

## THE TATTOO

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## Katrina on our heels

*A note to readers: These are the second and third parts of an ongoing series by a Louisiana teen whose family had to leave their St. Bernard Parish home as Hurricane Katrina headed straight for them. The first part of the hurricane diary ran in Friday's paper on page B3. With it was a first-person account by Jesus Manuel Diaz, Jr., whose family weathered Katrina in a New Orleans hotel before fleeing to his sister's home in Bristol this week. The entire series is posted on The Tattoo's website at [www.ReadTheTattoo.com](http://www.ReadTheTattoo.com).*

By SAMANTHA PEREZ  
The Tattoo

Tuesday, Aug. 30, 9:30 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana —

Dad threw open my door Sunday morning. "Sam, what are you doing? This isn't a game!" He stormed out. I looked at my alarm clock: 2:30 a.m. The note was lying next to me on the ground. I picked it up and held it.

Mom walked in. "Sam, where's the instruction book for your phone?" Apparently, my grandparents do not know enough about cellular phones, and they needed a book. You know, so they know how to dial a number. Whatever. I'd been planning on packing some last-minute things this morning, but mom had another idea.

I went outside. Mom had packed my backpacks into the car already. I knew I had packed the instruction manual, but I had no idea where it was. I hadn't thought my grandparents would need instruction on dialing a number on a cell phone.

Mom started yelling at me then, when the book didn't fall from the sky as she would have liked. She and I both share the PT Cruiser car and it was packed to the top with bags and boxes. There was just enough room to see out the back over two giant containers of our clothes. My two backpacks were stuffed into the car. The dark wine one was underneath one of the racks in the back.

I could barely get inside. It was hot and dark, but I stayed there in the car for over 30 minutes, looking for a small book so that my grandparents "could feel more comfortable using a cell phone" when I could have been saving some of my things. Funny how my mom's priorities are always right, when mine are always so very wrong to her.

I couldn't find the book. Mom was angry. I was sweating from looking for so long and it being so hot outside, even so early in the morning. All I had on was a giant shirt and a pair of denim shorts that are too large. (I've lost so much weight since Shelby left this summer. I don't know why I packed any jeans or shorts; it's not as if they fit anymore.)

Mom started yelling, saying that I should have known where I put the book, that I wasn't even thinking of how we were leaving my grandparents to evacuate on their own, how I was being selfish. I didn't understand why she was already yelling at me, but I don't think I was supposed to. I went into my room, stopping at the door. The note was in my back pocket. I liked it there. I grabbed my saddle bag. I don't use purses often. I actually just bought a shale gray one at Wal-Mart two weeks ago. I had my keys and wallet in it from the game last night. My saddle bag was filled with disks of my stories and some old CDs that I'd like to keep. I had my *Lord of the Dance* DVD in my saddlebag. I love *Lord of the Dance* and I wasn't going to leave it there. No. Never. *Lord of the Dance* got me through so many things; it would be sacrilegious to leave it there. Besides, they stopped producing it. I know this, so *Lord of the Dance* was in my bag.

I brought it to the car, and I stayed there, looking for that damn book. Couldn't find it. I went inside to get my new purse. I had my stuffed monkey in my arms. I have it to replace my bear that Shelby bought me. I have tried moving on.

I touched the note in my back pocket as I looked at my room. This hurricane was a killer. If it hit New Orleans with a direct hit, the city would be wiped out. I thought about Betsy. They blew the levees in the city, sending all the water into my parish. To save the city, they sacrificed my parish's homes and lives. Betsy only killed around 70 people, but many homes were lost.

I looked around my room. My stuffed animals were on shelves high above the floor. My books were stacked high on my desk. The computer was taken apart. My tower was in the back room, the office, and it was atop of my dad's desk. My shoes were all in a giant plastic case on my bed. Everything was out of order. Besides the blue and white walls, it didn't even look like my room.

I walked over to my closet and opened it. My pretty dresses were hanging there, all of them, and my pink one looked beautiful as my lamp's light shone it. I wanted to bring it. I almost let myself cry for the first time then, but I kept the tears back. I pulled the note from my pocket and sat down on the floor of my closet. The dresses were brushing against my head, pink and blue and black skirts against my face. I sat there for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of my parents hauling containers to the truck. I realized that I was too tired to even cry.

Dad called us. He was angry. I got up and closed my closet door. My dresses started swinging because my shoulder hit them as I stood. My note went back to my pocket. I grabbed the last of my things and turned off my light. I remember that I didn't look back.

Mom and I were in the car a minute later. It was so dark on my street. My uncle and aunt were planning on staying, and I looked at their house next to ours. It was dark, too. Mom opened the gate with the clicker (we'd just installed an electric gate opener) and drove out. We went to my grandmother's house, five min-



Michel Lee / The Tattoo

utes away. I looked for the book the entire way there. I was pulling handfuls of the things I'd packed out of my backpacks and dumping my things on the floor of the car. Mom was yelling still. "You could have thought about your grandparents! I know you don't want to give your phone away. You're so selfish! I'm leaving my mom and daddy!"

I didn't reply to any of it. What was I supposed to say? Of course it was true that I didn't want to give my phone away. I wanted to stay in touch with my friends because my friends were scattered and scared. I wasn't scared. Since Shelby left, I stopped caring about so many things....

She stopped the car with a jerk in front of my grandparents' house. I still hadn't found the book, and mom was starting to throw my things around the car, looking for it. I grabbed my purse to get my phone. I'm sure they could figure out how to dial a stupid number. It's not rocket science.

I unzipped my purse and looked inside. Keys. Wallet. Some papers. No phone. Shit.

I moved the papers aside. It had to be there. It had to. I know I packed it.

"Sam, where's your phone." It wasn't a question.

I started sweating again. The air conditioner wasn't on in the car anymore and it was hot outside. Louisiana is humid. I twisted my body in my seat and started looking frantically in the backseat.

"I can't believe you."

Anger and disappointment in her voice. Great. It was going to be a lovely ride to Shreveport.

I looked for the phone in all my bags. It was so dark and hard to see. Mom started yelling loudly. My grandparents came outside. "Jan," they told her, "it's just a phone. It's fine. We don't need it." As if that mattered to my mother.

After about 15 minutes of a hysterical search in the car for the phone, Mom and I took off for home. She was making sharp turns and driving down the road faster than I'd ever seen her drive before. We reached home, and Mom and I tore the house apart looking, but my phone was not there. Angrily, Mom brought both my backpacks and my saddle bag inside from the car and dumped my things on the floor of my room. The cases holding my disks broken open, and the disks spilled onto my floor. My stories. I became furious, but that's not something I can show.

"Where's your damned phone?"  
Mom never curses. She searched through the pile of all my things. For some reason, "Maybe

I'm Amazed" wouldn't stop playing in my head. I tried to think of where my phone might be. I know, I know, I know I packed it.

*Maybe I'm amazed at the way I really need you....*

Stupid Paul McCartney. I dumped out the smaller pockets, looking for my phone. It was nowhere. It had just stopped existing, as simple as that. Where could it be? Neverland. I moved through the pile of all my things. Disks were beneath my hands. I moved them aside to look for my phone. Mom was yelling at me from the living room. I ignored her. This wasn't my fault. Mom stormed out of the house. She started digging through the car.

I looked around my room and through the things on my floor for a long time, or at least, what seemed like a long time. Then I just sat there. All my things that I'd packed were on the floor. I looked at my closet, and I didn't want to leave my dress. I was so tired. I hadn't slept since Wednesday because Thursday ... Thursday was a bad night. I didn't sleep then and Friday night I'd packed.

The screen door opened and slammed closed. "Sam, did you find it?" Mom. Furious. "No, ma'am." The door creaked open and slammed shut again. I'd given up on finding the phone. It wasn't there. I didn't even know why were still looking. In my mind, I'd completely accepted the fact that it had stopped existing.

Still, I had to make my mom believe I was deep in search. It might ebb some of her anger, maybe. I looked outside and in the garage, and eventually, my dad showed up with his mother in the car. She had had a stroke two years ago and was coming with us. Dad hurried us up. It was time to leave.

I ran inside and fell on the floor beside my saddlebag, throwing in my notebook and one small pack of disks. They called me to come. No time for anything else. I grabbed the strap of my bag and stood up, running out of my bedroom and flicking off the light as I did. All my things were on the floor. If we flooded, even just a little, there would be no chance for my things. I didn't really think about it then. I was too angry, but this time, I know I did look back. All my stories, all my poems, all the things I'd worked so hard on, were just there on my floor. Vulnerable. What if it did flood? The books I was bringing were on the floor. My CDs, my games. On the floor.

Dad was screaming at me to come. The saddle bag banged against the wall as I ran down the hallway. I sprinted to the car and got in. Mom was about to cry. I was frustrated and

angry. I had no idea where my phone was. To me, it had just disappeared. Nothing hard to accept about it.

"I can't believe you," she said again.

Ugh. Dad locked the door to the house and came to the gate. I don't remember who closed it, but it screeched shut. Dad climbed into his truck, left, and we were not far behind him. Mom stopped at my grandparents' again. She got out of the car, angry at me and crying to her parents. My grandpa made her take a hundred dollar bill, and she broke down there. My grandma held me, gave me hugs. She said it was all going to be okay. Mom cried, "You're giving us money. We don't even have a phone to give you."

My grandmother hugged me more tightly. "It'll be okay," she said. I think she thought the streaks of sweat running down my face were tears. I told her that I knew it would be okay, and then I hugged Pa. It was time to leave again.

We drove off, Mom shaking with anger. I thought of how my grandparents' street floods in a strong rain.

"I love you, but right now, I am so angry with you."

We passed the bank. I missed my stories. I hoped the house would be alright. We're lucky. Dad built our house on a three-foot cement slab. We're about six feet above sea level, which is a lot better than so many places in the parish.

It took almost nine hours to get to Bossier City. We went far east, to Jackson, Miss., before turning back to come to Shreveport. It didn't take any longer than it normally would, and we were lucky because there was very little traffic. We even made it through the contraflow areas okay. Contraflow ... they knew that the evacuation was going to be so big that they reversed parts of the interstate to make sure people could get through.

Mom kept it frigid in the car the entire way there because she was falling asleep at the wheel. I offered to drive. Mom nearly swerved off the road once, because she almost missed the exit. I hid beneath two blankets and pretended to sleep. Hiding and pretending were better than getting yelled at. Somewhere in Mississippi, I remembered my new senior ring. I'd left it in the bathroom cabinet because I took it off to take a shower. It's so big, and I didn't want to lose it when I washed my hair. Oh well. Just a ring. I peeked out at Mom from beneath the blankets. She was going to freak out when she learned of this.

It didn't actually take her much longer than that to remember the ring. She woke me up, one hand still on the wheel. We were going 85 miles per hour down the interstate. "Are you wearing your senior ring?" I said no, that I'd put it in my makeup case. She said she hoped it was there but then went back to driving. Oops.

We made it to Bossier City by 10 that morning. Some of the family was already there. I waited with my grandma in my dad's truck while my mom and dad checked in. Mom was still very angry. Gee Katie, my dad's mom, asked what kind of tree was outside. I didn't know. We didn't have trees like these where I lived. She asked if it were a walnut tree. I shrugged. Maybe. I didn't know.

The room wasn't as dirty as I thought it would be. It was kind of nice. I looked at the phone in the room, and I realized that, with some work, I could hook my laptop to the internet. I called my ISP for a local access number, and I started setting up my computer. It didn't take long before I was online. We'd lost the local radio station just 10 minutes before we reached Bossier City, so my computer became the only connection we had to home.

We spent the whole evening watching the weather channel, which helped none, and CNN. Those were the only stations we had that were talking strictly about the hurricane. Katrina's course had changed only slightly. The track led it to make landfall just east of New Orleans. The country sighed in relief. The city has been spared!

I looked at the projected path. The eye was going to pass over my parish, and time was running out for it to move. The storm was a Category 5 now, the highest possible.

The whole night, we watched the television. New Orleans was a ghost town. Gee Katie talked about Betsy, how the waters never went down for weeks. My dad bragged that we had bought flood insurance just 45 days ago. He laughed. Mom cried. She was losing her wedding dress and her precious pictures. I didn't sleep that night. How could I? Katrina was coming to take away my home. How could I ever sleep?

## First news from home

Tuesday, Aug. 30, 11:20 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana —

We lost our home.

The levees broke and water spilled into the streets.

We got a call from a friend that stayed. My neighbor called my aunt's cell phone, begging for help. They were screaming. They climbed onto the roof, cutting a hole to get out of their attic. They lived a street away from us.

Our home is gone.... St. Bernard is completely under the water, and we have nothing now, just the clothes on our backs.

They won't allow news crews to show footage of my parish because of all the bodies floating in the rivers that used to be our streets.

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*Samantha Perez continues to write her diary of Hurricane Katrina. The updates are available online at [www.ReadTheTattoo.com](http://www.ReadTheTattoo.com).*

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