

THE TATTOO

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Out of place in a new school

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The TattooTuesday, Sept. 6, 2:13 a.m.,
Natchitoches, Louisiana –

I cried yesterday. It's only the second time I let myself cry since the hurricane hit. That doesn't make me weak, does it? I hope not. ...But, I guess it was a pretty weird thing to do. I know it was, but I'm not okay right now. I'm really miserable.

I don't think I was made for boarding school. I really don't think so. I want to go to school so badly, but I don't think here is the place for me. I don't know what to do. It's late right now, and I'm tired. I really wish I could go to sleep, and I'm about to cry because I'm so tired, but I have a roommate now. I can't sleep.

I had to be at LSMSA, my new school, yesterday morning. Counselors were going to meet with all of the new students, and we were going to have a schedule made. Mom had brought with us all of the important papers we could ever need, including my school transcripts, so it was going to be easy for us. We went into the auditorium and sat down. After a welcome speech, the teachers there said that there would be a placement test for incoming students.

A placement test? I hadn't known. No one had told me. One test for math, they said, and one test for a foreign language. A student guide brought us down the hall and up the stairs. We reached the second floor, and he led us to a classroom in the back of the hallway. We all went in, but from there, a teacher separated us. The teacher was very tall, and he wore nice shoes, I remember. He told me and a few others to take the foreign language test first and ushered us out of the room.

so I raised my hand.

The teacher called on me, and I asked him, "How are we supposed to do the trig test without a calculator? I don't know the sine and cosine values of the numbers."

Other kids lifted their heads to wait for the man to respond. Maybe I wasn't so dumb after all. I sat up straight in my chair.

"You're supposed to have those memorized. Don't you?"

I think if I had a little less pride, I might have turned red, but I didn't. "No," I told him. "We were allowed to use calculators at my old school."

His shoulders moved up and down in this unsympathetic shrug, and the other students gave me unpleasant looks. I slipped back down in my chair and started picking some more at my nails and started trying to remember sine values for angles.

A few minutes later, a girl behind me raised her hand. She looked like a mouse. Her hair was a plain sort of brown, and it looked brittle and unkempt. (Not that I can say much. I can't tame my curls.) She wore glasses, and her nose turned upward.

"May we use a calculator for the pre-calculus test?" She sounded really intelligent and arrogant about it. She paused expectantly, and I could almost hear the pursing of her lips as she waited. It was a scary sound.

The teacher said she could use her calculator, and she pulled one out of her purse. Who carries a calculator in her purse? Sure, I'd asked to use a calculator, but that didn't mean I had one with me. Maybe she knew we had a test. How come I didn't know?

I mumbled something to myself about how she was being allowed to use her calculator, and the girl heard me.

"I'm on the pre-calculus test," she

told me briskly. "You don't need it for your test."

I think, this time, I did turn red.

I guessed for most of the test, even if he did say not to. I tried my best. I set up the law of sines for so many of the triangles, but I didn't have my calculator to get an answer. I didn't know what to do. I bet Leanne could have done it, but Leanne's better in math than I am. The girl behind me finished her test and turned it in. She's smarter than I am.

Most of the class had moved on to their foreign language test by the time I turned in my trigonometry test and traded it for the pre-calc one. This test was worse, and I started getting nervous as person after person left the

room. The teacher already knew I was stupid because of the calculator question. But that wasn't my fault, was it? We were allowed to use them at my old school, and besides, I'm not good in math.

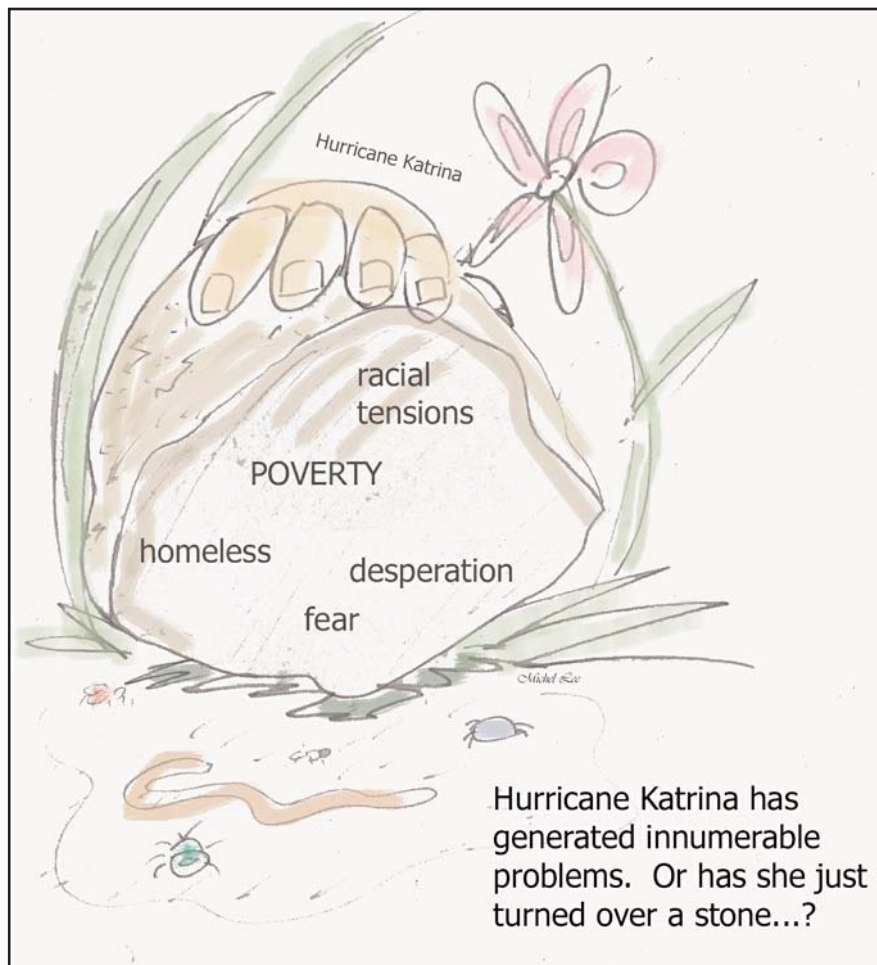
I turned in the pre-calc test only a few minutes after he gave it to me. I didn't know what to do with it. It was strange to me, and I needed a calculator. I wanted to cry when I turned it in, but I didn't. They'd understand when they made my schedule, I thought. I could have done it with a calculator, but I didn't have one.

I went back to the auditorium where my parents were waiting. They had filled out health and contact forms while I took the placement tests. Mom asked how it had gone, and I wanted to cry again. I almost did.

"I didn't have a calculator," I said. Dad's a math person. He started questioning me about the problems on the placement test, and I started feeling worse. I'm so unintelligent compared to these kids. I must be! They can do that kind of math without a calculator? I'd never be able to. Not ever in my life!

The teachers came back and separated the juniors (most of the new students) from the seniors. Schedule time. There were only a few seniors. The girl who was allowed to use the calculator she brought with us. Her nose seemed to turn even more upward. Another student guide led us down to the office and told us to sit in a small meeting room. Ants were on the tables there.

After a few minutes of waiting, a



Michel Lee / The Tattoo

Hurricane Katrina has generated innumerable problems. Or has she just turned over a stone...?

teacher came and collected us. He brought us to an empty classroom and we filled out a form about the credits we've already earned from our old schools. Then, the teacher called the calculator girl to him, and they began to discuss her schedule.

She talked properly and importantly, as if everything she had to say was grand and completely correct. She knew everything, it seemed, and maybe she does. I don't know. I learned her name was Becca. I talked with some other refugee students, while Becca spent over an hour trying to plan seven classes.

The other kids left for lunch just as the teacher asked me to come to him. My mom and dad were with me, and my mom handed him my transcripts. I even had my old schedule for this year with me, the classes I was taking at Hannan.

He started looking at the classes I need to take in order to graduate. He said that I didn't do well enough on my placement tests to earn a full credit for trigonometry or pre-calculus.

But I had As at my old school! I didn't understand.

I started getting really upset, but I tried hiding it. I pointed to the grades on my transcript, but nothing happened. I started wishing I were at Hannan, my school, not this school. Am I really that dumb? I guess I am now. I just needed a calculator. Maybe I am just dumb. I mean, Becca's not being put back in classes she already took. I was second in my class, but I'm not worth much against these kids. They're better than I am, and they

know it. They're smarter, and they have houses and nice clothes, and I don't. I never did, and now everyone knows I'm so poor and dumb. I stared at my transcripts.

The teacher started filling in my schedule, and that's when I cried. Looking back, I'm so glad we were alone in the room.

"I want my house back!" I was bawling. "I want to go home! I want my friends, Mama! I want to go home!"

Dad hit my shoulder gently.

"Come on," he said, but I don't remember his exact words. I think he said, "Stop, so we can make the schedule."

Whatever he said, it had the same effect.

I wiped my eyes, and the teacher continued. I could tell that he felt sorry for me and my family. He put me in his own British lit class so that he could help me personally. Pity, pity, pity. I hate it, but I didn't say anything. I knew that if I tried talking, I would just cry. Mom wanted me in physics again, and I signed up for Creative Writing: Poetry. My eyes were red, and my nose was itchy. Dad handed me his handkerchief. Then he got up and left the room.

The man finished making my schedule and was checking to be sure everything was working out when my dad walked back in. His eyes were red. I think I made him cry.

A few of the other seniors walked back into the room. I felt embarrassed. I never cry, and their first real impression of me was of my red nose and blotchy face. Great. I'm so amazing

now....

The teacher finished his work, and I left the room. Mom was crying now, too. She gave me a hug, but I'd managed to stop my tears by now. No more crying. See what crying does? It makes them cry. My mom and dad don't need to cry now, not because of me. I wasn't helping like I'm supposed to.

We moved into my dorm last night. I had a private room, and I was happy. I was alone in the suite because everyone else was gone for the extended weekend – since today was Labor Day. (We always went to our camp in the Violet Canal for Labor Day... but not this year....) Mom and I had gone to Wal-Mart and bought things I need: a dark blue comforter for my bed (it was only \$20 for a whole bed set!), a trash-can; some hangers; etc. Since I had no roommate to split a price with, Mom and Dad left me to set things up in the dorm, and they went back to Wal-Mart to buy a small refrigerator so I could have milk.

They came back with it around 45 minutes later, along with a giant rug and two mini-file cabinets for my work. They set the refrigerator atop the file cabinets. It was a perfect fit. I was shocked, though. I asked how much it cost, but Mom and Dad wouldn't answer me. I knew it was a lot though. The refrigerator alone was at least \$50. I can't believe they spent so much on me now. We need this money so much for other things. I wanted to cry again. They are doing so much for me. I wish I were good enough for them. I let them down too much, and I cry. The calculator girl with the mean nose didn't cry.

My mom's parents came to help set up my room. They had come down from my aunt's in Arkansas, where they had been staying, to see me and my mom. They helped me set up my dorm room, and they hugged me a lot. My grandma said she loved me, but soon it was time for them to go.

After my parents and grandparents left that night, it scared me how quiet it was. Outside my window, two students were making out. I closed the blinds. I took my shower, alone in the suite, and I put on my pajamas: my Hannan P.E. shorts and a t-shirt. I walked on my rug – it's blue and matches my bed's comforter – and flipped one of the metal lines of the blind. They were still making out.

It was late, and I was worn out from crying, so I slipped into bed. The frame creaked a lot, and it was cold in my room. I snuggled underneath the sheets, and I held the stuffed monkey I brought with me from home. It was dark, so I turned on the desk light.

Back in bed, I cried again because I was scared and it isn't right in this place. I feel really alone, and I miss Shelby. Just by listening to the calculator girl speak, I feel stupid. I'm not worth much against these people. It's why Shelby left me for someone else. He just woke up and had stopped loving me ... and now I know why. There are so many better people than I'll ever be. Most of the other new kids are from Ben Franklin, where students are very intelligent. I don't belong here.

I need Shelby to talk to, but he doesn't really care about me anymore. He says he does, but why did he stop loving me? Was I so bad? I'm not emotional or pumped full of estrogen and Harlequin romance, but I let myself need him so much ... and I need him a lot right now. He said I was selfish for needing someone when everyone is

hurting, but he doesn't understand. I'm trying to hard to be here for everyone, but why is it that no one is here for me?

I woke up on Monday, and I went to the auditorium like I was supposed to. New students received the final copies of schedules and then books. After that was done, I went back to the dorm. Mom and Dad had bought me a wireless card for my old laptop, and now I could connect to the internet. I signed online, and it felt nice talking to people I know, especially my best friend. I'm glad he's trying to be here for me, but he lives in Texas and it's hard. I'm glad he's there for me, though. No one else is, and things are just getting worse. I wish he were here, though.

I was called to the office about an hour after I'd come back from the auditorium. I thought it was to collect a book or something, but when I got there, one of the workers said to me, "You have a roommate coming in. Sorry 'bout that."

I'd asked to be alone....

I'm so grateful they took me in, and I know I shouldn't have been making demands, but I can't sleep around other people! I walked back to my room really nervous. I was still tired. How was I going to get to sleep now? I decided that all I could do was try, and when my roommate came in – from Ben Franklin – I tried being really nice.

Her name is Agata, and she and her parents are from Poland. I've only known her today, but she seems like the other Ben Franklin girls here. Maybe a bit nicer than they all are, but she's still uptight and speaks as if she's a diplomat. I'm just her roommate. She doesn't need to speak to me formally, does she? I speak eloquently when I need to, but I'm her roommate now. But maybe I'm supposed to speak this way all the time, too. Maybe then I can be like Becca and be smart. My nose can turn upward, and my hair can turn brittle, brittle brown. My parents could then be proud of their daughter.

I don't know what to do. I'm really tired right now, but it's almost three in the morning now. I tried sleeping, but I can't do it. My roommate's fast asleep, though. Apparently, she can adjust well. Tomorrow I have my first classes. I'm going get into bed. Maybe listening to some music will help.

I wish this were easy. I wish Shelby were here to make things better. He always was there for me when he loved me. I kind of need him back now.

I don't think I belong in this place.

About the hurricane journals

This is the 10th installment 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 August 29.

Two printed pages, containing the first parts, appeared on Sept. 9 and 10 in *The Bristol Press*. A third and fourth ran Sept. 23 and 24. A sixth page will be in the paper tomorrow.

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

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

Wednesday, August 31, 2005 –

The Bossier City blues

Thursday, September 1, 2005 –

Raisin Bran and gypsies

Thursday, September 1, 2005 –

Back to school?

Friday, September 2, 2005 –

Wine and celebration!

September 3, 2005

Just darkness and the cry of a million crickets

September 3, 2005

Let me go home

Keep reading here and online.

Perez is still writing.

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