

THE TATTOO

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Katrina made a gypsy out of me

The Bossier City blues

By SAMANTHA PEREZ
The Tattoo*Wednesday, Aug. 31, 7:15 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana* - People depend so much on one another.

Everyone has someone to help himself through this, someone to depend on for support. So many people are depending on me, but no one really asks if I am okay. Not really. They ask, but they don't mean the question. It's not like when I ask my friends if they are okay after all of this. I know when they are alright, when they aren't. I'm trying hard to be here for them, but there's no one for me to talk to ... not like I need.

I've only cried once because of this. Just once. My mom, my cousins, my entire family, they cry and laugh all the time. I laugh, but I don't cry. I can't cry because people need me, and that's okay. It's important that they are okay.

I talked to my friend Katie today. She managed to connect to the internet, and she asked me what was going to happen with everything. I doubt our school will open again this year, but it's possible that it might open in January. Anything's possible, after all. So, who knows, my old school might reopen in January. I think that's what a lot of the schools did after Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965.

I called McDonald's today, but my parents don't know this. They say they're going to try to get me back into school as soon as possible, but I'm not stupid. I know my family is going to need a lot of help, and I hate asking other people for it, even though we need it so much. I called McDonald's, wondering if they might hire me. It's just minimum wage, but it will be something to help my family. The only thing is, I don't know how much longer we might be in Bossier City. We might leave tomorrow or the next day. We might leave in a few weeks. We are gypsies.

Most of my class is in Baton Rouge, finishing high school there. Mom and Dad can't go there. It's so crowded, and the family can't all make a new life there. I don't really care. I miss my friends, but I stopped caring about so many things now. I think it will be better this way. I can help my family now, and I will. Everyone needs to make sacrifices, right? I hope this all works out. I want everyone to be safe and happy.

We haven't had any word about my cousin Taylor. We don't know if he and his family evacuated or not - and the family here is worried. We don't know if they are safe. I hope so. I didn't get along that well with Taylor last year, but after he moved next to me in religion class, we started get-

ting along quite well. He was even made drum major in band ... when my school existed ... when there was a band.

I'm hearing rumors that my school was destroyed by a tornado, as well as the flooding. I don't know. I miss school there some, but mostly, I miss my class and the people. One good thing, I'll never have to hike it from English class to physics again. That's always a good thing, I guess.

I don't think I'll be finishing high school any time soon. There's a chance I will be able to, but I need to help my family. Maybe one day, I'll be able to go to college, but right now, there's no money for it. We need money for food and other things we cannot live without. I never thought I wouldn't go to college, but right now, I don't think we'll have the money for me to go. Sacrifices must be made, and I'm okay with that. It's strange, but I really am.

I found more pictures of my parish on the internet. They're slowly starting to get released. I miss my home. There aren't any pictures of Violet, where I live, right now, but maybe in a few days, they'll have some. Maybe.

Looters are in the city. They are burning things and killing people. Why? They shoot at helicopters as they fly down, helicopters that are trying to rescue people that need help. I hate this. So many people need help there! Why are they acting this way? It has no point at all! They are idiots, and they are ruining so many things for so many needy people.

My good friend Leanne is leaving her hotel in Georgia and coming to Shreveport. I hope I get to see her, but things have been so busy. My family is depending on me and this computer, and between the texts and online conversations I have with my friends, I know that they need me, too. I need to be here for them. I'm so tired, though. I can't sleep anymore, but I wish I could. I just want everyone to be okay. Everyone deserves to be okay. No one deserved Katrina, but it happened, and I'm going to do everything that I can so that my friends can be alright, even happy, maybe. Even happy? I'll try, but no one's God.

I tried writing again today, but I couldn't do it. I remembered all my stories that are gone now, and I just didn't feel like writing anymore. What's the point? I miss my stories, though, even though they were never that good. Maybe it's a good thing I'm not going to be able to finish school or attend college. It'd probably be a better thing than letting me attend. Maybe it's fate.

I was supposed to have an essay due in English a week ago, last Wednesday, comparing the idea of fate between two short stories we read in the Norton's Anthology of Short Fiction. The book cost \$63. Now, if the tornado didn't send it to Oz with the rest of the parish, it's under a happy lake where the corpses of friends



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A scene from the Mississippi coast near Bay St. Louis after Katrina hit.

are singing fishing songs that last forever, where they drown again and again because the cycle never ends.

When we will learn that we can't harness nature? We can destroy it sometimes, like the rain forests, but that's not right. If we rebuild the city, it should not be located where it was, and even if New Orleans is one day rebuilt, it will not be what it once was. So many of my classmates are spread out across the country that I'll probably never see most of them again. Friends I've gone to school with since kindergarten are as far away as New York, making a new life there, not here.

Here? No. I don't want to make a new life here, either. I stay in a hotel and hardly sleep. I don't attend school, and instead, I call to get a job and support the family. It's not a bad life, I guess. It's something that needs to be done, and if it'll make everyone okay, I'll do my best.

Raisin Bran and gypsies

Thursday, Sept. 1, 7:45 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana -

My aunt, younger cousin and uncle left today, taking with them some other family members that have been here with us. They are going to scout a place for us away from here,

a place where maybe we can stay for awhile. A few fishing camps have been opened for evacuees. (That's what we are, evacuees.) You can only stay there for 30 days, but, like I said, we're gypsies now.

It's not a bad life, living from cigarette to cigarette, as Shelby started saying after he changed. And, besides, Esmeralda was beautiful in the Disney version.

I've been living off of the cereal packs from the hotel's free breakfast: Frosted Flakes, Fruit Loops, Raisin Bran. You can make your own waffles here with a waffle-making machine. You pour the batter into a machine and close a heated lid. The waffles are nice, but they are too big for me to eat.

I drink milk constantly, because milk is my favorite drink. I sit in this chair in the hotel. There are gray stains on it, and the cushion has been worn flat, but it's a good chair. It rocks, though, when you lean too far to the right. I hope it doesn't break. I have a glass of milk next to me, except it's not a glass. It's a red plastic cup. We wash them and use them again like real glasses, but a real glass doesn't bend when you squeeze it in your hand.

My friend sent me a link to an online forum that a former teacher at my school started. It's amazing. Everyone is checking in. I found that my cousin and his family are safe in Mississippi. Someone posted that my school, Archbishop Hannan, was hit by a tornado before the parish flooded. I don't think that it will be back in session before we can graduate. We don't even know when they'll let us back into the parish.

I wish I knew things about home. There isn't anything about St. Bernard on the news. It's all about New Orleans. It's all about the crime there.

We aren't all like that. We aren't all carrying guns and shooting at the people trying to save lives. We aren't all stealing and killing. I hate the news. Why can't they show my house, my parish? We hardly know anything about home. I just want to go back there. I wonder what color my pretty dress is now. Black? Brown? Certainly, not pastel pink.

I needed to get away from the computer today, so I went to the pool area of the hotel. I brought my flute, and I played, and I was happy. I played the songs I know by heart, the songs from *Lord of the Dance*. I faced away from the pool and closed my eyes. The chair I sat in was the kind that beautiful people bring to the beach, smooth, flexible plastic. I took off my shoes, and then I played "Warriors."

When I'd finished playing a few songs, a man at the table a few feet away asked if it

was a Celtic tune. I was excited, and I said yes. It turns out that his wife, who was with him and was very pretty, had seen *Lord of the Dance* before and loved it. She said she was from New Orleans, an evacuee along with her husband. She worked at Loyola University. I'm pretty sure she said she was a librarian there. I remember smiling when she told me. I love books! Both of them were so nice. We talked for a long time by the pool, and when they decided to leave, they came to me and gave me a big hug. They said that I played beautifully and that things would get better. They were nice people.

I played some more from *Lord of the Dance* and other things, but then I went back to the hotel room, where I belong. I found some more pictures of home, and I heard from a few more of my friends. I miss them. I miss my school. I miss my locker. I miss getting to skip to the front of the lunch line, cutting all the underclassmen, because I'm a senior at last.

It's funny thinking about how it's under water.

Well, Mom says I need to eat something. I'm debating if I should have Raisin Bran or Fruit Loops. Such amazing, life-altering choices. Last week, I was deciding on where I might go to college. Not anymore. Oh well. It's life now.

Welcome to the Gypsy World.

Back to school?

Thursday, Sept. 1, 10:30 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana -

I might get to finish school! My cousin Kristy talked to her old college friend today, a man named Jeff. His mother lives only about an hour away from where we are now, and she offered us a place to park the new camper my dad bought for us. There was a camper lot across from the hotel. Dad bought one of the last two. It's small, but I think it's nice. It's like being a gypsy and living in a dollhouse.

Kristy mentioned how I don't have a school anymore, and Jeff's mother offered to talk to her friend, a member of this school's board of directors. It's called LSMSA, the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts. It's only for juniors and seniors, and you have to live in a dorm. I'm nervous about that because I can't sleep at all around other people, but it's worth it - to finish school!

Tomorrow, I have to go there for an interview. I need to wear something nice, but I don't know if I have anything pretty enough to make a good impression. All my nice clothes were things we had to leave at home. God, I hope I get in. I really want to finish school. It's a very good school, too. The curriculum is "challenging." I hope if I do get in, I'll do well there.

I might get to finish school! I'm so excited! I can't believe it!

I'm going to bed. I can't wait to thank Jeff's mom. I hope I get in. Dad says it'd be very good for everything if I get into

this school. He wants me to go there so badly. I don't want to let anyone down. I'm nervous.

I guess I'll just have to see how tomorrow goes.

Wine and celebration!

Friday, Sept. 2, 5:24 p.m., Bossier City, Louisiana -

I was accepted! I'm now a senior at the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts. I move into a dorm on Sunday and my schedule will be made on Monday. Then, on Tuesday, classes will start.

I'm so nervous. It's like college: the schedule, the dorms, the atmosphere. Seventy percent of the teachers have PhDs. I can't believe it. I'm scared I won't be good enough. Everyone's so much smarter than I am. I know it. I was second in my class at home, but this is so much bigger - and better? I'm scared that I won't be able to make up what I've missed, that it will be too hard. I hope not. I'm nervous!

I met so many nice people in the school's office today. They were all helpful because they know we don't have a home anymore. They pursed their lips like the world does, one nod, deep and over-exaggerated. They don't understand. Not really. See, when their days are over, they head to their homes, where everything is the same for them: lovely brown carpet beneath their bare feet and pretty pink dresses hanging in their closets.

I already know that the other students are so much better than I am. I'm scared I won't be okay. I miss my friends. I have the feeling that everyone is going to be smarter and richer than I am. I'm nervous and I miss my old school, but I'm excited about starting again. I just hope I fit in.

I'm nervous about the dorm, though. I know I can't sleep around other people, as hard as I try. I'm so sorry about it, but I can't help it. I hope I don't have a roommate. I know I won't be able to sleep.

But, hey, wine and celebration - I get to finish school!

About the hurricane journals

These are the fourth through the seventh parts of an ongoing series by Samantha Perez, a Louisiana 17-year-old whose family fled its St. Bernard Parish home shortly before Hurricane Katrina slammed ashore last month.

Two printed pages, containing the first parts, appeared on Sept. 9 and 10 in *The Bristol Press*.

Join *Tattoo* readers all over the world as they follow this young writer's moving story.

Tomorrow's paper will include two more installments from the hurricane journal.

The entire series, including later entries, is posted online. Check it out at: www.ReadTheTattoo.com.

Previous journal entries:

August 29, 2005 - Last days in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana
August 30, 2005 - Fleeing Katrina
August 30, 2005 - First news from home

Keep reading here and online. Perez is still writing.



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A washed out road near Bay St. Louis, Miss. after Katrina struck. In the background is a ruined railroad bridge.

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