

THE TATTOO

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MAKING A PERMANENT IMPRESSION SINCE 1994

VOLUME 12 No. 28

Christmas cheer in a FEMA camper

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The Tattoo

Monday, Dec. 26, 4:44 p.m.,
Ponchatoula, Louisiana

No one can predict what happens in life. Fate is crazy like that. Sometimes, Fate makes life good, warm and sweet like freshly baked cookies. You meet people who care about you or you gain a friend. You walk through a parking lot and find a shiny penny face-up on the ground. But no matter how many good things happen, there are other times when Fate turns cruel. You lose your home in a hurricane or, worse, you lose yourself and become hurt and confused.

Christmas was yesterday. I played my flute for Midnight Mass with the church choir. Even though he had to go to work early the next morning, Dad came to church with my mom and listened to me play. I had a few solos, and when I played, the people in the pews below me turned and looked up at the choir loft. They turned to look. They turned to watch me play.

We came home after Mass and opened a few presents, because Dad would be working on Christmas Day. Mom had bought me the first season of *Jonny Quest*, and Dad and I were both really excited about it. Mom and Dad fell asleep on the sofa while I watched *Jonny Quest* until 3:15 in the morning. Then, Dad woke up and left because he needed to be at work for 5:30 — and work for him is back in St. Bernard, over an hour away.

I have been looking back lately, thinking about everything that's happened. In a way, it's a frightening, statistical wonder. In the months since the weekend of the hurricane, I have lived in four separate locations: a house, a hotel, a dorm room and a FEMA camper. I have been enrolled in three different schools. At night, I sleep on a sofa, a space heater plugged into the wall beside me. I drive on the interstate to get to my new school,



Samantha Perez / The Tattoo

The Perez family Christmas tree, inside their camper

where the people around me do not know me. This is my senior year of high school.

I come home in the late afternoon, and I try to write stories of my own, because stories take people away from bad things. I write, and I write, and I am happy. I'm always tired lately, too worn out from everything. It's stress, I guess. Maybe that's why I am always getting sick here. Whatever the reason, by the middle of the evening, I'm exhausted. I take my shower at night. Without fail, I run out of hot water, and the cold water that comes in its place is frigid.

When I sleep, I keep my laptop and my MP3 player next to me because I'm afraid that the camper might burn down, and then I would have nothing left to help me keep going.

Like I said, Fate is crazy. Yet, in spite of everything that has happened, I am happy.

I'm not a fool. I know that everything that has happened to me in the past year has made me better, stronger, wiser. I can take more disappointment and hurt than I ever could. I can let the bad fates roll down my back. I dodge punches, and I throw some of my own.

This time last year, I was happy, in a relationship with someone I cared for. Last Christmas Eve, Shelby came to my house. We exchanged Christmas presents beneath my tree, and he said that he loved me. The next day, it snowed. It actually snowed in St. Bernard. White flakes fell down from the sky, and in my front yard, I made a little snowman. That Christmas, this time last year, was wonderful.

I was ready for things then, but I wasn't throwing any punches. I had stopped growing stronger while I was dating

Shelby. I lost my independence slowly, and I did not even realize that it was gone until it was too late. A trait I always prided myself in, my independence, had slipped away, and I had done nothing to stop it.

I guess that's why I was so bad off when he left me. I wandered around for months, trying to find myself again, find the person I was before him. It certainly took awhile to remember who I really am inside. It was not easy, but I have no regrets.

The relationship I did have so long ago and all the things that happened to me this past summer have made me a stronger person. I am wiser than I was before. I understand more, and I won't forget the mistakes I made. I will use them, instead, and continue along my way.

The hurricane was unexpected, a fine twist Fate sent

my way. I can remember sitting in the passenger seat of my mother's car, looking out of the window. It was still dark because the sun hadn't risen yet. We had just finished yelling at each other because she had thrown the things I had packed on the floor. I was angry. I remember looking out and seeing the lights of other cars on the road, and I remember wanting to cry. Wanting. I didn't cry. I kept going.

That's what I do. I find a way, and I keep going. What else is there to do? I've learned to not get attached to things, because with a snap of Fate's delicate fingers, those possessions can be wiped away. Maybe that's why I sleep with my laptop nearby. I don't like letting Fate hold all the cards. I want to make my own Fate. I want a part in creating my future.

Deep down, I am worried about college. Tuition is expensive, and I'm working hard to apply for scholarships. I guess I don't want to be alone wherever I go, but I know I can't let my friends change my decision. Everything around me, even my friends, is unreliable lately. I am too, I know. It's an effect of the storm. No one knows what is going to happen. Definite plans are made in the very last minute.

I don't know where I will go for college, but I know what I want to do. I'm going to work hard and double major with English and journalism. Doors were opened to me after the hurricane that I did not know existed. I don't want to close those doors.

I've known what really matters in life for a very long time: just happiness. Sometimes, though, I forget, or it slips to the back of my mind. It's funny, because even though I run out of hot water every time I take a shower and even though I sleep on a tiny sofa next to a space heater, I am happy, and that's all that matters in life. Happiness.

I live in a snow globe. Fate shakes my world up, and the

snow falls again. A lot of the times, the snow is so thick around me, I can't see happiness or the way to reach it. That's when life gets hard. The things you depend on fail, or the life you know is blown away.

What I have learned is that there are things in life that cannot be expected, altered or ignored, and when it comes down to it, the only thing we can do is stand before the monster on our own feet. I learned that. All the things that have happened to me — the happiness last Christmas when I was loved by someone special, the hurt I felt when he left and the fear I face now when I make plans for college — have made me stronger and wiser.

I have no idea where Fate will bring me next year. I have no idea what I will look like or who my friends will be. I have no idea where I will be. In a dorm? In a FEMA camper still? I do not know, and I won't know. That's what makes life tricky. But I know that, because of the things that have happened to me, I am better prepared to face the hard times this upcoming year will bring. All I can do, and all any of us can do, is keep walking along and when a fist comes flying my way, duck. Or work some *Jonny Quest* Judo magic and fight back.

Maybe I'm just fooling myself, but right now, I am sitting on the floor of my camper. The space heater is running because I'm cold, and there's a tiny Christmas tree we bought from Target on our little table. I live in a camper, and my friends live across the state. I have no idea what to do about college and the rest of my future, but right now, I am happy. I have no idea why, but I am. I am happy!

And now, as I look back at all that has happened, I realize that this was the hardest year I have ever lived through, and, despite that, I know in my heart that I would not change a thing.

Katrina hit hard, but left this teen stronger

Since the day that Hurricane Katrina swept across Louisiana, 17-year-old Samantha Perez has chronicled her life as a refugee from a hard-hit, working class town next door to New Orleans. This is the 12th in an ongoing series of special issues of *The Tattoo* devoted to her remarkable journal, which has attracted tens of thousands of readers from across the globe to share Perez's heartbreaking tale.

All of her journal entries are online at www.ReadTheTattoo.com and we encourage readers to catch up with them there. Below are excerpts.

Aug. 29th, the Monday Katrina hit

I lived in a place called St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana, a town just southeast of New Orleans.

I say that I lived there, because I don't anymore. I don't live anywhere. Currently, I'm in a hotel room in Bossier City, four miles outside of Shreveport, La., nine hours away from my home — my home that doesn't exist. Four days ago, Friday afternoon, I had no idea that this was going to happen. I woke up Friday morning and went to school. We had a Creative Writing meeting during lunch, and my friend Jenny Mae and I went. I was elected Editor-in-Chief unopposed. Everyone knows that I'm a writer. After the meeting, we ate hotdogs for lunch in the cafeteria, but the hotdogs tasted funny — kind of chewy — so we only ate a few bites.



NASA photo

Katrina heads toward the Mississippi Delta.

That's the last time I ate.

Aug. 30th

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.

Sept. 1st

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.

Sept. 3rd

I do not belong here. I do not, I do not, I do not. I don't belong in a place like this. I am not a country girl. I'm really not a city girl, either. I'm just a Perez from St. Bernard, just like the hundreds of other Perez clan members. I do not belong in this place.

... There's no water here, and it makes me want to cry so much. I look outside the window of the trailer, and there's nothing but grass, trees, and the downward slope of the hill. There are two houses on this giant lot, as well as their trailer (which they lent to us) and our camper. We had dinner in the house farthest from the camper. The son of the lady offering us part of her home was in town from Houston, and he fixed an amazing spaghetti dinner.

We had to walk there in the dark. There are no lights at night in this place. No stars were out tonight, either. It was just dark. No lights over the river. No orange haze coming over the levee, the lights of ships in the Mississippi River just across the street. Nothing — just darkness and the cry of a million crickets.

I want to go home.

Sept. 6th

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!"



Samantha Perez / The Tattoo

The first camper the Perez family stayed in after the hurricane

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.

Sept. 17th

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.

... 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 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.

Oct. 23rd

Everyone yells. My parents fight with each other or with me. I fight back. It's hard living so confined and stressed and unknowing.

... Sometimes when the yelling starts, I go running down my new, strange street. I like how, if I run fast enough, the tears fly backwards and splatter on the ground behind you. Splatter away that person you needed, that friend you never thought would hurt you. Splatter away loneliness. Splatter away sadness.

Oct. 30th

I went to find a heavy jacket [at Target] and I was in the dressing room when my cell phone

started ringing.

I answered it, and it was Jenny Mae, my best friend from Hannan. She seemed excited, and when I asked why, she said she just saw my mom outside.

I started screaming into the phone, and I rushed out of the dressing room, hauling everything with me.

Jenny Mae saw me as soon as I stepped out of the dressing room area, and we ran to each other, screaming. Everyone stopped to watch, but that's never something Jenn and I cared about. We hugged each other, and the two of us cried right there, jumping up and down, up and down, in the middle of Target, everyone watching and smiling because, somehow, they knew.

Nov. 4th

Sometime since this ride started, I grew up on accident — something I said I never would do. Peter Pan stopped being real to me and transformed himself into the "spirit of childhood." Neverland lost a place for me, and my wishes became warped.

And it all happened one fall day when a gurgleswoosh came from the big, blue, wet thing, and it came with a cackle-cackle and a whoosh-whoosh. It blew and it blew until it flooded my house down. Whoosh.

Nov. 23rd

I stood there in the snow. It fell and flakes stayed in my hair. It was beautiful, and I know it doesn't mean anything to some people, but seeing the snow meant something special to me. Snow is from television, of happy Christmastime Hallmark movies where people are in love and happy. It means something good. It means warm cookies on Christmas morning and snowmen and Santa and reindeer. Snow is happiness, and happiness fell down from the sky, getting caught in my hair and falling on my face.

Dec. 12th

We found out about it today, this burning, burning Burn Book. A group of younger students wrote it, and we found it. In it, they wrote that they wished all of us from St. Bernard had stayed in our homes during the hurricane, stayed there to drown.



Brent Altamus / The Tattoo

Jenny Mae Shockley and Samantha Perez



Samantha Perez / The Tattoo

The Perez home

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The best teen journalism in the world. For questions, comments or to join, contact advisors Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus at (860) 523-9632.