Eden. Let the snow fall. Bring on the blizzard.

A sweet reunion

Sunday, Oct. 30, 4:45 p.m.,
Hammond, Louisiana –

Yesterday was my new school's homecoming dance. St. Thomas Aquinas' Homecoming. Not Hannan's. That doesn't matter, though, because my Hannan friend Cassie – who is at St. Thomas with me – managed to convince me to attend.

I wore an icy blue dress with white flowers. It had a halter top to it, and the bottom swished when I walked. I saw it at the mall here one weekend when my mom brought me. It was on sale, and in the end, I only paid \$11 for it. It came back to the camper with me because of its price alone, but it really is a pretty dress.

Saturday morning, Mom and I drove to the Target a few Interstate exits away so that I could get a coat.

It's cold here now, and I lost my coat in the hurricane. We wound up finding a gorgeous, inexpensive red one from Ross, but first, we went in Target so Mom could find some things she needed.

I went to find a heavy jacket and I was in the dressing room when my cell phone started ringing.

I answered it, and it was Jenny Mae, my best friend from Hannan. She



Samantha Perez / The Tattoo

Mold covers the walls of the back room of our home in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana.

seemed excited, and when I asked why, she said she just saw my mom outside.

I started screaming into the phone, and I rushed out of the dressing room, hauling everything with me.

Jenny Mae saw me as soon as I stepped out of the dressing room area, and we ran to each other, screaming. Everyone stopped to watch, but that's never something Jenn and I cared about. We hugged each other, and the two of us cried right there, jumping up and down, up and down, in the middle of Target, everyone watching and smiling because, somehow, they knew. What made it even more special was that it was her birthday.

We walked around for an hour, talking about everything, before she had to leave with her mom, but I knew that if Cassie hadn't convinced me to come to Homecoming, I would never have seen Jenny Mae yesterday. It was so good seeing her. It made me realize even more how much I miss her.

I got ready for the dance at our

family friend Mark's house. His wife Kristie did my hair, twisting it and pinning my curls up. It looked really nice, and I was still so excited about seeing Jenn, which made it even more spectacular.

Mom brought me to Cassie's house trailer because I didn't know the way, but we wound up getting lost anyway. I called Cassie, and she asked where we were. I told her that we were parked in the empty lot before a Mount Zion church. She said to stay there, and a few minutes later, a car pulled up, our friend David (from Hannan but now at St. Thomas with us) behind the wheel.

Mom left us to go visit my grandparents, and I climbed into the back seat of David's car with Cassie and our old Hannan friend Bunch. Another Hannan friend, Amanda, was riding in the front. It was good laughing with Bunch again. Laughing is an amazingly powerful thing these days.

We ate at a Chinese restaurant not far from the school, and we found that it was the Hannan spot. Four other refugee Hannan students were there, ready for the St. Thomas Homecoming. All of us sat close, so there was a Hannan corner of the restaurant, loud and laughing. Bunch started saying that he wanted doughnuts before we had even left the restaurant.

The dance wasn't as fun for us as it was for the St. Thomas students – except for Cassie. She was on the floor dancing the whole time, but David and I walked around the school with Bunch and Amanda. Stars hung

Eventually, we stopped at a gas station for some Frappuccino and directions. Bunch made me laugh a lot more there, but eventually I had to come home to a little camper with a little bed and no more Bunch to make me laugh.

Still, I need to thank Cassie later, because I'm so glad I went.

Yesterday was a day of reunions with Hannan people for me, and I wish I could make every day like it. I loved being with Bunch and Amanda, and I loved even more spending that time with Jenny Mae. I miss Jenn every day at school. We were always together at Hannan. It's so strange not having her with me now.

I'm so glad I did see her, though. That made my day.

Music provides escape

Friday, Nov. 4, 6:38 p.m.,
Ponchatoula, Louisiana –

I've been thinking a lot about wishes lately. The wishes I have now and the wishes I should be having as a teenage girl in her last year of high school. The wishes my mother has, the ones she should be having.

I guess, if I could have anything in the world right now, it would just be to have my best friend, Michael, care about me again, for us to be the way we used to be. He made me laugh, and I value laughing.

I wish for no more abrupt changing. No more people changing on a whim. Changing, changing, changing. Shelby changed from the person I knew, as did Michael – and both times (it's really amazing how this works), I find myself hurt.

The headphones go on, and my fingers start typing whatever words spill out of my head.

My mom hates the camper. She fixes herself on remembering the house. I miss the house too, but the lessons I have learned in my life have taught me that missing things will only hurt me. No Shelby. No Michael. No home.

I put on the headphones and try stumbling around on my own two feet, but Mom brings to the camper books from the library on building homes. It's an open window to hurt.

Hurt's a constant thing in my twisted gypsy life. Normal girls now are wishing for dates to dances and to go out with friends to the mall and movies. Normal parents are wishing to get through the workday to come home to see the family.

What are our wishes? Mine has almost always been the same: to be happy. It hasn't changed since I started high school. To just be happy.

Funny, how that's sort of difficult to achieve when you are permanently "displaced," your best friend doesn't want to hear from you again, and your friends are scattered across the country.

Sometime since this ride started, I grew up on accident – something I said I never would do. Peter Pan stopped being real to me and transformed himself into the "spirit of childhood." Neverland lost a place for me, and my wishes became warped.

And it all happened one fall day when a gurgleswoosh came from the big, blue, wet thing, and it came with a cackle-cackle and a whoosh-whoosh. It blew and it blew until it flooded my house down.

Whoosh. I'd find a star to wish on, but stars lead to Neverland, and Neverland doesn't exist.

It's frightening how much I'm depending on music right now. I think it's frightening how much each person in this mess is depending on a single thing: be it a lover, a friend, or something else. I depended on Michael too much, and I pushed him too far.

At least I learn from the mistakes I make. See, you can't push music too far. The songs I listen to that take away this stress and hurt, the songs that make me forget my Impossible Wishes for a little while. These songs are staying right here, and that's a good thing. Dramatic or not, I know I need them.

Self-perseverance. I wonder if Michael and Shelby would be proud of how I'm handling this standing-on-my-own two-feet business. Would they look at me and care? Or did they both change too much? Hi, ho, uncertainty. Whoosh.

About the hurricane journals

This is the latest installment of a special ongoing *Tattoo* series by Samantha Perez, a Louisiana 17-year-old whose family fled its St. Bernard Parish home shortly before Hurricane Katrina slammed ashore August 29.

Join *Tattoo* readers from all over the world as they follow this young writer's moving story of how Katrina turned her life inside out. The entire series is posted online. Check it out at: www.ReadTheTattoo.com.

Earlier entries include: Aug. 29, Last days in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana; Aug. 30, Fleeing Katrina; Aug. 30, First news from home; Aug. 31, The Bossier City blues; Sept. 1, Raisin Bran and gypsies; Sept. 1, Back to school?; Sept. 2, Wine and celebration!; Sept. 3, Just darkness and the cry of a million crickets; Sept. 3, Let me go home; Sept. 6, Out of place in a new school; Sept. 8, Sleepless in Natchitoches; Sept. 13, Hitting the road, again; Sept. 16, Guilt and doubt; Sept. 17, Going home.

Keep reading here and online. Perez is still writing.



Justin Skaradosky / The Tattoo

WWW.READTHETATTOO.COM

The best teen journalism in the world. For questions, comments or to join, contact advisors Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus at (860)523-9632.