

THE TATTOO

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Tired, crying and still homeless

Sleepless in Natchitoches

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The Tattoo

Thursday, Sept. 8, 2:28 a.m., Natchitoches, Louisiana —

I'm really tired. It's late right now, and more than anything, I just want to crawl into my bed, beneath the blue comforter and stranger's sheets to go to sleep, but I can't. I know I can't, because every night that I've been here at LSMSA, I've tried. Instead, I wind up listening to the girls next door as they talk until three every morning, or I listen to Tenacious D and Led Zeppelin until I doze off for 20 minutes. I like dozing off. My alarm clock isn't very fun to watch.

I hate not being able to sleep around people. I think if everything wasn't piling against me, I could sleep. But in the back of my mind, I'm going down a long, long list of things that I need to get done before it becomes too late. So, instead of being able to concentrate on sleeping, I'm stressing and worrying. I can't sleep because there's so much I need to do, including hours and hours' worth of schoolwork that needs to be completed so that maybe I can catch up in this school and learn what I've missed because of Katrina.

I had physics today, and my self-esteem is as low as ever. All the refugee students are behind. We don't have any idea of what the teacher is explaining to his regular students, half of whom are failing. Great. The physics teacher is making the new students make up all the homework we've missed, and that's a big worry in my mind. I don't know how to do the problems. I've missed too much, and my brain isn't made for physics work.

2:36 a.m. I need to do those physics problems by tomorrow. I've gone to tutoring twice for him, but I don't really understand. It's too advanced for me. I'm not very bright in this school. My pretty, little light bulb went dim quite some time ago. I don't know the basic formulas to turn them into the complex ones needed to get the word problems done.

My other classes aren't as bad, though. I don't need to work as hard in them to catch up. British literature is fun. I really love English. I love reading and wondering how the writer sat when he or she wrote it. Was he sitting upright, hunched over? Did she have a leg curled under her as she wrote? See, these are the kind of things I think about. Was Shakespeare smiling when he wrote Sonnet 73 or was he sad? Maybe, one day, a little girl will think those questions about me because I still want to be a writer more than anything.

American history is my favorite class. My teacher is absolutely amazing. His lectures are great, and taking notes for them is actually fun. The teacher is understanding, too; he's making sure I have time to get things done for my other classes instead of drowning me in makeup work like most of the others are doing. I hope I don't let him down because I'm trying really hard to make it work here.

Since I'm back in trigonometry, a class I already took, math is unbelievably simple for me. I love this feeling. They are learning trigonometric functions, and as the teacher wrote problems on the board, it felt amazing because I knew exactly what to do. I haven't known what to do in math since I first learned addition! After subtraction hit, it went dashing downhill. I'm enjoying math class for the moment, although it still stings how I should be in calculus.

3:51 a.m. I still can't sleep. My roommate has gotten friendlier, but it's still really awkward between us, I think. She's taking over the refrigerator my mom and dad bought me, bringing her own food in. She didn't even ask. She brought nasty boiled eggs and yogurt and tea. There's barely any room in the refrigerator for my milk. Mom even took out the shelf when she bought it for me so that I could just fit a gallon jug, but then my roommate brought all of her things and there's no room for a gallon anymore. I feel like I'm letting down my parents because of this. They spent so much money on the refrigerator because they love me and want me to be okay here, and I can't even use it. I don't want to disappoint them.

I haven't eaten anything in a long while, either. I snack on those cereal packs from the hotel when I'm doing my homework or studying, but that's it, really. Frosted Flakes make physics a little easier. There's no time to go and eat a full meal. I'm constantly busy, and there's so much work to do. There's just no time to do it.

No one else seems to care here, no one else besides me. I'm not the only one here because of the hurricane, but the others seem to be dwelling on other things. Maybe that's okay for them, though. Most of them have houses and money and carpet to go back to once the roads open to them again. I don't, and that's really obvious.

The other day, I was sitting on the steps of the stairwell inside, waiting to go to class. Two other girls were there — new, hurricane girls. I'm pretty sure both were from Ben Franklin. The father of one of the girls was there, too, and the three were talking. I sat there on the step, listening, dressed in my Hannan P.E. shorts and my first refugee shirt. It's orange and has 4-H written across the front. I was wearing my gray tennis shoes (which I had to tape yesterday to keep them together!). The girls were talking to the man about the dorm; apparently, the two girls were roommates.



Michel Lee / The Tattoo

I sat there on the steps and listened as one of the girls begged her daddy to buy her and her roommate nice, new pillows for her dorm, pillows soft and black, she said. I listened as her daddy agreed instantly.

I wasn't really shocked, just sad. Don't they understand what's happened? I mean, there I was listening to their talk, dressed in a stranger's shirt and shoes with tape on them. I'm not ashamed of the person I am, not when it comes to this. I love my shoes, and the shirt was clothing on my back. Why should I complain? I have one pillow in my room. It's not soft or nice or black, but it's new because we hardly own anything from before anymore.

My parents made me work hard to get the things I wanted. They gave me points for good grades, and I could get things with those points. I earned things. I had to stop sucking my thumb when I was young to earn Lego pieces to play with. I know what it's like to work for something, to earn it. Maybe that's why, thinking about home, it hurts so much to know that it's gone. The things I worked for and earned are gone.

Black pillows. Soft, she said. Nice. New. It's really dark in this room at night, and Agata speaks Polish in her sleep. The internet shuts off at midnight, which is irritating. I miss talking to my best friend. He's trying so hard to be here for me. He's the only one. I wish he were at the school, just for a little while. Then it could get better. I could have someone here to talk to instead of being alone.

Everyone is an overachiever here, and everyone is out for himself. I'm all for Machiavelli, but here, it's unreal. We, the refugee students, are over three weeks behind in studies, and in physics, I honestly have no idea if I'll be able to catch up. The teacher offers tutoring, but in class, he doesn't even acknowledge us. But I copy the notes like a good girl, and I hope something inside makes it click into place. No such luck.

I asked a girl next to me in physics class if I could see her work for the first homework from the beginning of the year. I told her I was really clueless about what to do. She stared at me for a long moment, a blank look on her face. Seconds passed before she started looking literally appalled with me. "No," she told me flatly. "No, I can't let you see my work."

Fine. Whatever. I'm only three weeks behind and HOMELESS. But, hey, whatever. Maybe I'm the odd duckling here, but this place isn't right.

What made it even worse, though, was the fact that after class, when we were all leaving the room, I heard her telling her friend, "Can you believe that new girl? She asked to have my old homework!"

God, why do they all have to be this way here? I'm not the only one who notices this. The other new students do, too, mostly the few of us not from Ben Franklin. I miss Hannan and my friends there so much. At Hannan, things were different. Students knew each other and teachers knew students. Life was better there. Teachers interacted with us. Instead of girls snapping when asked for homework, teachers would joke and ask, "So, Sam, what did you and Jenny Mae get for the answer to number six?" Life was happy with Hannan and my friend, Jenny Mae. At Hannan, we all had a relationship with each other, and it was good. Here, people hardly know each other, and it feels so funny sitting in a class with people who don't even care to know me.

I'm trying to make it work in this place, but it's so hard. Mom and Dad absolutely love living in Provençal, and I know it would be better for them if I stay here at LSMSA. I'm really trying, and I want them to know that. I'm tired of letting people down and not being good enough. I just wish my friends were here with me. I'm tired of being miserable in this place alone.

I have the note Shelby wrote me on my desk, the one I held as we evacuated and left home. I was looking at it earlier when I was sitting on my bed. The edges are worn now because I've

kept it hidden in my purse. It's not straight and crisp anymore. It's a flat, cheap pillow; it's a shoe with tape holding it together. It's not new and nice and soft. I've looked at my note a few times since this started, but the person that wrote it isn't here anymore. My Shelby, the one that felt something for me, is really gone, and I'm alone in this horrible mess.

I called Shelby just the other day. I called him, and I was lucky because the call went through. My roommate was gone, and I let it ring. Shelby was always there for me when he loved me. He promised he always would be. Ring, ring. He answered his phone, and we talked a little before I broke down and cried. I cried and I cried, but it wasn't my Shelby who listened on the phone. He's changed so much from the person I knew and loved. I wish the old one were back, but when his voice didn't even change or soften as I cried and hurt there on the phone, I knew that deep down, he stopped caring about me. Just like that. Flip the switch, turn off the light.

He says he's here, but he's not here for me in the way I need him to be, and right now, I'm looking at the note he wrote me back when times were happy, and it doesn't really mean anything anymore. *I'm here for you whenever you need me.* I'm so tired of crying alone.... I wish I could make him understand or help him turn back to the person he was. I miss when he was there for me and made things better just by believing I'm someone special, someone worth loving.

I still can't sleep, but I'm exhausted and I want to sleep. *You should get some rest, ok?* Circles are dark, dark, dark under my eyes. I look in the mirror in the mornings, and every day I wonder where I went off to, where I found a place to hide. *I love you, baby girl.* I'm going read the next chapter for American history class now.

Hello, Puritans. Goodnight, baby girl.

Hitting the road, again

Tuesday, Sept. 13, 9:12 p.m., Provençal, Louisiana —

I'm leaving LSMSA. After my parents saw how exhausted I was when I came home this past weekend, I think they realized what the school was doing to me, as hard as I'm trying to balance everything. I slept the whole weekend, and when Sunday came for me to go back, I didn't want to at all. I wanted to stay in the small, cramped camper and sleep for a few more days ... or forever.

I promised my dad that I'd keep trying this week, but I asked them to look for another school, just in case. Mom told me that I didn't need to go back if I didn't want to, and even though my dad agreed with her, I knew that he wanted me at LSMSA because I'd get a good education and I'd have a place to stay, no matter what.

This morning, Mom called and said that St. Thomas Aquinas School in Hammond, Louisiana had accepted me. I'd learned from my friend Chuckie that there were some Hannan people there. Mom told me I needed to be there by 11:30 tomorrow morning because they wanted to make my schedule and get me started in my classes.

It's so hard keeping up with the pace of everything since the hurricane. So many decisions are being made in a second's time, and I'm wondering how long we can go before making a wrong decision this way.

I went into the dorm room, singing that I get to leave. My roommate stared at me, but I didn't care. She was buying my refrigerator from us; let her stare at me in any way that pleases her. I was happy to leave, as nice as the teachers have been to me. My service hour director and I bonded a lot today while I was doing work in her office. We have the same MP3 player, and we talked about music and traveling and things like that. I think she was sad I was leaving, and I like her a lot. I'm going to email her and hope we keep in touch. She said to never stop dreaming of traveling. Her husband is really nice, too. He gave me a gift when I told him I was leaving, even though he doesn't even have me as a student. It's a fossil, and he put it in the palm of my hand: 250 million years old. I love things like this. I was astonished. I almost cried there in the office, and my service hour director came and gave me a giant hug.

Mom and I stripped my dorm room down to nothing, not that there was very much to strip. We're planning on giving the file cabinets to the lady who owns the property my parents have been staying on. She has a business, and she can use them.

I'm so happy to be out of LSMSA, but I don't mean that in a horrible way. I liked the teachers, but so many of the students were petty and cruel. I couldn't handle the hurricane, being so behind in schoolwork, the people, and the dorm all at once, and it was taking a big toll on me. I feel terrible for letting my mom and dad down, not to mention all of the people who worked so hard to get me into the Louisiana School, but I'm sorry. I hope they know that.

I'm still really tired, and now I'm in the camper, clean and in pajamas. Mom and I have to get up early tomorrow to be in Hammond. It's a long drive, so I'm going to get some rest. Dad is going to be staying behind in Natchitoches for a day or so more to handle business here.

After that, we're back to the gypsy life, in the camper and on the road.

Guilt and doubt

Friday, Sept. 16, 8:47 p.m., Ponchatoula, Louisiana —

My family is together again in another location: Ponchatoula, Louisiana, hours away from where we were before in Natchitoches, and I'm feeling guilty now for not being able to make boarding school work for me. This is the first time I have ever run away from something in my life, but I admitted defeat. In the aftermath of letting the white flag wave, I feel so much guilt. Already, my parents are both saying how much they loved Natchitoches and how they miss the people we were staying with. I feel terrible.

We're living on the lot that used to belong to our friend's grandmother. There's a house here, but it's unlivable. Windows are broken and tiles are off of the walls. There is mold and rooms that are unfinished. The three of us are living in the camper, and it's tight and Mom becomes frustrated easily. I don't have internet, and I miss talking to my best friend, but when night comes around, I can sleep.

I think that it might be better here. School is better here at least, and I'm happier in this place than I ever was at LSMSA. Here, I have some friends from my old school, and even though I was never really close with any of them, it's comforting looking around and seeing something familiar. Besides faces, nothing is familiar these days: not the uniform I have to wear, not the scent of the hallways, not even my own bed. It's all foreign, but that's okay because I can get through this. The eye of the hurricane passed over my home, but I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere.

I only have four classes a semester, but they're an hour and a half each. I'm in calculus now, with two of my friends from Hannan. I'm in physics, too, but I understand what we're doing now. I'm learning the basics I hadn't been taught at LSMSA. I'm taking journalism now, and I'm still in American history. My classes aren't hard yet, but I've only been here a few days. I hope this works out and that my parents can be okay here. I feel so guilty because I know that I'm the reason we're here. I just hope this move is worth it in the end.

About the hurricane journals

These are installments 11, 12 and 13 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 Aug. 29.

Five printed pages, containing the first 10 parts, appeared on Sept. 9, 10, 23 and 24 in *The Bristol Press*. A fifth ran Thursday.

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.

Keep reading here and online. Perez is still writing.

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