

THE TATTOO

THETATTOO@GMAIL.COM

MAKING A PERMANENT IMPRESSION SINCE 1994

VOLUME 12 No. 8

Just darkness and the cry of crickets

By SAMANTHA PEREZ
The Tattoo

Saturday, Sept. 3, 9:09 p.m.,
Provençal, Louisiana —

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.

But this is the place I'm in, and I'm grateful, to an extent. I'm so grateful that these people are letting us stay in their yard, offering us a spare trailer and a place for our camper. I am grateful for their hospitality and kindness, but that doesn't change the fact that this is a place in which I was not made to be.

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. This morning, I finally overslept. Overslept? No, I take it back. I finally honestly slept. Good sleep, for the first time in over a week. It felt good. The first thing I knew was that Mom was shaking me. The man bringing the television was here.

I felt absolutely horrible that I was not dressed to greet him. Mr. Long came into our hotel room, 129, and put the television there on the bed. He put a remote next to it. I wanted to cry.

Why is everyone being so nice? I went over and hugged him, telling him thank you so much. Now, my parents can have the news in the camper, now they can know what's going on when they move. I can never thank Jo Lynn and the Longs, people we didn't even know, for coming to our aid. We put the television in the camper today. It was absolutely perfect!

I can never thank everyone enough for all that they are doing for me and my family. I've been making a list of those that I need to thank. As soon as I get settled in, I'm writing hundreds of thank you notes to everyone that has helped me. I'll write them, even though everyone deserves so much more.

We drove to Provençal today, a few miles outside of Natchitoches, Louisiana. It's so rural. I knew from the second that I stepped out of the car that I did not belong in this place. I smiled and hugged everyone, but looking around, I knew. This place wasn't made for me, and I was not made for it.

I slept most of the day, which I felt so guilty about. My mom and dad set up the trailer, making it home. I wasn't feeling well — my throat has been



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

Hurricane Katrina tossed these cars along a stretch of Interstate 90 on the Mississippi coast.

hurting the last few days. I think I'm starting to get sick, and I dozed off when I sat down in a giant chair. I was just that tired.

I woke up with mosquito bites all down my leg — the first thing like

to. Being a gypsy is fun for a time, but it's hard. There's no one to talk to about this. Everyone is depending on me, expecting me to be strong, but really, I need someone now.

there in the dark, dark, dark. The hisses of crickets were trumpets bringing me home.

But this isn't home. I walked in. You have to turn the handle to close the door behind you. You can't just let it swing closed. That was annoying. So many people were there. One man was tall and round and wearing a white cowboy hat. I thought of my shrimp boots at home. I miss home.

The chef was named Jeff, the man from Houston. His wife was very nice, and he was very fat. He was funny, though, and he made my plate, even though I said I would do it myself. His wife handed me the gallon of milk after she asked what I would like to drink. I poured the milk into a red, plastic cup. Our glasses at home were nice.

Jeff fixed me a large plate, and I stood at the counter and started eating. Mom and Dad came a minute later. They had taken a bit longer than I did because Mom had been crying again. Dad was hugging her when I walked into the camper to ask if they were ready. She walked over and gave me a tight hug, gripping my back and pulling me close, as if her life depending on holding me in that hug.

"You don't have to go to that school! Don't go if you are going to be miserable! I want to go home, Sam. I want you to go to Hannan and have your senior ring and graduate with your friends. I want you to be happy!"

She cried, and I said it was okay. Be strong. No tears. Keep them inside. Roll with the punches. Punch, punch. Ow.

So they were late to the dinner. I sat on a stool at the wooden table in their dining room. Jeff and his wife, Kristy and Jean, and Mom sat with me. Mom's eyes weren't red or puffy. I wondered why, because she had been crying so hard just a few minutes before.

I ate only half of the plate. I haven't been eating much this summer, and now, I've only eaten those cereal packs I stole every morning in the free breakfast. Ah, the good life.

The spaghetti was amazing. Mom loved it, too. She said Jeff should stay and not go back to Houston. Jeff laughed. He took a bite of his own spaghetti. It was a big spoon, but I thought he was going to eat it, too. Jeff is nice though, so I didn't smile when I thought of him eating the spoon.

I left the dinner after I finished my milk, said I was going to take my shower early and not get in the way tonight. I haven't taken my shower yet. I need to. I don't want to get in the way.

I'm going to take my shower now, because that's what I need to do. I'll be moving into the dorm tomorrow, sharing a bathroom with five other girls, six of us all together. I'm so nervous about starting school. I wish someone were here for me to talk to.

I really need someone here. I don't want to be a rock. I don't want to be an island. I was both at a time, but then I worked hard and made a happy life. Where did it go?

Oh, yeah. I remember. Katrina washed it away.

I miss home, you know. I miss my house, my home, my life there.

home in this place. So far, it's the only.

I miss home, and it's really starting to show. I miss coming home and having to climb over my fence, school skirt swaying, because I left the gate clicker inside the house. I miss my door, wooden engravings deep and old, giant curly flowers in the wood. I miss the thick brown carpet. I miss my bed. I miss my desk. I still remember the scent it had when I opened the cabinet door, the warm smell of my computer's tower mixing with the comforting smell of wood. I miss so many things about my home. We don't even know how long it'll be before they'll let us back into the parish, to save what we can and realize all that we lost.

There's a dead wasp on the carpet here, just a foot away. I'm scared of bees.

Can I go home now? I really want

A part of me misses Shelby still, but so much has happened. He's something in the Old World now, something that was washed away in the hurricane, something that cannot be salvaged, like paper, wet and faded, after soaking in 13 feet of water for five days.

What day is it? It's really just a blur. I miss home, you know. I miss my house, my home, my life there. Hide it inside. Be strong for everyone else. That's what everyone needs now. They need someone to depend on. I won't let them down. No tears. Want to cry. Can't cry. Won't cry. Keep on going. Day to day. Move in tomorrow. So very scared. Keep inside. Mom needs to think I'm okay. Otherwise, she'll cry. Be strong. Keep it going. Roll with the punches. Punch, punch. Roll with it, baby. Ride the tiger.

Spaghetti dinner. I made my way

Let me go home

Saturday, Sept. 3, 10:30 p.m.,
Provençal, Louisiana —

A wasp in the shower. Scared of bees. Buzz, buzz. Toilet broke. Gurgle, buzz, buzz. Dirt on the floor. And the water once came from a well. Can I please go home now? Please? I don't want this anymore. I don't belong here. Everyone knows it. I wasn't made for this! Let me go home. Please, bring me back to the water, to the river, to the canals. Bring me back to the marsh where I belong, where my family lives down the street, not across the country. Bring me back home, please. Please. I want home.

Parents are back from the Far Away House. Spaghetti taste on their tongue. Wipe away tears that I won't let fall. Wipe away. Buzz, buzz, gurgle from the bathroom. Can't let it show.

About the hurricane journals

These are the eighth and ninth installments 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*. A third ran in Friday's paper.

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!

Keep reading here and online. Perez is still writing.



Josh Gales / The Tattoo

A house near Bay St. Louis, Miss. after Katrina hit on August 29.

WWW.READTHETATTOO.COM

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