

If I stop breathing
By
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Here's the thing- anal sex doesn't hurt, at least not after the one thirty-seventh time you've had it done to you. By now, at the age of twenty-two, I am so used to it that it's about as painful and excruciating as a game of bridge. I just smile, breathe heavy, and pretend that I'm really into it so that all the Johnny Jackass's out there will blow their loads and I can get paid.

It's funny though, looking back on it. When I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up I never dreamed I would be would be living in a run down shit hole in the shadow of the city of Angels, hustling the street for tricks, dodging the cops and gang bangers, and whoring myself out to a variety of camera lenses in a thousand hotel rooms and other "exotic" locations. No child ever says that. I think I said I wanted to be a nurse.

But life throws sucker punches, and the only thing that keeps me sane is that I know we're all just pawns in some perverted game of chess and that nothing we do is a result of our own actions. I think if it were, I would have ended it long ago, because I never chose to end up here. I just did.

Right now, even as I think these things, a hairy Latino man by the name of Julio is behind me, thrusting himself deep within me. I've done work with Julio before, and he knows his way around my body. I think in another life we could actually have been lovers. He has a soft touch, his kisses are tender, and he's different from a lot of men I've worked with because he's kind to me, unlike so many who just blow and go.

But yet he goes on, in and out, back and forth, while I let out a scripted moan and the camera men eat this up. I desperately long for it to be over, but I know it will go on for a while. The worst thing about people who've been in the business for a few years is that they know how to control themselves, as opposed to the John's I pick up on the street who usually lose it after a minute or so.

I feel faint as a wave of nausea washes over me and my mouth is as dry as the Mojave Desert. I tremble as old memories flash before my eyes, my parents, my brothers, and my whole dreadful childhood. I desperately need a hit of sugar to cleanse my head of those images.

The camera lights flash. Our images are captured electronically, as Julio reaches around me and begins to slowly massage my genitals. My moan this time is real-I feel a brief moment of pleasure. I can't remember the last time I had sex for love, or if I ever truly have. It's one of the many nasty side effects this business has on you. Sex becomes just another job, like making refrigerators or tracking stocks. After a while the last thing you want to do is procreate with anyone, and you sell that piece of your humanity for a few dollars.

Time ticks by as I feel Julio build to climax. I arch my ass higher in the air and lay my head down on the bed in an erotic act of submission. His big bulky hands press against my shoulder muscles as he forcefully holds me in place. Julio raises, thrusts, and leans into me as we couple like a pair of high school wrestlers, then he stops, breathes in deep, and slowly lets it out. I know he's spent. Thank God.

Julio pulls out and I roll to my back and look back at Big Bill O'Grady, who is producing this little love fest. Big Bill is in this business, I think, because he couldn't find any woman who will willingly lay his fat ass. Like a rattlesnake that feeds off desert rats, Big Bill preys on us chicks that have no self-esteem or dignity in order to satisfy his hunger. Bill is as fat as he is disgusting. He rarely shaves, he has nasty, tobacco stained teeth, and smells like a boy's locker room after gym class. Bill also goes everywhere with a camera – it's his delusion that he's God's gift to erotic cinema.

"Good job, Miranda, you're such a tasty piece of ass. It's no wonder we get so many hits on our site."

I ignore his compliments. "Do you have my stuff?"

He fishes around in his trouser pockets and pulls out a small sandwich bag of white powder. "Here." He says as he tosses it to me.

I say nothing and wait for him to leave, wait for them all to leave.

"Hey senorita," Julio calls. "You wanna come to thees party, see where we end up?"

"Another time, Julio," I said. Translation: Fuck off, Julio.

I've been doing this a lot lately. I've noticed I've become more and more antisocial. If it had been two years ago, I probably would have gone out with him to some club, gotten trashed, and gotten laid. But these are different times. My soul is tired, my body has been used up, and it's getting harder and harder just to make it to the end of each day. Somehow I manage.

"Hey, Bill, if it's all the same to you I'd like to stay here tonight."

"Sure, we have the room until tomorrow morning. Just make sure to be here in case I get hungry."

I slowly nod and look back at his fat face. "Sure, I'll be here."

"That's my girl."

I figured I don't have to worry so much about Bill. I know he will spend the rest of the day on location at another set, and in the evening go back to his homemade studio to work on the editing. By the time he gets finished he'll smoke a jay and drink until he passes out. Besides he has to be as flaccid as an ex-president, anyway.

I reach down to the floor, grab my panties, and pull them on. I grab my t-shirt and pull it over my bare, firm breasts. I sit back up on the bed and wait for the crew to leave my hotel room.

One by one they all leave and I draw the curtains, submerging the room in near darkness. I walk over to my duffel bag that holds my few belongings and pull out my needle and set it on the bed. I can feel my hands start to tremble as I pour some of the white powder into a spoon and begin to cook it with a cigarette lighter. As the heroin begins to melt, I set the lighter aside, grab the needle and begin to suck it up with the syringe. When I finish I put the remainder of the powder back with the rest of my belongings and toss the burnt spoon into the bathroom sink. I toss my soft brown hair back, extend my arm, and shoot life back into my veins. I pull the needle out and let it roll onto the floor as a wave of euphoria begins to wash over me. The pain I have been carrying deep in my soul melts away, and all my scars are heal. I feel free. I feel whole. I can see memories from my early youth. I am back in the sunshine of, playing with a friend of mine, absolutely unaware of the nightmare years of my coming adolescence. My skin feels warm and a surge of relaxation washes over me. My arms and legs feel heavy as lead as I fall back against the mattress and consciousness slowly drifts away.

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Miranda isn't my real name. I've also gone by Jasmine, Candy, Cindy, Alexis, and Bambi, depending on where I was and who was asking. I don't carry I.D. It makes it too easy for the cops if I get arrested, and other than that, most people don't ask questions. If the truth has to be told, my real name is Mark Llewellyn, but when I die all they'll do is put me in a cheap casket and bury me beneath a small sign that simply reads "Jane Doe." Then everyone will simply forget that I ever existed.

My parents, Robert and Judy Llewellyn, think I'm dead. It is just as well, because they wouldn't look at me even if they knew I was alive. Robert and Judy are residents in the chiefly hypocritical town of State Center, Iowa. The towns

name is as it says as it sits more or less in the center of the vast agricultural wasteland that is Iowa. State Center isn't much more than an oasis of trees and houses lost off a lonely stretch of highway 30. The town even calls itself the Rose Capital of Iowa, which is strange, because I don't recall a lot of people there growing roses.

Like most rural towns, the people of State Center are so mind-numbingly backwards that when a beef processing plant lobbied to open there to help save the towns economy, the residents rejected it because they didn't want an influx of Hispanics moving to their safe, little white village. Most people in State Center come in two flavors: the lifers and the runners. The lifers are those sad people whose sit and wait to die like the town that surrounds them, and whose world ends at the city limits. The runners are mostly kids, looking to escape the bonds of State Center to a place with lot more excitement and a lot less corn.

In a sense, my parents belong in that town, especially Robert, who has built this perfect image within the community as a hard-working, church-going family man. But his perfect image is all just a hollow charade, and it ended as soon as he walked in the doors of our quaint little two-story, three bedroom home and began to drink.

When I was living at home, Robert and I never got along. It's not easy to love a man who runs his family like a boot camp. In a way, my older brothers Zach and David had it better. They were the ones who were the rough and tumble, naturally athletic, mischievous boys that every father is proud of. Me? I was just the sissy boy that causes most fathers to wish that their wives had just given them head on the night of conception.

Oh, Robert tried to get me to do manly things. Until I was twelve, he ritualistically forced me to play baseball. I can still remember running in from the outfield in tears because the sun had burnt my soft skin. It didn't help the fact that I couldn't hit, run, or catch a ball. One day when I was ten, after I inevitably struck out and caused our team to lose a crucial game, Robert angrily declared that no son of his would be a loser. He took me home, stood me in the back yard, placed a bat and my hand and proceeded to hurl baseballs in my direction as fast as he could throw them.

It was a pathetic sight to see, Robert screaming at me while I swung aimlessly at the bullets he chucked at me.

"Keep your eyes on the ball. No, no, choke up on the bat. Goddamn it, this isn't fucking rocket science; just fucking try to hit the goddamn thing."

The next thing I knew he rocketed a ball straight at me. I flinched. Tucked my head and tried to get out of the way of the hurtling sphere. Had I not been wearing the practice helmet he bought for me last Christmas, he probably would have killed me that day. But as fate would have it, the baseball struck the ear

guard and knocked me to the ground. The blow rung my ears and left me disoriented. In retrospect, it didn't hurt that bad, but I began to cry nevertheless. Robert just stood there, folded his arms and spit on the ground.

"Suck it up. Be a man, not a baby. You little wuss." He threw his glove and walked back in the house, leaving me bawling on the ground.

That was the first time I realized he didn't care about me. For as long as I could recall, he never took pride in anything I did. I loved to draw as a kid. I was actually good at it, but he would only take my work, look disapprovingly at it, and say something like, "Art is for girls, boys don't draw."

Still, something inside me kept waiting for the day when I could see it in his eyes, or for him to actually say he was proud of me. But it never happened, and as I laid there covered in tears and mucus I realized it never would.

By the time I was eleven, Robert had developed new and inventive ways to make my life miserable. He would often goad my brothers into tormenting me or try to get me to fight them.

"C'mon, he's pushing you." He'd say. "What are you going to do about it? Fight back, be a man. Stand up for yourself. God you're pathetic." All my brothers had to do was degrade me and they instantly had the approval from Robert I had endlessly tried to win. There was one time I tried to fight back. Zach had been pushing me repeatedly at the Robert's primal urgings. I snapped, charged at him, and tried to throw a roundhouse punch at his face. He was bigger than me, and my little punch landed softly on his chest. Zach stood there for a second, looked at me and pushed me by my sternum, sending me flying across the room.

But even though Zach tormented me, I could feel that he was at odds with what he was doing to me. It often seemed like he wore a mask whenever Robert was near, he would be the son Robert wanted him to be, loud, obnoxious, rough and totally uncaring for anyone but himself. But when Robert wasn't around he shed his mask. He was quieter, more reserve. What's more, he didn't pick on me as much. As Zach got older, he gradually began to withdraw himself from the family. He would spend the nights at his friends' houses, or stay in his room away from the rest of us.

David could care less about me, or anyone else for that matter. He would often wreck my room and sometimes break my toys. Four years older than me and fully indoctrinated in Robert's Nazi machoism, he would openly make fun of me whenever he had the chance. Each time his childish comments tore my heart to pieces.

"Hey Mark, fagsayswhat?"

"What?"

"Exactly, Fag."

“Hey Lil’ Fag.” His affectionate nickname for me. “What do you and hockey have in common? Neither of you have any balls.”

Life was already hard enough for me, yet my family felt the urge to make it even harder. I didn’t have any friends in school. Most of the boys were miniature versions of Robert and my brothers, who took great pride in teasing and publicly humiliating me. Most of the girls ignored me because I wasn’t one of them, but there were a few of them that got a kick out of calling me a sissy and a queer.

And where was Judy through all of this? Where was the woman who had given birth to me? She was usually halfway through a bottle of Southern Comfort. She drank to ease the pain and forget her horrible life. Judy had once been a Miss Iowa contestant. In her youth, she was tall and slender with natural blonde hair and stunning emerald green eyes. But those days were long behind her. Her face was now wrinkled and saggy. Her body was the shape of a spoiling pear and her golden hair now thinning and gray. She was the brutal victims of alcohol, cigarettes, childbirth and time.

I think in many ways Robert blamed her for my existence. He often yelled at her because of the things I did that didn’t jive with his idea of how a boy should act. It only got worse as I got older as their fights escalated from a war of words into an all-out living room brawl.

“You just had to have another kid, and look what that got us; well as soon as that little sissy is eighteen, he’s out of here,” I overheard him say to her one night.

“He’s not a sissy, He’s just a little shy, that’s all.”

“Shy? Huh, he’s nothing but an out-and-out wuss, and it all your fault. You smothered him too much when he was a kid.”

“I didn’t do anything different than I did with the other boys.”

“No, you’re right. I guess it’s genetic because he obviously gets his uselessness from you.”

“He’s not useless, and if he is he picked it up from your lazy no good...”

The smack that followed seemed to stop time, its loud sharp echo still rings vividly in my head. I could hear her cry through the walls in my room. It was far from the first time he had hit her, but it was the first time that I knew he did it to her because of me.

Then Robert began to isolate me. As soon as he discovered that Judy had some affection left for me, it didn’t take long for him to drive it out of her, so that she ultimately gave up on my defense. She learned when to shut up, because as soon as she tried to open her mouth, Robert would close it for her. I know Judy had once loved me. I can still vaguely remember her teaching me to ride my bike when I was seven, or how she would laugh and smile when I would help her

make cookies when I was four, or how she would proudly display my art work on the refrigerator. But by the time I was fourteen, I figured she had come to resent me, because I made Robert come down on her. Even if I truly had nothing to do with whatever problems Robert was having, he always found a way to blame me and take his frustration out on her.

Gradually, she stopped speaking with me. She did her best to avoid me by staying well-hidden behind an alcoholic fog. Judy's silence was a like a knife to my heart. I once had a mother, someone who loved me, and now I truly had no one. I was trapped and alone, a prisoner in my own home.

Even though Robert ridiculed me and made my life a living hell, he never laid a hand on me, at least not until that last night.

It was the July just between my freshman and sophomore years of high school, and I was tired and exhausted from a hard day's work. Robert's latest endeavor to try to make me into a man was for me to get a job. Since I was only fifteen, the only type of work I could get was detasseling, which is an excruciatingly difficult job of walking down endless rows of corn in the hot July sun and pulling the reproductive stalks out of the corn plants. The worst part about it was that after I had gone to bed for the night, I dreamed I was back in the fields detasseling and as soon as I woke up, I had to go right back to it. It was like there was no escape. I had been doing this non-stop for the two weeks, and looking back on it now, I can almost say that there are jobs worse than streetwalking.

That night, as the sun was sinking lower in the sky. Robert and Judy were half-passed out in front of the TV. Zach was out for the evening, so I seized my chance to dress up. I had been secretly wearing Judy's clothing for the better part of a year and a half, at first just borrowing little things like her panties, bras, and pantyhose. But as the months passed, those no longer sufficed, and I began to borrow whole outfits whenever I got the chance. I knew I could get away with borrowing her lingerie for a few days, but anything more than that I could only take for a few minutes to an hour at a time. Every time I had to return her things it felt as if someone kicked me in the stomach. When whole weeks passed and without having the chance to dress up I would silently go crazy inside of myself.

The thing is that I had always felt that I was a girl, when I was three I remember looking at Robert and my brothers and knowing I was not like them. They were mean, and I wasn't; they were rough and dirty and I was soft and clean. My brothers wanted to be football players or policemen when they grew up. I just wanted to be a mommy and be able to have babies.

But that evening as I walked into Robert and Judy's bedroom, I felt an uneasy chill. I didn't know why at the time, but as I stood there I shook briefly like a cold breeze blew past me. I opened Judy's drawers and began to select my

outfit for the evening. I picked out a white frilly satin blouse with a long polyester black skirt, nude control top pantyhose, and matching black bra and panties. The only thing I couldn't get were heels. By that time I had outgrown Judy's shoes by two sizes. As I left Robert and Judy's room, I tucked my bounty underneath my shirt to keep it away from any prying eyes that might be watching.

I hurried back into my room, shut the door as quietly as I could and stripped out of my everyday clothing. As I stood there naked, I took a quick look in the mirror. I couldn't stand what nature was doing to me. I could see dark brown hairs begin to grow above my lips, my muscles were beginning to bulk and firm up from all the field work I had been doing, and I could hear my voice begin to crack to unnaturally deep octaves. I wanted to cry. Nature was forcing me to become the one thing I couldn't stand to be. A man.

I looked away from the mirror and started to dress. I knew that I had to be quick, finish, and return Judy's clothes because I could hear movement downstairs. I pulled the panties onto my waist first and then fumbled with the bra and only managed to get one of the clasps hooked. I pulled the blouse around my broad shoulders and quickly buttoned it, then pulled the skirt up around my waist. I did the panty hose last. I was always afraid I'd cause a runner in them and they'd know I'd worn her things. Carefully I got them on, even though there was still a good length bunched up around my feet.

I took a walk around my room and twirled a couple of times in the skirt, letting it twist and furl around my long, albeit hairy, nylon covered legs. I came back to the mirror and looked at myself again, and my heart sank. I looked like a boy in a dress. But somewhere deep in the reflection of my clear blue eyes I could still see the girl within me screaming 'LET ME OUT'. I needed to be a girl more than anything in the whole wide world, but it seemed like I would be forever trapped in this masculine prison.

Deep in my frustration I walked over to my bed and fished for the coffee can I had hidden under there. When I had located it I pulled open the lid and removed the newspaper I used to cover my hidden treasure. I pulled out a tube of cherry red lipstick; I looked back down in the can at the rest of my bounty, burgundy nail polish, mascara, and some rouge blush. All of this I had bought piece by piece at Eldon's Thrift Store, with the excuse that it was for my mother or a present for my girlfriend.

I knew I was wasting precious time, but I didn't care. They could all go to hell as far as I was concerned. I needed to be free. I needed to be the girl that I was. I grabbed the blush and lipstick and walked back over to the mirror and began to coat my lips in red. I didn't have a make up brush, so instead I used my fingers to apply the blush to my oily face. I looked terrible, and faced with my

frustrations I took the mirror off the wall and turned it around so I wouldn't have to see my hideous reflection staring back at me.

I returned to my bed, lied down and closed my eyes and pretended that I was in some other reality. It was homecoming and I was voted the homecoming queen. Guys lined up and competed for my hand, and all the girls were envious of my natural beauty. Scott Fisher, a senior and the school's star running back, asked me to the dance. Our bodies embraced as we danced to the soft, sensuous music. My breasts pressed firmly against his chest and I felt his sweet breath against my lips as he leaned in to kiss me, deeply, passionately. After the dance we went back to his place, his parents weren't home and he kept the lights dim. We continue our loving embrace and he kisses me up and down my neck as I moan softly. His steady and careful hands reach behind me and unzip my dress; I lay back and let him slip it off of me. Half naked I pull him into me and he fumbles with the clasps on my bra, but he unhooks it and pulls it off my chest, exposing my soft breasts. His hands caress my breasts carefully as he slowly moves his hands down my waist to my panties and...

"Hey I thought I told you to mow the lawn, hurry up it's getting..." Robert says as he walks in my room and stares at the sight before him.

My fantasy was broken and I was sent hurtling back into the real world, I can't imagine how pathetic I must have looked to him, me laying on my bed smeared in makeup and wearing Judy's clothes, with her skirt hiked up around my waist and my cock in my hand.

Robert was aghast, but I could tell he was hardly surprised.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? No son of mine is ever going to be a fucking queer." He stormed over to me and pulled me up by my forearm. "You're a fucking disgrace, you know that? You're a disgrace to this family! You were born a disgrace, and you'll die a disgrace."

"Hey, at least, I'm not some sad pathetic prick who batters his wife because he can't get it up."

He backhanded me and I fell down.

"You think that's funny, do you? Do you think I'm a pathetic prick now? What's the matter? Is the little sissy going to cry again? You pathetic piece of shit," he said as he delivered several quick punches to my face.

"I've had it with you! You're done. Get the fuck out of my house, you goddamn queer."

He picked me up again and I practically flew out of my room. When we reached the stairs, he turned and let go of me. My momentum continued I realized it was too late to stop myself from falling. I landed five stairs down on my elbow and continued ass over end until I reached the bottom. The pain was sharp and intense, but somehow I managed not to break any bones. I must have

laid there for at least a minute, eyes closed, the tears silently streaming from my face. When I looked back up I saw Robert standing there holding the .22 he kept in his night stand.

I didn't wait to see what he was going to do with the gun, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me out the front door. I could hear him scream the words that still vividly echo in my skull today.

"That's right, you run, you little punk. If you ever come back around here again, I'll not only kill you and dump you in a ditch, I'll kill that bitch of a woman for every bringing a little faggot like you into this world."

I ran into the muggy July evening, still wearing Judy's clothes. I ran past Zach who had just returned home in his car. His mouth hung open as I ran past him.

I ran as fast and as hard as I could, through people's lawns, down empty streets and into the city park praying no one would see me. I sat winded beneath the park's awning, surrounded by nearly a half dozen empty picnic tables as I stopped to catch my breath. My body seethed in agony as the adrenaline rush slowly wore off, my face was tender and bruised from Roberts repeated blows, and my left eye kept watering and was hard to keep open.

I didn't know what to do, I had no place to go and I had no friends or family that would take me in. I would die tonight I thought. I would have to somehow hitchhike over to Ames where I would either drown myself in the South Skunk River or throw myself off an overpass into oncoming traffic.

Why did no one love me? What had I done to deserve this hell? I couldn't help who I was, I never asked to be born a boy, and I never asked to have such a shitty family. I must have done something to piss God off in a previous life, why else was he making me suffer so?

Slowly the sun set and the stars came out. I don't know how long I sat there underneath that awning; time didn't seem to be real anymore. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear someone come up to me.

"Hey, Mark, is that you?" It was my brother Zach.

"Yeah, what the hell do you want? You've come to take your shot at me too?" I didn't look back at him.

"No I came to find you? What the hell is going on?"

"What does it look like? Dad's throwing me out of the house. He said if I ever go back he would kill me and Mom."

"Why?"

"Do I really need to draw you a picture?" I said as I looked up and gave him a haughty glare.

He paused for a second as he gave me the once over. "No, I guess not."

"Good, now will you leave me alone so I can die in peace?"

"No I won't, you're coming with me."

"Fuck that, why would I want to go with you?"

"Because I'm going to get you out of this place."

"And just where are you going to take me huh, you heard what I said I can't go back home, and I got no place left to go."

"I don't know; Mark let's just get the fuck out of here, all right? Just come with me and get in my car before anyone else sees you. It's all right, you can trust me."

"Trust you? Ha! I've never been able to trust you. Knowing my luck you'll tie me to the roof of your car and parade me through town so everyone can get their jollies."

"Listen, I don't blame you for not wanting to trust me. You know, for all the shit I've ever done to you; I'm sorry. I can't take it back. But if you want to sit here and sulk in Mom's clothes until someone else finds you, be my guest. If not, come with me. I have spare clothes in the car. Maybe we can find somewhere safe for you to go."

It was the lesser of two evils. I picked myself up off the ground and walked back with my brother to his black el Camino. I got in the passenger's seat as he fired up the car and we drove into the night. For nearly twenty minutes I said nothing only staring absently into the crack dashboard. We were half way to Des Moines before Zach said anything to me.

"Aren't you going to change clothes, man?" he asked.

"No, I think I'll leave these on for now if it's all the same to you."

"Suit yourself, but at least take the makeup off. It looks like shit."

I looked in the review mirror and saw that he was more or less right. I didn't want to be reminded of my image so I grabbed some napkins that were in the glove compartment and angrily removed my lipstick and blush.

"So what's the deal, Mark? Are you gay, or what?"

I honestly didn't know what to say, it was something that was more or less assumed at home, even though no one bothered to ask my opinion on the subject.

"No...Yes, fuck, I don't know."

"Dude it's all right, I mean what does it matter at this point anyway?"

"The thing is... I like guys but not as a guy. Does that make sense?"

"No."

"I like guys as a girl would. I want to be a girl."

"No offense dude, but I've always thought that you were a bit of a girl."

"Look at me. Why would I take offense to that?"

He laughed a little. "I don't know."

We drove around the streets of Des Moines, not really knowing where we were going. Somewhere, along University Avenue, we stopped behind an abandoned service station where I changed into the clothes Zach had for me. The jeans were loose around my hips and a few inches too long as they had fit Zach several years ago and had stayed in his car since about that time. He had an old White Zombie t-shirt that smelled of stale sweat and was threadbare from wear. It also had several small holes in the armpits.

Our next stop was at a Quick Trip where he left me in the car while he filled up with gas and bought a twelve pack of Miller Lite with a fake I.D. I closed my eyes and briefly let myself fall into a short dreamless sleep. When Zach came back and started the car I woke up, the clock said that it was 10:15 p.m. Somehow I had slept for a half hour, because of my exhausted and battered state I didn't bother asking what had kept him so long, I just assumed that he had needed to use the restroom. When we got back on the road we drove until we came to an empty Target parking lot, where we stopped to rest and talk.

He pulled out two cans out of the twelve-pack and handed one to me, I looked at him like he just handed me a fish.

"Go on take it, you need it after the night you've had."

I took the beer and opened it and took a nervous sip, it was bitter and disgusting, but I couldn't stop from drinking it, somehow it calmed my nerves.

"You know, I wish things could have been better for us," Zach said as he stared out into the empty parking lot.

"What do you mean us? You and Dave always had it easy."

"Dave maybe, but he's just a walking corpse. I think Dad sucked all the life out of him. Did you know he was arrested last year up in Madison for beating his girlfriend?"

"No shit."

"Yeah, you know what Dad said when he found out?"

"No."

"Atta boy, you gotta keep'em in line otherwise they'll end up walking all over you," he said mocking Robert's voice as best he could. "I think it was then I finally gave up on him, you know. I figured out that all this shit, everything he is, everything he's been trying to make us, is nothing but a bunch of shit. I often wonder what Mom saw in him that made her want to marry him."

"From what mom said, he was a different guy before they were married-sweet and charming and all that jazz, but he's always had a problem with alcohol. Being domesticated didn't help either, it only made things worse when she had us."

"She told you that?"

"Yeah, pretty much. A long time ago, Mom and I used to actually talk. The worst part was that she would always insist he was a good man, or that she deserved what he did to her, did to all of us, and if we just did what he wanted than everything would be fine and we could be a happy family."

"God, what a bunch of shit. Man, he really beat the crap out of you didn't he," Zach said, leaning over to examine the bruises on my face.

"I've tried not to look."

"I remember the first time Dad hit me."

"He hit you? When?" I said as I looked back at him.

Zach settled back into his seat. "It was last summer. I think maybe you were at camp or something. Anyway I had been out drinking and smoking all night and I came home, God it must have been three or four in the morning when I stumbled in and he was like 'What the fuck are you doing?' I told him to piss off, that I just needed to sleep. He said something like, 'Like hell you are, you come in here and wake everybody up at this hour. Well your ass is going to be up at six and working for a change around here, starting with the gutters, and I was like, 'fuck you, old man, if you'd get your fat drunk ass up and do something for a change around here we'd be living in a regular fucking Hilton.' That was when he sucker punched me in the stomach. The worst part about it was it caused me to puke everywhere."

"What did you do then?"

"Slept in the car all night, thought I'd let him handle the puke since he caused it, when I came back in the next afternoon, I found out that the shithead made Mom clean it up."

"Unbelievable." I said as I shook my head.

I had finished the first beer and it made me feel lightheaded, but I reached for a second. It was strange talking like this with Zach. In my entire life, I could scarcely recall when we had talked about anything more than what was on TV. Part of me kept waiting for his betrayal, for him to just kick me out the door and leave me alone in this city. But something else told me he was for real, that he really did care for me.

"Why'd you come back for me anyway?"

"I already told you, man."

"No, I'm serious. You're probably going to get it if Dad finds out what you did. Why put your ass on the line for me?"

"I mean, you're family and all that other shit, right?"

"Yeah," I said and we sat in silence for a few seconds.

"I mean, I've always hated seeing the shit you've had to endure at home. I know things I've had to take, and I can only image that you've had it about a hundred times worse. Thing is, when I saw you run out of the house tonight, it

freaked me out a little, but it didn't really surprise me. You know, like I've always thought you were more of a girl anyway, but in a way I respected you because it was your way of fighting the old man and not catering to his bullshit."

"Thanks for coming for me; it's probably the best thing anyone's ever done for me."

"Don't sweat it man, I'm sure you would have done the same for me." He said as he tossed an empty can out the window. I wasn't so sure that before that night I really would have.

We sat talking about our respective childhoods and drinking until almost daybreak. I didn't want the night to end. I didn't want to find out where I was going to live. But as the sun began to rise, Zach fired up the engine, and I dozed off from sheer exhaustion. My sleep was short lived, when I awoke we were sitting in the parking lot of the Youth Emergency Services and Shelter building. The first thing I saw was the gold dome of the Iowa capitol building glittering in the early morning sun. Closer to the ground, the houses revealed to me what a dive the neighborhood really was. Everywhere small decrepit houses lined the streets, some of which had their windows boarded up with plywood. Old, rusting cars were parked in driveways and there was litter and piles of leaves strewn throughout the lawns. The neighborhood gave me little confidence in what was about to be my new home.

"You want me to go here?" I asked him, somewhat taken aback.

"It's probably the best place for now, at least until we can figure something or someplace for you to go."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I've got to go back."

"Why don't you just leave man? Start a new life in the city or something."

"Yeah? With what? I don't have a high school diploma yet, and I scarcely have any money to live with. What do you want me to do, bunk here with you?"

I looked away for a moment, and I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces.

"Speaking of which, I have something for you."

He reached in his front pants pocket and pulled out a series of twenty dollar bills and handed them to me.

"Here's three hundred dollars, just in case you need it. It's the most I could get out of the A.T.M. You're short about ten because I had to get the beer."

I took the bills and looked them over.

"Listen, don't worry about it. You'll be safe here. I'll come down on the weekends to make sure that you're ok. It's gonna be tough for awhile, but keep your head up and you'll get through it."

I didn't want him to leave. Anytime before today I longed for my brothers to be anywhere else but near me, but within the last ten hours Zach had shown me that he wasn't just my brother, he was a human being too.

"Thanks, Zach, for everything." I said as I look back into his eyes.

"Hey, don't sweat it, you're my brother or sister or whatever, and I care about you."

I smiled and looked away. "And I love you too," It felt so odd to say that it almost came out sounding sarcastic.

Zach laughed. "Hey, don't get too mushy on me. You might inadvertently take down my protective shields and I'll be unprepared when I go back to the house from hell."

I laughed out loud.

"Hey, I'll see you this weekend, all right."

I just nodded as I stepped out of his car and closed the door behind me. I stood there paralyzed for a minute as I watched him drive into the distance as I wondered if I would see him again.

I was so exhausted that all I wanted to do was sleep, but I had to wait while the shelter personnel, as well as an agent from the Department of Human Services questioned me about my background. They were especially interested in the fresh bruises in my face. Once they discovered that Robert had assaulted me, it opened up a floodgate of questions. "Is this the first time he hit you? Has he hit or struck any of your siblings? Has he ever sexually assaulted you? Describe his relationship with your mother and other family members?"

These questions came at me from almost out of nowhere, and I gave them as accurate information as I could, except for letting them know that Robert had once struck Zach. I figured Zach didn't want to be involved in any kind of legal mess otherwise he'd still be sitting here with me. Finally after what seemed like forever the interrogation ended and they showed me to what would be my home for the next six weeks.

I slept for much of my first day in the youth shelter. When I got up that night I was able to better comprehend my surroundings, and to the shelter's credit, they did the best they could to make the place seem like a home. There were large living areas complete with a TV, VCR, recliners, and sofas. There was a recreation area that contained a pool table, ping pong table, and both a Play station and Nintendo 64. Very quickly the shelter personnel began to emphasize structure and self-discipline. I was responsible for fixing my own meals, washing my clothes, and keeping my place orderly. My room was small; there wasn't much in it except for two twin sized beds and a pair of dresser drawers.

The shelter provided counselors if we wanted them. I was hesitant to speak to anyone other than my brother, but I hesitantly decided to talk to a

counselor by the name of Tim Edison. Tim was about Robert's age. He always wore brown tweed sweaters. He had a brownish grey brush mustache, and he wore bifocals and had a terribly nasty habit of chewing on his pencil, often reducing it to a nub of mashed wood and graphite.

I really didn't know what to say to him at first, and so for about fifteen minutes we only made small talk. Then he finally tried to dig deeper into my past.

"Is there anything else that you wanted to talk to me about today, maybe something more that's bothering you?"

"I don't know, I guess I just feel like a prisoner here, you know."

"It's a perfectly legitimate way to feel, coming from home where you had a routine and familiar surroundings. Even though you may not have had the best family environment, you knew how to survive in it, what to expect and you could adjust yourself to that. It will take time, Mark, I know things are uncertain right now, but this is something that you can get through. Perhaps the best advice I can give you is not to worry about tomorrow or the things you can't control, but rather just focus on today."

"I've tried that, it doesn't work. I mean, I'm here and no matter what I try to busy myself with, my mind keeps coming back to that moment where I saw Robert standing over me with that gun, threatening to kill me and my mother."

"Tell me why your father threatened to do that to you."

I stared at the floor as I tried to bring the words to my mouth, but somehow they didn't come. I didn't tell him that I was a cross-dressing freak who just wanted to be a girl. It didn't matter to me that he might have had every PhD under the sun. I still didn't feel like I could trust him, especially since this was my first time meeting this man. What could he do, run home and tell his wife and kids about the crazy sissy he met down at the youth home?

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"Are you sure? Anything you say to me I will keep in the strictest of confidence, I won't hurt you or ridicule you. You can trust me. It will be all right."

Zach had said I could trust him and so far I had been able to, although part of me still kept thinking that he had dumped me off at this youth home in order to get me out of town so I couldn't embarrass him.

"I just can't right now. I'm just not sure who I can trust. All my life people have discarded and ridiculed me and then hung me out to dry."

"Mark, I wouldn't do that to you."

I looked at him warily. There was just something about him. I don't know, maybe it was the way he sat, the way he continued to move about uncomfortably

as if he were sitting on a pebble. Perhaps it was the fact that he was from Robert's backward generation that told me I couldn't trust him.

Tim tried and tried to get me to open up to him, but I just couldn't do it. Perhaps if he had been a woman I could have summoned my strength to confide in him, but I didn't. I couldn't. I figured the fewer people who knew about my secret the better. The only person I was able to confide in my whole time at the shelter was one my roommates, boy named Jeremy Jefferson.

Jeremy was a very tall, very skinny black kid. At age fifteen he was already over six feet tall. He wore his hair braided up like the rapper Snoop Dog and in more than one way he resembled him. Jeremy came briefly into my life at the end of my first week at the shelter. For the first day he said nothing to me as he was taking in his surroundings. But by the next day, as I was lying on my bed trying to read a book, he came into our room, threw down his back pack, and sat on his bed.

"I positively hate this fucking place."

"I know," I said without looking up from my book.

"How long have you had to put up with this hell hole?"

"I don't know. 'Bout five days now, I imagine."

"Shit, I hope my sister comes and gets me or I swear I'm going to go fucking postal."

"I don't know, it's not too bad. At least my parents aren't here."

"Oh yeah? What did they do?"

I looked up at Jeremy. "They kicked me out and threatened to kill me if I ever went back."

"Ooh, you must have done some shit. What the hell you do?" Jeremy's face brightened up as he sat down on the bed next to me.

"I'd rather not talk about it." I said as I looked away.

"C'mon. How bad can it be?"

"It's not bad. I just don't want to talk about it."

"All right, all right no need to go all ape shit." He said as held up his hands. "Just curious, that's all. I mean, we all in the same boat right so what does it matter why you're here?"

"C'mon, I don't know you and I really don't want to talk about it. I mean, how would you like it if I asked you how you got here?" I said bitterly as I looked back at him.

"Wouldn't care."

"Fine then, why are you here?"

"I tell ya, but you gotta tell me why you're here then, too."

I thought about it. It was like that game, 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours', and my curiosity got the better of me. I figured while he was telling me, I could always come up with some reasonable sounding lie if I needed to.

"All right fine, I'll tell you after you tell me."

"All right, I'm gay, pure and simple. I like dudes and my parents couldn't have a fag living under their roof. They said I could come back if I straightened up, but other than that they gave me the boot. Now, how 'bout you?"

My mouth fell open in disbelief. His answer surprised me. I thought he was the stereotypical gangsta from the inner city. I thought maybe he would have been running with a gang and involved with drugs and things like that. I didn't ever expect that this tough-looking kid would actually be gay. He didn't fit with what my mental picture of a gay person should look like. Needless to say, I had to reinvent my image of him very quickly. I figured he was probably the one person who could understand what I had gone through. I set the book I was reading between my legs and looked back over at him.

"I guess my story's not that much different than yours. A few days ago, my father caught me wearing my mother's clothes. He said if I ever went back, he'd kill me and mom."

"Whew, that's some tough shit. I didn't really figure you for a drag queen, but hey, whatever, it's fine by me."

Jeremy and I got along fine after that. He told me all about his upbringing and life. He wasn't from the inner city as I had previously assumed. His parents owned a rather nice home in West Des Moines, and between them they made nearly a half million dollars a year. His father was a prominent lawyer and his mother was a regional salesperson who sold computers to schools throughout the Midwest. All Jeremy would say was that they were, "Selfish bitches, who cared more about money than any of their kids."

I only spent a little more than a week and a half with Jeremy before one of his sisters agreed to let him live with her in Omaha. But during that week we became pretty good friends. We spent a lot of time playing pool and Play Station in the recreation room. I had hoped we'd stay in touch, but once he left, I never heard from him again.

Zach managed to keep his promise to me. He came down from State Center and visited me every Saturday. When I saw him that first Saturday, my heart was filled with joy that he had kept his word. Zach decided to take me out for an afternoon away from the shelter. We were sitting at a red light when he dropped the bombshell.

"The cops came the other night and arrested Dad," he said without looking me.

"Really? Good, that fucker deserves it."

"Yeah, I guess the state is going to charge him with assault on a minor."

"Good, I hope he gets ass raped in prison for all he's done. Has Judy said anything about all of this?"

"Not really. Zach said as he shook his head. "She's been kind of sullen lately. She keeps to herself mostly. I think she's probably afraid to say anything because of what Dad said to you."

"Hmm, I hope they put Robert in jail for a good long time. It will be good for all of us."

"I don't know how long that will be. He was out on bail the same day as he was arrested, and he was livid. I left that night, but I know he had another go around with Mom. Her face was good and swollen the next day when I saw her."

I was somewhat dismayed that Robert had gotten out of jail. There was no justice in this world. He threatens to kill me and beats the crap out of me, and they send him on his way. I bet at most he'd get some sort of community service thing for his sentence.

The light changed to green and Zach proceeded to drive. I watched idly the cars and they rolled past.

"God, if there is any justice in this world, they'll put him in jail for a good, long time."

"Yeah, if there is any good side to this, it means that you won't have to see his ugly face ever again."

"What about you? Are they going to get you out of the house?" I said as I looked back to him.

"I doubt it; I'm rarely at home as it is. Besides, I'm almost eighteen. They probably won't bother with it."

I had hoped that once Zach graduated and got a place of his own that I could come and live with him, but that dream was quickly shattered as life threw its next sucker punch. At the end of one very humid August evening, I was sitting in the recreation lounge of the youth home, idly looking through the *Register* when a small section of the obituaries caught my attention.

Killed – Zach Llewellyn, 17 of State Center, Monday in a fatal automobile accident. Zach was the son of Robert and Judy, he left behind a brother, David, 19. Zach was a senior at West Marshall Community School. Services are scheduled Friday at First United Presbyterian Church.

Shocked and devastated, I ran back to my room and cried all night. It couldn't be. How could the only person who had ever cared about me suddenly be gone? What was I going to do now?

I wanted to go to the funeral but I knew there was no way I could get myself back to State Center. I also didn't want Robert to see me, because I knew he wouldn't hesitate to fulfill his threat. In a sense, the obituary was a declaration

that I was already dead to them. They had lost two children, and I was sure that Robert didn't really care.

For the next several days I was like a zombie. I scarcely slept or ate and when someone tried to talk to me, I spoke in short sentences. I didn't see Tim the counselor anywhere after Zach passed away. I didn't feel I could confide in any of the other counselors who were available at the shelter. I just wanted to be left alone. I just wanted my brother back.

My situation went from bad to worse, by the beginning of September, Child Services had become aware of my case and was looking to put me in a foster home. For me, this was the worst possible thing that could happen. I would truly become a product of the system, a kid beaten and kicked around from home to home, neglected and then abused while the foster parents collected drinking money from the state. I knew I was going to have to make it on my own. So on the tenth of September, I gathered my few belongings, the money Zach left me, and I boarded a bus bound for Kansas City, taking my first steps to a hellish world.

* * *

As my high begins to wear off, I wearily open my eyes and am greeted by the darkness and bobbing shadows from the world outside. I need another hit, I don't have the energy to pull myself out of bed. Instead I pull the sheets over my head and pretend that I'm dead. Somehow I sleep a short dreamless sleep only to be woken up when I hear the hotel door opening. Great, Big Bill has actually come back, just what I need. God, Viagra should be illegal.

He doesn't bother to turn on the lights. I hear the rustling of clothes as he strips naked and then climbs under the sheet with me.

"Hey sugar, I'm hungry, why don't you come here and satisfy your daddy?" He whispers.

Slowly he reaches around my head and guides me to where he wants me. In my dazed and weakened state I can only comply.

I want to puke.

Looking back, I regret leaving the youth home. Having any kind of home was better than none at all. I often wonder what it would have been like if I would have toughed it out through high school and those foster homes. In my dreams, I graduate high school and make my way through college and become the woman that I've always wanted to be - smart, beautiful, successful, and respected. Or sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if I had actually had caring loving parents. I've read stories on the internet about some parents of transsexuals who actually help their kid transition while they're still teenagers.

But I have to wonder, for every one of those kids who gets the privilege to do that, how many more like me are there out there who are just thrown to the wolves? After all, there's a reason why you never see bumper stickers that say, 'Proud Parent of a Transsexual'.

Right now I'm as much a woman as I'll ever become. Even if I could get all the money for the reassignment surgery, it would spell doom for my career, and thus my livelihood. Unfortunately, there is little work for post-op girls in this business and there is nothing else that I know how to do.

So like a pawn I continue to move forward, from man to man and the occasional girl. I live my life in between the shadow zones of money and sex. In some ways I know I've been fortunate. In eight years, I've managed to avoid death, disease, and starvation. I've seen those girls who get into a John's car and are found later buried somewhere in a shallow grave, or those whose poverty and desperation drive them to inject silicon into their own breasts and they wake up dead the next morning. But survival brings its own horrors, and if I stop breathing tonight, I know I will be all right, because no greater hell exists than the one I've already endured.