

THE TATTOO

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Fleeing Katrina

By SAMANTHA PEREZ
The TattooMonday, Aug. 29, 5:25 p.m.,
Bossier City, Louisiana –

I guess that, in the long run, my dress won't matter much.

It was a pretty dress, though, and even though I haven't cried yet over what's happened, I know that when I do cry, it will be because I lost my pretty dress.

It sounds petty, and in your minds the stereotype of this girly, popular, cheerleader will come into your head: gorgeous, blond hair with bright blue eyes, nice makeup, with long eyelashes that never have tears on them to mess up mascara.

That's not the person I am. I'm not pumped full of estrogen. I'm not a cheerleader. I don't have blond hair. But, I will miss my dress....

I was going to wear it to my senior prom this year. It was strapless, this beautiful shade of pastel pink. A band of material crossed the dress at the top, a pearly, pearly white. Pearly white flowers were printed on my dress and I loved it more than anything else in my whole room.

I didn't really dream of the prom, wearing my dress for that night. I dreamed of just wearing it and stepping into my living room, thick brown carpet beneath pretty white shoes. Shelby, the boy I've fallen madly in love with, would be waiting, looking at the giant, 11x17 pictures of me as a baby hanging on my wooden paneled wall.

When I walked in, he'd look at me with those eyes and I know that he would be thinking that I'm beautiful.

Maybe I loved the image of that more than I loved the dress, but the dress symbolized that fantasy, and right now, I'd give anything in the world to live in that moment for the rest of my life. Then again, maybe I just loved the dress, but that image and that dress both belong to an old world that doesn't exist anymore.

That dress, those pictures of me, that thick brown carpet... it's all gone now, because hurricane Katrina took it all away.

I lived in a place called St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana, just southeast of New Orleans. I say that I lived there, because I don't anymore. I don't live anywhere. Currently, I'm in a hotel room in Bossier City, four miles outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, nine hours away from my home – my home that doesn't exist.

Four days ago, Friday afternoon, I had no idea that this was going to happen. I woke up Friday morning and went to school. We had a Creative Writing meeting during lunch, and my friend Jenny Mae and I went. I was elected editor-in-chief unopposed. Everyone knows that I'm a writer. After the meeting, we ate hotdogs for lunch in the cafeteria, but the hotdogs tasted funny – kind of chewy – so we only ate a few bites.

That's the last time I ate.

Friday night, I had to go to my school's first football game of the season. My friend Leanne and I are in the band. We both play flute, but I play piccolo for marching band. We're both seniors in high school and this weekend was supposed to be our senior retreat, an overnight "bonding experi-

ence" for the senior class.

Leanne and I talked the whole game, mostly about the retreat: how boring it was going to be and how we still needed to pack for it when we got home. We talked about how we were going to just bring two pairs of clothes and a bathing suit. We would be packing light so there would only be a little to haul with us. I was going to sneak my MP3 player, even though they weren't allowed.

Our friend Chris came over to sit by us near the end of the game. Chris is just a sophomore, but he's funny and makes Leanne extremely happy. Leanne, of course, likes him a lot and when the other girls came to sit by him, she was more than a little jealous.

We lost the game, naturally, but we were happy then. Who knew that in a few days the stadium we were sitting in would be under water?

Leanne and Chris decided to go by her house after the game and they asked me to come, but I decided to go home and pack for the retreat. I walked towards the parking lot with the new tuba player and his mother. She asked about the senior retreat and mentioned, slightly worriedly, that a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico might be coming our way.

Not a big deal, I thought. August and September are the worst months of hurricane season, but I'd been busy with school so I'd only heard a little about hurricane Katrina. I knew that it had passed over Florida but not much more than that. I doubted it would be anything major. After all, the retreat wasn't even cancelled. How bad could it possibly be?

I talked about it with my mom when I reached home, in Violet, part of St. Bernard. Most of the family lives in Violet and we're no exception. My mom said that the retreat was still scheduled, so I should just pack for it and we'd see what the hurricane was going to do in the morning. The hurricane was still too far away to predict its path with any accuracy. Dad called from his work (he had the night shift) and suggested evacuating. It wasn't that big of a deal. Since hurricane Ivan last year, he'd been fairly paranoid about hurricanes.

So Friday night was a night I spent packing for my senior retreat, which of course was going to be boring, and getting a few items of clothing ready, in case of that unlikely possibility of evacuation.

By Saturday morning, the hurricane's projected path showed New Orleans getting a direct hit.

Mom called the school. The retreat was cancelled. Dad doubled the efforts of his evacuation campaign. I filled a Rubbermaid container with my clothes, emptying my closet and throwing everything into a container. I spend most of the day on the internet, getting information from my friends and giving it. Everyone planned to depart, but my family rarely ever leaves for a hurricane. We ride hurricanes out. It's what we do. My family and our relatives are linked to our parish. We don't like to leave it.

However, by Saturday night, the decision had been made: we had to leave. Hurricane Katrina was now a category four – and it was coming straight for the city. We needed get out



NASA photo

Hurricane Katrina is poised to slam into the Mississippi Delta in this NASA photo taken hours before the massive storm made landfall on Aug. 29.

of the parish.

My Aunt Tudy had made calls and gotten the family a number of rooms in a hotel just outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, in a place called Bossier City. Mom was upset because she did not want to leave our home and she especially did not want to go to a hotel in Bossier City that allowed pets. She and dad fought a lot that night, and a good bit of their anger was taken out on me.

I finished packing all of my clothes into the Rubbermaid container. I filled it to the top. I found two old Jansport backpacks, one bright red, one a deep, wine red. I found my notebooks of poems and stories and drawings, and I put them in. I put in the little book my dad and I wrote when I was just 6 years old, about how Super Sam had to save Barbie and Ken from a ghost. I saved my disks of my stories, because I would not be able to bring the tower of my computer with me. I took my books, my precious books, off my shelves and stacked them high in my room so just in case we did get water, they would be safe. I filled two backpacks with the things that were important to me. I put them in my room and stacked everything atop my desk, bookshelf and dresser, so it would all be safe.

I looked at my pretty dress a lot that night. It was just hanging in my near-empty closet. I wanted to bring it so badly, but mama said no. No room for dresses.

Besides, mama was hoping so

much that we would be safe. New Orleans take a direct hit? No. Never! Betsy was bad enough. My grandmother stayed for Betsy in 1965 and I've heard stories of that hurricane my whole life. I grew up hearing tales of people hacking away at their roofs with axes, cutting holes into their roofs so that they could squeeze out to safety, fleeing from the water flooding their home. I heard about feet of mud waited for people in their destroyed homes. The parish was devastated.

My dad went to work Saturday night and the oil refinery in the parish at which he worked was shut down for the hurricane. I had piled everything onto my bed, just in case we did get some water. I slept that night on the floor, my cell phone plugged into the charger. We were planning on giving it to my mother's parents, because they were evacuating too but have no cell phone. I slept on my thick brown carpet, my sky blue robe as a blanket and my stuffed bear that Shelby gave me as a pillow.

I thought about driving all that time in a car, leaving for Shreveport. I wished Shelby were there, I know, because I'm always wishing Shelby were here since he left me this summer. I have plenty friends at school and in the parish, but none that I tell everything to. Shelby was the only person that ever loved me for me, who was ever there for me, and as I sat on my floor, picking things up at two in the morning and making sure that they would be safe, I wished more

than anything that he would come back to me.

We're still friends, I guess, but now he's not here for me in the way I need him. We were together for so long and I haven't stopped loving him. I curled up on the floor. I found a note he'd written me months ago in my nightstand drawer as I was searching for things to pack. The air conditioner kicked on, and I pulled my feet under the robe.

Dear Sam,

I love you, you know. I'm here for you whenever you need me. You should get some rest, ok? I love you, and I care about you so much. I'm here whenever you need me. I love you, baby girl.

Your Shelby

At two in the morning, it was cold, and I wanted to cry because I needed my Shelby back to me. Part of me was just so tired, but another part of me was scared about what was going to happen. Two backpacks were full of the things I wanted to bring, and all my books were stacked against the wall, high where they would be safe. We were really going to evacuate. For only the second time in my life, I was going to leave my home for a hurricane. I looked at everything stacked on my bed. I didn't want to leave. I fell asleep on my bedroom floor, looking up at my ceiling and holding the note tight in my hand.

More than anything, I wished that I could bring with me my pretty, pretty dress.

Saturday: Read the second and third installments of Sammy's journal on page A6 of *The Bristol Press* or online at www.ReadTheTattoo.com.

Louisiana teens write in wake of hurricane

When Hurricane Katrina slammed ashore, *The Tattoo* immediately began looking for a teenager writer who could tell the story.

Samantha Perez, 17, answered the call.

While the country tried to figure out what was going on in New Orleans, Perez was writing online about the flooding that claimed her town and destroyed her home.

Today's journal by Perez is the first of four that have already been published on *The Tattoo's* website, www.ReadTheTattoo.comMore of her work will appear Saturday in another special edition of *The Tattoo* on page A6.

Fourteen-year-old Jesus Manuel Diaz, Jr added his story this week after his family arrived from New Orleans at his sister's home in Bristol.

The Tattoo, now in its 12th year, publishes young writers from across the world.

It is the volunteer work of journalists Jackie Majerus and Steve Collins.

Staying behind in New Orleans

By JESUS MANUEL DIAZ, JR.
The Tattoo

Hello, my name is Jesus Manuel Diaz, Jr. and I'm from Kenner, La. If you people are interested in my side of the story and what I experienced during the hurricane, I will tell you then.

Before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, my family and I went to the Windsor Court Hotel, a fancy hotel near the French Quarter where my father works.

We arrived Sunday night at the hotel, but nobody knew if the hurricane was going to be just another ordinary storm that was going to pass by or something terrible. We gambled on an ordinary storm.

We were wrong.

The storm – or should I say "Madre Naturalesa," which means Mother Nature in Spanish – brought all of her strength and wrath just to destroy the poor Gulf Coast, the place where I was born.

The next day, Monday morning, Katrina arrived. All of us were at the hotel. My mother and I were on the 20th floor when it came.

The hurricane was so strong that the win-



Molly Horan / The Tattoo

Jesus Manuel Diaz, Jr. in Bristol this week.

dows just shattered in every room. We both ran out of the room – my mother praying – but the storm just got stronger.

The hallway was so scary. One of the doors just flew open from the force of the wind, which was trying to suck it out the window.

It felt like we were in a black hole. The mirror down the hallway was moving. I thought it was going to fly right at us.

All of the power went out except for the hallways. My mother and I both felt the building was shaking as if the place was going to collapse down to the ground.

My father, a pastry chef who was baking in a third floor kitchen, came at last. All the hotel employees had to wait at the cafeteria until the storm was over.

After the storm passed, things got worse on top of not having power or any air conditioning. Two days later, we lost water. Everyone had to fill the tub before the water went out.

Then it was getting hot and everyone started feeling paranoid.

My body started to overheat and I couldn't even breathe because we were in a closed area. Then we changed rooms and we had two balconies for air to breathe.

Then things got even worse.

Across the street from our hotel, a Subway

restaurant was on fire.

It was the same as you saw on television – everyone from the hotel had to work together to take out all the chairs from the ballroom so they wouldn't catch on fire.

You could feel the heat from the burning Subway coming through the windows of our hotel.

The only thing we could do was watch the restaurant fall down and burn.

At that point, some National Guardsmen told us that we could leave, but to leave together, with a National Guard escort. We waited and waited and they did come and that's how we left.

But you know what hurts? That George W. Bush abandoned the people of Louisiana in their time of need.

All the people at the Convention Center had no food and no water.

So please listen – I'm only 14 years old. These people need our help, my hometown needs HELP!

If you people of the United States don't help, then I'll never forgive this country.

May the Mother of God, Queen of Peace on Heaven and Earth, and God, bless you all.

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.