

## THE TATTOO

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## Seeing my house after Katrina

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I saw Bambi on the road today. Pretty brown coat like my pretty brown carpet. I saw him lying there, but he wasn't alive anymore. Dead deer on the road, and nothing more. Drive on by. We had to move to the right side of the road so that we wouldn't roll over him in our black Ford truck. Poor little Bambi.

See, they said to go back for closure and nothing more than that: no clothes you left behind, no quilt your grandmother had made for you. No dress, no books. Closure instead. Go back to put the mess Katrina made behind you. It would be bad inside, they said, and hard to see, hard to believe. What you go to see will not be the place you left behind.

I knew what they said. I heard it just fine. Too many people were saying it; it's hard not to hear. I understood, but when my uncle called last night, asking my dad if he wanted to get into the parish, I knew I was ready to go. Somehow, I just felt ready — more ready than most people could feel, and from what I know now, that's true. I was ready, and because of that, I went home.

It's funny seeing that typed: I went home.... Home to my parish, home to my street, home to my own house. But it wasn't home. Home isn't really there anymore, and in my mind, I can't really remember coming home from my school, pulling the car into the gate, and throwing my backpack on the floor. I can't remember it, but I saw my house. I saw my gate. I saw where I used to put my backpack after school. Now, I'm sitting in a bed that's not my own, and I think of my bed. I touched it today, but I couldn't sit down on it. It flipped completely over, you see. Box springs and all.

Dad didn't want me to go, but my mom managed to get him to agree. I'm lucky. Many parents aren't bringing their children back to see their homes right now. Sights too bad for them to see, smells too bad for them to smell. I think that's true for a lot of people, even adults who think they're strong enough to see, to smell, but I was ready for the experience. I didn't cry.

We met my Uncle Wayne in the Applebee's parking lot at eight this morning. He was a bit late, but he wasn't complaining. He had gotten us permission to get into the parish, special permission, and we were all grateful. He came, and for a long time, he told us stories of St. Bernard and what the hurricane did to it.

He was in a flatboat the day after Katrina hit. In Arabi, he and his brother and a few others went around in their boats, plucking people from their own rooftops. Streets weren't streets anymore. It was all a lake with little peaks of Atlantis sticking up above the water.

My uncle told us of how he brought the people he saved to the courthouse in the parish, but the officials there said to take the people somewhere else — no room in the inn. My uncle told them no, told the people to get off the boat anyway. He made trips into the night, saving people from my parish, while everyone else sat there in the courthouse. He lost only one person, a boy my age who fell into the water. My uncle grabbed for him, but the boy didn't come back up. After, he said, some of the police broke into the Wal-Mart storehouse and started looting in the parish. It's amazing what a crisis can do.

My uncle was our escort into the parish, and my parents and I followed him down debris-covered roads and past blockades in my dad's black pickup truck. There was hardly anyone on the road as we drove. In some places we had to go against the traffic or off of the road itself to avoid fallen trees or still-standing water. We drove down the road, and I took pictures of homes that were destroyed and boats flipped over. Grass was growing in cars that had been left behind, and, on the side of the road, we drove past a dead deer.

"He drowned," Dad said. The radio was on,



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On the road to St. Bernard Parish.

and callers were talking about insurance and FEMA. No one was talking about Bambi. Poor Bambi.

We visited my uncle's nursing home first, and in the distance, over the levee, Lake Pontchartrain was beautiful. Inside the nursing home, though, it was a disaster. Debris was on the floor. Some things were wet from where the rain had come in through the missing roof. Vandalism had caused so much damage, and my dad, my uncle, and uncle's friend Neil carried guns with them as they walked through the nursing home.

We visited one lady's room that the burglars had broken into. The locks on her things had been busted open, and her clothes and belongings were everywhere, thrown across the floor of the room. My uncle told us she was an artist. He showed us a painting she had done, and I thought it was lovely.



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My room, after Katrina, in my family's home in St. Bernard Parish.

After a while, we left the nursing home, and we entered St. Bernard, entered home. It was eerie being there, one of only a few cars on the road. Wendy's signs were bent. The pavilion on Sonic had collapsed. Mud was caked everywhere on the ground. Things were brown and gray, not green as they used to be. It was like I stepped into some other reality. This wasn't the St. Bernard I remembered.

We drove down St. Bernard Highway, and we passed the library where my mom used to work. The glass had all been busted in, and the gutters had fallen. Further down the road, the top of the Grove of Trees was gone, and sunlight rained down, lighting up the road. The street had never been so bright from daylight ever before. The leaves had always kept it shaded. Now, the trees were nearly bare.

We turned into my neighborhood, and it was strange. Usually, I see green. I remember always seeing green: green grass, green bushes, green shrubs and trees. Now, the salt water had killed all of those things. It was brown now, an old, dry brown.

Dad stopped the truck in the middle of the street, and the three of us spilled out. My uncle did the same and walked towards my dad. All of us looked at the house. Symbols from military units were spray-painted on my front door and bricks. A power line was down in my driveway, the cord sticking up to about my waist. The automatic gate my dad had worked so hard on had been cut so that people could get in. My garage door was bent in the corner. Limbs were down on my parents' wedding tree, the oak they had planted on their first anniversary. The bushes my dad loved were brown, dead and old.

My dad and uncle went into the house first, and I looked around the street. No one was there. Mud was caked onto the ground, broken pieces that had dried. They crunched beneath my feet. I put on my black rubber boots, and I stuffed a pair of yellow gloves into my pocket. It was hot, and in my side yard, our air conditioner unit was lying on its side.

My uncle and my dad came out, flashlights still in their hands. Uncle Wayne looked at my mom and said to her, "It is not that bad." He stressed the words carefully, but when mom walked onto the porch and looked through the front room door, I knew she wasn't expecting what she saw. I was.

The smell was horrible. Mold and rotten food and mud scents mixing together. My toy box was on its side, and my old toys had spilled out onto the floor. Dad had built that toy box for me when I was little. He had put a safety catch on it because he didn't want the lid to fall and hurt me. When I was little and Mom and Dad used to play games with me, Mom and I hid in it once for hide-and-seek. The wood was smooth, and I used to sit on it when I was young and practice my flute. Now it was just broken, like everything else.

Our piano was turned over, and I moved close. My black boots were stepping on papers and slick mud and pictures. I touched the piano, my hands ungloved. The tops of the black keys had been sheared off. I don't know how it could have happened. I tried pressing down on one of the keys, but there was no sound. I didn't really expect one.

In the living room, the entertainment center — the one Dad had made for the new television — had fallen face down into the ground. The television was still in its place, but the speakers of my parents' old stereo had been crushed. I couldn't get through with all the debris. It was unnerving looking down and realizing I was stepping on things once precious to us. I tried to avoid stepping on my mom's pictures, but there was no room to walk. Furniture was barring my path, and finding my way out was a maze.

I walked outside again and to the back door. There was a refrigerator in the breezeway, on its back. It looked familiar, so I moved closer. It was our old refrigerator. Mom and Dad had had it for 20 years, before it finally broke this past summer. Just before the hurricane, we had put it out for the garbage collectors to take, leaving it there on the street. Mom had pushed it on its side before we left. It had ended up back in our breezeway.

On the ground, there was a nectarine. It was rotten, mushy and brown. I stepped next to it

and opened the screen door. The heavy wooden one was lying flush against the doorway. Our love seat was in the kitchen, and a laundry basket was on top, the sheets my mom had washed before we left still folded neatly inside. It hardly looked touched. I took a few steps inside. Our table was split in two, and I saw an ice cream carton on the floor.

The carpet in the den was ripped up. It looked wet and nasty, and the mud clung to the bottom of my boots. Our sofa was where our love seat had been, tipped over on its back. I walked to the hall. There was mold growing everywhere on the walls. It was as if we had put up some demented circle-pattern wallpaper for fun. One of my mom's shoes was in the hall, but it was covered in fuzzy mold. Small branches, sticks, and twigs were everywhere in the house. The door to the office was split in two, but I couldn't see in. That wasn't important. I wanted to see my room most of all.

My door was open, waiting for me like always, so I walked right in. Nothing was in its right place. My bed had completely flipped over, and my grandma's quilt was trapped underneath. My bookshelf, the nice one my dad had made with the rounded edges, had fallen over. Papers were on my floor, but I couldn't tell what they might have once been. My roll-top desk had fallen over too, and my night stand was on its side. My chest-of-drawers was face up on the floor. My tall lamp had fallen over. A dress I was going to wear for my senior Ring Mass was still hanging from the shelf above my closet. My old figurines and stuffed animals on those shelves were looking at me as I walked in. I wondered if they were mad because I had left them. I would be.

I knelt down and touched the quilt on my bed, but it felt stiff and old. I don't have a bed anymore. I've slept in too many different houses, hotel beds, and now a trailer, to own one bed. Gypsies don't have their own beds.

I put on my gloves, and I walked through the hall to my bathroom. I shined the flashlight and looked on the counter where I had left my senior ring. Ponytail bands and boxes I had left in my bathroom were scattered throughout the house. I didn't expect my senior ring to be there, but it was. Relieved, I turned to bring it to my mom, and I saw all the bathroom tiles that had broken off and were lying cracked and shattered on the floor.

My mom slipped the ring into her pocket, and I walked back to my room. I was dripping with sweat, and flies were buzzing everywhere in my house. Back in my room, I saw that my dresser was lying against my bed, the mirror on the ground. I felt something beneath my boot, so I looked down. Fanned open and frozen in shape was one of my old favorite books, *Servant of the Shard*. Good ol' Salvatore. I had been wanting to read it at LSMSA. There it was, waiting for me ... and I had stepped on it.

Apologetically, I picked it up — it smelled horrible, just like everything else — and I set it on my dresser's side. Okay. Let's get this done.

I knew what I wanted to see. I knew, because for some reason, I could never imagine it being less, being damaged. In my mind, I always had pictured it the same. It couldn't be different in my mind. I just couldn't imagine it. My pink dress.

I climbed over my bed to get to the extra closet my mom kept the suitcases in. That's where my dresses had all been hanging. The nightstand was blocking the door from opening, along with piles and piles of random things. Old board games. My checkers game, the one with the wooden board and pieces. My bedside lamp. Papers, books.

But don't tell me I'm not determined when I want to be. Cat Woman and Paul Bunyan rolled into one. I found a way to balance myself on the overturned bed and move my nightstand away. It was heavy, but now I could open the door a few inches. I struggled moving some of the things there, but I knew if I stopped to look at what I was throwing to the side, it would take longer to see my dresses and it would hurt looking at what I lost.

It took awhile, and I was dripping with even more sweat by the time I started pulling on the door, tugging hard to open it. Things were still blocking it, but I pried my way open. It was dark, but I could see the even darker circles of the

growing mold. My dresses were still hanging there, some in dress bags, some just loose. I took them all, and I managed to get them out of the closet, then out of the house. They were heavy, and it was difficult carrying all of them high above me, careful that they would not touch the muddy ground.

I went into the laundry room, the smell worse because of the outside freezer, and I grunted as I hooked them all onto the railing near the washer and dryer. I pushed the older dresses aside, and I was gasping for breath as I lifted the plastic bag and looked at my pink dress.

My pink dress.  
It was fine, and I started yelling for my mom to come and see. My dress was fine! I looked at my other new dresses, the ones in the bags, and they were still beautiful, too. They were all wet and slightly dirty at the bottom, and all of them smelled terrible. I smiled. Dry cleaners. Simple. I picked snails off of my older dresses, the ones that had not been in the bags. They could be cleaned too. It was amazing!

I was eager to find more things after that. I went around the house, a scavenging gypsy. Like Santa Claus, I threw things into my black garbage bag, my sack. A CD that could be cleaned, a cross that looked better with orange rust than it did before without. An owl necklace I had used for decoration on my wall. The bow my friend Jenny Mae had put on my birthday present for my Sweet Sixteen. Into the bag, back out the chimney. These were the things that mattered to me.

My dad had been afraid his boat had sunk in the garage, but it shook alive when he started it. My mom's quilts had been folded in a box, one of the few boxes that water hadn't soaked. Photo albums were wet, but the pictures inside the plastic sleeves could still be seen. Closure? Maybe. Some closure, some memories in clean boxes in the back of our black Ford truck.

Despite the few things we found safe, it was hard going through our house, looking at nearly everything that couldn't be saved. My baby pictures were distorted. My dad's framed college diploma was wet, and there were so many things we simply couldn't identify.

There was cream cheese in my bedroom, ice cream cartons in the den. Things I had left on the top of my bookshelf were now in the far end of my parents' room. The counters in our bathrooms had warped from the water and the pressure. Clothes were moldy and moist. Books were in a corner in my room, covers separated from pages, everything ruined. All my books.... My owl puppet that had always watched my room for the bedpost was on the floor near my closet, wet and nasty. My owl's bright eyes weren't bright anymore. It looked as if the puppet had cataracts, cloudy eyes no longer watching from my bedpost.

When we left that afternoon, we were hot and smelled terrible. There was a rainbow of stains on my clothes. The bed of the truck was filled with boxes and crates containing things we were



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Our family home in St. Bernard Parish. The front door is marked by rescuers to indicate the house had been searched.

just hoping, praying we could maybe save. But in one of those garbage bags, my pretty dresses were waiting for me, and even though I might not have a prom or a date or anything, that dress still meant something.

And as we drove away, seeing my parish destroyed, I thought about walking around my house and seeing things on the floor that were part of something old, like things Shelby had given me, things I had once treasured.

I realized that it didn't really matter anymore, any of it. If this has taught me anything, it's that I know the people who are here for me and I know how much I need them and appreciate what they do for me. I know that, and seeing a faded picture of me and Shelby trapped beneath my bookcase, it really didn't matter anymore, because that's the past and the past is just inside my head now.

So drive up the road, past the Bambi on the ground. It's back to this gypsy life, back in a different place, a different bed each night.

I'm glad I have my best friend now, and even though I yell at him, I'm glad he's there for me. I don't know if I'd be okay without him, and I'll never be able to be the friend he's being for me.

When he tells me he's there for me, I realize that it can be okay in the end because I didn't lose the things that matter. I lost papers and stories and clothes and parts of my past, all things a part of me will miss for a long time, but I didn't lose the people that matter to me. I'm scared I'm depending on them too much. I know I love them and I need them, more than they can imagine, because it's a hurting feeling knowing I'm sitting in this strange bed and smelling the mold and mud still clinging to me. I'm glad they are here for me now, because they make me happier than I've been in a long time, and all we ever need in the world is happiness.

So, goodnight, Bambi. Sweet dreams. Sleep tight.

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