

Kerrie's Run

By Kelly Blake



16 miles or 1600...it's all the same...

School was an absolute nightmare for me up to ninth grade. The school was not exactly a 'safe zone' for anyone, not even the teachers. We lived in a tough working class neighborhood and every block on the way to school was a physical and mental challenge. The kids were very territorial. That's how it is in the city...or at least South Boston.

Twenty three years have passed since I began school in South Boston but I still shudder when I happen to think about 'those days'. I remember the taunts, the fights...well...not really fights, the fighting was finished quickly, and the beatings followed. But most of all I remember the sexual abuse...the rapes.

Home was not much better. I was subjected to the drunken rages of my step-father. My older sister seemed to escape his wrath and my two younger half-sisters were...well...too young to be in his way. My older sister was able to protect them though I didn't learn for years what that protection personally cost her.

My mother, also an alcoholic, was completely unavailable to us. So between my older sister and my own good actions we took care of things. That became harder as time went on because my step-father was spending much of his time at home usually drunk and waiting for his favorite victim; me.

Things got so bad that I would sneak out of school to get home before him. My sister came up with the idea of dressing me in some of her older garments (I was already wearing some of her more androgynous things...her hand-me-downs), combing out my long hair, putting a bit of her cosmetics on my face and passing me off as one of her school mates. The bastard was usually too drunk to recognize me in that disguise and I would escape his brutal hand.

But then there were days when I couldn't escape from school early enough. On those days I would hear the same insulting derogatory names and feel the wrath of his hand. He never hit me where it would show, such as my face, and he never hit me with his fists. He would, on more than rare occasions, use a device; his belt, a stick of wood or something else.

The end result was always the same. I would suffer his abuse and as soon as he'd tire and head for the living room couch, I would scurry off to my sisters' room or my own tiny closet of a space. I felt that something would have to change because between school and home life, such as it was, I was nearing the point of anguished desperation.

Options such as running away or suicide were becoming a bit more than attractive. And since I had no innocence to protect, even the thought of going with one of the guys that purchased my use from my tormentors seemed an improvement. I felt like my world was coming to an end. The stress and fear of simply getting through the day was becoming overwhelming. I was enjoying the white powder my sexual abusers gave me more than I should and I began to long for its use regardless of the physical and mental cost.

Then one day a miracle of miracles occurred; the blessing of all blessing befell me. My step father, in an unusually vicious rage, struck me numerous times, several of his blows landed upon my face. Once he had finished punishing me for some unmentioned fault, although he always seemed to mention a few, he told me to pack up and get out. He didn't want to ever see me again. He then strode to the couch, stretched out upon it, and promptly passed out.

My older sister was still out with the little ones so I left her a note explaining what had transpired and promised to call her once I found a place. I emptied my book pack and threw in some of the clothing she had allowed me to wear, my tooth brush, hair brush, shampoo, conditioner, and a few of the cosmetics she used on me. A small pocket knife and three hundred dollars I had managed to save over the years completed my travelling kit.

I knew exactly where I wanted to go; Fort Lauderdale. I had seen news stories about spring break and how the college people would sleep in their cars on the beach. I wouldn't be noticed; just another kid on the beach. And I was sure I could scrounge up spare change if need be.

My only challenge was getting there. I could take a train or a bus or fly if somebody would purchase a ticket. I had no friends to speak of. Indeed kids tried to avoid me altogether because I was not only such a tempting target for abuse, but I was also rumored to be a diseased whore. And though the school abuses and sexual abuses had come to a crashing halt one day, the

lingering rumors still persisted if only silently muttered from a distance and bespoken in a cursory glance.

There was one person I could go to for help. Odd as it may seem, he was at the top of the food chain. What made that so odd a fact was my position at the bottom of that cursed chain. I knew he hung out at Rosie's Bar and Grill. I knew there was no Rosie. It was one of those places that you didn't dare go into uninvited. My 'friend', Owen, hung out there. It was his uncle's place, or one of his places of business, and everyone knew of his uncle.

Everyone knew Owen as well. One might say that at the young age of eighteen he was a man of respect. Or, what was more commonly heard was, 'You'd best not be owing to Owen.' He had worked for his uncle since he was sixteen. That was when he left home. I had done him a favor once and, in this neighborhood, if one does a favor, one is owed three.

I was stopped at the front door by a huge bald man I knew to be called Frankie. I waved the three hundred dollars in front of him and told him I needed to see Owen. He smiled slyly and nodded knowingly as he turned and started toward the rear of the bar and a door marked 'Private'. He turned his head suddenly, pointed at me, and said; "You...wait there." I wasn't about to do otherwise.

I looked about the place. No two chairs at the tables matched and no two tables matched for that matter. The wood floor was well worn and reeked of a hundred years of spilt beer and whiskey and, no doubt, blood. It was that kind of place. Four men sat at a back table playing cards. I noticed Mister O'Connor at the bar reading his newspaper and drinking coffee I judged from the shape of his cup.

In no time at all I saw Owen come through the door. He smiled when he saw me. As he came closer he spoke.

"What are you doing here?" His voice, full of curiosity, was more than pleasant to hear. There was something about his very deep voice...its resonance...that shot right through me. I found it to be...quite...exciting?

I shrugged my shoulders and blushed. I didn't know at the time why he should have such an effect upon me. I mean...I wasn't interested in either girls or boys. I was what one might call underdeveloped? I didn't have 'urges'. In fact my voice hadn't even cracked.

"I need some help getting a ticket." I managed to squeak out whilst looking at the floor and nervously shuffling about with my feet.

"Are you leaving town? Where are you going?" His voice was gentle. Owen reached out and placed his hand upon my shoulder. I could hear he was concerned. At least somebody was.

"I'm going to Florida...Fort Lauderdale."

“What?” He was really surprised. “Come with me.”

Owen steered me toward a rear door with an exit sign over the door frame. He opened the door for me and guided me into a private court yard. There were several tables with chairs arranged around a tree that grew in the center of the yard. Owen sat down on a bench by the tall fence and I sat catty-corner to him.

The light of day couldn't totally hide what the dimness of the bar and my sunglasses did. Owen slowly reached out and gently removed my sunglasses. I could hear him quickly catch his breath as he bit his knuckles at the sight he saw.

“Who did this to you?” I knew he was getting angry. His face began to turn a bright red much in the manner that my dear departed father's face did. I couldn't answer him. I gazed down at my hands and shrugged my shoulders.

“Is this why you want to leave...to run away?” I shook my head. Owen rose from his seat and started back to the bar door. “You wait right here.”

I could tell he was becoming even angrier but I didn't fear him at all. He was the one person who never bothered me in the least and I didn't see a reason for him to start now. In only a brief moment he came back out through the door followed by the diminutive Mister O'Connor.

Thomas O'Connor was a fixture in our neighborhood. He was very well respected and, in spite of his size, nobody ever gave him any trouble. He was in charge of the guidance departments in our area for several schools although one would be hard pressed to find him around his office or even the school buildings.

“What's all this I hear about you wanting to leave?” Mister O'Connor asked as he pulled a chair up to where I sat and Owen took his original place.

Mister O'Connor leaned in toward me and he too observed my bruises. He shook his head and made a hissing sound through his teeth. He took my hand in his and, after looking at it for a moment, began to speak.

“Is this the reason you wish to leave us?” I liked Mister O'Connor but I never thought of him as part of an 'us'.

“That...and other reasons.” I couldn't contain myself any longer and tears began to flow down my cheeks.

“You know I can fix this.” Owen smiled gently as he spoke. “I could have a talk with whoever did this and I promise you that it will stop.”

“Yes...” Mister O'Connor added insistently. “We could remedy this matter for you right quickly.” I thought I heard a bit of a brogue and lilt to his voice.

“It’s more than that. It’s everything. I just can’t stay here any longer. Everyone knows everything and they stare...you know?”

“I could find you a place to stay in Brookline.” Mister O’Connor offered. “Or even Braintree. I know a lovely family there who would love to have you...visit.” His deep blue eyes twinkled as he spoke.

“I would even take you in with me until we could settle you.” I was surprised and pleasantly shocked at Owen’s offer. I smiled up at him. “I think we could even find you a place in Quincy. It’s really lovely out there and people I know have a grand old house with plenty of room.”

This went on for a short time. I was more insistent than they were because it finally came down to the questions I had asked myself before.

“Where will you stay? Where will you sleep?” I could hear the exasperation in Owen’s voice.

“Well...” I smiled for the first time simply thinking about where I was going. “I’m going to stay on the beach. Lots of guys do that and I won’t even be noticed; simply another kid on the beach.” I giggled as Owen and Mister O’Connor looked at each other. “I also have money for food and stuff.” I showed them the envelope with the bills slightly sticking out.

“That’ll be good for a while but honestly Kerrie...it is Kerrie...” I nodded to Owen. I was surprised he even knew my name although maybe Mister O’Connor told him. “You’re not fit to live on the streets.” His concerned face and tone of voice was...welcomed? I mean like...he cared?

“The streets are a very tough place...” Mister O’Connor said. “...even if the weather is nice. It’s no place to be wandering about aimlessly. I do some people in Miami.”

There was a glint of hope in his eyes that perhaps I would concede a bit and go to them instead. But my mind was made up. I shook my head.

“I have some people in Miami as well...and in the Florida Keys but...” He exhaled almost sadly. “I don’t know anyone in Fort Lauderdale.” He turned toward Mister O’Connor who seemed to know people from all over. “What about you Tommy?”

I was struck at Owen calling Mister O’Connor by his given name. I’d never heard anyone do that before but then again my exposure to the world was greatly limited when my father departed this life. Mister O’Connor was deep in thought for a moment before he spoke.

“Well...you see...it’s like this...” He began most solemnly. “It’s the sister of Sean Padriac.” He spoke almost in a whisper. “She has a right fine place down there. It’s not far from the beach either and she is a true woman of quality; character.”

“Sean Padriac...as in THE Sean Paddy???”

“Himself...” Mister O’Connor spoke quite gruffly.

“Can you call her?” Owen sounded most anxious.

“Oh...she won’t speak to me I’m afraid. In fact she might even tell Sean Paddy and that wouldn’t be prudent for my...future.” He smiled at Owen. “She’s not like us and Sean Paddy likes it that way.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Well...” Mister O’Connor smiled slyly and a twinkle of mischief came to his blue eyes. “She does have a fine mate. The heart of a saint she has and I know she will speak to me about this matter.”

Mister O’Connor jumped up out of his seat and walked back into the bar. I smiled at Owen. He looked down at his hands and rubbed them together. From his expression I could tell he was deep in thought. Suddenly he looked up at me.

“Let me ask you something.” I loved to hear his deep voice. That deep sound made him seem older than he was.

“Sure...anything...” Well...almost anything anyway although I couldn’t think of anything I might want to withhold from him.

“That day...you know...the day you told me about those men...”

I remember that day so very well. It was a very cold morning and I was making my way toward school in a most direct manner. On days like this I rarely got bothered because it was simply to cold expend the energy to beat on anyone.

Anyway, as I came to the corner I noticed four men in an alleyway. They were holding baseball bats and softly talking whilst trying to keep warm. I instinctively knew what was on their minds. But in this neighborhood, unless your kinsmen were involved, you kept your mouth shut and minded your own business.

I cast my gaze back down after only glancing at them for a moment. I continued walking around the corner and away from them. Suddenly I spied Owen coming toward me. He wore his customary black leather jacket over a sweat shirt with a hood.

Now most people, if they see Owen coming toward them, would prudently cross the street and hope that he continued past them...from a distance...a goodly distance I might add. But I held my course and when I was a few mere yards away I looked up into his eyes. I managed to catch him glancing at me. It was just as I can within speaking distance of him that I warned him.

“Four...around the corner...with bats.” And I continued walking. I heard a faint voice in my wake.

“Thanks.”

And that was that. I never looked back and I never tried to find out what had occurred. That isn't done unless you were looking for trouble. Now I must explain that I had no fear for Owen's well-being. He was a very big boy of six feet and four inches...or more and he weighed two hundred and forty pounds or there about. He could most definitely take care of himself.

Just from looking in his eyes I could see rage and anger...and pain. I didn't know what the source of all that was for almost two years after our first 'meeting'. One thing was for sure. He knew how to channel it to his and his uncle's benefit.

I couldn't figure out the relationship between Mister O'Connor and Owen. They had to be very friendly for Owen to be using his name as he did. Mister O'Connor was diminutive in size but not in stature. Everyone seemed to defer to him when he was around and he even had the respect of Owen's uncle. I was never to learn much about him other than one comment from... Wait...I get ahead of myself.

“What made you warn me that day?” Owen stared at me with his piercing powder blue eyes attempting to see if what I told him was the truth.

“It seemed like the right thing to do.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Anyway, I didn't want to see you get hurt...or anything...”

My voice trailed off. I couldn't tell him what was in my heart because I really didn't know. I felt something...but I was very confused at the time. I couldn't tell him that I, for some reason unbeknownst to me, felt something very strongly for him. I wanted to sit upon his lap and crawl inside of him where I'd be safe, and warm.

“Well...” Owen smiled at me and his gaze softened. “Thanks for doing the right thing.”

Mister O'Connor suddenly came through the door breaking the mildly uncomfortable silence. He had a broad grin upon his face. I knew he was successful at whatever he said during the phone call.

“Well...” He looked at me as he spoke. “We seemed to have found you a right fine home...” I began to reply that I didn't want one...yet. He held up his hand to silence me. “...when you are ready?” He bowed slightly.

“Well then...now to the ticket I suppose.” Owen looked at me. “You'll fly of course. The train takes too long and the bus is a nightmare. It's certainly no place for you. Now I'll be needing your full name.”

“Patrick Kieran Bailey...but everyone...that is my family...calls me Kierie.” Owen was dead silent for a moment. A look of astonishment crossed his face.

“You’re a guy?” He looked at me in amazement.

“Uhhh...yeah.” I answered softly.

“Well...makes no matter to me.” Owen smiled warmly and looked into my eyes as he spoke.

“Listen, you guys won’t tell about me leaving, will you?” I really was worried about not being able to get away. The worst nightmare would have been to get caught and turned back over to my step-father.

“We don’t do that around here.” Mister O’Connor said quite gruffly as he turned his head to one side and spat.

“Here, let’s see to your money.” I handed Owen the envelope.

I could sense that Owen was also a bit annoyed at my question. He got up and went into the bar. I sat with Mister O’Connor and we spoke about the trip; what to do and how to handle myself. This all occurred before nine-eleven and a child my age could fly unaccompanied. I would be walked onto the plane, situated, and the stewardess would be made aware that I was travelling by myself and that I would be met upon arrival.

Upon arrival, the stewardess would escort me off the plane and to where ever the waiting party might be. At this point I was to break loose of her grip if she held my hand, shout that I see them, thank her on the run, and disappear into the crowd that would surely be waiting.

I was to take the bus into the city. It would be a long or far trip and it would be way cheaper than taking a cab. Plus I could exit anywhere I wanted. Then we went over how to avoid detection by cops or anyone else. I had already worked some of that out in my mind but he had a few tips. Mister O’Connor, whatever he might be today, was definitely a creature of the streets.

Owen finally returned. He was smiling and rather excited. Taking a seat next to me he handed me back the envelope.

“Stick this away where it’ll be safe. I got a ticket for you and we can pick it up at the airport.”

“We’ I thought as I took the envelope and stuck it away in my back pack. He handed me a slip of paper. “This is my private phone number. If you get into anything you don’t want or like, call me. If you want to come back, we can always find you a different situation, call me.” I nodded and smiled. “And this...” Owen pointed to what I recognized as an E-mail address. “...is my address. E-mail or call to let me know you’re safe.”

That he said ‘me’ and not ‘us’ wasn’t lost to my ears. I felt like shouting; ‘Why can’t I stay with you? Why can’t you keep me safe with you?’ And I felt like telling him something else but I couldn’t. I wanted to touch him; feel him, his body next to mine.

Even though I was nearly fifteen and looked twelve, I knew way more than any child should ever know about the things two people can do to please one another. I didn’t feel a need to be pleased as much as the need to do something to please him. I didn’t understand why at the time.

“I also have a couple of corned beef sandwiches and two cans of soda for you. They will serve you something on the plane but take this anyway.” He handed me a brown paper bag.

“And here...” Mister O’Connor handed me a slip of paper as well. “This is the name address and telephone number of the woman in Fort Lauderdale.”

I took the paper and looked briefly at it. The name was the name ‘Meaghread Ni Dhomnaill’. I had no idea how to pronounce her name. “How do you say her name?” Mister O’Connor laughed.

“Just call her May.” He laughed. “And her mate’s name is Cait.” That seemed easy enough.

“Your plane leaves in two hours so we’ll have plenty of time to get you to the airport.” Owen spoke with a hint of...sadness in his voice?

My Run...

My flight landed as scheduled and my escape from the very kind stewardess went as planned. She smiled and waved as I disappeared into the crowd. The bus dropped me at the central bus station in downtown Fort Lauderdale and for the first time I was able to savor the blessed heat.

I thought of hugging Owen at the gate and he returning the hug, and a kiss atop my head, lingered in my heart. The aroma of his body clung to my mind. The way he made me feel at that moment in time will never leave my consciousness. And every time I thought of that moment I became confused and my entire physical being tingled.

After stepping off the bus I gazed at a bus route map and quickly determined that Las Olas Boulevard wasn’t more than a few blocks away. I managed to grab several of those maps as well as a bus schedule listing and made my way toward the center of the city.

Las Olas was teeming with people. The air was alive with something I had never experienced before and, at the time, had no name for; party time! Everywhere I looked I saw people with smiles on their faces; laughing, joking, even singing. And the music flowed out onto the street from a place called O’Hara’s.

Everything I looked at...even the people...seemed to sparkle and shine. This was indeed a stark contrast to the grayness and dullness of my...home? I saw antique shop after art gallery, after clothing store and in between all of this were the food shops selling pizza and ice cream and every delight one might desire.

This all seemed like a carnival...or at least what I had heard and read about such events. And the people were so colorfully dressed. I thought that this was some sort of heaven; where everyone was on an eternal vacation. I couldn't begin to imagine what it must be like to live in this...this heaven all the time.

I walked until the store fronts ceased near a small bridge over a creek and crossed the road to walk back up the other side. In spite of the warmth of the evening, having only just arrived from the cold dampness that was passed for spring in New England, I felt nothing at all. I was just so overwhelmed with everything my eyes fell upon.

I stopped and bought my first meal on the street. I had to open up my back pack to dip into my 'stash' for the first time. I opened the envelope to find that my funds were now doubled to an amazing six hundred dollars! Not only didn't Owen take my money for a plane ticket, but he had also given me three hundred extra dollars.

As I handed the counter man a twenty dollar bill, I suddenly realized that I was 'owing to Owen'. Then I began to count up the favors returned as I ate a slice of pizza and sipped from a cup of soda. Getting me the ticket, giving me the three hundred dollars, taking me to the airport, giving me his personal phone number and e-mail, and simply taking the time to help me made five times the favor returned.

I had no idea of how I would ever be able to repay such kindness. Little did I know that within a year and maybe two or three months I would repay that debt a thousand fold. But I get ahead of myself. I was enjoying my veritable feast as I walked when I noticed that there was a river to my left. I quickly walked to it and found what I was to learn was called the river-walk.

The walk went on for a distance of about six or so blocks along the New River and there were benches for resting and boats at berths. Of course there were people strolling about and again the sounds of music filled the air. I began to tire from the wear and stress of the day so I sat on the first vacant bench I came to.

I thought about where and how I would spend the first night of my freedom. Casting my eyes about I noticed a stack of cardboard cartons behind what must have been a small super market. I also noticed that there were several spots set back from the river that were thick with shrubbery. I knew what need to be done so, when I had rested a bit, I went to cut up a carton to make my mattress for the evening.

After do this, I continued to walk along the river and under a bridge. The spot under the bridge look enticing but then again, if I was enticed so others would be as well. I walked a bit further and found the perfect spot. It was alongside of a house surrounded by shrubs tall enough so that I wouldn't be noticed. I put down my cardboard mattress, used my pack for a pillow, covered myself with my winter coat, and promptly fell asleep.

South Florida is the end of the road on the east coast of the United States. People come here to die from old age and people come here if they have no money or possessions to speak of. There really is no winter so one doesn't need winter clothes. There is rarely a heating bill to speak of so one doesn't need much of a house or shelter for that matter. It's a land where food was relatively inexpensive and every restaurant had an early bird special. I thought my six hundred, no...make that five hundred and ninety five dollars, would last me forever.

In the morning, I awoke and walked back to the market I took my 'mattress' from. After purchasing a bit of breakfast and some snacks and drink for later on, I caught a bus headed for the beach and my final 'home away from home'.

Upon seeing the ocean I got off the bus to my first dose of reality. There were no cars on the beach. There were no kids waking up after a night of celebration. There was no spring break madness that I had heard so much about. There was only a sea wall of sorts that prevented any parking on the sand and signs that declared the beach to be 'closed' at nine in the evening. I felt shattered.

I did, however, notice that there were public showers at each break in the little sea wall and that the water flowing through them was not cold. As I removed my sneakers and socks and prepared to cross the sand to the ocean's edge, another plan began to formulate in my mind. I sat and soothed myself gazing out toward the sea and instinctively knew I needed a bathing suit.

A bathing suit would allow me to be on the beach for a goodly part of the day without questions being asked. I could stay close enough to a family, or a couple, to be the 'disenfranchised' teen. I noticed that some of the women who used the shower upon leaving the ocean would also have shampoo and conditioner for their hair. And now I knew that I had to purchase a girl's bathing suit so that again no questions would be asked of a teen girl having a back pack and washing her hair at the beach.

After spending some time at the beach, and realizing that I also needed something to prevent sunburn, I boarded a bus heading along the beach. I transferred onto another bus heading up Sunrise Boulevard and away from the beach. I constantly referred to the simple map I got the prior evening and I made mental notes of where things were and where I was.

After a short ride I noticed a Sears's Town strip mall. I got off the bus knowing that I could easily buy a bathing suit and whatever else I needed; a wide brimmed hat, sun block, and some

sort of beach robe and a good detailed map of Fort Lauderdale. I made my purchases and nobody looked twice. I was simply a girl buying a bathing suit and some beach items.

I spent the remainder of the day riding the bus system and getting to know my way around the city proper. I wound up the day back on Las Olas eating pizza for dinner again and then simply strolling further up the River Walk to see what was at the end. I found the performing arts center and a museum. I knew how I was going to spend the next day. My 'mattress' was still in place and again I spent the night in the bushes.

Within my first five days of 'freedom', I managed to work my way through all of the downtown museums and sites. I was becoming somewhat tired of my current sleeping conditions. Though safe, the mosquitos and various other night crawling residents were preying upon my food and bodily resources. The ground was becoming a hard box spring and my clothes needed to be washed rather badly.

I was growing tired of running to the beach every day to do my toiletries and the very act of having to keep moving to avoid detection by the cops was weighing quite heavily. I met a few others like me; young people on the move and away from home. They would share what little they had and I would do the same. There were drugs and alcohol purchased with bummed change but I refrained from partaking. It was too easy to fall back into that habit and I knew what I would eventually have to do to sustain that need.

Although some of the others had no problem selling themselves for the money, they had no protection from the predators and the various bruises on some of their faces exhibited that fact. Of course the world abounds with pedophiles that really didn't seem to have a gender preference in their ever thirsting quest to destroy what was pure and innocent. There is no such thing as innocence on the streets. We all ran from the abuses back home. We all knew what the deal was.

The second week I made the downtown public library my daily base. I could hide in the stacks of books on the various floors and either read, sleep, or simply rest during the height of the day. Toward the afternoon, I would take a bus...the central bus station was across the street...up to 'five corners'.

There was a super market where the ever growing gay community would shop. I could scrounge up a few dollars rather quickly from the gays and they were more than generous. On occasion one would offer me a night's shelter but I was determined not to do that unless I really needed the money and shelter.

My funds were running low. Street food was expensive and I couldn't purchase anything that required refrigeration. If I did buy a hot sandwich, I had to find a peaceful place to sit and eat. Most of the time I got by eating cookies, chips and fast food.

“I was lost but now am found...”

I was well into my third week when the gravity and the enormity of my situation fell upon me like a giant boulder falling upon an ant. I was up at five corners doing my sidewalk act when suddenly my vision narrowed and I felt dizzy and I needed to sit down. My breathing became quite erratic and sweat began to pour off of me like a never ending fountain. It was then that I experienced the first of my panic attacks since I left home. It was then that I thought of my father.

I loved my father so very much and I missed him terribly. He was a track maintenance supervisor for the M.T.A. up in Boston. He was a tall, sinewy, jovial Irishman with fair features and prematurely gray, almost white, hair. His blue eyes twinkled with an internal smile that only the truly content seemed to have. A good word or two was always his greeting even when he might not have felt all that good.

His face would turn beet red whenever anger was growing within him, or when he had a glass or two with his friends on a Friday afternoon. He never got the ‘red face’ with my sister or I and I can never recall him ever being drunk. Oh yes...I have seen the ‘red face’ when he was laughing and full of mirth.

He was always kind and patient with our family, especially with me. He sensed that I was not going to play for the Red Sox or the Bruins someday. In fact, I believed that he knew I wouldn’t even make a bat boy. But that didn’t stop him from being attentive and loving toward me. He would play ball with my older sister and me, always making sure that the ball would find its way gently into my glove and if, by the grace of God, I happened to hit the damned thing, he would manage to just miss catching it.

He would take my sister and me to see the Red Sox play, especially if the Yankees were in town. We would pocket some treats and load up on hot dogs and sodas and ‘enjoy a day at the park’ as he would say. He took me fishing down by the river once every so often but I really didn’t like the smells or the mess. I went anyway simply to be in his company. My sister fared better at these things so it was a family outing of sorts that met everyone’s expectations of time with our father.

My mother never came along to these things. Emotionally she was never really very available to us. If I needed a hug or a kind word, I went to my father or my sister. We would spend the evenings watching television, me cuddled up on his right knee and she on his left. He often said, with humor in his voice and a twinkle in his eyes, that he was mother to two daughters.

I was nearly seven when he was killed by a drunk driver. I hated him for dying and leaving us; for leaving me. I was so very angry at him for not being around when I needed that hug or kind word. My protector was gone. My hero had clay feet. Thinking of him always brought tears to my eyes, as it did now. How I wished...

As if he was whispering into my ear I reached into my pack and into the zippered pocket that held my lifeline to the world. As my world began to clear and come into focus again, I gazed at the two pieces of paper; still there and still intact. I looked at the name attached to the phone number. Maybe I could get a May and a nice soft comfortable bed for the evening. Maybe I could wash my clothes.

I went to the pay telephone (remember those?) near the doors of the market. I called the phone number given to me for exactly this kind of moment. After several rings, a woman answered. I told her my name and the name of the man who had given her number to me. Before I could go on...and on...and on...she spoke.

“What has kept you from us?” I could hear her smile as she said those words. I could also hear a brogue strong and thick enough to stand on. She was definitely from the country. She sounded like a Scot or maybe Irish from the North.

“Where are you now?” She certainly wasted no time! When I told her, she became quite excited and began to speak so quickly that I couldn’t understand a single word she said. I asked her to speak more slowly.

“I am sorry. I do that sometimes. I am in the very market where you stand. I will be out very shortly. Wait for me by the front door.” She giggled.

I don’t know why, but her excitement and her giggle made me feel better. Maybe it was nice to simply have someone be excited by my arrival. Maybe it was simply nice...no...make that wonderful...to be wanted. I straightened myself out a bit. I ran my hands through my hair to kind of look presentable.

Beneath my tee shirt and shorts, I wore my one piece swim suit. I would need to explain that to her. The panties and other articles of clothing in my bag might be a bit more difficult to explain but I’m getting ahead of myself...again.

Oh my God! I could see her coming. She was pushing a wagon full of bags. This had to be her. She was stunningly beautiful in the way that Celt women are. She stood straight with her shoulders back and was a good five inches taller than me. Her simple, modest, beige linen dress draped her body in a way that held little secret of what was hidden beneath.

Thought the sleeves fell to mid arm and the hem to mid-calf, one could see that she was quite shapely, to say the least. She had broad hips...child bearing hips. And there were those marvelous breasts that tented out the linen. She had a wee bit of a belly as women of her build tended to have, but she was certainly far from Reubenesque. The only way to truly describe her

at that moment would be to call her lush and plush or perhaps an anatomical invitation for procreation for those so inclined.

She stopped right in front of me. “You must be Kerrie (she pronounced it as Key-rrre). I am called May (pronounced May...which you already know).” Her smile was dazzling.

“Who are your people?” she asked.

“What?” What? “What people?” Yeah, what people?

“What is your family name?”

“Bailey”, I said. “Kerrie Bailey.” (Bond...James Bond)

“Bailey...Irrrrisssh...” she replied with a bit of derision in her voice. “Not a hanging matter. You are most welcome with us and it would honor us if you made our home yours.” There was not a bit of guile in her sweet lilting voice or smile.

She bent slightly and removed my sunglasses. I turned my head away trying to hide the remains of my bruises as she gently, but firmly, turned my head back so that our eyes met. I noticed her briefly glancing at the discolorations but then her gaze returned to mine.

She ran her fingers through my hair, kissed my forehead, and said: “You are a beautiful child. You will be a blessing to us.” The smile was gone and her eyes got a bit watery.

“Come, lend hand with my packages and we’ll make you a place with us.” She began pushing her wagon into the parking lot and I followed.

Her hips swayed in a mesmerizing dance that countered the swing of her arms and the movement of her shoulders. And her hair, her gorgeous strawberry blond hair, set aflame by the sun’s brilliant light, flowed down her back in large natural waves. And as the ends caught the slight breeze, strands would trail behind her like the fiery tail of a comet. That same slight breeze blew her scent back toward me as I trailed her. She wore the scent of expensive perfume; slightly sweet and yet slightly tart.

Her “peaches and cream” skin had the slightest band of freckles that ran from one cheek across the bridge of her nose to the other. Her mouth was wide and her lips were full. They had a natural ruddy tint. Meg’s cheeks had a natural blush that was quite lovely.

What truly captivated me was her big, round, pale green eyes. When she gazed directly at me and it was as if I could see into her inner being through them. There was warmth and kindness as well as empathy to my plight. But I could also see that those very same eyes could look right back into whoever she was gazing at and see the true nature of that person.

She was, in my mind’s eye, the epitome of confidence, grace and femininity. I could feel that she knew who, and what, she was and didn’t care what others thought of her. I was more than envious. “Little boy...what do you want to be when you grow up?” “Oh...I want to be May!” Nice.

Now I must say...truth to tell...that it was her grace and poise I envied. Unbeknownst to me was the image of myself, lodged deep within the recesses of my mind, which May would bring out within the next two days. It was her strength of will and her intuitive soul that would pull it painfully out. She would cause the beginning of my... 'rebirth'...complete with (psychic) pain and tears. Anyway, I get ahead of myself again.

We came to her car, a green BMW, and I loaded the bags into the boot. I closed it and wheeled the wagon to the space between the curbs. I went to the car, opened the door, placed my small back pack on the floor and got in. The car smelled of leather and of her exquisite scent. She turned the motor on, placed her hands on the steering wheel, and began to back out.

At that point I had a moment to gaze at her hands, which were not exactly delicate! Her hands were not the hands of a high maintenance woman. Her fingers were quite long and (for lack of a better word) stout. And her fore arms were muscular. This woman knew what it meant to work for a living. She wore a Claddagh ring on her middle finger of her left hand with the crown 'up'. I remember this from the neighborhood and it indicated that she was indeed taken. There was a heart shaped diamond in the center and emeralds in the crown.

My breath was taken away by Meg's finger nails. They were exquisitely and perfectly polished, at least in my own mind they were. She wore clear nail polish that, from what I could see, was absolutely perfectly applied. I could not see one flaw in the finish as they sparkled in the light. Her nails were all the same length. They extended slightly beyond the tips of her fingers just enough to give her nails a nearly perfectly oval shape. They were long enough to be quite feminine and alluring to her lover; and yet not too long to be able to work with her hands. I couldn't resist...

"Your nails are absolutely perfect. Who did them for you?" I was so totally taken by the moment that I felt no fear in asking.

She smiled and thanked me for the compliment. There may have even been a bit more of a blush to her face and neck.

"I do them myself." I was somewhat startled. I had played around with polish, well, actually, my older sister and I had played with the polish and I simply could not seem to be able to get the finish just right. Secretly I practiced on my own for what seemed like hours and I would finally see the royal muck I had made of my hands and remove it all only to begin again.

"It must take forever."

"Not really. I do them with a few coats; that takes about twenty minutes. And then each day I add one coat in the morning. Every five days the whole thing comes off for a day or two. That is when I trim them. The nail is a living thing and must breath. So I let them breath and then I start again. Once a month or so I have fingers and toes professional done." She smiled the entire time she was relating this process to me. She glanced at me and noticed me staring at her finger tips as though hypnotized.

“If you like...I will do yours for you. But only if you wish.” She reached over and grasped my left hand. Her hand was not only warm to the touch in the air conditioned car, but I could feel her strength as she held my fingers and gently, but firmly, and pulled them into her line of sight. My fingers were a disaster! I not only bit my nails, but the cuticles as well. I was embarrassed, to say the least, at the way they looked. She placed my hand back in my lap.

“You must stop what you do to these fingers. You have beautiful delicate hands but you destroy them with this.”

She was certainly right about that. I had not been the most secure person for seven years, and this was only one manner in which my insecurity manifested itself. I was basically a mess. My hands, my hair, my...everything...was a mess.

“Anyway’, she added, ‘it will not do to have fingers on your breathe.” I giggled along with her as she spoke.

“I would like that very much. But I don’t know that the time is right. I am asking for more than I really should. Just some food and a shower would be a blessing.” My emotions got the better of me and tears began to roll down my cheeks. Meg pulled the car to side of the road and stopped.

“Take your glasses from your face. We need to speak for a moment and I want you to be seeing me, and that I may see you as well so that we know each other.”

I removed my sun glasses with more than a little hesitation. From her side she could easily see the bruises again. She reached over a swept the hair from my eyes and handed my some tissues she took from a pocket in the door. She looked into my eyes as I wiped them and blew my nose.

“Let us have no more of these tears. I take you to our home.” May emphasized the words ‘our home’ as if I had been residing there forever. “I will not be putting you out to the street for you do not belong there. That is the first thing. Now, you are a right beautiful child Kerrie. We will clean you up a wee bit and put the shine to you as well. You will not need to worry about tomorrow. You just be at ease and rest your heart a bit today.”

May then reached over with both arms and, pulling me into her as much as the seat belts would allow, she hugged me to her. She held me with her strong arms and she pulled my head into her neck and shoulder. That was the first truly warm human contact I had in longer than two weeks. I started crying again. I felt so secure at that moment and all the pent up emotion burst out of me. It was kind of like being tucked into a soft ripe cushion of wonderfully scented motherhood. It took about five minutes before I could compose myself enough to continue the ride to her home. May held my hand the entire way and I knew that she wouldn’t let go of me until I could stop my tears, and she didn’t.

We continued the drive in silence, a comfortable silence. I relished the warmth of her hand. The car crossed Federal Highway as we headed toward the older part of town. The streets were tree

lined and the homes were older, and larger. By the time we got to her home, I had managed to stop sniffing and was able to relax a bit and enjoy my surroundings.

The house was huge and looked relatively new. It had an “old country house” look with a wide sweeping covered veranda that started at the back end of one side and ran three-quarters of the way around the house to the other back corner. The pale yellow exterior with the white trimming around the windows and doors brightened the entire picture. The front double door and frame were of stained oak and cut and frosted glass insets were in each. The cut designs were Celtic knots (what else).

As she drove through the gap in the shrubbery and up the driveway, I could see the obligatory pool and Jacuzzi in the rear. There was a gazebo and several fruit trees. The entire backyard was sculpted with flowers and bougainvillea bushes. At the back door there was a wooden deck that led to, and surrounded, the pool and Jacuzzi. Oh my God, who have I met?

Ni Dhomhnail Abu!!!

I felt nothing for women on an emotional level. I have my mother to thank for that. But May, and then her partner Cait, would change all of that. And May wasted no time. May had an enormous impact on me from the very beginning. I was completely unaccustomed to unconditional love and that was the only way May knew how to behave. Inversely, her openness and honesty frightened me. All I had known for half of my life was treachery and betrayal and violent abuse.

My greatest fear was that I would prove my inadequacy and be tossed out. After all, for years I had heard about all of my short comings from my step-father. He would shout them at me before, during, and after a beating. He would continue until he passed out on the couch.

As a result, I became the greatest over achiever in the history of over achievers. I had to be perfect in every way, shape, and form. I remember getting a three point seven in an advanced algebra course and having a complete melt down of epic proportions. I was fastidious with my belongings. Everything within my bedroom had to be neat and orderly. But I get ahead of myself...yet again.

May stopped the car at the edge of the deck by the back door and got out. I followed her grabbing my pack and putting it on my shoulder. We took as much as we could both carry and, putting down her bags, May unlocked and opened the door. A gust of cool air slapped my face in a most delightful manner. She muttered something I couldn't quite, at the time, understand.

“What?” I thought she was speaking to me.

“It is the custom of my people to utter a blessing when we enter a home, ours or someone else's. We also greet one another in that manner. That is the custom”.

So what was I to do? I said, upon entering: “Bless this house”. I'd heard that said before, so...

“Aye...right fine”. May laughed as I followed her to the kitchen table and placed my load of bags on it. She immediately went and fetched me a glass of milk from the refrigerator. “Have this and ease yourself”. I swear it was the best drink I’ve had in a long time. I started a second glass as she brought the remaining bags of groceries in.

Now you must understand that my head was in a bit of a swim. I was on the streets only five minutes ago and now I stood in the “heart” of what Meg calls “a grand cottage”; a twelve room home only a few minute walk from the downtown area. Although there were lace curtains on every window, May is certainly not of the “lace curtain” kind of woman.

There was nothing pretentious or phony about May. I was to later find out that she always had a stash of dollar bills in her bag or on her person to accommodate an outstretched hand. The dollar was always accompanied by a blessing for better luck and times. There were some people such as her back home but I’d never met one before.

You know the type and every ethnic community has them. They tend to keep the “old ways” and the culture from where ever they came from. They never really feel a part of the new place they live so they try to create the old where they presently live. And they tend to practice the best aspects of their culture as if to say: “This is who we really are”. May their names be known forever.

May took me upstairs and brought me into one of the guest bedrooms. That bedroom was the size of our living room and dining room put together. May had provided me with one of her sleeping tee shirts and a beautiful rose patterned silk robe. She brought me into the adjoining bathroom.

“Wash yourself well and use as much time as you need. There are soaps and such in this closet”, she said opening a door in the bathroom, “and when you are done, call out so that we might comb out your hair. Make yourself easy in these rooms. Also gather all your clothes that I may wash them.”

May took my face gently into her warm hands, pulled me close, and kissed me again on my forehead. She left the room and I turned and had a chance to look in the bedroom at my new surroundings. All the furniture was made of wood, real wood. The floors were wood and had lovely patterned oriental rugs scattered about. The dresser had a big mirror attached to a frame that had a smaller mirrored wing on each side. A Queen Anne desk and chair as well as smaller round table with two chairs occupied the walls on either side of a bay area. The chairs were upholstered with needle point seats and backs.

A great bed crowned the room. It was a queen sized bed with a hand carved head and foot board. Four posts rose from the ends and the feet were carved eagle claws around a ball. May didn’t know what period the piece was from but she adored it and hoped her guests would as well. Of course there were laced draping fabrics hanging from the upper wooden cross pieces and they were tethered at the posts.

As in the rest of the house, there were no white walls. This bedroom had pale pastel green walls except for the wall against which the bed stood. That wall was lime green. There were various gold framed pictures and drawings scattered about. And, of course, lace curtains on the windows. The bay area that had double glass doors that opened onto a balcony where one could sit and read.

And that bathroom...Lord have mercy... that bathroom! I had never seen such a thing in my life, not that I had seen all that much to begin with. The sink was atop a porcelain pedestal and had golden fixtures. An oval gilt framed mirror hung directly above the basin. The toilet and bidet were in an enclosed and vented and, for lack of a better word, housed in a fair sized closet with a laced curtain draped window.

The true center piece of this bathroom was the shower. It was fully tiled, as the rest of the room was, with a built in tiled bench in its center. There were several nozzles aligned along each of the two tiled walls which one could direct the water flow. Another tiled wall provided entry from either side and prevented the spray from exiting the bathing area.

The shelf within the shower held every possible shower product available for whatever part of the body that needed special attention. And there was a mirror on an extending arm that could be adjusted to any part of one's head that might need special viewing. There was no door or shower curtain and the feeling of openness was thrilling. How totally cool!

Back home, the hot water lasted long enough to merely ease the chill of a winter's morning. In this shower, I luxuriated for no less than fifteen minutes and the water still remained hot. I washed myself using soaps that seemed to be created expressly for those body parts and finished with my 'bird's nest' hair, using the shampoo and accompanying conditioner.

I dried my hair and the rest of myself and wrapped the towel around my body, tucking the end in under my arm. I took a second towel and, after bending over, wrapped that one around my hair as my older sister had shown me. I gathered my clothes and re-entered the bedroom. I felt wonderfully clean. I hadn't felt this clean since...well...that last time I felt wonderfully clean, and that was quite some time ago.

I put on Meg's sleep tee, a feathery soft garment that fell below my knees, and her robe, which fell to my ankles. I could smell her scent on both even though the tee was clean. She probably scented everything. Between the length of the tee and the robe, there was little chance of exposing my very little secret. I put my head out the bedroom room and called to her, letting her know I was finished. I still didn't know what to do, or say, about the gender thing so I decided to say nothing.

May joined me in the bedroom. "Ah...t'is a far sight better than before. Do you not think?" I put on an ear-to-ear grin. "That is the way I expected you to smile", she said. "Let's see to your hair first."

She took the towel from my head and began to closely examine my hair. “We must take care for your hair is nearly destroyed; so many split hairs and such.”

I could see a genuine concern as May pulled me by the hand back into the bathroom and, after retrieving a spray bottle containing a mysterious fluid, began to spray the strands. She then began running her fingers through my hair, massaging the stuff into, it seemed like, each strand. Then she massaged my scalp and that felt wonderful. May’s strong fingers and hands had a miraculous effect. My scalp felt so revitalized and...tingly?

May took a comb and hair blower from the bathroom closet and set to work combing and blow drying (on a cool setting), my hair. She was as gentle as she could be with the knots but she still elicited an occasional “ouch” on my part. Finally my hair was combed out and looked amazing. But she would not let me see the final result.

“Lets’ do one or two other things so that you might be presentable. This does not take but a moment or two.” She guided me from the bathroom into the bedroom and sat me down at the table near the bay window. “I’ll be right back”.

She left the room returning with one handful of items I could not yet discern. She sat down next to me and began to relate the ‘May Theory of Beauty’.

“All of us are beautiful and when we go and put things on our faces we must be sure that we point out what is there, not what we would like to be having. Also, most important, never use that which is of someone else. That is unless you know them most well. A sickness can easily be spread be doing so.”

She placed a few packaged cosmetics on the table and unwrapped them. “I know you are quite hungry but this take but a moment or two and it will do you good straight away”.

May picked up a compact and opened it. “These are colors suited to me but we do not use much and our skin is almost the same hue. Now, close your eyes and be still”. My sisters and I often played with make-up and, because of my lack of friends, and my difficult home situation, included me in their play. In other words, I knew the drill. She made several swipes across my lower eyelids using a fine haired brush.

“Now, open your eyes and look up”. I complied as she unscrewed the mascara brush from its tube. “Do not move even a breath’s worth”. She quickly did my upper lashes and then the lower. She repeated the process one more time.

“Now to your lips. This is a colorless balm that will help repair what the sun did to your mouth”. I pursed my lips a bit as she applied the balm. She rubbed she own lips together and I knew she wanted me to do the same. “Your skin and lips are dry from the sun and heat. Let’s do this one more time”. She reapplied the balm.

While May was applying the make up to my face, I felt such a strong longing to see my sisters. After my father died, almost a year after, my mom remarried. Within three years she had two more girls. Anyway, it suddenly occurred to me that I really missed all three of them. It felt so

very natural for May to be doing this with me, even if the reason for doing this originally no longer existed in my life.

May then gently patted my cheeks and told me to look in the mirror. “OH! MY! GOD!” I said, completely surprised at the image I saw. ‘This is truly who I am’ I thought. My green eyes seemed to become larger...alive. And my lashes were thick and long. My cheeks were naturally aglow. And my lips...oh my God...they were, so glossy, so ...kissable. With my brown hair brushed away from my face, and in spite of my bruises, I actually thought I looked...well...kind of cute. It was ear-to-ear grin time!

May came up behind me and, placing her hands on my shoulders, said: “I guess this is who you are, is it not so. And you are beautiful, just as I told you.”

I turned toward her and hugged her as my tears flowed. She had managed to open up my heart with her actions and I felt some of the pain I acquired over the past few years flow out of me. Although I didn’t think of myself, or see myself, as being beautiful, this reflection in the mirror definitely was a different me, but it was, without any question, me.

“Come. We’ll go down and make ready the meal. By the hour it is grows late. I will give you something to tide you over till the dinner”. She took me by my hand and led me down the steps to the kitchen.

“Mostly we make our meals in this room. Sometimes, when there are guests or kinsmen, we eat in the big room.” I guessed she was referring to the dining room. “You pay close mind to where things rest so that you may take for yourself when you please” she said with a smile. “I know how hungry I would get when I was younger.”

She began to pull plates and cups and silverware (real silver I might add) out of the cabinets and cupboards. I paid close attention to where these things were located.

Our family rarely had a meal together. Mostly it was us kids and usually we just got our plates and scooped whatever my mom could manage to throw in the fridge. Sometimes, more often as time went on, my older sister, with my help, would make us all a meal.

“My mother had to take a job at a local laundry to make ends meet and she worked from three in the afternoon until closing around eleven. My step father, when he worked, usually came home in the late afternoon or early evening. But he was already fed and usually drunk. So it was my sisters and me for dinner; so much for our family meals.”

I think that was the most I said the entire afternoon. Meg smiled and looked at me with a knowing look. Then I spoke of my step father and his drinking. May remained quiet as I vented my anger in telling the tale. After I had finished my little tirade May spoke.

“We call that ‘the sickness’. Drink for some is a sickness that they cannot control. I have seen this in my own kinsmen. Even the smell of a drink can set them off after months of abstinence. They say that drink was put on the earth to prevent us from taking over” May said and laughed. “I do not suffer from this; although I do like a beer now and then.”

Then I spoke of my mother. I hated my mother almost as much as I hated my step dad. I hated her weakness and her inability to put an end to the beatings. I hated her weakness for not leaving him, or for not throwing him out. I felt that she loved that brute more than me. Why else could she let it go on if that wasn't the case?

Since the 'genie was out of the bottle' I spoke of myself. And mostly I despised myself. How could I let that happen to me and why couldn't I find the courage to stop it. I never hit back. I could barely shield myself from his onslaught. I almost had to agree with my step-father...there was something wrong with me and I began to believe that I deserved what was happening to me.

May became angry and quite animated upon hearing what I had said about myself. She berated me and said that it was foolish to think that I could possibly be at fault for the sins of my 'parents'. It wasn't my job to be the adult in the family; it was theirs and they failed miserably. I listened in silence, my gaze cast downward toward my hands...my fingers. I knew she was right but that was my logical self-thinking and not my deep down inner self.

All I knew up to this point was that I was shown more kindness, by a complete stranger in an afternoon, than I was by my mom and step-dad in years. May showed me how to set the table. Fork on this side and knife and spoon on that and so on. I jabbered away complimenting her on the silverware and the stoneware dishes and cups. It might have been the most I've ever spoken to anyone other than my sisters.

I smelled something wonderful and May bade me to sit at the table. She then placed a plate before me with salmon, veggies and some sort of potato thing. My eyes must have looked bigger than the plate. We never ate like this; not even on a holiday. Our meals were mostly out of boxes or cans. Once in a very rare while my sister would get something fresh from the market; maybe a chicken or some fish. I would help her cook whatever it happened to be and we would feast.

"I think you will like this. It is potato pie. We call it colcannon." I repeated the word silently to myself. I think I might have had it at someone's home during a wake. "It has many things in it but mostly it is potato, cabbage and butter, much butter."

It was absolutely wonderful. There was more than a bit of garlic in it as well. I wolfed it down. Lord I was hunger. She gave me a bit more and that was eaten as soon as it hit my plate. I finished quickly and before May could even stand from her chair I had the dishes in hand and went and placed them in the basin.

"We'll save the rest for dinner. Now, let's see those hands of yours." She sat and once again took both me hands into hers. "Your skin is most dry. We must do something with that later. And we must work on feeding you up a bit."

I blushed. My finger nails were a disgrace for sure. "I do that when I'm nervous and I guess I'm nervous a lot."

May arose from the table and went into the hall and, I guess, into another room. She returned with a small bottle of clear nail polish and sat down again.

“We’ll start small with a wee bit of polish to shine them up. This has vitamins in it. This is to help them be healthy.”

In very little time she had managed to coat all my nails. I couldn’t believe how wonderful it felt to see them shine in the light. The polish itself was very thick and I could feel it on my nails. I could feel it dry. It seemed to draw the nail tighter. It’s difficult to describe but it did look and feel really cool.

“You put more lip balm on so you look fine when my love comes and that will be right soon.”

I couldn’t resist asking, even though I knew it wasn’t something you asked a person as soon as you met them. “Are you guys rich or something? I mean, you live in this big house and have really beautiful things.” May looked at me carefully and pursed her lips. Maybe it was the wrong thing to ask.

“We both come from humble homes. My Da has a farm and he and my Mum and two of his kinsmen work very hard for everything. My darling comes from fighters. The father made war against the Brits his whole life, as his father and his father’s father did. There are six brothers more and they made war as well.” I couldn’t imagine what it was like to have so many brothers.

“There is no money from the father, but some of the brothers did well when they quit the war business. The “Troubles” changed to talk and her brothers are not much for talking you know. One of them is even a doctor, and one a farmer and two others have a business together. Of the brothers, Sean Padriac, has the most. He does business around the world.”

I remembered how Mister O’Connor and Owen spoke so respectfully about him. May continued to speak.

“My love went to school for many years and become a physician. Every penny was kept and put into other things that made more money. We are very much blessed that those things made a great sum. We built this cottage and when we are ready to go back home, even this will make money; a goodly sum of money. My darling is right smart.”

I definitely wanted to hear more about Cait’s family. They sounded like a wild bunch of people.

“We even have a place ready for us when we return home. It is a grand home with many rooms so that we may fill it with our loved ones. It is made from stone and sits on a fair piece of most fertile land. We go back home to visit two, often three times a year.”

May's glow...you know that inner glow...matched her smile. Obviously she missed her home back in Ireland. I didn't bother to ask May's profession. She tended to this amazing home and to Cait.

"We must go shopping. You have so very little with you. You'll need many things; skirts, blouses, shoes, everything."

I guessed there was no question in May's mind; I was staying with them...at least for a while. I was curious about May and Cait.

"How did you two meet? How long have you known each other?" I had a dozen more questions but I found May to be a talker so I bided my tongue and my time.

"I was fourteen when we first met. There is a gathering of my love's clainne every July. We met there when I became lost from my people. Our lands are near and any party is a good party so we went. Anyway, we know the people well for many years. At sixteen I made my choice to be for Cait."

"God, you were so young!"

"At sixteen years my Mum had two babies, a husband, and a farm. Where I come from sixteen years is not young. I have fourteen brothers and sisters and I am the oldest." She laughed at saying this. "And my Mom has one more coming yet."

"But didn't you go to school?"

"I went till I was twelve. I learned in our language from the church. I read a bit and write a bit and I certainly do know my numbers. Numbers are most important so that you may not be fooled with money. All else I learned at home: How to work hard and how to tend to people. What is more important than that?"

I sat totally engrossed in May's tale. She did have a point in that she did know everything she needed to know. I thought about what her life on the farm must have been like as she applied a second coat of polish to my nails. I was also surprised that people married and started families at such a young age. I mean I've heard of kids in our neighborhood who had children and wound up marrying but that was not frequently the case.

"We'll also need to get you ready for schooling down here..."

OMG!!! I remember so vividly how I began to tremble at the very notion of having to go back to school.

"I could stay here and help you. I mean...this is a big house and you must need help to tend to it." I was hoping May would buy that notion but I should have known better. She only laughed and shook her head.

“I’m afraid you can’t get out of going to school.”

“But how will I be able to register? And I didn’t finish the year and...” I went on and on and on trying everything I could think of to get out of going to school.

“Don’t fear a bit. Cait will fix everything.” May laughed and pulled me to her for a hug.

I gazed at my nails. How perfect they looked. If only I hadn’t bitten them down to the quick. I not only had an incentive to stop biting my nails. Little did I realize that I’d just unknowingly acquired a polished nail fetish?

“We’ll have lawyers...and the lawyers will have lawyers!”

May took me upstairs to ‘my’ bedroom and drew down the bed cover for me. I took off the robe, kicked off my flip-flops, and hopped onto the bed. As I slid between the covers, I felt the smoothest, most comfortable sheets ever. May pulled the blanket and sheet up to my chin, leaned over and kissed my forehead, pulled down the shades, and she wished me good dreams. I think I was asleep before she even left the room.

I must have slept for several hours because the room was nearly dark when I awoke. I was still on my back. I guess I was so tired that I hadn’t changed position from when I first got into bed. I saw that May had done my laundry and it was stacked neatly on the dresser. I arose from the bed and, after putting on my cleaned panty, went to the bathroom and the first thing I did was to check my make-up. How strange! I wanted to see if the ‘I’ I liked so much was still there. It was, thankfully. I sat and peed, freshened my lip gloss, and started for the door.

As I headed for the stairs, I heard talking down in the kitchen but I couldn’t understand the language. I knew it was either Gaelige or Irish because I sometimes heard it spoken in the neighborhood. It was spoken mostly by some of the old people and by the Provo emissaries that frequented the bars and other hang outs looking for donations.

“Bless this home and all in it!”

“My friend and lover!” There was an excitement in May’s voice.

“And you are my heart!” I heard a rich alto voice reply.

“We have a blessed guest my heart.”

“May...please God not another kitlin or roont. The damned things make me sneeze. And they shit and piss all about.”

“No my heart, not an animal. This is a young girl from Tommy O’Connor.”

“What?” There was more than a wee bit of tenseness in Cait’s voice. ***“You don’t receive young girls from Tommy O’Connor, a bomb maybe, but not young girls. This child must come from somewhere and she will surely be missed.”***

“She has been beaten and was in need of some money...not to mention food and a bath. What was I to do? Some fools threw her out and I want to keep her.”

“But you’ll have two of your own soon enough.”

“Would you turn her over to the county?”

There was a fairly long pause in what had been a rapid exchange of words.

“And what, if I may so bold as to ask, do you intend to do with this child after she is bathed and fed?” Now Cait’s voice was really tense

I felt like vomiting from nervousness as I descended the steps. I entered the kitchen and saw where that rich deep alto voice came from. Cait stood taller than May at six feet and two inches. She wore jeans, a white tee shirt, and white running shoes. She was definitely a sharp contrast to May. Cait had a defined athletic build with broad shoulders, no waist, and slim hips. Her arms were muscular for a woman and I could see the bottom of a tattoo on her right arm. She wore no jewelry, make-up, or nail polish. In fact her nails were cut down to the quick. Cait is definitely an alpha female. Even her name sounded hard.

I briefly looked at Cait’s face and into her eyes. She was quite beautiful really. Her hair was chestnut with a hint of auburn and one or two silver strands scattered about. This woman would probably never dye her hair. Her lips were full and thick across a wide mouth. Her skin was pale with a bit of coloring in her cheeks (although she was reddening rapidly about her face and neck). Her eyes were cat-like ovals and a piercing pale gray. She impaled me with her stare and I shivered.

“So...Kerrie is it? Who are your people?” Cait didn’t waste any time.

“Bailey. I am Kerrie Bailey.”

“Irish.” Again that tone. I was afraid she was going to spit. What’s the big deal?

“What’s the big deal?” Nice comeback, huh? “So I’m Irish. Aren’t you?”

“Your people came to Ireland in the eighteenth century; probably from England. You’re newcomers.”

Was she serious? After three hundred years we’re still newcomers? WTF! I didn’t say that of course. Not to Cait. She stood there with her hands on her hips and I swear I thought she was

going to hit me. She didn't. She turned and looked at May. May stood with her hands on her hips and returned the stare.

“You didn't answer me. Would you turn this child over to the county? Or would you rather turn her back to her kinsmen...perhaps to the one who knocked her about so badly. Maybe next time he'll put the boot in.”

Yes May...do your thing. You go girl!

“May come to your senses...” Now Cait's hands were out from her body with palms up. I knew she was pleading her case. *“...she is not a kinsman, she is not even of our people and this is not our place. They have laws here that say you simply can't take in children you happen to find and keep them. I know what is in your mind.”*

“Hang their laws. Somebody threw this child out and I take her...” May raised her finger into the air for emphasis. *“...and I claim her. That is all I have to say.”* May walked up behind me and placed her arms around me.

Cait threw her hands up and her eyes rolled toward the ceiling. *“We'll have lawyers! And the lawyers will have lawyers!”* Her hands returned to her hips, not fisted this time and she seemed to calm down a bit. *“You are my heart, my darling. As you wish I will do. But there will be rules to this. And we will have lawyers.”*

Ni Fhearghail Ab!!!

With resignation, Cait sat at the table and slowly exhaled. May set a brown bottle of beer and Cait looked at her, smiled and took a sip. Cait suddenly crooked her finger at me.

“Come...let us have a look at you Kerrie Bailey.” She smiled.

I looked up at May, who was also smiling. She nodded her head so I slowly got up and tenuously took the few steps over to Cait. I remember that I trembled slightly from fear as I approached her. I didn't know if she was as gentle and kind as Cait. I didn't know what to expect.

Cait took my hands when I neared. Her hands were warm and her grasp was firm yet gentle.

“I like your nails.” She smiled as she examined both sides of my hands and then looked to May.

Cait looked at my wrists. I watched as she gazed at my arm, her eyes moving higher and higher. She even looked at the crotch of my elbow. I didn't know why at the time.

“There's no problem with this one.” May offered but Cait continued checking me out anyway.

I could tell Cait was looking at the remnants of my bruises as she gently swept my hair out of the way.

“Who did this to you?” Suddenly there was real concern in her eyes and she voice became soft.

“Her step da has the sickness” May said as she took a seat just behind me, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. I looked at my hands and the glistening polish on my nails.

“I can see I’ll have my hands full with the two of you.” Cait spoke as she noticed where I was looking. “Where else has he hit you?”

Holding Cait’s hand, palm pressed to my body, I directed her to the spots I could reach.

“Do any of them still hurt?”

Do they still hurt? They would probably hurt me the remainder of my life. “No...”

“How old are you sweet heart?” Sweet heart...hmmm...I think I’m beginning to like the sound of that. The way she said it sounded genuine.

“I’ll be fifteen next month.”

Nodding her head, Cait gently took my face in her hands, pulled my head toward her, and kissed me gently on my fore head.

“When was the last time you saw a doctor?”

I honestly couldn’t remember. I went once a year for school shots and that was it. If I got sick, which wasn’t too often over the last few years, I stayed home and under cover. We simply couldn’t afford to run to the doctor for every little thing.

“Not in a few years, I guess.”

Cait laughed and continued; “Tomorrow you will visit me at the hospital.”

I nodded my head.

“And maybe we will do a bit of shopping for you. We also need to do something with that hair of yours. We can have a fine day together if you’d like.” Now that should be a real trip! Shopping with May! “Let us put out the meal.”

As the evening progressed, I began to feel more comfortable with the ladies. After dinner, we went to another part of the house, the library, where May served us dessert; cut fresh fruit, ice cream, and coffee.

Books lined three of the four walls. Although there were many medical and reference books, there were also histories. One section, to the right of the doorway, was full of cook books,

sewing and craft books, and stuff in Gaelige. I guessed that to be Mea's literary refuge. The room was lighted only by table lamps. Two sat upon Cait's large carved desk. In front of the desk were two large leather upholstered arm chairs, one of which was turned to face two matching loveseats that each had a coffee table in front of it. The loveseats, opposing each other, had end tables at each end and they also held the lamps.

Upon Cait's desk sat a computer screen, and an even larger one rested on the window alcove behind her and on either side of that screen appeared to be printers. A stack on neatly piled magazines rested on one corner of the desk and a pile of folders stuffed with papers rested on the other.

Mea set the tray upon one of the coffee tables and cut us each a piece of her cake. She then went behind the loveseat and produced a huge bag of knitting. Cait took her place in the large arm chair facing the loveseats. Mea sat down at the far end of the loveseat and patted the spot next to her as she motioned with her head for me to sit next to her. I did.

The room, softly lighted, had a warm and lived in feeling to it. These two seemed to always have something to do. At least that was my first impression. My second impression was that they seemed so...comfortable together. It was as if each knew what the other was going to do. The three of us sat in a comfortable silence as we munched on the cake.

"There will be much to do." Cait looked wistfully as she spoke. "There must be school. We will need to find tutors for math and English so that you may enter the tenth grade...is it?"

Gulp! No...make that a double gulp! I really hadn't considered school at all and I didn't stay long enough to finish ninth.

"We will also need to find a proper school for you as well. One that is suited to you."

I looked at Mea who had started to knit between bites of cake. She smiled and nodded her ascent.

"I think that twice a week with each should put you at least par if not one up on everyone else."

Twice a week with each...sacred feces!!! Who was going to pay for that? I stopped eating and looked at my nails. I guess my concern was expressed by that action.

"Don't you worry about the cost of anything we do for you sweetheart." I think I was getting to like the sound of that name...hmmm...sweetheart. "You'll be paying dearly I can assure you." That didn't sound good. "You will be helping Mea with whatever she does. That means early to sleep and early to rise." That didn't sound too bad.

"You must also be around people your own age or at least your age group. We will see about you volunteering at the hospital. You can put your time to good use. You're a wee bit young but

I think I can be most convincing when I need to be. And I'm sure you'll make some good acquaintances."

Cait turned to her desk and reached for a large yellow pad and pen. She began to make a list of things to do. Mea simply sat, nodded with her most Cheshire cat smile, and continued to eat and knit.

"But most importantly, we must see about getting something that gives us loco parentis."

Mea stopped her activity. "***What did you say? What does that mean?***"

"That means that we can act in place of her parents."

"Aye!" She laughed and continued her knitting.

"We can act as parents and make decisions. That means we'll need someone in Boston to deal with that end. Is that okay with you Kerrie?"

"Yeah...sure...great." Yeah...sure...great...that's good. I won't have to go back and I can be 'legal' down here.

"I'm sure your friend Tommy can help." Cait smiled as she spoke. She knew that May and Tommy, for whatever reason, were like oil and water. I found out much later that their claimnes were traditional rivals; the O'Connors in the south and May's people in the north. May only spoke to Mister O'Connor because of some weird code of mutual respect.

"May he live in one thousand rooms and may his teeth pain him in each one." A typical Mea curse... She really didn't like him. "He only calls me because he's afraid of you!"

Cait laughed. "Tommy is not afraid of anybody, least of all me."

As Cait sat behind her desk, I kept eyeing her computer. I knew what I had to do. It took me a while to build up the courage to ask but my need became overwhelming.

"Can you please send an e-mail for me?" I asked in my sweetest voice...and with a smile.

Cait looked at me for a moment, then to May, and then back at me.

"You don't have an e-mail account?"

"Huh...a what?" The thought never occurred to me that kids had e-mail accounts which are so common today.

"You want to write to your sisters?" May smiled.

"No...we don't have a computer but I have a friend that does."

“What is the family name?” May asked.

“O’Dwyer?” Again with the name thing? “Owen O’Dwyer.”

“Ahhh...” May sounded relieved with that news. “T’is a good name...he’s from a small clainne but from good people.”

“Can he be trusted?” Cait asked with some degree of seriousness. “After all, we are breaking more than a law or two.”

“Yes...he can be trusted.” I was quite emphatic in my response. “He seems to be very friendly with Mister O’Connor. And he has a good job with his uncle and he helped me get away. He even offered me, him and Mister O’Connor, to find me somewhere to live closer to Boston. He even gave me some money and didn’t take anything for my plane ticket.”

I began to become excited as I spoke about Owen. The ladies certainly could hear this in my voice. I even began to speak more rapidly and my smile, my grin, was ear to ear.

“He loaned you money?” Cait asked cautiously as she looked at May and then back to me.

“No...he simply put it in the envelope with the rest of the money I had. He didn’t even tell me.”

“For my own curiosity I wonder who his uncle might be.” I couldn’t read the expression on Kate’s face but I could hear that she was most serious.

“Owen’s uncle? He’s Mike Burke.”

“Mike Burke...” Kate said the name slowly and with great deliberation as if to make sure I had said what I’d said. I nodded. Kate looked at May and began to speak in their language.

“I will need to call Brother. We must have total control over this.”

“Aye. They all seem to play on Brother’s team.”

Cait looked at me and smiled. She bade me come to her and took me on her knee. She established an e-mail account for me that allowed me to send my message. I wished my sister had one so that I could let her know I was okay. I sent the e-mail to Owen, whose address I memorized letting him know I was with the ladies and that all was well.

“Remember to always greet with a blessing and end with one. T’is the way we like to do things.” I took May’s advice and even the blessing she suggested.

May you have peace at your table...

Dear Owen,

I wish to thank you for your great kindness and help. You need to know that you have helped save my life. I am starting a new life for myself down here with the never ending help of two women who have befriended me and taken me in. It looks like I may have found my place with them. Please let my sister know I'm okay if you have a moment.

I understand about the ticket and I won't forget that I owe you for it. I will pay you back I promise. Anyway, aside from that, if there is anything I can do for you, or if you ever need help, please let me know. I will never forget what you did for me. Also know that I will forever think kindly of you.

1000 blessings upon you,

Kerrie

For better or worse, I clicked the send button, but not before creating my own file and saving it on the desktop. I knew enough about doing that from school. If he chose to write back, I would save that as well. If only he'd write back...I really didn't expect that would happen. I simply wanted to sincerely thank him and let him know I was in good hands.

I took my place next to May on the leather upholstered loveseat. I sank into the comfort of the overly padded loveseat and ate one of the luscious cookies May had baked. These were butter cookies that virtually melted in one's mouth.

"Let's talk about a few things" said Cait. "You will be our welcomed guest for the immediate future. May claimed you and that means she is responsible for you and your well-being. And what she lays claim to becomes my responsibility as well. There are certain things that must be done and certain actions that must be taken."

I listened attentively and she took a sip of her beer. "Tomorrow, you must have a physical examination. That includes blood tests as well as several other things. I want to do this at my hospital. There would be too many questions and too many big ears anywhere else. I don't think you want to answer questions about your bruises at this point anyway...right?"

"Right" I echoed.

"Good. I simply want to make sure that you are healthy."

I now realize that Cait wanted to make sure I had not contracted an STD. She was a little more aware of what my situation might have been because of her exposure to the patients she sees in the hospital. She guessed the full extent of my abuse, and not simply that of my step-dad.

"I also have a friend...a Doctor...at another hospital. We will need to speak to him about your..." Cait cast her eyes off as she thought about what she wanted to say. "...condition?" She smiled.

“My...condition?” ‘Uh-oh...here it comes’ I thought. I began to tremble again and this time my stomach, now filled to the brim, began to ache...and not from the food.

May sat and silently listened. Her eyes fluttered from me to Cait and then back to me. Cait laughed.

“Yes...your condition. You are clearly underdeveloped for your age. We must determine what can be done to...assist your body in developing. You look to be more like a twelve year old rather than someone who is fifteen...almost.”

I began to cry. Oh my God...she wanted to take away my...image? This was so close to the way I kind of pictured myself?

“But I don’t want to change.”

I went to May quickly and repeated what I had just told Cait. She pulled me into her arms and held me firmly. She then looked at Cait with a stare that would have shattered me. Her face became vermilion in color and it spread to her neck. But Cait only smiled and held up her palm to silence anything May might want to say.

“I only want to find out what the matter is. I already suspect but it’s important to know. This child has stopped developing at some point in time and unless we understand why, she may remain the way she is. You would want her to have a normal and happy life, right.”

“Aye...” May replied rather gruffly.

“Anyway...we can’t do anything to this child at the moment. We don’t have any real right and we are currently breaking several laws that I can think of. So any medical attention other than what might be necessary is out of the question.”

That certainly made me feel better. I simply couldn’t see myself with all of that body hair and whatever else accompanied being a boy...a real one anyway. That night I slept soundly knowing that these ladies truly had my best interest in mind and they would be open and honest with me.

Rebirth

May woke me at six in the morning with a kiss to the forehead (did I mention that these two did a lot of hugging and kissing?) and a gentle shaking of my shoulder. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and sat up. I reached out toward her with both arms and hugged her. I wanted to make sure that yesterday wasn’t a dream. I needed to feel that touch of concrete solid reality with my body. She smelled so good...clean and fresh. And she looked so beautiful in the semi darkness.

“Good morning sweet heart. Quick...make ready and put on your clothes. Then come down to the kitchen.

Sounded like a plan in the making to me. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, brushed out my hair and flew out of the bathroom to dress. I pulled on my only pair of jeans and a pastel green tee shirt I bought when I was at Sears. I went back to the bathroom and applied a bit of mascara as best I could. The upper lashes were easy but the lower ones...

Before I could make a total mess out what should have been an easy preparation, I stopped and went on to apply the lip balm.

After checking my appearance one more time in the mirror, I raced down the steps (God, I never raced anywhere except away from my step-father or school mates) and into the brightness of the kitchen. “Morning all” I said with a big smile.

“Well, somebody’s ready for the day” said Cait. “And a great day it will be...Just water for you. We want to have a good blood test done.”

I was hungry and would have liked to eat at least some bread or something but Cait wouldn’t even permit juice or milk.

“And you do look quite lovely. Did you sleep well?” That meant something coming from May. My appearance is not something that Cait would necessarily notice. I felt good. I felt better than I had in a long time. This was all still very new to me...my surroundings and these ladies, but in spite of that weird feeling of being someplace different, I FELT GREAT!

“Yeah... I really slept well...for a change.” I was all smiles.

May looked absolutely beautiful; even more so than yesterday. She was totally aglow and radiant. Cait, as I was to quickly find out, was typically Cait in her casual pants, simple pull over top, and sneakers.

After piling the dishes of the quick breakfast into the dishwasher, we headed outside for the cars. May and I went in her B.M.W. and Cait got into a green Jaguar sedan. We all started out toward the hospital where Cait worked. The weather was simply lovely with the temperature being perfect for the beach...in April no less. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky and a gentle breeze blew off the ocean.

Cait quickly disappeared down the street. “She is impossible! I hate when she goes so fast!” May spoke and I giggled to myself. I actually thought that it was kind of cool the way Cait simply took off in an imaginary cloud of dust.

By the time we got to the hospital and had entered the emergency room, Cait had already changed into her scrubs and wore a white lab coat with the hospital name and logo as well as her name; ‘Doctor Cait’. Her last name was really her claimne name preceded by ‘Ni’ which means

‘daughter of’. It was an ancient name in its original ancient spelling which nobody except those with the knowledge of Gaelige, or Irish, could properly pronounce so she went by the name of Doctor Cait.

Cait escorted May and me past the triage desk and into the actual emergency department area. She took us into an exam room and a nurse followed us in to assist. The nurse handed me a gown to wear, drew the curtain closed and asked me to strip to my undies and socks, which I promptly did.

Cait examined me after the nurse took my weight, height and blood pressure. I had my ears, nose and eyes look into. I also had a rectal exam, which definitely wasn’t something I was particularly fond of and many levels. I was in tears before Cait even started. I had to drop my undies and she saw my ‘little secret’. Cait gently cupped my ‘boy bits’ in her hand and nodded knowingly. She turned to look at May who was more than a wee bit surprised.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Cait was quite gentle in her asking. I shrugged and looked at the floor, my face reddening more from the exposure than the lie. “Listen sweet heart...” ‘Uh oh...here it comes’ I thought. “You mustn’t keep anything from us. All things can be dealt with but we must know the truth.”

I nodded my head but I had to say something...you know? “It’s not me...not who I am.” I said it very softly. I could barely hear myself. May came over to my side and put her arm around me.

“I know who you are and that’s all there be to that matter. I saw who you really are and that’s who you shall be.” She smiled so sweetly as Cait rolled her eyes and shook her head. But she didn’t argue.

Kate then put some jelly on her glove and after telling me what she was going to do, she did it! Even though I was in tears, I must admit that it did feel...thrilling? She was very quick and it was over before I could protest more than I had. But deep down inside of me, it did give me the tingles. Anyway, we were, praise God, nearly done. All that was left was the blood testing, or should I say letting.

“Listen sweet heart...” Cait suddenly was really very serious in her demeanor. She put her hand upon my cheek. “If anyone touches you in a manner you don’t want or like, you must come and tell us. We will make sure it doesn’t happen again, okay?”

She knew!!! Cait knew!!! I didn’t know how she knew at the time but she knew. I trembled at the thought. There were no more secrets, at least for my part of things. May got off her chair and also came to my side. She pulled me to her bosom and held me firmly for a moment or two. I looked up at Cait and through my tears I managed to nod my head.

I calmed down and blow my nose just as a woman wheeled in a cart filled with many different colored tubes. Cait filled out a form and checked off a lot of boxes. Then she began to write other tests she wanted to have performed. After she handed the order to the phlebotomist, who gave her a quick look like; ‘Are you serious?’

The woman then proceeded to inflict a major wound upon my arm as she stabbed me with the needle. She then began to fill tube after tube after tube. I didn’t think it would end! I thought she would drain me dry. Finally, after filling better than a half dozen tubes, she removed the needle, applied pressure with an alcohol pad, and then put a band aid on my puncture.

“I need those results as soon as possible and give them only to me.” Cait had her very serious face on and the poor woman felt somewhat intimidated by Cait’s insistence of who to give the tests to. Cait repeated herself three times! Anyway, I was now able to get dressed.

“Kerrie sweetheart, we really need to put some weight on you...” Cait now had her serious Doctor look on. “You’re five feet and six inches tall and you only weight ninety-four pounds. That is not healthy for someone your age. I believe I know what the problem is and we will deal with it.”

“To be sure...I will see to that.” May giggled. “I wager we can put a stone and a half on her in a month’s time!”

Cait escorted us to the door of the emergency department. It was now seven in the morning and she had to get to work. May and I left and proceeded to go to a diner on Federal highway to have breakfast and discuss the plan for the day. We rode in silence for several moments and then May spoke.

“I only see you as a girl. I think that perhaps your...smallness is really a sign that perhaps somewhere along the way a mistake occurred. Would you agree?”

What May had just said was startling...to say the least. I’d never considered that before, at least not formally, but perhaps she was right. I looked at her gentle smiling face and nodded my head.

“Do you think I’m too skinny?” I wanted to desperately change the subject. But at least I knew that our plans to buy me things, androgynous with a hint of the feminine, wouldn’t be changed.

“Yes. But do not worry about that. I promise you that we will put a little meat on your bones for sure. But let’s decide what to do first today. Nothing opens until ten. I think we need to see to your hair first. That way when you try on clothes, you’ll have a really good idea of how you’ll look. After we eat, we’ll go back home and do a bit of cleaning and we’ll also look at some magazines to see what styles you might fancy.”

I agreed. I had no idea of what I wanted to do with my hair. Nobody ever asked me before. Anyway, after we ate, we headed home. The thought of having somewhere to go was wonderful.

I went up to my room and put away the few things I had. Then I attempted to make my bed. I really never had to do that before. Back in Boston all I had to do was flop out my blanket and that was that. After about ten minutes of frustration I called out to May for help.

May came in and showed me how to do it. The fact that it was a big bed, and I was small didn't help but May showed me how to compensate for my size, and strength. I was going to learn much from May about taking care of myself, and my things. My sister Carrie often tried to show me some things but her life was so full of taking care of the little ones that I could never have enough of her time.

After cleaning my bedroom and my bathroom, I went down to the kitchen to find May eating a piece of her cake. She had several magazines and catalogues on the table.

“Come sit and look through these. See if something doesn't catch your fancy.”

I took a seat next to her and began looking through the magazines. To give you, the reader, some idea of the time period, wines and berries were the colors and the wedge was very 'in'. Personally, I hated the wedge. Firstly, it was very metro and urban. Women in suits wore the wedge. To me, it was kind of the female crew cut. Yuck!

As I turned the pages, I found up-dooos, down-dooos, various other hoo-dooos and then, suddenly out of the mist in my mind, I saw it. IT!! It screamed out at me. Even the model's hair color was almost the same as I dreamed of. It was a pixie cut. I loved it. It wasn't too femme and it wasn't at all butch. And her hair was strawberry blond; not as strawberry as May's but within that range of color.

It was soft and gentle and appeared easy to deal with. I got very excited and showed what I had found to May. For some reason I really wanted her approval on this most delicate of decisions. And I wanted her opinion on the coloration; especially of my hair.

“It's most cute. I think you would look adorable with that style.” I'm not sure I was enamored with looking 'adorable'. I Mean, aren't babies and small animals adorable? “And as for the coloring, we can treat your hair with henna and Senna. They are natural dyes and will definitely bring out the red already in your hair and lighten it a bit.”

“That would be so totally awesome!” Now I was really excited. I loved the look of it. I continued to look through the magazines but the only styles that reached out to me were the pixies or pixyish styles.

I was also looking at the clothing. There were so many different things and so many different colors...and materials. I was more than overwhelmed, even after discounting those styles that were perhaps too...stylish for someone my age?

May set down a glass of milk and several pills and she told me to take them. She said they were multiple vitamins and minerals and that she, and Cait, took them every day. I spoke to her about clothes and shoes and explained my dilemma.

“Let me help you make this easy.” She say and took hold of my hand and with a smile she said, “If we think about natural things like cotton, silk, lightweight wool and such, all will be easy. Also it becomes quite hot in the summer so think light. If you need for the cool, we can get sweaters and light coats later on. You’ll see. It will be easy.” May pointed toward the pills, not wanting me to get away without taking them.

Then there was the shoe question. Looking through one of the catalogues, I saw the type I wanted. “Can we get these?” I pointed to something called a ‘skimmer’. It’s kind of like a cross between a pump and a ballet shoe?

“You and Cait!” She laughed and, rising from her chair, took my hand and pulled me up. She took me upstairs to their room, or I should say rooms. Their ‘private chambers’ as May called their bedroom was just that; private. Only the closest of family members were permitted in. Suffice it to say that there were three room in their suite as well as two huge walk in closets and an enormous bath room.

May took me into Cait’s ‘wardrobe’ and neatly placed in shoe racks were skimmers. There had to be at least twenty pairs. They were different colors and styles. Some had embossed designs and some were of cloth. Some had small heels and others were sportier with strong foot support. There were even patent leather and alligator skimmers for more formal occasions. The only other shoes I noticed were three pair of penny loafers and five pairs of white sneakers (for work I guessed).

My stared quite wide eyed at everything else in the closet. I was struck by the neatness and the absolute order of all of Cait’s clothing. Everything was on hangers. If it didn’t hang, such as a purse, it was neatly aligned on one of the shelves. Even her belts were hung on special hangers. She had blouses and pants of varying colors and styles. Her ‘formal wear’ were pants and jackets including two very feminine tuxedos. There were no dresses or skirts.

We soon headed down to the kitchen after stopping in my room to collect the clear nail polish. There was still a bit of time left so May applied the polish to one hand and let me do the other. My fingers were starting to itch like crazy and I had such an urge to bite my cuticles that I could keep still. I told May and as usual, she had an answer.

She rose from her chair and went into the pantry. She returned with a bottle of lotion for the hands. It not only cleaned with an antiseptic, but it also had emollients to help heal the damage I’d done. After my polished dried, I applied the stuff to my hands and fingers and the itching all but stopped.

It was soon time to leave for the mall. May stopped at the front door closet and took out something she called a 'hobo bag'. It had a long strap for carrying over the shoulder and a large interior with pockets sewn in on the sides and dividers to separate the interior. It was canvas and wheat colored. She gave it to me saying I would need it today. I raced to the kitchen and put the lotion in it. 'Such a huge bag with only one item in it' I thought and giggled to myself.

When we entered the mall, my nose was assaulted by the aromas of one hundred different perfumes and scents. The Galleria was an older mall but contained a fine variety of shops. Our first stop was to be the salon where May had her hair done. Though she frequented the shop on a weekly basis, once a month she went with Cait.

As we approached the shop I began to get nervous to the point that I was actually trembling. "Don't worry my little one, David, the owner, is a good friend and he will make sure you look beautiful."

Truly I was not worried about the skills of the stylists. What was causing my fear was the fact that my entire life was spent in kind of a gender limbo. I really didn't dress, or appear in any way, to be a male or a female. There was a certain amount of comfort in this ambiguous state. I was not called upon to act in some preconceived notion one way or another and, in truth, didn't. Even when my dad was alive, there was never any pressure on me to be more masculine or boy like or pressure to stop acting as I did for that matter.

Now I was making a choice and it was a choice that I didn't feel entirely comfortable with...yet. Suddenly the whole world, not only Cait and May, but the entire world would view me in a certain way and impose a preconceived gender behavior upon me. Whilst I didn't 'feel' that I was a boy, I didn't 'feel' that I was a girl.

Although I must confess that dressing in my sister's old clothing and interacting with my sisters, and the ladies, felt very comfortable...and comforting. I also must confess after discovering that my 'disguise' fooled my step father, I began to associate wearing girls' clothing to being safe. I never became aroused by wearing feminine clothing but I did become more...outgoing and social?

I also found that although her things were a little too large on me, they did fit me better where it was important. I began wearing her old panties. Though small on her, they fit me well and felt far more comfortable than my other undies. I guess the cut and the fact that the weave of the cotton was much tighter helped.

May walked into the salon with me in tow. My nose was immediately assaulted by both a flowery scent and a very almost noxious chemical smell. In spite of the early hour, the salon was already busy. May stopped at the appointment desk and greeted the woman sitting behind the desk. She seemed quite surprised to see May and apologized after seeing that May's name was not notated for an appointment.

“Oh...” Mea giggled. “This is for this young lady.” And she placed her hand in the center of my back and pulled me forward.

“Ohhh...” The woman said with a knowing nod. “Then you must be Kerrie.” She smiled pleasantly.

“Yes...” I squeaked with a growing blush and smile.

“David is expecting us.” Suddenly a rather pudgy man approached from the rear of the salon smiling, waving, and calling May’s name.

David turned out to be a very jovial, gentle, and slightly flamboyant man. He was impeccable attired and not a single hair on his head, beard or mustache was out of place. He came up to May and, after placing his hands upon her waist, leaned in and kissed both her cheeks. May did the same and grinned.

“So...” David said turning toward me. “What can we do for you young lady?”

I don’t think I fancied the ‘young lady’ thing. I mean that’s something one would say to a formally attire eight year old...or something. I looked at May. She nodded and, with a confident smile and a hand upon my shoulder, told me to let David know what I wanted.

“Well...” said I. “I think I want a pixie cut? You know...something easy to care of?” I looked back up at May who smiled and again nodded her head.

“Well...I believe I have just the style for you. It’s a combination of both a pixie and a wedge but it’s still short enough to towel dried.” I liked David’s hearty laugh.

David directed me toward the rear of the salon and asked one of the women to quickly wash my hair. Having never been to a salon...not ever...I thought this was quite civilized; washing the hair before cutting it. The last time I was in a barber shop, I simply sat in the chair and he did his thing. This was more like a ritual? The sensation of having my scalp massaged was truly thrilling.

She towel wrapped my mop of a head and brought me to David’s station. After combing out my long locks David began to work. May sat in an empty chair at the adjoining station and David kept up a steady conversation with her as he lopped off large clumps of my hair with his shears. I was beginning to panic a little because I really had no idea of how short he would make it or what the end result would be.

I closed my eyes and kind of spaced. I called up the vision of myself I had been developing, and dreaming about for so long, and concentrated on that. It was so very strong and I was hoping, praying that David would be doing something to bring me closer to that image.

I know that he was lopping off quite a bit because my head actually felt lighter? I opened my eyes and looked at the pile of hair accumulating around the chair. I looked at May and she smiled encouragingly at me.

“You will be quite surprised.” May said with a chuckle. “I think it looks wonderful.”

David was nearly finished. I could tell because he was down to doing a snip here and there. He finally removed the smock he put around me and, after blowing off some of the cut strands, once again had someone wash my hair. I enjoyed the scalp massage once again as the remaining cut hairs were wash away.

Once I returned to the chair, David sprayed my hair with a clear liquid and massaged it into my hair, or at least what remained. Then he combed it out whilst drying it with his hand dryer. The cool air felt wonderful on my head. Finally he put his brush and dryer down and allowed me to look at the finished product.

I was stunned. The cut was so very close to the image I had in my mind. It was as though he saw that image and sought to duplicate it. I couldn't help myself. A very broad grin appeared upon my face as I slowly ran my fingers through my hair.

“Well...” David asked with a smile. “...do you like it?”

I looked to May who was also grinning.

“Oh my God...I love it.” I went and actually hugged David. I don't think he expected that. And then I hugged May. “This is great. Thank you so much.” I felt myself become emotional.

“We also need henna and Senna.”

“I could do that here if you'd like. I think the color would be heavenly on her.” David said to May.

“Ahh...if only we had the time but we do have a very busy day and much to do. But for sure the next time we will see. I think she would look amazing with strawberry blond hair.” May smiled so very...maternally at me?

David told her how to mix the two powders and how exactly to use it. He even wrote down the instructions and told May to call him if she had any problem. What he said next shocked me.

“I would love to see how it turns out. She really is very beautiful and I think with that hair color I would love to photograph her. Maybe put it up on the wall with some of the others.”

I looked around the salon and there were photos of gorgeous models wearing various hair styles. The thought of me being up there was just too unbelievable to take in...totally. But May acceded that he could be right and that she would let him see the final result.

After paying for the cut, we left the store but not before I observed myself in even mirror along the way. I do need to admit I really liked the way I looked even if I couldn't see myself as being 'beautiful' or the model type.

Our next stop was the Banana Republic. We both looked in the show windows first to see what the latest offerings were. As we walked through the door I gazed around me opened mouthed and in shock as I looked at all of the very stylish clothing. We were almost immediately accosted by a sales woman.

"We need to get some things for my...niece to wear for this season." Niece? Okay.

"She's tiny. Let me get a tape."

The woman left us and quickly returned with a tape measure. She measured my waste and, with a certain amount of care, my chest.

"Oh you are so lucky." She spoke quite...well...almost longingly. "You are a size zero. You should be a model." She laughed. I didn't. It wasn't funny, at least to me.

Anyway, we started with skirts. I saw these lovely silk and linen wrap skirts that I adored. I tried one on just to get an idea. Of course it was loose but I loved how it fell to mid-calf and kind of emphasized my relatively long legs. I also liked the fact that it did have side pockets and an 'easy fit'.

We found two of that style skirt; one in a buff color and the other in a pearl pink. May found several tops that were good color matches for the skirts. She also got me two hobo bags similar to hers. They really didn't have much else in my size. We put our purchases in the car and returned for round two.

We fared much better at the Gap. They had tons of stuff I could wear. They covered all sizes from babies through...well...everything! They had these gauzy draw stringed pants that were really comfy. All the colors were tropical solids so I got two pairs that I liked the most. May made me buy an extra few in different color offerings.

They also had these amazing gauzy skirts that I loved. May told me that they would be excellent in the summer's heat.

Seven pair of pants, four tees, four more skirts, six tank tops (not including the draw stringed cotton, egg shell colored draw stringed cotton pants and pastel green tank top I was wearing out of the store), three packs of Hanes soft cotton bikini panties, two one piece bathing suits, and a dozen pairs of brightly colored, patterned and white cotton knee socks later, I could, with qualifying decisiveness, answer, yes, we have certainly been helped. I have no idea of what May paid for all of that stuff, nor do I think she really cared. She was grinning from ear to ear watching me admire myself in the full length mirror.

As I gazed at my reflection, I realized several things. I realized that I could barely recognize that person staring back at me. I realized that whoever that person was, she definitely couldn't be mistaken for a boy. And I realized that my nipples were slightly tenting out my tank top. True, I was certainly excited about my new wardrobe, and true, the sensation of the soft fabric rubbing against them felt...electric. I turned to see my profile and sure enough there were two barely perceptible bumps encompassing my nipples. Little wonder that Cait was rummaging around that area. Could it be?

I was becoming quite tired. I had no idea of May's shopping stamina. In truth, I had no idea of May's stamina at all. I was to find out that once she sunk her teeth into something, anything, she wouldn't let go until whatever it was had been completed to her satisfaction.

May did notice my 'wilting' so we stopped into a deli to have a rest and something to eat. It felt great just to be sitting and resting my feet. It was now nearly two and we had been going since early morning. We got our sandwiches and drinks, ice teas, and chips and ate. May chattered on and on about how great the day had been thus far and what we had to do next. I would have been quite amazed at my own demeanor in that I was listening so attentively and even offering my suggestions when I could.

It was at this point that I noticed a stain on May's blouse. I couldn't recall her spilling anything but then again I was so absorbed in our conversation that the roof could have caved in and I wouldn't have noticed. Suddenly I noticed a second spot appearing opposite the first.

"Oh dear, I'm letting down." May replied with an annoyed sound to her voice as she pulled the material of her blouse out and away from her breasts.

"Letting down...huh?" I was so clueless.

"I'm pregnant...with twins no less." May giggled as she spoke and my mouth fell open. "And it seems that my milk has come in early. This happens with my mother every time."

"Oh my God...what are you going to do?"

"I have some absorbing pads in my bag. Let's finish our meal and we'll go to the ladies."

"The ladies...?" Huh...what ladies?

We ate quickly and left even more quickly. May took hold of my hand and walked at a very brisk pace toward the escalators. We went downstairs to the ground floor and, before I knew it, we were in the ladies room. I was so wrapped up with May's problem that I hadn't even noticed. May deftly took four pads out of her bag and just as deftly reached into her bra and slid two pads over each of her nipples. Once she had seen to her problem, I had a chance to look around. That's when I had a minor freak out.

"We're in the ladies room!" I said as I stared at her through panicked eyes.

“Well...” May laughed and innocently smiled. “I suppose you might as well become accustomed to this. After all, I don’t think you would want to go into the men’s room looking as you do.” She turned and, after checking her face, pulled out her lipstick and refreshed her look a bit.

I looked at her for a moment with a pained expression. I exhaled and cast my glance around. Thankfully there was nobody else around. So I mimicked May and checked my face as well. I hadn’t brought the lipstick May had given me basically because I really had nowhere to put it. This was the last time my not having cosmetics on my person in some way would occur. I continued to look at myself trying to imagine how I would look with auburn hair and a bit of makeup.

If May hadn’t broken the spell, I would have stood there all day gazing at myself. Our next stop was a shoe store. I fell in love with the first shoes I saw. I’m so easy. They were espadrilles; a very simple canvas shoe with no heel to speak of. Mea helped me match the colors to what we had purchased earlier. She bought me four pairs of them. She also bought me a pair of penny loafers with tassels and actually put pennies in the vamps. She topped this all off with two pairs of sneakers and two pairs of sandals (one pair for around the house and another pair for the beach). I had gotten more shoes in one afternoon than I think I’ve owned in my entire life!

We now had no choice but to return to the car to park all the bags, of course after putting on a pair of my nice new espadrilles to match my tank top. I know that to some extent I still really hadn’t realized the impact of what was happening to me. And what was happening to me? I was completely shedding my old cocoon of who I was and starting to become the beautiful butterfly I prayed, and imagined, I would eventually be.

Yeah, I know it sounds trite, but it was true. I didn’t realize it back then but I was, with May and Cait’s help, leaving behind an old tattered identity and beginning to assemble a new one, bit by bit. The truth to tell, we were only really putting new paint on an old wall. And like an old wall, the new paint does help but if there are structural problems with the wall, they must eventually be dealt with.

I went and sat for a moment on a bench outside the store. May sat beside me and put her arm around me. I suddenly lost it and tears began slowly rolling down my cheeks. May pulled my head into her body and wrapped her other arm around me as I silently wept. I was tired for sure and certainly confused and at this point totally overwhelmed. I know she sensed my distress but said nothing. She held me and gently kissed the top of my head in an attempt to soothe and comfort me.

I eventually stopped crying and rested in her hold. Then she spoke: “I know this is much for you little one but you must trust me. Three more things to do and then we go. You will understand when we finish. You give yourself over to me for three more very quick stops?”

I nodded my assent. What else could I do? She, and Cait, had already done more for me than anyone, except maybe Owen, had ever done for me. I felt very beholden toward May at that moment and had to trust her.

“Good. Let us get something to drink. I bet you are quite thirsty now.”

Again I nodded my assent and we arose from the bench. She took a tissue from her bag and wiped the wetness from my face. She brushed her fingers through my hair and then led me to a snack concession.

“Your hair cut is most becoming.” May smiled.

My haircut was to actually become a sort of trade mark for me. No matter how often I might try something else I would always return to either a pixie cut or a pixie-wedge or some combination of the two. After having a few sips of cola, I felt revived enough for our next stops. Our first stop was at a pagoda where May had my ears pierced.

To be sure, I was frightened at the thought of having a needle stuck through my earlobes but it really wasn't much of a thing. The woman there was very kind and understanding. She carefully measured the placement of the holes and then sprayed something on my lobes that felt very cold. She quickly took her piercing gun and before I could even say 'ouch' I had a hole in each lobe.

May bought me several pairs of earrings and studs to keep the holes open. She also listened to the instructions of how to tend to the wounds. By this time I was really exhausted and the anxiety of getting my ears pierced didn't help. But we still had two more stops to make.

Next May took me by the hand and led me into another shoe store. I immediately saw the type of shoe I wanted...envisioned. It was a skimmer. The vamp is styled kind of like a pump but the shoe has either no heel to speak of or a very short heel like maybe an inch or an inch and a half. They looked so super comfy when I first saw them in one of the catalogues...or maybe one of the magazines May showed me.

Anyway...a lovely woman assisted us...May insisted I have a pair of shoes for each of the outfits she bought me. We walked out with five pairs of skimmers in various colors and another two different styles of sandals for kicking around and for the beach. May definitely wasn't crazy about my flip-flops.

By the time we got to the car and made room for the shoes in the nearly stuffed boot, the time was just after four o'clock. We'd been in the mall a full six hours and we still had one stop left. I was frazzled, to say the least, and on the verge of tears...again.

And I was very conflicted. Cait didn't give the okay for a permanent stay and yet May was buying, like, everything I might need. I certainly couldn't begin to take one tenth of the things if

I had to leave. I just didn't understand what was happening or why she was doing what she did. It wasn't long before I understood why she was 'torturing' me so.

And the money!!! Lord only knows how much she spent on me. Every time May went to pay, I was usually occupied looking at that stuff so I had no notion of what these things cost. I do remember that everything was top shelf quality. May scrimped on nothing and she didn't even bother with items on sale. It was strictly what I wanted or what she thought I might need. And we still had one more stop to make!

May once again took me by my hand and led me back into the mall and to one of the origins of the heavily scented air that seemed to permeate everything; Dillard's. At that time Dillard's was the biggest department store in the mall. There was a Saks but it was small and they soon after vacated. Even after Macy's moved into the mall Dillard's was still the place with the most central location.

Anyway, May led me hand in hand. She was like a monastic on a mission from the Lord and nothing would stop or divert her. She arrived at our destination which was the cosmetics counters. I was totally stunned at the assortment of products and the wide array of colors and aromas. But May knew exactly what she was doing. Evidently the sales women knew May and greeted her quite cordially. May strode up to the counter and took a seat on one of the stools.

"I would like this little one..." She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled me toward a stool next to hers. "...to have the benefit of your experience and perhaps show her the possibilities by doing her face?"

"Oh certainly..." The woman, Lisa, was so polite and...gushy? She turned her head and looked at me quite carefully. "You're really lovely sweet heart, do you know that? Your skin is so perfect."

"Thanks..." I blushed. Her face showed no sign of simply being polite. I also knew I didn't get any zits like other kids.

"How about a nice look for school?" The saleswoman gushed very enthusiastically. Maybe it was the thought of a big sale. It was obvious to me the May frequented this part of the store.

"That would be perfect." May said as she swiveled her seat around to face me. "We must see what she does so we can do it. That is if you like what you see." I nodded.

And so it began. After thoroughly cleansing the little makeup I'd worn off my face Lisa creamed, powdered, blended, mascaraed, powdered, blended, primed, powdered, blended yet again, preened, and finally fluffed me up a bit as well and ended with a colorless lip gloss over a lipstick. She stood back and carefully looked at me.

“You know...you really should consider modeling. You are really very beautiful.” Lisa said in all seriousness and then she turned me toward Mea. “Well May...what do you think?”

“I think she looks gorgeous.” May beamed with such pride as if I was her own. “That’s a marvelous look for school...and you can do that back home.”

Mea giggled with joy at the result. Lisa then called her manager, who had attended the customer Lisa had left to attend me.

Again with the modeling thingy...I just didn’t see it at all. I hadn’t even seen what I looked like yet. I sidled over to one of the stand mirrors on the counter and took a look. I was, to put it mildly, completely shocked...and amazed and delighted. Staring back at me was nearly the very image I’d had in my head for God only knows how long. Only this image was so well defined and...perfect.

Now I must tell you that I’ve always had this problem with how I looked. I always saw, and on occasion still see, the face of an eleven or twelve year old child; gender...’tbd’? But now there was no question in my mind. I was looking at a...young ...teen girl? Oh my God...and her smile was heavenly.

There truly is no way I can adequately describe how I felt. I mean I loved the way I looked when May did my face but this was something else. Everything was applied with a light touch so that I looked quite natural even with the foundation she used to even out my skin tone (I hated the feel of the foundation on my face and rarely ever used it except for photographs). And the lipstick she used was pink with a bit more blue to make it almost also a mild shade of berry. The neutral lip gloss was just enough to give my lips the ‘wet’ look? I was so enthralled .

“Oh my!” Lisa’s manager simply gawked at what was done. She looked at May. “You really might consider having her do some modeling May. She looks ...amazing.”

I continued to look at my image in the mirror. I didn’t recognize the person I was staring at. There was absolutely nothing left of the old me. My mind was actually swimming and I felt weak. I felt as though I might faint. I felt a bit nauseous. She indeed did look sort of like a teen model; the kind I saw in the magazines my sister read, and hid (wasted money that could be spent on whiskey you know).

“These cosmetics are designed for active teens and are water resistant. They come right off with most cleansers.” said Lisa as she gathered several small cases of the same colors, plus a few more ‘for the evening’ she said. “They’re also hypo-allergenic.”

May then turned to me and asked. “We need be finding you a scent as well. You cannot be complete without one. Do you have anything in mind?”

“I love yours May. Can I use that?” She grinned and nodded.

“It is called Calendra and I think that a Chanel might be good as well. You can’t have too many good aromas on you. It’s good to change every so often.” May grinned and giggled. “It keeps them guessing.”

‘Keeps who guessing’ I thought.

“Oh yes...” May said as she got up off of her stool. “And some White Linen. I believe there’s a special on a kit that comes with it? Do you have a sample?”

“We sure do.” I don’t know how May managed to stay so bright and perky; such amazing energy. Lisa returned with the sample spray bottle and handed it to May.

“Now watch and do as I tell you.” May was all smiles as she sprayed the scent into the air.

“Now walk through the mist.” I did as she asked and I felt the coolness of the tiny droplets play across my face and upper body. “Now you have the scent on you without knocking people over with it.” May chuckled.

I knew exactly what she meant. I remember, especially on Sundays, the older ladies who seemed to bathe in perfume and go to church. And some of the girls at school were also very overpowering with their scents. I kind of liked the smell of the White Linen.

Lisa left momentarily and returned with three small colorful boxes containing the perfumes, and a much larger box which was I assumed correctly, the ‘gift’. May paid for everything and Lisa put all the boxes large and small into four bags. She was quite gracious and May hugged and kissed her cheek whilst thanking her for her trouble. I did the same to Lisa and thanked her as well. We could finally leave and go...home.

May and I gathered the bags and went back to the car. I couldn’t walk past a mirror or window without trying to catch a glimpse of myself. I bumped into several people as a result of my total distraction and preoccupation with the “new” me. I remember closing my eyes as I sat in the comfort of May’s car and simply dreaming...visions of me.

May and I brought all the bags up to my room...MY room. She retrieved hangers from an empty closet in one of the other guest rooms and we began the chore of quickly trying things on, pulling the tags and hanging things up. I took great care in this process because I rarely ever got anything new; at least not since my father died. I even lined my new shoes along the floor of the closet as I’d seen in the ladies’ closet. I wanted everything to look perfect...to be perfect.

May gave me the luxury of putting my new cosmetics away where I wanted. As things turned out, the gift May got for the perfume purchase was an amazing assortment of cosmetics in a large, jewelry box sized, decorated plastic case. There was a full spectrum of eye shadows, blushes, and lipsticks in individual pots. There were two mascaras and several liquid eye liners as well. I was totally thrilled.

My chores being finished, I joined May downstairs in the kitchen to help with the preparation of the evening's meal and await Cait's coming home. I remembered where May placed things so I immediately got to set the table as she had shown me the prior day. I noticed her turning and smiling when she noticed what I was doing.

I need to tell you that children in my situation and at that age tend to do one of three things. Either they radically rebel against their situation and become 'problems', or they test their limits to see if they are really wanted, or, they try to become the most perfect child they can possibly be for fear of being rejected and sent away yet again.

I was the third type of child to the point of becoming obsessive-compulsive about nearly everything I did. I had to be perfect otherwise I failed to live up to what I believed to be their standards; an impossible task. This was to haunt me for years...and still does. I simply had to be everything to everyone and I still do.

When Cait finally did come home, she walked in the kitchen door and, before even saying her traditional greeting, she saw me and froze all movement. I looked at her long enough for my smile to slowly fade. I didn't know what she was thinking but it couldn't have been good. I was wrong.

"What is this?" Cait said with her eyes bugging and her jaw dropped.

"Say something nice or you'll be warming your own bed on this evening." May smiled at both of us as she spoke.

"Kerrie? I can't believe this is you. You look...wonderful." Cait then turned to May. "If this is all your doing then you've done quite well. I especially love what's been done to that mop atop your head."

"I had some good help." May beamed a brilliant smile at me. I blushed.

We ate leisurely and spoke about our day. Cait was all ears and listened to every detail intently. She didn't speak very much about her day. I was to find that this would always be the case. Very little that occurs in the emergency department makes for good dinner conversation. In fact when Cait had a rough day for one reason or another, she would often sit in her car in the driveway until she felt she could interact with us. On occasion I knew she'd been crying whilst sitting in the car.

After dinner we had dessert in the library. It was ice cream with cut fruit. They both would never tire of the fruit. Indeed in their garden they had an assortment of fruit trees. Oranges, Key limes, mangos, and even pineapples spotted the garden area. It was then that Cait cleared her throat; a habit of hers when she wanted everyone's attention.

“I’ve spoken to Brother and we’ve set in motion several important actions.” Cait leaned forward in her oversized leather arm chair and folded her hands atop the desk. “First we will tend to obtaining guardianship...” She looked at me with a broad smile. “...over you. My brother has a law firm that handles his interests in Boston.”

I was in my place next to May on the loveseat. She put her arms around me and pulled me into her embrace. I was verging on tears. This meant that I would definitely have a place in their home.

“Secondly, Kerrie, your school records will indicate that you are ready for tenth grade.”

“But I haven’t even finished ninth.” I barely finished my eight year. I knew the work but I didn’t always attend class out of fear of an...incident of sorts?

“We will arrange to have you tutored. I spoke to a friend who is very prominent on the school board and she gave me the names of several very good teachers with plenty of experience. This will begin next week...” God...I hardly arrived and it begins. “...and will continue until you begin upper school. She also recommended an excellent vocational school for you.”

I was terrified. A vocational school was where they put the trouble makers to teach them some sort of trade until they either dropped out completely or managed to graduate and get a job. My terror must have shown on my face because Cait was very quick to continue.

“We will be visiting the school and you will need to be prepared for entrance exams in English and mathematics. This is not a school for the slow or dim witted. So you need to be prepared to do your best with the tutors. It’s a vocational school but almost all the students go on to college or university.”

I nodded my head. It sounded like a very tall order for me. It was barely April and I had to be completely ready by...

“Oh yes...school begins in the second week of August. Now, onto other matters.”

Cait took a sip of her port. She was in the habit of having a drink on occasion and this was one of those occasions. Cait looked at May and spoke.

“Do you remember Joe Moran from the hospital dinner-dance last year?”

“You mean the one at Sacred Heart?”

“No my heart, the one at Memorial?” May looked off to one side for a moment.

“Ahhh...yes...the one who kept thanking us for the contribution.”

“Yes...exactly. He’s an endocrinologist at the children’s hospital and he’s just the one Kerrie needs to see.”

I was as clueless as May...an endocrinologist...what the hell was that? Our expressions must have given Cait a clue.

“Kerrie is not producing...Kerrie is not producing enough hormones to enter puberty.” Turning to me Cait continued. “My friend Doctor Moran specializes in just the problem you are having.”

“But I’m not having a problem.” Oh my God...I actually...whined???

“Sweet heart...you have no apparent hair growth where a male of your age should. Your voice hasn’t begun to change, your...parts are those of a young child, and the only place I’ve seen any growth is...in your chest. I want him to examine you. Your blood tests came back with what I expected.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to be a boy...or a girl. I mean...why do I have to be anything at all?” I was verging on more than simply tears. I felt the world beginning to close in on me.

“Why do we need to do anything at all?” May always came to my defense even when I may not have been totally right.

“Look...all I’m saying is to let the man examine you and perhaps run a few tests. What harm is there in that?”

“I don’t want to grow hair and I don’t want a beard and I don’t want to be anything else but this.” I exhibited myself with my hands making sure I covered my entire body. “This...” I again pointed both hands at myself. “...is what I see in my mind. I match. I don’t want to change it.” Now I was in tears.

“Oh honey...” Cait got up from her desk and came to sit next to me. She also put her arms around me. “...we’re not going to do anything to try and change you. We can’t anyway. We only want to see that you are physically developing in a healthy way. Do you understand?”

I sniffled and squeaked a yes. I had no idea, nor did the two ladies...my saviors...of the commotion and upset we would all be facing over the next two weeks.

Learning to crawl...

Cait made an appointment for me to see Doctor Moran in the early morning prior to his rounds at the hospital. She did so because she knew there would be a bit of explaining involved and she didn’t want a fuss created before she and May had legal custody of me.

I had dressed for the occasion. I wanted to look...well...I wanted that image in my mind to meet the one in the mirror. I wore a new, store bought ‘oold’ and really spent a bit of time trying to

perfect my daytime look with my new store bought cosmetics. I know that Doctor Moran was more than a bit surprised when he saw me and then gazed at the gender recorded on the paper work that Cait filled out for me.

I really hated changing out of my clothing to put on a hospital gown. I was actually trembling and starting to be overcome with nausea when I entered the examination room. It was one thing to be naked, or mostly so, in front of the ladies but in front of this man? After quite a bit of coaxing Cait and May finally were able to have me remove the gown I was given.

Although he appeared to be a nice man with a genuine interest in his work, I refused to let him physically examine me. Nice man or not, he was still a man and I would have none of it. I learned at too early an age that not all nice men are nice and that there are those who would not forsake any opportunity to degrade and defile that which is pure and innocent.

I was in tears when he simply touched the glands in my throat and I was out and out bawling when he began to probe with his fingers around my chest. When he asked me to remove my panty I did and full scale boogie-woogie. I screamed and yelled and tried to hide behind Cait and May.

“Don’t touch me...don’t touch me...leave me alone...don’t touch me...” I screamed over and over like some bizarre mantra.

“I won’t touch you Kerrie. Please try and calm yourself.” The Doctor looked at Cait. “We need to talk...now.”

I stayed secure in May’s arms when the Doctor and Cait left the room. I could hear them speaking and, although I couldn’t tell what was being said, I could tell that the discussion was quite...animated? Cait raised her voice and the Doctor then did the same in a pleading tone. This went on long enough for me to come to my senses and at least stop crying.

When they re-entered the room I began to tremble again. Doctor Moran stood away from me and sat down on it. He smiled in a very pained manner. It was if he was the one to be examined and was making the best of it.

“Kerrie...would you mind if I watched and Cait examined you?”

Cait crouched down so that she was staring into my eyes.

“Sweet heart...he really needs to see you down there. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

I had to trust Cait. I know that she wasn’t going to do anything to hurt me...or worse yet...turn me in. That was on my mind and now with this Doctor being involved. This suddenly became a more complicated deal. I didn’t realize how complicated a deal it really was or that technically more than a few laws were going to be broken.

Cait put on a pair of latex gloves and helped me remove my gown again.

“Alright honey, please pull down you panty.”

I did with my eyes never leaving hers. I didn’t want to even recognize the Doctor as being in the room. I closed my eyes as she slowly lifted my dick up and held it for a few seconds.

“Okay Cait.” That was all the Doctor said and Cait immediately pulled my panty back up. “You can get dressed now Kerrie.” I turned and took May’s hand. “And thank you for being patient with me.”

Doctor Moran spoke as May and I began to leave the room. I turned and tried to smile back at him but I couldn’t. My heart simply wasn’t into it. I was so very worn out from the drama of it all. May had to help me dress. I was totally stressed and her presence was very reassuring.

We joined Cait and the Doctor in his office. He had obviously been speaking with her because he seemed to stop in mid-sentence. We both sat down to hear what he had to say but it was Cait who spoke first. She took my hand in hers before speaking and smiled gently...that kind of maternal smile?

“Doctor Moran and I agree on what the ailment is. He is simply waiting for the blood tests to confirm his diagnosis. But he would like you to speak with a woman he knows about your...situation.”

“Huh...” I was so very clueless back then.

“About your mode of dress and that sort of thing?”

“What’s wrong with the way I dress?” I was again becoming a bit upset but Cait was very quick to reply.

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it sweet heart. I just think that we should explore all of the possibilities before any medical treatment is formulated.”

“But...”

“Just speak to her once and if you think that it’s a waste of time you don’t need to see her again.” May came to the rescue yet again.

“I think you should also mention the other issues? Doctor Moran assures me that she very good at helping young people overcome...” Cait looked at May for a moment. “...certain difficulties?”

With more than a wee bit of trepidation I agreed to speak to this woman. As things turned out this was probably the best decision I ever made. Anyway...I get ahead of myself.

We finally left the good Doctor, who was late for his rounds, and headed back up to Fort Lauderdale and some breakfast. Cait had the day off so we sat around and lounged by the pool. They had that lovely gazebo set off to the side of the pool. It was partially hidden by bougainvillea bushes with flowers of varying colors. Though not yet in full bloom they were magnificent all summer long.

After a delicious lunch May mixed the henna and Senna and added enough lemon juice to mix it into a paste. She then set about putting the goop into my hair until I couldn't see anything but a solid mass of green atop my head. She then covered my head with a shower cap and I had to remain pasted and covered for at least three to four hours.

Cait retreated to her office where she began making phone calls and reading her journals and such. Cait was a prolific reader of anything having to do with medicine. I don't know how many hours a week she spent doing so but I do know that whilst I did my homework, she seemed to always be doing hers.

Both Cait and May were great at setting examples. It was never 'do as I say' with them. It was always 'do as I do'. I might mention at this point that Cait and May were very opposite in many ways. Cait is a concrete-sequential thinker and May was abstract-random in her thinking. May instinctively knew about me...the fact that perhaps I was in the 'wrong body'. But Cait had to have it proven. They did always agree when it came to the really important things and they spent a lot of time speaking to each other; especially about me.

When the time came to wash my hair out and rid myself of what was rapidly becoming torment, the results even surprised May. The color of my hair was now nearly the same as hers. I was totally thrilled. My hair normally was light brown with red highlights. I normally slicked it back with my sister's mousse and wore it in a ponytail. With my new cut and color, an entire world of cosmetic magic opened up to me. Doing the henna and Senna thingy became a monthly touch up ritual along with having my 'do trimmed.

Anyway, that evening after dinner and in the library, Cait began to explain what she and Doctor Moran spoke about. Back then gender dysphoria was not a recognized diagnosis even though there were enough instances of occurrences to qualify it as such. And 'gender identity disorder' wasn't even a dream in some shrink's head. However, the Europeans were far more advanced in their research and medical practices and were even considering medical treatments for early and pre-teens.

Cait did a wonderful job of explaining what she had found that afternoon on the internet, and in making phone calls, in such a way that both May and I understood. Though I wasn't quite ready to accept that I had the disorder, I preferred the thought of living as I envisioned more than living within the definitions of a particular gender; especially male.

There were problems and Cait explained those. I was too young to legally begin a female hormone regimen although some sort of hormone treatment was necessary; male hormone treatment was the only 'legal and ethical' treatment available. However, since my body wasn't going through puberty anyway, and I was sort of developing rudimentary breasts, there was no immediate rush to take action. I was totally jiggy with that.

But May, in her infinite wisdom, thought something should be done soon because I would be entering school and I would need to list my legal gender. May also noticed that perhaps I had certain feelings toward a boy (Owen). I couldn't deny that.

Cait listened patiently to all May brought up before giving her side of the situation. And Cait was in a moral dilemma. Starting someone so young on estrogen was medically unsound and legally wrong. There also was an internal dispute over whether she had the right to presume such an enormous decision based on preliminary research that was being done within another country for an 'elective' course of treatment.

I, in the interim, was spacing out on my present situation and being amazed at how totally blessed I was. I knew where I would be sleeping that night. I knew I would have all I could eat. I knew that I would have clothes to wear. I knew that I could dress as I wished. I knew I wouldn't be beaten. I knew I wouldn't be molested. I knew I would be protected. And I knew I was wanted.

In just a mere few days my entire life had changed. I couldn't even imagine how much it would change over the years.

"Kerrie...Kerrie..." Who is calling my name?

"Kerrie...have you been paying attention?" May asked as I returned to the here and now.

"Yes...of course..." Okay...so a little white lie which was my last by the way.

"Well then, do you agree?" Cait asked with a sly smile on her face. There was never getting anything past Cait.

"Oh...yes...of course." I didn't have much faith at that point. Life had kind of taken that away. But I knew I should start so...I went along with whatever the ladies decided.

"Then it's settled." May grinned. "I know you will be so very happy."

I spent the next few days simply learning the routine of the house. I also began to mimic the brogue of May and Cait. Although they sounded quite different, I adopted their accents somewhere in between the two. I felt as though the stench and filth of my 'past life' had been washed away; at least on the surface. Now I wanted to lose everything that made me from Boston so that South Boston accent had to go.

I also began to learn Gaelige. I was to discover that they spoke two different versions of that language. The vocabulary as well as the usage could vary from county to county and even town to town. That's why the language that's called Irish, based on Gaelige, became the official language of Ireland with rules and like spelling and so forth.

I would pick up a few words each day from May. After a few weeks I was able to understand some of what they were discussing and, after six months or so, I was able to converse with reasonable ease and partake in the discussions. At this point in my life I even dream in Gaelige.

There was music playing in the house almost endlessly from morning till bedtime. All types of music could be heard from jazz to formal, to traditional Irish folk tunes, to rock. But mostly during the days when Cait worked, May would play the traditional Irish folk music and listening to the songs that were sung in Gaelige also helped my learning. I got to the point where I would be singing a song when someone else was playing the aire and the ladies would laugh and often sing with me.

My tutoring began, as Cait had promised, the second week of my residence; two afternoons a week for English and two for math. I devoured everything they taught me. I worked very hard at learning and would spend three or more hours during the day, or usually in the evening, studying. I got to the point where they were having trouble putting me far enough ahead to present me with a challenge.

Of course I had great assistance from Cait. She would help me if I became stuck on a particular math problem or I ran across something in language that I didn't understand. And I even began to read some of the books in the library. The ladies had histories (mostly of Ireland), fiction, poetry, and plays; everything that one might want to read.

The one thing I failed to notice was the absence of a television. Back in Boston, the telly was the center of our world. Carrie had a small portable set in the girls' bedroom and a 'vcr' machine. We would watch these old tapes and telly shows in our own little world.

I asked May about not having a telly. She said they did have a 'right fine' set. Then she took me into the pantry and opened a closet. In the closet stood a huge box with one of the first available plasma televisions. The ladies simply never got around to installing it.

Crush...

I was becoming rather anxious during the first few days because I hadn't heard anything from Owen. After Cait had shown me how to sign on and access my mail several times, I would check every morning, afternoon, and evening. My concern was twofold. I was worried about my sisters worrying about me. I was also very concerned about Owen. He'd been so...personable to me...and now...nothing?

On my fourth day, in the evening after dinner, I signed on whilst eating some fruit and...lo and behold...I saw an e-mail that wasn't from the provider. I clicked on the mail and the letter opened. I immediately scrolled to the bottom and saw his name. I screamed for joy nearly knocking over my dessert.

The ladies thought I had gone bonkers but I couldn't help myself. He began by apologizing for not writing me sooner. He didn't write why but even at that young age I understood. His life was very complicated. He then informed me that he met my sister after school and told her of my well-being and I was somewhere very safe.

Owen told me that Mister O'Connor was taking care of things. Again he was very non-descriptive and he wrote 'Tommy' so I knew. There were one hundred guys named Thomas on each block. The only rivals for given names are James, Patrick, Peter, and John (or Seamus, Padraic, Pheadair, and Sean). Anyway, I knew things were being sorted out. Owen also mentioned that if I wanted to write something to my sisters he would make sure they got it. I thought that was very sweet of him.

Then the letter got personal. I never expected, nor would I have dreamed, that he would write the things he did. He wrote how he felt about learning I wasn't a girl and how that didn't seem to matter to him. He wrote that he felt something different and quite special when we sat and spoke on that one day. He also wrote that he felt pained when I got onto that plane.

He went on and wrote some of the most sensitive things I'd ever read. I was in tears, smiling mind you, but in tears. By the time I got to the bottom of the letter I could barely see. I read it more than several times; over and over. I read between the lines and around them. I felt as though I could actually feel him, smell his aroma, and feel the embrace of his arms and the soft pressure of his lips.

"Can we print it out so I can have my computer back?" Cait chuckled as she watched me. May was watching me as well and they both knew that the letter was special; as if I could hide that fact.

"Yes..." I squeaked as I asked her how to do that.

I grabbed two tissues from the box on Cait's desk and dabbed the tears in my eyes and blew my nose. I watched what Cait did very carefully because somehow I knew there would be more letters from Owen. I couldn't wait to write him again. He ended his letter with that invitation to do so. When the e-mail printed out I held it with two hands as though it was the most precious artifact in the world...and to me it was.

"We can also save the letter if you'd like." Cait looked at me with one of the biggest smiles I'd seen her have. "We can even save the one you wrote to him."

"Yesss..." I literally hissed.

I was bouncing up and down on my toes with excitement. Cait took a three and a quarter inch plastic thingy (remember those) out of her desk and I closely watched her bring up my e-mail and then Owen's response. She then showed me how I could access it whenever I wanted and she handed it to me.

"If you'd like, we can keep it safe right here." Cait opened the center drawer of her huge desk. I carefully put the disk in there.

"Well...may we see it?" May was also quite excited for me. I handed it to her and she grinned as she read. "This is quite lovely really." She handed the letter to Cait. Cait read it rather quickly.

"You know...he's a bit older than you." She spoke with a hint of distain in her voice.

"Ahhh...look who's talking now will you." May lilted as she spoke and she chuckled.

"That was quite different. You were...very mature for your age and I had a vision of what I wanted in life. This one..." She looked down at the letter and then at me. "I don't know about this one."

I could tell that Cait didn't fancy the idea of Owen in my life at all. But then again she knew more than she was telling and I know that now. She was trying, in her own way, to protect me from perceived dangers and she felt that Owen was quite dangerous.

"But I don't see the harm in writing if you wish."

I know she was trying to buffer her opinion for my sake and I accepted. I took the letter...HIS letter...up to my bedroom that evening and re-read in numerous times. I rested in bed with my eyes closed but my mind was racing so very fast. I was thinking...wake dreaming...of Owen.

I was also composing my reply in my head. I really was so tempted to tell him exactly how I felt about him; excited to the max. But I also realized that I really didn't know him and I certainly didn't want to send the wrong message or, even worse, a completely foolish reply. Somewhere between 'yours truly' and 'love' I finally fell asleep.

After breakfast and before I began my daily routine of helping May, I went into the library and to Cait's computer. I sat before the blank e-mail form and suddenly decided to trash what I had in mind to write. I simply began to tell my tale from the moment I got off the plane till this very moment.

I also went into detail about May and my shopping trip and my visit to Doctor Moran. I needed to make sure, very sure, that he understood I wasn't exactly what he might have thought. I wanted to be sure he accepted me as I was...before I wrote anything really serious...you know?

The letter also made me focus on the gender thingy; something I'd been in denial about. Not wanting to 'become' a boy with hormone treatment was very different from wanting to 'become' a girl. But the fact was that I had sexual thoughts regarding Owen. I wasn't looking for pleasure as much as I wanted to do something to please him. I wanted that physical connection with him as well as the spiritual one.

Though I didn't realize this at the time, I was 'programmed' to equate sexual actions with positive affirmation and reward. When I was being used, after the first few times I was raped by those guys, they began to give me drugs and some money as well. After all, I didn't save three hundred dollars out of my allowance from good old mom and step-dad. I didn't realize I was being pimped out and thus the rewards of sorts. I was simply being a 'good bitch'.

But somewhere deep inside of me I wanted this relationship, if indeed one existed, to be different. I put a bit of myself into my reply without giving too much. Again, I didn't want to sound foolish. I did end the letter with 'truly yours' instead of 'yours truly'. I hoped he would pick up on the subtle difference and appreciate what I wasn't writing. I clicked on the send icon and it was done. I saved my response on the disk as Cait had shown me.

To my great surprise I receive a response from Owen the following day. I was totally taken with the idea that someone actually wanted to...know me? We began to correspond regularly. On occasion I'd need to wait a day or two but Owen always responded and I in turn.

Our writings became sort of romantic without being foolish; sensual without becoming sexual. And the writings were very real in that we wrote nothing that was totally fanciful and unrealistic. Although I told Owen about some of my fantasies, more like dreams actually, I tried, and I believe I succeeded, in not becoming...mushy and gushy?

One day Owen sent me a picture of himself. He was dressed in a suit and even had a dress shirt and a tie on. The suit looked expensive. It was kind of a shiny grey color and was really very stylish; maybe by an Italian designer. He looked absolutely amazing. His hair was combed and he was so grown up looking; at least from my vantage point. Even Cait, who never took a fancy to men, thought he looked 'handsome'.

He in turn requested a picture of me as I looked now. I didn't have any pictures of myself at all. I wanted a 'glam' shot. Nothing risqué or too enticing mind you; simply a picture of me looking...good. I had no idea of how we could do that. I knew the ladies had a camera hidden somewhere. But then to make it ready for the computer was totally out of my very humble abilities.

Cait and May were in the habit of having a portrait of them done every year. Normally this was done in the fall and became a part of their Yule Tide greeting to friends and acquaintances. They always used the same photographer so May offered to take me there and have a photo taken and readied for internet transmission.

The day of the photo session I primped and preened for almost two hours. I had no trouble with the OOTD. It was my look I was worried about. I must have redone my makeup at least three times until I could get the color combination absolutely perfect. I wanted my lipstick and blush to match my hair color as closely as possible. This made my eyes really stand out. Praise the Lord for cosmetic kit specials at the mall during special occasions.

Once the color matching was done to my satisfaction, I put on two sets of earrings. The ladies acceded to my wanting a second piercing in each earlobe which was the latest fashion rage at the time. So I put on one pair of drop earrings and another pair that were stud fashion rhinestones. They looked so much like diamonds that I couldn't resist a way of lighting myself up.

The photographer was rather nice and complimentary to me. He set up his studio equipment in a matter of minutes. I mentioned to the ladies that I would really love a picture of the three of us simply to keep upon my night table. He gave me a stool to sit on and began to fiddle a bit with one of his two cameras that were set up on tripods.

“You know...” He said to me as he looked through the view finder. “The camera really loves you. You really should think about modeling.” I was really tiring of hearing that from people. I simply didn't see it.

Anyway, he took a number of pictures. It was ‘turn this way and that; look over here and now there’. He switched to his other camera and began to shoot pictures. Photographing the three of us was much less...demanding. I was ever so gratified when the ladies decided to use one of the photos of the three of us as their annual Yule Tide greeting card.

After disappearing for several minutes he returned with a disk which he handed to Cait. May had him make several prints of our portrait and of me as well. Evidentially the camera he used for my portraits was a digital device so it would be easy for me to send a picture to Owen. I did so that evening with a bit of trepidation. After clicking on the send icon I ruminated for the remainder of the afternoon whether I'd done the proper thing and whether I'd sent the best one.

I anxiously awaited his reply. I didn't know why at the time that I should have expected a quick reply. It's not like Owen had a nine to five job. His hours were different to say the least. I would scrupulously check the date and time of his e-mails and each time was definitely different. At the time I was naïve enough to still believe he worked at construction. When a letter was dated at two or three in the morning I simply assumed he couldn't sleep. After all, I had the same kind of problem.

When the response did come I was over whelmed with my emotions as I took in each word. I knew that what I felt about him...and what Owen had written about how he felt...were in agreement. He knew he felt differently about me than any other girl...he wrote ‘girl’...that he's met. He wrote that he's even given up on seeing or even looking at anybody else because all he could think of was me.

Owen said he'd made several copies of the picture and had one in each room of his apartment. He even had one on his bed stand so that the last thing he would see before sleeping would be my face. I simply melted inside when I read that.

I was experiencing my first love crush. All I could think about was Owen. I thought about him dressed. I thought about him naked. I thought about him maybe wanking to my picture. I thought about how marvelous it would be for me to be there to help. I wanted to touch him so badly that it hurt.

Things that go bump in the night...

During the night of the fifth day with the ladies I had my one of my nightmares. I would have them back in Boston but on this night things were quite different. The horror was usually the same. I was falling into a very dark, suffocation, stifling, and bottomless pit. I slept with the door ajar so that some light would come into the room. If I had the nightmare, I would awaken, see where I was, and calm myself enough to at least rest because sleep was always impossible after an incident.

On this particular night I had the nightmare but when I awakened it was totally dark and I freaked. I screamed for all I was worth because at least I could hear my own voice and know I was still alive. The light bulb in the hallway had gone out.

To my surprise Cait was the first one into my bedroom. She immediately flipped the wall switch that turned on the lamp and rushed to my side. She embraced me and held me tightly as I cried hysterically. I was totally unhinged. She kept repeating the same mantra in her most soothing voice.

“Shhh... We're here. Nothing can hurt you. Shhh... Everything will be alright. Shhh...” She rocked me gently as she spoke.

May then came into the room and she too rushed to my other side. She didn't say a word. She let Cait continue on but simply the scent of her next to me was so soothing. I eventually calmed enough to speak and I began to apologize most profusely. I kept repeating; “I'm sorry... I'm so very sorry...”

May handed me several tissues and I dried my tears and wiped my nose. Cait stopped her embrace but kept one arm around me. May also put her arm around me. Cait asked me about my dream and I told her.

“Do you have other bad dreams? You know...that repeat themselves?” Cait gazed at me with wide eyes. She was truly listening.

“Yeah...I dream...” I sniffled and looked down at my hands. “I dream about being beaten. And sometimes I dream about sinking into slimy stuff.”

“Anything else?”

I couldn't answer Cait. I looked up at her and my tears began to flow again. I couldn't talk about the rape and repeated molestation thing at that point. Thankfully I didn't need to. Cait understood my silence.

“It's okay sweet heart. You don't have to tell us anything else. Do you think you can go back to sleep? Would you like one of us to stay with you until you do?”

I remember shrugging my shoulders. I was still trembling and gazing at my hands; my finger nails. I wanted someone to be with me very badly. I was still trembling. What really frightened me was the thought that maybe they didn't want to deal with me and my...baggage?

“Nonsense...” May spoke in her most determined voice. “You'll come to bed with us on this night.”

I went into their bedroom with them each having a hand on my shoulder. I immediately climbed onto the bed and scooted between the sheets in the center of their king sized bed. If we were going to do this, I wanted to do it right and the center of the bed felt right.

Being in their bed was amazing. The feel of the feather pillows, of which there were more than a few, the feather mattress cover I sank into, and those luxurious sheets. The scent of May's perfume and of Cait's permeated everything. The scent of them...their womanly scent was mixed into the brew as I buried my face into the softness and inhaled. I felt warm and comfy and, most importantly, secure. I think I was asleep within a few minutes of Cait turning off her lamp.

That wasn't the last time I crawled into bed with the ladies. Even as the dreams grew more infrequent and I grew older, I would still crawl in between them when the dream was particularly vivid and horrid. I still have a nightmare once in a while only now I have someone next to me almost all of the time...praise our merciful Lord.

The next morning Cait made it her primary business to call the shrink Doctor Moran had mentioned and she cajoled the woman into an appointment at the beginning of the next week. This was the beginning of my life long process of being rid of the demons that still on occasion haunt me. May also installed one night lamp in the electrical socket by my night stand, one near my vanity and one in the bathroom.

Cait had to work that Monday so May took me to the office. Her name was Doctor Jillian Stern but she allowed me to call her Doctor Jill. She was a very pleasant middle aged woman who specialized in traumatized pre and adolescent children. Right from the beginning she made it

clear that she considered medication only in the most severe circumstances and preferred working at developing coping skills instead.

Doctor Jill asked if I was comfortable with May being in the room. I had no objection at all. Indeed I preferred her to be there. Doctor Jill asked a lot of questions and I gave her one word answers unless two words were required. She pretty much got the idea of what was going on from Cait and I merely confirmed that idea with my silence.

I was so closed up to people at that point that it was nearly a year before I even acknowledged the sexual abuse in therapy. But we did work on the physical and emotional abuse thingy and my self-esteem problems. I was classic in that I exhibited all the symptoms of PTSD. From the nightmares, the day mares, the panic attacks, my obsessive compulsive behaviors and everything else.

I was so very obsessed with trying to be totally perfect that I would often trigger my own panic attacks. I'll always remember the full blown meltdown (not my first meltdown by any means) I had in my junior year of upper school. I had only gotten a three point seven five grade score in an advanced algebra course.

I became hysterical; crying, profaning, hyperventilating and Lord knows what else. May became so concerned that she brought me to the hospital where one of the doctors gave me two milligrams of Ativan. Of course this was under Cait's supervision. I had so feared the severe repercussions that never occurred. Not only wasn't I thrown out of the house, we all went out for dinner at a very nice restaurants to celebrate my otherwise perfect average; one of the best in restaurants in town.

Even after more than a year with the ladies I was still very insecure about my place. I obsessed about neatness and cleanliness, my school work, my nails, my LOTD; over everything and anything. Of course as time went on I became far less concerned with these things. Now I only obsess on my family and my work. The mess in the closet can wait. But my nails and my LOTD still must be perfect.

Within that first month I considered Doctor Jill to be reasonably cool and I stopped needing one of the ladies with me during therapy. Also within that month she determined that my 'unique' style of dressing and presenting myself was not really a result of my trauma. I did explain my sister's method of disguising me so that I wouldn't be beaten. But she determined that perhaps a gender identity dysfunction actually did exist prior to those days. When I thought back to my early childhood, and what my Father had said, I knew she was probably correct right.

She shifted my case over to a therapist she worked closely with after determining that I wasn't crazy enough to be medicated. I saw the therapist twice a week for quite some time and Doctor Jill once a month. What I didn't realize was that both the good Doctor and her psychologist were also making notes regarding my gender dysfunction. Praise God they did.

I also began what will probably be a lifelong relationship with group therapy. Between the group and my own psychologist I managed, for the most part, to function quite adequately. I was still so closed up that I didn't even speak at group for more than a month. Even then I would only reply, or even say, one or two words.

I am one of the few blessed ones in that I am fully accepted by those closest to me. My older sister knew and though we do have issues between us, they mostly pertain to my 'leaving her and the little ones'. Though she understands on a conscious logical level, she resents the fact that I stumbled into the most fortunate situation with Cait and May.

My older sister is an alcoholic. She has been sober for nearly two years now but, as we know, it is a lifelong ongoing process. You must understand that the price she paid for the safety of our younger half-sisters was her continuous rape and molestation by our step-father.

I revealed my 'rebirth' to our younger sisters only this past year. They had asked me why I didn't have any children of my own. I only felt it fair to tell them the truth. They never gave my disclosure a second thought. They were so young at the time I was thrown out that they only really remember me dressed in my sister's old clothing and simply assumed I was a cis girl.

We were finally able to free all three of them from their horrid situation within three years of my meeting the ladies. What they couldn't understand at the time...what my older sister couldn't understand...was why I spoke with an Irish brogue. I explained to Carrie that when I underwent my 'rebirth' I wanted everything about me and my past in Boston to change. My South Boston accent was a constant reminder of where I'd been and I wanted my rebirth to be complete. Of course by the time they joined us in Fort Lauderdale, I was so fluent in Gaelige that it's all I spoke with the ladies unless others were present.

“Livin’ La Vida Loca...”

After my first month had past I was fairly well scheduled. It is so important for children to have routine in their lives and I was desperately in need of just that. May had, in effect, become a soccer mom. Tutoring four times a week, therapy twice a week, two group sessions a week, homework every night and daily chores with May kept me busy and my mind off of my 'troubles'.

By the end of my first month a number of different things, all wonderful things mind you, occurred. The ladies had gotten guardianship over me...a blessed miracle. I found out later that originally when negotiations began, there was a sum of money my 'parents' asked for. That was acceded to but then other demands arose. However, something must have occurred during this

period because suddenly the documents prepared by Cait's brother's lawyers were signed with nothing exchanged at all.

Cait also received a copy of my transcript indicating my gender as being 'F'. Somehow she also managed to get birth certificate with me being listed as an 'F'. Boston in the eighties and the nineties was the kind of town where one could get anything done if one knew the 'right' people. That came to a very abrupt end around the close of the decade. I read a quote by a famous lawyer named F. Lee Bailey (distant cousin). He said that if you had a problem and you had money, then you had no problem. That summed up Boston.

After much discussion, trepidation, and soul searching, we all decided, thankfully, that I should begin hormone replacement therapy. Only it wasn't really replacement as much as hormone augmentation. My body was already producing a minute quantity of estrogen which is quite normal in all males. It wasn't very much but it was enough to exhibit certain changes in my body because I was producing almost no testosterone at all.

Although Doctor Moran refused to write the prescriptions for us, he did offer to monitor me until I turned sixteen and he could legally take over. So Cait wrote the prescriptions as recommended by Doctor Moran and used May's name for legal purposes. I was already beginning to 'bud' breasts and at the time the only thing I thought of was being able to fill out my clothing properly. Cait administered my dosages every day to insure I would be taking them regularly.

I had become simply another family member and, other than the ladies having to alter their time to transport me to different appointments, their lives continued on almost as usual. The ladies were in the habit of eating out several times a week on days when Cait wasn't working. They usually had lunches and at least one dinner a week out of the house. On rare occasions they would have breakfast at the local diner.

Now there was a third party to include in these wonderful interludes; me. I would usual dress for the occasion. They rarely ate anywhere that wasn't a table cloth kind of place and they too dressed in a more than casual mode.

We usually ate downtown; one of the fine restaurants on Las Olas Boulevard or someplace along the beach. Very often the restaurant would attract the downtown business crowd of people. The ladies loved nothing better than to dine and comment on the people; they loved people watching. The first time I went with them I was amazed at the conversation.

"Lord have mercy...would you look at his bottom now!!!" May would mutter in a hushed tone. "T'is good for the thrust." She would chuckle.

"Hmmpfh."

Cait didn't comment too often on May's observations of men. However, when May commented on a particular woman Cait would add her opinion. I must admit that it wasn't long before I got

into the spirit of the thing. Sometimes I would see a man who was...well...who would remind me of Owen and I would say something.

More often than not May and I would talk about some of the fashions that were being exhibited in our personal little fashion show. Style was definitely the name of the game and most of the players knew exactly what they were doing. Cait would listen attentively and suddenly become emotional? I mean she would look at May in such a loving way and give me in the same fashion. I think Cait was envisioning May's giving birth and seeing her nurture little ones as was her way with me.

And we would do things. There were gardens and museums and, of course, the zoo in Miami. There was never much slack time. And the ladies enjoyed these things as well. May loved visiting gardens. We often went to the orchid gardens up in Palm Beach County. She loved anything that grew and bloomed. We frequented the Fairchild Gardens in Miami as well.

We began going to the beach frequently. The ocean was so amazingly delicious. The water, even in the winter, was warmer than the water up north summer the high of the summer. May purchased me several one piece swimming suits with sewn in cups. The size was so small that I almost filled the cups.

I had no real bulge to hide. That gives you an indication of just how underdeveloped I was as a boy. But just to insure there wouldn't be any...issues...I noticed that many of the girls wore athletic shorts over their suits. So we also got several pairs in complimentary colors. I really loved to frolic in the water. And with the fresh water showers I was able to wash all the salt and sand off and remain comfortable if we continued to stay near the beach.

I was included in social events that the ladies attended; at least the ones that children were permitted to attend. I was introduced as a 'distant cousin'. Within rural Ireland, a distant cousin is usually a kinsmen related by blood and name.

For example Cait would be a distant cousin to May. Both are from ancient clainnes and their traditional lands adjoin. Cait's family name in English is Farrell. A Frawleigh, or Frawley, would be a cousin to Cait. The Frawleys are an offshoot of the Farrell clainne. Anyone not of a clainne is Irish. May's clainne, in English, are the O'Donnalls. Their cousins would be any other people with 'Donnall' or a variant in their name; Donnelly, O'Neal, Neally, etc. The O'Donnells are a strong branch of the O'Neil clainne.

I once watched an interview with Paddy Maloney of the Chieftains. In speaking about Sinead O'Connor, he referred to her as being 'one of us'. This could have meant two things. Firstly that she is a fine singer. But just as likely and far from unheard of is the fact that the O'Connors are also an old clainne. Maloney, Keene, Malloy and Fay are all old Irish names. The first three are clainnes. And Fay dates back to the middle ages and first appears in county Doire (Londonderry in English).

Although in modern Ireland some of these older traditions are fading, there are still some who abide by these things. Outside the country, anyone who is from Ireland is considered a distant cousin. That's why the Irish people in the states are sometimes called clainnish. However, when it comes to a united Ireland, being a Republican is a good thing.

But I digress. In being with the ladies in public, I became quite accustomed to using the ladies lounge. The first few times I would go with either Cait or May. I was accustomed to pee sitting down anyway. It was difficult for me to stand close enough to a urinal because of my anatomical shortcomings? And all the stalls in the lounges had doors. By the fourth time I was more than comfortable going by myself.

One of my 'day mares' at school was relieving myself. I couldn't go to the boy's room. That would be an open invitation to getting beaten up...or worse. Thankfully I was able to get permission to use either the one in the nurse's office or the one in the guidance counselor's office. The administrators of the school weren't totally blind to my situation.

By the month's end May had managed to put ten pounds on me. Though I couldn't stop eating, I never ate much at one sitting. Between my new found weight and social events, May found it necessary to shop for more clothes for me.

Now whilst May did like to look good and spent money for being primed and preened, she wasn't really into 'things'. She had a wardrobe but rarely added to it. Perhaps she might get a few new gowns for the season, and accompanying accessories, she otherwise was quite frugal considering her position. But she loved buying things for me. And so we would make an occasional shopping trip to the mall.

Oh my God...then there was my birthday. I had been with Cait and May for almost two and one half months. I really didn't think much about July eleventh. I mean I hadn't had a real birthday since...since my father died. My sister would always get me a card and a little something but otherwise there was no big celebration, or even a tiny one.

That day I awoke to the aroma of May cooking breakfast. It was a bit early considering Cait had the day off. I was absolutely famished and the aroma of the bacon cooking was overwhelming. May would cover it with maple syrup and then pan cook it. The result was the sweetest saltiest treat ever.

I quickly did my bathroom activities, threw on my robe...I had adopted one of May's...slid into my sandals and ran, literally ran, down the stairs and into the kitchen. Greeting my eyes as I entered was a banner that read "Happy Birthday". There were balloons all about and all shades of decorations. On the center island counter top was a stack of wrapped and decorated boxes.

Both ladies shouted 'happy birthday' and came to me to hug and kiss me. It was so totally amazing. I had tears in my eyes (nothing new in those days) and a smile so intense that my

facial muscles hurt. I can't even begin to explain how I felt. My heart was so overcome with joy.

I really didn't know what to attack first. Should I have breakfast, attack the presents, or start with the lovely pie May concocted as a birthday cake? Since I was in such a quandary I let the ladies lead the way and we had breakfast.

We ate and I jabbered away about everything and nothing at all really. I was excited. The ladies told me that this was my day and that we could do whatever I wanted. I thought at great length about what I wanted to do and I decided that we should all go to the beach and then maybe have dinner downtown at a really nice restaurant. I wanted to get dressed in my finest and, well, look like an adult?

May had thrown together one of her notorious fruit upside down cakes. This one was raisins and pecans atop a wonderfully moist golden meal cake. This was my favorite dessert although everything she baked was amazing.

After that I attacked the presents. Everything was wrapped so prettily that I felt badly having to destroy all that fine work. So I carefully unwrapped each gift to preserve the paper for perhaps a later use. I chose blindly and I happened to grasp a large package. I opened it to find three shoe boxes. Inside were high heels...sort of. They were really nice leather pumps with two and a half inch heels; one pair in black, one in cream, and one pair in cordovan.

This was May's doing. I personally had an aversion to the high heels I've seen worn around. I couldn't imagine myself balancing in them and I just envisioned foot injury after injury. May felt that one was never well dressed without 'heels'. Of course she never wore anything taller than three inches.

Cait never wore anything taller than perhaps an inch and a half. She was all about sensible shoes. Indeed she was all about sensible clothing as well. Though Cait had a sense of style, it was uniquely her own and it was a rare event when she would concede a fashion point to May.

Anyway, I excitedly tried on my first pair of heels and managed to walk fairly well once I felt I wasn't in danger of executing a back flip of some sort or breaking an ankle. I gushed my 'thank you' to the ladies.

The next box revealed several sets of matched under garments. This again had May's hand in doing. The panties were bikini cut and of lustrous silk in different primary colors. Along with the panties were color matched training bras. I was developing rather consistently and now really had more than mosquito bites on my chest. May quickly assured me that if they didn't fit properly, we could stop in the shop and exchange them.

Lastly were a dozen pairs of thigh highs also in assorted colors. I abhorred panty hose. I tried them on once back home and I spent the entire time pulling them up, or down, or simply trying

to feel comfortable. I loved the colors the thigh highs came in and I knew that May must have gone through a bit of trouble assembling these things for me.

I unwrapped the next package and opened the box only to find several more small wrapped boxes. I was wondering where May, or Cait, found the time to do all this without me knowing. Anyway, the smaller boxes each contained sets of hand strung antiqued glass beaded necklaces and matching earrings, one set were drops and the other were studs. I wanted to be able to wear a pair of drops with studs or simply two pairs of drops. And this was how they responded; with these sets.

There were three more boxes of the beaded jewelry and each set had the two styles of earrings. I was so completely overwhelmed with their thoughtfulness that I began to shed tears again. Each set was a differing color and the beads had that mirror like reflection that antiqued beads tended to have. I now had jewelry in emerald green, gold, amber, and pink. I was ecstatic.

The next box was truly amazing. This one was from Cait's brother. I never expected a gift from him. I had never met him although we had spoken several times briefly on the telephone when I answered for Cait. We even spoke in Gaelige the last time and I think he was quite amused and surprised.

I opened up his present even more carefully. The box was the smallest thus far. I opened the top and removed a cotton filler to find two small drawer string pouches. Upon opening the first one I was shocked to find a pair of real emerald studs. The stones were quite nice and Cait said they looked to be about a carat each. I had no idea what that meant but I had to immediately try them on.

After putting the studs in I ran to the bathroom just off the kitchen to see how they looked. They were so amazingly...amazing! The manner in which they seemed to emphasize my eyes was wonderful. The earrings sparkled in the light and really drew attention to my face.

I was so engrossed with admiring the earrings that I'd forgotten the second little pouch. I opened it up very carefully and dumped the contents into my palm. It was a second set of emerald earrings only these were dropped. The little stones were mounted in silver and linked by fine silver chain. They were gorgeous and very extravagant. I didn't know how I could possibly ever thank him. And he barely knew me.

The ladies were quite taken as well. Cait had mentioned that her brother often went to South America on business and Columbia was usually his first stop. The ladies had also received gifts of this sort from Sean Paddy. I knew that he would be spending a day or two with us sometime this fall. He always stopped over to see the ladies on his way to, and from, his South American trips.

There was one final box. It was the smallest box of all and seemed to be a mystery to the ladies. Evidently the small box arrived with the package from Cait's brother but it was not a part of his gift. I stared at it for a moment before opening it. Once the paper was off I saw a perfectly cubed box. I opened the top to find a very beautifully decorated ring.

“Fainne Chladaigh!” May spoke in a hushed and solemn voice as if I had received something even more valuable than all the emeralds put together.

“What does that mean?”

I'd never heard that expression before. I knew it was a ring very similar to the one that May and Cait wore. I looked at them as I removed the ring and automatically placed my third finger of my right hand into the ring. It was slightly large on me. I had the crown pointed up.

“Do you know what that means when the crown is pointed toward your heart?” Cait eyed me with a smirk of a smile. Of course I had no idea and I shook my head. “That means you're in a relationship.”

“Who would possibly send me such a...” Suddenly I knew who the sender was.

“Well...” Cait said rather wryly. “At least you put it on correctly, if you feel that way. You realize that this is a serious gift; more serious than any of the others.” I nodded my head even though I didn't realize the true seriousness of the ring...at least in some people's minds.

“It really is quite beautiful.” May seemed to be in the spirit of the thing. She smiled and hugged me to her.

Indeed it was. The heart was a cut red stone. The crown was fashioned in tiny sparkling stones. Though I'd seen them worn in the neighborhood, and both Cait and May wore them, I'd never seen one quite as...quite as beautiful as this one.

“It looks to be special made.” May took my hand in hers to see the ring close up.

“I wonder how he knew it was my birthday. I didn't mention anything.”

“Hmmp...” Cait snorted. “I wonder indeed.”

“Why is the stone red?” That for sure I'd never seen.

“Maybe it's your birth stone.” May giggled. I didn't know why until she looked that up. Her face lit up as she made her pronouncement. “It's a ruby I think. That's your birth stone.”

“Well...” Cait said with her wry smile widening. “He certainly seems to have gone through a wee bit of bother to get this gift for you.”

“You don't like him, do you?” I was beginning to feel a bit off about the gift now.

“Oh sweet heart...” Cait drew me to her and hugged me. “I don’t know him. And what I do know would cause me to caution you about this one. He’s involved with his uncle and that alone is enough to caution you.”

“But your brother is involved with Owen’s uncle.” I was definitely becoming defensive.

“Yes...but Brother is a kinsman and Michael Burke is not and that makes a big difference.” I was surprised that May was so quick to answer. She was often my defender in matters that involved Cait.

“And my brother has reasons other than money for doing whatever it is he does do; though he has made a pretty penny of it for sure.” Cait sighed. “Look sweet heart, all I’m saying is that you should be careful with your heart.”

In truth...my e-mails to Owen and his back to me had taken a new turn. At first the exchanges were like friends, good friends. But somewhere along the way it seemed to become more than simply that. The e-mails became kind of intimate? Well, not really intimate more like romantic I guess.

It’s a thing we both seemed to slip into and it felt very comfortable. There were no demands as such...as if. But I do believe we were really getting to know each other. We were really getting the ‘feel’ for each other. But I did understand that the ladies were only truly interested in my well-being and my heart.

That evening we did eat dinner at a really nice place on A1A. The breeze was off the ocean as is usual and we ate out on the upstairs terrace. The food was superb. I hadn’t eaten food so wonderfully prepared as what we had that night. This also gave me the chance to wear some of my new jewelry and undies. I must say that the three of us looked really amazing and we did get gazed at as we walked through the restaurant to the staircase to the upper floor.

Preamble...

Later that week Cait announced that we were going to be visiting the school I would shortly be attending. I must say that I wasn’t particularly thrilled. I would have preferred having the tutors for the next three years but I understood that this was not a viable option. I did understand that my ‘fairy tale’ life was coming to an end. No more mid-week expeditions and no more fancy lunches; at least not during school days.

All the old fears were coming to the fore front as the day came closer. I mean the day we were to go I actually hurled breakfast and I had the worst cramps ever. But in spite of my physical symptoms, I couldn’t think of an excuse good enough to get past Cait, or May for that matter.

I dressed really rather...business like? I wore a simple front buttoning white blouse and a sand colored wrap skirt that fell to mid-calf. My cordovan loafers with these really neat tassels completed my outfit. I wore my green antique bead necklace with both the drop and stud earrings. My makeup was just as conservative. I only wore a bit of mascara and a shade of lip gloss that was close to my hair color.

During the ride to the school I found myself starting to hyperventilate. Cait spoke about perhaps making a trip to the Keys for the weekend. She was trying, without much success, to keep my mind off of the task at hand. Cait and May understood that school was kind of a trigger point for me. It was a fear I simply had to face.

Upon arriving at the school and parking in the lot, I immediately noticed that there were no fences around the school, at least not at the front. We walked up the few steps onto a covered courtyard. The buildings were arranged on either side. There were fixed tables and chairs as well as little chest high...my chest high...walls that made up alcoves with bench seats.

I was struck by the fact that there were no bars on the windows or on anything else I saw. I didn't realize that schools like this existed. We past what appeared to be a snack bar in the very center of the long courtyard and the cafeteria was on our right. All of the buildings were only one floor which also surprised me. There couldn't have been that many students attending the school.

The more I saw, the more relaxed I became. Whilst I didn't look upon this as a fun adventure, I also didn't look upon this as a death sentence. As we approached the administration building I noticed display windows exhibiting the different vocational disciplines offered as well as some of the students' work.

We walked into the building and up to the receptionist's desk. Cait announced who we were and who we needed to see. Evidently we were expected and the woman escorted us the short distance to the school Director. They didn't even have a principal. This was something new to me.

The school Director greeted us warmly as she ushered us into her office. She appeared to be a very pleasant middle aged woman who was brightly, but sensibly dressed. As we took our seats around a circular table, she informed us that her name was Lois Smith and offered us coffee or some other form of refreshment.

Doctor Smith, as she preferred to be addressed, was somewhat amazed that someone as young as me was entering tenth grade.

"Kerrie is a very quick learner and has a fine mind." Cait countered.

"Ms. Bartlett mentioned that both of you are Kerrie's guardians?"

“We both have decision making rights for Kerrie.” I could hear the tenseness in Cait’s voice.

“We have more than a few same sex parents.” Doctor Smith seemed to put Cait’s mind at ease. “We like to think of our school as the school of the future.” Her smile was blinding and, in spite of Doctor Smith trying to ‘sell’ the school, I certainly could hear the pride in her voice. “Better than eighty percent of our students go on to higher education and the other twenty or so percent are placed in well-paying technical jobs.”

Cait and May were quite impressed with what they were hearing. Quite honestly, I hadn’t thought as far ahead as college. I was too concerned with how I would ever be able to finish upper school.

“Now Kerrie...” Doctor Smith finally got around to addressing me expressly. Up until that time I sat quietly and simply listened. “We do need to give you two tests. These are designed to establish that you are truly ready for tenth grade work.”

“Okay...” ‘Great’ I thought although this wasn’t unexpected.

Doctor Smith stood up and went to her desk. She then came to me and handed me two booklets and a pen.

“There is one test for critical thinking and one for math. You’ll have an hour for each.” She smiled and turned toward the ladies. “In the meantime, I would be happy to show you around the campus.”

Doctor Smith placed me outside her office where the receptionist sat and then walked out the door with the ladies. I took a look at the first booklet. I’d never heard of critical thinking but at a quick glance it seemed to be some sort of vocabulary test...of sorts. I began to mark the circles on the answer sheet. I managed to work my way through it fairly easily.

The math test was a bit more difficult. But I had spent a lot of time studying math and I also had Cait’s help when I couldn’t quite understand a concept or problem. I also managed to get most of it done and I guessed at the last few problems. Cait always told me that if I wasn’t sure of an answer, choose the one that seems the most reasonable and so I did. I finished a few minutes before the ladies and Doctor Smith returned.

“You’ve finished both exams already?” Doctor Smith seemed more than a little surprised. “That was rather fast. Did you answer all the questions?”

I nodded rather demurely. Cait and May were both beaming proudly at me. I think they were more positive of my success than I was. And, to be truthful, I was fairly positive I did well. Now before you think I might be a great thinker or anything of the sort, I must assure you that it was really the result of all the time I put into my homework. Nothing really ever came that easily and I had to work at whatever I was studying; harder and longer than most I think.

Doctor Smith sat and we spoke for a while. She was trying to get a ‘feel’ for what I was like and, to be perfectly honest, I was doing the same with her. I told her about my past experiences with an ‘inner city’ school without getting into the horrors any more than I needed to. She assured me that ‘bullying’ was dealt with rather harshly. I held my tongue and resisted saying; ‘So that’s what you call rapes and beatings these days.’

But I did get a good feeling about Doctor Smith and I did believe that she cared about what went on in her school. I still wasn’t all that thrilled about the idea of going to any public school, not that I knew a private school would be any better. We chatted until the receptionist came into the room and handed Doctor Smith my scores. She had already told the ladies.

“Well...” Doctor Smith cleared her throat. “It seems that you are more than ready for tenth grade. In fact, it appears you are more than ready for some of our advanced placement courses.” I looked at her with surprise. I thought I did okay but that well? “You should be very happy here. I think we can challenge you and you’ll receive college credit for some of your courses in the state and community colleges. I believe you’ll be a most welcomed addition here.”

“Thank you.”

What else could I say? I didn’t want to seem anxious nor did I want to seem blasé about attending. We rejoined the ladies and, after taking a proper amount of time to thank Doctor Smith for her kindness, we left. It really wasn’t soon enough for me. Old memories die hard.

School...

I still had two weeks before school began. Of course this gave May an opportunity to practice her second favorite sport; buying me clothes. Her first favorite sport is catering to Cait of course, and to me. But, to be perfectly honest, May was as good as her word. I weighed a staggering one hundred and twenty pounds; a new record for me. I was no longer a size zero.

I know this was partially due to my new diet and partially due to the hormones I was receiving. I was actually developing a shape...of sorts. I was filling out what I wore in a most appropriate manner. Now, being a four-six, depending upon the maker, a whole new array of clothing became available. As one might imagine, size zero doesn’t offer a great deal of choices.

May also picked up a few things for herself. She was into her second trimester and, well, getting big. Comfort was always her most important concern so everything she got in dresses and such, though quite lovely in design and color, were a bit bigger than what others might have deemed necessary.

Another big concern for us was the fact that May was now tiring more easily and, much to her disappointment, wasn't able to work as hard as she did. Of course with me starting school and not having quite the time available to help her Cait decided to have a cleaning service come in to do the work. May, however, didn't want 'outsiders wandering about' and wanted perhaps a 'cousin' from home to come over and help.

This very next week Triona arrived. Triona was indeed a first cousin to May complete with nearly the same shade of strawberry blond hair, those very pale green eyes and a host of siblings as well. For sure they could have been sisters. She seemed to have a very similar disposition and we hit it off rather famously.

I spent most of my free time with Triona. Aside from being closer to my age at eighteen years, she was very outgoing and vivacious. When the four of us would go out to lunch, we couldn't stop laughing at Triona's observations. Also, being able to drive, the two of us would take off for the beach or some other place that required our exploring.

I spent the next week and a half talking about all my fears and trepidations of going back to school with my therapist and group sessions. I still wasn't very open in these sessions and I keep things somewhat generic. I simply said I was afraid of the bullying and left it at that.

Therapy...real therapy...is about developing coping methods; tools for psychological survival. Because of my closed up self at that time, I couldn't really utilize much of what was given to me. Those tools were too general and not geared for the horrors I faced back in Boston. But at least I was able to vent a bit and that always seemed to help.

I was scheduled to attend a one day orientation along with other new students. The day before this began I started my preparations. May took Triona and me to her stylist for our hair and mani-pedis. I had a look in mind and I wanted so very much to match that image with the one I saw in the mirror for the first day of school.

I tended to dislike what I saw in the mirror. The image was still that of a twelve year old boy who was pre-pubescent in spite of my growing...boobs? I never considered my day begun unless I applied a bit of mascara, a touch of lip gloss, and my hair was at least combed. To this very day I still feel that way even though a wrinkle or two have appeared.

I was always amazed at how different I could look when I dressed to go out; even if was only to shop. What I saw in the mirror was a teen girl verging on adulthood. Certainly my attitude at that time was more adult than anything else. I suppose being in adult company most of the time was one reason. The other was that I'd truly had my childhood taken from me and there was no recovering of that.

Inversely I enjoyed being treated as an adult by the ladies. My opinion was valued and that certainly helped my self-esteem. I finally began to truly feel like I was a part of something; a

family of sorts that was much more than mere blood relationships. The look I wanted was that of a young woman; someone with a definite idea of what she wanted and where she was going; even if that was still a bit obscured.

So out came a soft pastel green colored cotton wrap skirt, one of the new ones May purchased for me. I hung a simple white short sleeved blouse with bone buttons next to it on the closet door coat hook. I had skimmers that were almost the same color green as the skirt. White thigh highs completed my basic look. The ladies, especially Cait, regarded school as my new job and I wanted to dress the part.

I even threw together the items I needed for the day in one of my hobo bags. I needed, in my own mind, to be totally prepared for the next day. Tissues, a notebook, several pens and mechanical pencils were only the start. I needed a few panty liners...just in the event...as if! I made sure everything I needed for identification, my admissions form and birth certificate and such were settled in their proper and secure place.

I even arranged the cosmetics I was going to wear the next day in a specific place so that I wouldn't be overwhelmed by not finding what I needed amidst the angst and confusion of getting myself together in the morning. My OCD was in full swing.

Although I could have arranged for transportation to and from the school, the ladies wouldn't hear of it. They would drive me to and from school. On the days Cait was off she would drive me and May would drive me when Cait had to work. This certainly made me feel more secure and I cherished the fact that I was being so carefully sheltered.

I had no idea what riding on the buses was like but I'd heard the stories back in Boston of what went on at times; especially in my neighborhood. Even though I more than qualified for bus transportation, it only took two or three rides to convince me I was better off making the hike and dodging the territorial fights that could ensue. Back in South Boston each block presented its own challenge.

I didn't sleep much that evening. So instead of reading or listening to music, I did something that was suggested by my therapist and in the group sessions. I began a journal of sorts. I wrote down everything that was on my mind and I wrote down everything I felt about the impending moment of truth...so to speak. To this very day I still keep a journal or sorts. I even transferred my hand written journal onto a computer which the ladies purchased for me not very long after I began school.

In the morning I awoke quite blurry-eyed and tired but the shower was brisk enough to awaken me a bit more. I blew dried my hair and quickly put on the panty and trainer I had situated on the counter top. I simply adored the lovely rose colored set. May always believed in matching sets. I did my other toiletries and cosmetics and went to dress.

Of course I assembled the few cosmetics I used in a small zippered bag and placed that into my hobo bag. I dressed and wore my green glass beaded necklace and earrings. The Claddagh ring never left my finger. I opened the closet door to inspect myself in the full length mirror. A smartly attired young woman ready for a day's work stared back at me. I smiled weakly and knew I was as ready as I'd ever be.

Downstairs the ladies had prepared a breakfast but I was too nervous for anything other than some toast with cheese and preserves, some cut fruit, and a cup of coffee...a new habit. Triona was present and she was quite excited for me as well. She complimented me on my OOTD, as did the ladies, and they all wished me great success for that day.

Cait gave me fifty dollars for food and other expenses I might have; fifty dollars...a veritable fortune to me. She also stated that should I need more for anything I shouldn't hesitate to ask. I had become so accustomed to the ladies paying for everything that a need for some money of my own never occurred to me.

We arrived at the school about half an hour early. This allowed me plenty of time to get another cup of coffee and work myself into a greater state of anxiety. The exercise lasted until other students began to arrive by bus and car. I noticed that many of them were around my age and entering ninth or tenth grade. I noticed only a few older kids.

We assembled in the auditorium to receive our schedules and class home room assignments. After reporting to my home room briefly, the teacher there brought another student and me to one of the ninth grade class rooms to join a tour of the campus; something I had no time to do on my last visit.

I had a small note pad out and I took notes of where different things were located; especially the rest rooms. I was also very careful to notate where my classes were located. I definitely didn't want to begin Monday in a tither trying to find where I was to be first thing in the morning.

I had lunch in the cafeteria and discovered a whole new world of school cuisine. Evidently the food was prepared by adult students in the cooking school and was really very good. I got a complete meal for less than five dollars and I couldn't even finish everything.

The remainder of the day was spent in the auditorium watching films on substance abuse and such. We also heard from the director Doctor Smith and several other administrators regarding the school and proper conduct.

Cait met me directly after school and immediately peppered me with questions about my day. She was most concerned about my opinion and my 'feeling' about the school. Cait and May definitely wanted me to feel comfortable with whatever school environment I was subjected to. Of course I told her that I thought it was okay. I really wouldn't be able to tell until school really began on Monday.

“Where’s May?” I was unaccustomed to seeing Cait without May; especially on Cait’s day off.

“She’s home resting. She needs to do that more these days. Triona is with her and I’m sure the both of them are asleep.” Cait chuckled. “I’m so happy you were good with the school today. That was a concern.”

“Yeah...it was pretty nice. I won’t really know until next week is finished.” That is if I survived the first week. “The guys I saw today seemed...well...pretty tame. But everyone is on their best behavior the first day at a new school I guess.”

“Indeed they are.” Cait laughed.

As soon as we arrived home and entered the house, both Cait and I went directly upstairs to see how May was doing. Just as Cait predicted, May and Triona were asleep. I watched Cait look at the two of them with such a loving look on her face. She had this kind of Mona Lisa smile?

I was envious of course. Triona was in my spot in the bed. But I couldn’t be angry with either May or Triona because the two of them looked so much alike that it was almost like viewing a before and after picture separating the years between them.

Cait shooed me from the room lest I awaken them. I went to my room and changed out of my clothes being sure to hang up the skirt and placing the shoes where they belonged. My blouse went into my laundry basket. I retrieved a more comfortable tee top and shorts to wear. I sat down at my desk and made my daily entry into my journal pretty much describing the day and then I joined Cait in the library.

That weekend seemed to fly past all too quickly and yet way too slowly. My entire being was focused on Monday. No matter what we did I simply couldn’t get the day off my mind. We did eat dinner out on Saturday night. Cait had to work that weekend but she managed to get out of work early enough so that by eight in the evening we were in a nice restaurant.

May was on her own schedule of course. She ate whenever she got hungry was putting on a bit of weight. But her Doctor didn’t seem to feel this presented a problem...yet. Triona was a godsend every day. She and I took care of the laundry and most of the daily chores and still had time to lounge around the pool and simply talk.

Her favorite topic of conversation was boys. I listened to her ‘words of wisdom’ about dealing with the opposite sex. Whilst I wasn’t particularly interested in boys, other than Owen, I was raptly soaking up every word because I knew that I would be surrounded by them at school and I needed to know how to deal with them.

The entire issue of boys was somewhat mysterious to me. Although I couldn’t really relate to Triona’s seeming boy addiction, I found her stories to be enlightening and even humorous.

Evidently Triona was quite the little social butterfly back home. Her first experience sexually was at the age of fourteen and she found it to be an amazing one at that.

That was the same age May had her first experience. And although May found the experience to be great, she was able to put all of that aside once she took up with Cait. I asked May about her relationship with Cait and she put that entire thing into perspective with four simple words; "We are soul mates."

Perhaps soul mate was an apt way of describing my relationship with Owen. We just seemed to always be on the same page regardless of what page we were on. The fact that our only real communications were strictly via e-mails didn't seem to matter. I told Triona about Owen and I and she thought the entire thing was quite romantic.

One of the first things Triona asked me when we were alone was about my ring. I explained the entire story minus the part about me being a boy. There was no real reason for her to know anyway. She thought that perhaps he had the same crush on me as I had on him. In a very real sense I was grateful for whatever kind of relationship I had with Owen because if I wasn't thinking about school, I was thinking about him and, in truth, I preferred thinking about him.

Sunday evening I was determined to at least attempt to get to sleep early so I began my preparations for the next day early. This time I readied my book pack as well. The ladies had purchased me one of those back packs that also had an extendable handle and rollers on the bottom. That truly proved to be a godsend because the weight of the pack filled with text books and note books and whatever weight more than I cared to attempt to hoist and carry upon my shoulder.

I went through the same routine as on Thursday evening. I chose my outfit, a cotton buff colored wrap skirt with a white pull over blouse with puffy short sleeves. This was an older blouse that May decided to embroider with Celtic knots and other traditional symbols in a variety of colors; mostly Kelly green, sky blue, red and vermillion. This was a practice done with other garments that I, and the ladies, had purchased. May felt these symbols were good luck as well as protection against evil.

The colors also had great significance because the Irish really never wore tartans although under English rule they were assigned such. The red represented May's clainne; her coat of arms had red hands. The vermillion represented Cait's clainne. The blue was a symbol of purity. Green was associated with Saint Padriac. The legend goes that Saint Paddie used the three leafed clover to explain the trinity to the pagan Celts and became the color associated with the 'emerald isle.

Again I slept very little Sunday night. After writing in my journal, I snuck downstairs and wrote to Owen. It was a rambling kind of e-mail. I simply put down everything that crossed my mind; all my fears, trepidations, hopes, desires and wishes. I mean I often...actually usually...do that

but I think I was particularly whiney? But then again, if I can't bitch about it to him, who can I bitch to. I figured the ladies have enough of me on a day to day basis anyway.

I woke up the following morning blurry eyed and tired yet again. I dreaded having to wake in such a condition every morning. The shower once again did its thing and by the time I'd dried my hair I felt awake enough to face the day.

By the time my makeup was done I already felt my stomach beginning to revolt yet again at the thought of going to school. By the time I was fully dressed and satisfied with the way I looked, I was nauseous. And by the time we were ready to go I had already thrown up once and was trying desperately from doing so again. Praise God for mouth wash.

I was quiet on the drive to school. Triona and May drove me. Most of the conversation was really between them and I was too into my own thoughts to even hear what was being said. Once again we were about a half hour early. After receiving a hug and kiss from both ladies, I reluctantly stepped out of the car and hauled my pack with me.

After buying another cup of coffee...great for an upset stomach...I took a seat at a table near the steps. I wanted to get some sort of idea what the regular students looked like. Essentially I was looking for those guys who might present a problem to me. The joke of it is that I was no longer really a guy to be bullied. But the habit of trying to spot trouble before it happened was embedded within me.

Fairly soon the students began to pour into the courtyard area. There were all shapes and sizes and styles of dress. Blue jeans were almost everywhere. And tee shirts seemed to be part of the uniform. But the wildest thing was the makeup. Oh my God...talk about overdoing it. The makeup was applied so thick that I doubted they could even feel their faces. And eye liner seemed to be applied with one of those big roller paint brushes. The bright red and pink lipstick and very false eye lashes seemed almost clown like. And the girls were just as bad.

I saw this one guy...he was tall, over six feet, and skinny as a rail. With his long hair and beard he resembled one of those icons of Christ. What really threw me though was the granny dress he wore. I felt like Alice in Wonderland. Nothing I saw made sense. There were the goths, the grundies and the hippies and the God only knows what...

There were also the preppies and the kids that dressed a bit more...conventionally? I saw kids carrying instruments even though there was no music program. And everyone was seemingly busy speaking to others who they probably hadn't seen since the end of the prior school year. Nobody gave me a second glance and I was quite happy with that.

Just about everybody had arrived and the courtyard was beginning to empty as kids started off for their classes. I did the same. Fortunately kids were still standing and milling around outside the door of my first class. I walked in and scouted a seat for myself. I was very accustomed to

sitting as far back as I could. That way it was harder for kids to throw stuff or shoot rubber bands at me. But I remembered what Cait and even my tutors had said; 'sit as close to the front as you can'.

I chose a seat in the first row and as close to the center as I could. Several seats in front were already taken which was encouraging. I certainly didn't want to be the only one in front. I placed my bag beneath the desk, which actually was a very long table, and took my seat with my notebook and pen beneath my folded hands. I anxiously waited.

Suddenly the teacher walked in followed by a flood of students. It took but a few moments for everyone to settle down. The teacher was a very pleasant looking young woman who seemed to be a lot like myself. She had a pixie haircut and was also dressed preppie style. The course was advanced placement English and she introduced herself as Doctor Greene. My God...is everyone here a Doctor?

Doctor Greene gave us a syllabus for the course that included all the readings and the dates they were due. She also outlined various dates for a paper due by midterm. I could already see a problem because most of the readings were referenced by computer web sites which meant I would be fighting for computer time with Cait.

Time seemed to fly by as I listened intently to every word out of Doctor Greene's mouth. I even took a few notes. I may have been the only one but I knew that if I didn't, I surely would forget what she mentioned and, with my luck, which hasn't been all that bad lately, she would put something relating to the topic mentioned on an exam.

My second advanced placement class, in Geometry, went about the same as the first class. The teacher, this time a very preppy looking guy, also inundated us with hand-outs and a listing of due dates for homework and tests. He also gave us a text book that was too thick for my liking. My head was spinning at the end of that one and I realized that maybe, just maybe, I really had more work than I could do.

After this class we had a lunch period but I really wasn't that hungry. Just the imagined rigors of what lay ahead of me killed my appetite. I did get something to drink and settled myself toward the rear of the courtyard at an unoccupied table for four. I immediately took out my math homework and began to work. I knew that if I waited till later that evening I would forget everything I had been taught.

Just before I had to go to my next class I felt the urge to pee come over me. I went to the closest rest room which was in the cafeteria. Fortunately it was a very lovely day out and there weren't any people sitting inside, which was good from my vantage point. It's not that I'm unfamiliar or uncomfortable with using the ladies lounge because I did often enough with the ladies. But this is the first time I would be going in on my own at a new school and I was just a wee bit nervous.

Fortunately, as with the other rest rooms, the stalls had doors...with locks no less. There was a short wait for a stall because the rest room was not very crowded. I learned something waiting there that was to become a truism throughout my academic life. Half the girls in there were in front of the mirrors fixing their makeup and going on and on and on about who knows what because they all were speaking at the same time. The other half were front of the mirrors crying and going on and on and on about God only knows what because they too were all speaking rapidly and all at once.

If I didn't need to go so badly I would have laughed. Fortunately a stall was vacated and in I went. Listening to the chatter as I sat and did my thing was interesting. All the girls speaking almost sounded like a flock of birds that was settling down for the evening in a tree. Nothing they said was intelligible. I quickly did my thing and left the stall to wait patiently for the use of a sink to wash.

Again I wasn't really noticed and certainly nobody spoke to me and that was just fine. I finished washing my hands and touching up my lips just in time to head to my next class. This one was advanced placement history. I always liked history so I actually was full of anticipation until I got the text for the class. It must have weighed ten pounds. It was as thick as some of the medical texts Cait had in the library. I was very thankful that I had the rolling back pack because I could never have tolerated the weight between the math and the history book.

My last class for the day was Spanish. Thank God Cait was reasonably fluent and literate in the subject because nothing sounded like it was spelled. I got a text book for that class with the admonition that everything counted; reading, writing, and speaking. 'Lovely' I thought. Why couldn't they be teaching a sensible language like Gaelige? Now I definitely would liked to be able to read and write that.

Before I realized what had happened, my day was over. I couldn't believe it. I got through it totally unscathed. I really didn't think it was possible but it happened. I actually smiled as I walked to the car with May and Triona waiting patiently for me. The moment I situated myself in the back of the car I began to relate the entire day to them. I truly got excited about the whole thing and they had to tell me to speak slower.

Of course I repeated the entire day's events to Cait when she came home. She was most pleased that I enjoyed the school and that I had a great day. I knew I needed to broach the computer thingy with the ladies but I waited until we had finished dinner and sitting in the library. That's when I showed my readings list to Cait.

"Why these are all computer references." Cait leafed through the several pages and saw how extensive, and intensive, the readings were. "Well, it seems you'll need a bit of computer time. I suppose we should buy one for you." I could barely contain my excitement. "We could put it up in your room." Cait looked off to the side in thought.

“I’d prefer it be down here. Do you think we could do that?”

There was no way I wanted to be shuttled off to my room. Everything we planned and spoke about always took place in the library. Plus I loved the company. I’d been so long left to my own devices. When I was with my sisters, it was always about them. I enjoyed it being about me.

“We could always set up a little area against the long wall.” May’s idea was pretty good.

The long wall was mainly book shelves and there was a power outlet half way down the wall. Lighting wouldn’t be a problem and I could remain in the center of things. We both looked to Cait. Triona also joined us after her kitchen duties were finished. She had a bemused expression on her face upon seeing our serious expressions and hearing the deafening silence.

“What’s this all about then?” She giggled.

“We’re thinking about getting Kerrie a computer and perhaps setting it up in here.” Cait motioned with her head toward the wall. “Against the books perhaps...”

“What a capital idea. I should be able to e-mail home quite easily then...” Triona looked toward me. “...if you don’t mind.”

I didn’t. I thought the more the merrier and all the more reason to get a second puter. That also meant that I could freely e-mail Owen without having to displace Cait.

“Well then...there it is.” May pronounced as she spoke with a big grin upon her lips.

I only wished my sister had a puter so that I could write to her...them. At the moment all I could do is send a message through Owen. I’ve even done several e-mails to her using Owen’s address. He would print them out and give them to her. He would even send me her written responses by scanning the letter and making it into a jpeg so that I might see her actual handwriting. She would sometimes draw little designers on the page like hearts and birds and even a flower or two.

“What do you think about that Kerrie?” I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t hear Cait’s question. I looked at her with this blank expression. “I’ll be getting the new computer and you can use this one. Since you’re a relatively new user, if something messes up, and believe me it will, it won’t be any great loss.”

“That’s perfect.”

I was delighted simply to have any puter. I didn’t care whether it was new or not. Cait would be off in two days and she would see to it then. After finishing my dessert, another wonderful fruit pie by May, I got down to the business of my homework.

That night I rested in bed and thought about the possibility of her getting a puter so that Owen and I could communicate more frequently and I could get more e-mails to Carrie. I missed her and my two half-sisters very much. They are the only people I missed aside from Owen. At least I got to write to Owen and he would respond. It would be yet another restless night for me.

My second day at school went really well. I was in a chemistry class, a technology class, an advanced placement psychology class and a health science class. More work and even more weight for my back pack. I was now committed to trying to stay one chapter ahead in everything I could handle. Dr. Smith was not kidding about the heavy academic emphasis.

Oh...and I got hit on for the first time. Oh my God!!! Upper school guys are really so pathetic. He was in my history class and, in truth, he was not too bad looking. Anyway, I was asked a question by the teacher, I don't quite remember what it was, but I had done the reading and knew the answer. Well, after class this guy waits outside the room. As soon as I walk out of the class he comes over to me.

“Are you Irish...are you from Ireland?”

I was so inure to the fact that I now spoke quite easily in a brogue. I stared into his bright blue eyes for a moment mulling over a proper reply.

“Aye...ya tink?”

I smiled and never lost eye contact. In some parts of the country, the ‘th’ sound is pronounced as a hard ‘t’. May pronounced her ‘th’ it such a manner. I then turned on my heels and walked away. I didn’t even realize that I was being hit on until a girl from my class caught up to me.

“Did Mark hit on you?”

I looked at her with an ‘as if’ expression. “He merely asked if I was from Ireland.” I answered quite pleasantly. She was the first student to speak to me without any undisclosed agenda such as trying to get into my...panty?.

“Yeah...” She giggled. “He hit on you. You need to watch out for that one. He already has a girlfriend.”

“Oh... T’is not a hanging matter; I am otherwise engaged.” Now I had to giggle. I was so clueless.

“Huh?”

She seemed so sweet. I guessed that the colloquial expressions I picked up from the ladies confused her. I rephrased myself.

“I have a boyfriend.” Well...not really...but sort of?

“My name is Jessica but call me Jess. I hate Jessie.” She smiled.

“I am called Kerrie. My given name is really Patricia Kerrie but I hate Patricia and all of its forms.” I laughed.

“Yeah... I know how that is.”

We walked for a bit and then she had to duck into her class. I continued on to mine. I felt really great about finally meeting someone, anyone other than family that is. The entire nine years, well almost nine years, I spend in Boston schools I was never able to make one friend...or even an acquaintance. I'd been at this school for a scant two days and I've already met two people. Well...more like one and a half?

I couldn't wait to tell the ladies. Of course it was the talk of dinner and even dessert afterward. I understood that what I had said as a response to Mark was quite appropriate if I wasn't interested. If I was interested, all I needed to do is continue the conversation in a friendlier manner. I was a bit curt for sure.

Then, of course, the ladies began discussing flirting. Well...at least May and Triona did. Cait was bored so she returned to her reading. I thought their conversation interesting but, truth to tell, I really wasn't very interested in flirting, at least not at school. I suppose I did flirt more than a wee bit in my e-mails to Owen. And perhaps he did as well with me. But I felt that we were seriously past flirting. And I certainly had no need for it in school; not at all.

It's not that I didn't find the guys at school to be...attractive? It's just that...well...they were boys and lived in that kind of world; a privileged world where a childhood was permitted and perhaps even fostered. I never had that sort of world; at least not after my father departed this life. And Owen was much the same. He never really had a childhood and he too lived in the world of adults. That is one of the very strong reasons why our –emailing...our ‘talking’ to each other...was so very important to us.

The following day at school was worse. I was hit on a total of four times! This was becoming rather annoying. I thought I had found the solution that afternoon when Triona and I went to the beach. As we walked along the sea wall, I spotted several tee shirt shops. At that time the beach front shopping was not quite as developed as it became and tee shirt shops dotted the entire four or five block stretch along ‘downtown’ A1A.

We crossed over to look in the windows. I always got a giggle out of reading what was written on the tee shirts. We strolled along, getting hit on twice, when suddenly it came out from the window and grabbed me by my mind! It was the perfect tee-shirt. Written across the front was; ‘I don't do boys!’ It was perfect. Triona thought it was perfect.

Of course, in my naivety, I thought it meant ‘I don't do boys’; as in I considered Owen to be a man. I had absolutely no idea that this was not the ‘usual’ meaning behind the shirt. Anyway, I

dashed into the shop and purchased the shirt in a large size. In that way, when it's life as an outdoor daytime shirt ended, I could wear it as a sleeping tee.

Now I was not nearly naïve enough to not know what 'doing' someone meant. I also knew that the school, although their dress code was somewhat flexible, definitely wouldn't go for my new found fashion sense in tops. I also found out that political tee shirts were also a major league no-no. I once wore and P.I.R.A., or the Provos as we called them, tee shirt with a silk screen of a man and a woman holding Armalite automatic weapons. Their slogan, our slogan was 'Our time will come!' The school simply had no sense of humor when it came to that sort of thing.

I already knew the dress code when I bought the tee shirt but I thought that if I got through one or two classes with it, the point would be made and I would be left alone. I decided to think the entire idea through and maybe wear the shirt on Friday. Of course I didn't show the shirt to the ladies because...well...how do I explain my predicament and my resolution to it. To my knowledge, we never got hit on when I was out with them. I didn't realize at the time that having a girl with them fed the misconception that I was Cait's daughter.

Thursday was ridiculous! I couldn't walk from one class to another without tripping over some boy who wanted to make my acquaintance. Even Jess was surprised but she told me that this was simply a case of me being the 'new meat'. I didn't care for her explanation but I knew from past experience that it was undoubtedly true. I brought an extra tee shirt with me.

My entire being, my mode of dress, my general conduct was not what I would consider enticing. I didn't think of myself as perhaps being a hottie and certainly I didn't give off any 'signals' that might be construed as being enticing. I was strictly all business when it came to school. After all, I'd finally found a school where, if nothing else, I felt safe. These...hits...were truly without any are harm but I had enough. This vexing situation had to come to an end.

The next morning I went to school with May and Triona. Triona and I were giggling the entire way knowing what I was going to do. May was a bit put off by our behavior but I think she simply thought it a wee bit of foolishness between two young girls.

My plan was simple. The tee shirt resided in my hobo bag. I would immediately upon entering the courtyard, proceed to the nearest rest room and change into the tee shirt. Then I would get my usual coffee and take my place near the front of the courtyard. I hunched over and clutched my bag to my breast. I didn't want to get busted before I had the chance to deliver my message.

I had such a good time with that tee shirt. Guys were looking at me with a variety of expressions and gestures. Some would look sad and simply shake their head. Others looked as though they stepped in something left in their path by a very large dog. A few others looked at me and simply smiled and nodded their head. I couldn't figure that one out but at least they weren't hitting on me.

Jess thought the entire thing quite hysterical. She asked why I was wearing the tee shirt and I explained to her that I already had this guy in my life...sort of...and I simply wasn't interested in dating anyone. She giggled during the entire English class. Of course when we left class together and walked down the hall, guys began to look at Jess with the same strange expressions they had reserved for me.

I almost made it to lunch but on my way out the door and into the courtyard I ran directly into an administrator. I was told in no uncertain terms that either the tee shirt went or I did. When I asked why, he smiled and simply shook his head in disbelief. Clueless was my middle name.

After exchanging the tee for a more suitable tank top, I went to my usual table with a sandwich and a drink. Jess had lunch with some of her friends and although she invited me to join them, I thanked her...profusely no less...but explained that I really needed the extra time to study. And that's exactly what I did. I studied Spanish.

No sooner did I open the work book than this guy walks up to me. Now I must declare that I have incredible gaydar. I am very, very, rarely wrong. I certainly wasn't in this case. I mean the guy was immaculately dressed; neatly pressed Docker trousers held up by one of those tan leather woven belts, and a silk Hawaiian flower print shirt. He wore boating shoes that matched his belt's color...of course and he wore no socks.

But what really gave him away was the fact that he was impeccably groomed. Not a single hair on his head was out of place. And his moustache looked as though he measured each and every whisker to guarantee that they were all the proper length. Then he opened his mouth and I heard that lilting affected manner of speech.

“Hi...mind if I sit here?”

He smiled a perfect smile. I would have hated him except that his voice was...soothing...and his smile was without guile and seemed genuinely sweet. It was then that I spoke what was perhaps the nastiest thing I'd ever said to someone who didn't deserve such abuse. I looked at him with my eyes narrowed and I had a rather annoyed expression on my face.

“Were you born this gay or did you need to work at it?”

There was dead silence.

“Huh...?”

“What's your name?” It was a demand. I mean he stood there as if hypnotized and he desperately needed someone to take the lead.

“Chris...”

“Do all the boys call you Chrissie?” I spoke with my wryest lopsided smile; eyebrow arched...of course.

“Uhhh...yeah...” He stood there looking like some small creature just confronted with a very much larger, and hungrier, one.

“Well then...Chrissie...” I emphasized ‘Chrissie’. “You might as well take a seat if you’re so determined to bask in my presence. I am called Kerrie.” I had to control a severe case of the giggles.

“We’re in two of the same a. p. classes and I thought...”

“You thought??? You thought what...that maybe you could copy my homework or something?”

“No...no...oh no...” Chrissie began to apologize so very earnestly that I was beginning to have a bit of mercy...but not much...yet. “It’s just that maybe we could study together for tests and stuff.”

“That sounds fair. What are you planning to major in?”

“Design...graphic arts and that kind of stuff. You’re new here. Do you know what you’d like to major in?”

“I haven’t really thought about it at all. Maybe...something in health care?”

“How long have you been living here?”

“About four and a half months.”

“It must be a lot different than where you came from.”

“Yeah...it certainly is.”

“So...how do you like living in the States?”

“Huh...?” Oh poopie shit...he thinks I’m from Ireland. “Uhhh...actually I’m from South Boston.”

“Yeah...but...”

“My guardians are from Ireland and I guess I simply picked up on their brogue. But I must admit that it’s fun to have people think I’m from Ireland.”

“Guardians...what’s that all about?” Chrissie suddenly leaned forward and rested his chin upon his hand.

I didn't know whether I could really trust Chrissie so I gave him a very homogenized version. I told him that I was living with two 'cousins' and would remain with them at least until I finished my schooling. As we sat and spoke to each other, this girl walks up to me and introduces herself.

"Hi...I'm Jo..." She had such a strange crooked smile and was kind of dressed like a guy. "I just wanted you to know that I don't do boys either." She slid a piece of paper toward me. "Call me." And she was gone.

I looked at the paper and sure enough she had given me her phone number. I had no idea where that came from. I must have had this perplexed look on my face because Chrissie giggled and had this knowing look on his.

"What...?"

"She's gay. That's all. But you can do much better than her. You are totally gorgeous and seem really nice. She's okay but she's into getting stoned a lot."

"Yeah...but why would she give me her phone number?"

"Well...you kind of announced that you didn't do boys so..." He smiled and giggled.

"Yeah but..." Suddenly it struck me. "Oh my God...they all think I'm...gay?"

"Uhhh...yeah..." Chrissie laughed. "What did you think?"

"Well...I thought that not doing boys meant that I was only into men. I was tired of getting hit on. It's a nuisance." Clue...less...

"Derp..."

"What...?"

"You derped...you messed up. Now every lesbian in the school is going to hit on you." Chrissie now broke out into near hysterical laughter.

I didn't think it was that funny. A girl hitting on me was definitely something new and I didn't think it could be as bad as the guys doing it. I was wrong. The girls were every bit as aggressive in their approach as the guys were although it did provide me with a giggle now and then.

"It that why you decided to invade my personal space?"

"Oh no..." Chrissie sounded sincere. "I thought that you seemed to have a little bit of fashion sense and you seemed to be very serious about what you're doing. And anyway...I thought your accent was interesting." He smiled.

"It's called a brogue laddie...a brogue."

Chrissie and I went on to become great friends and even after the years rolled past we still keep in close contact. I now knew two people I could talk to. While Jess and I kept our talks fairly superficial, Chrissie and I got into much deeper stuff. In spite of our closeness, I never broached the subject of my 'rebirth'. There simply was no need and to this very day I've kept that from him.

Chrissie did ask about my ring and about its significance. I explained to him that it was a birthday gift from this guy I was really into. I didn't initially tell him the entire story but, over time and soon enough I did reveal the entire sordid mess.

There was something about Chrissie; something sad and hurtful. Chrissie had everything he could possibly want and many things he really had no need for. His parents were rich. They lived in a massive house on one of the keys off of the Bayview section of town. However, they were never really around.

Chrissie had access to all the money he needed and there were people to clean the house and the yard and the pool. The only thing Chrissie lacked was parents. They were constantly away; or at least it seemed that way.

Because I was almost along the way to school, Chrissie offered to pick me up and drop my off after school. But the ladies needed to meet him and get to know him a little bit. The first time he came over, which was the first Saturday of the week I began school, he was a bit intimidated being surrounded by women; particularly a very strong alpha female and two very strong beta women in Cait, May and Triona.

He was also a bit put off by the fact that we all mostly spoke Gaelige amongst ourselves although Cait and Triona were slipping into Spanish every now and then to help me improve my speaking and vocabulary. The ladies were very taken by Chrissie. They thought him to be very polite and gentle. Initially there was a bit of trepidation about letting him drive me to and from school but judging from the manner of his dress and comportment and the fact that he didn't hesitate one bit to help out with lunch or dinner, they acquiesced. He wound up spending a lot of time at our home and became a defacto member of the family.

The ladies and I had a big 'meeting' the first Friday after school began. They wanted a full report of how things went and it couldn't wait till our normal after dinner talk. I told them everything...and I mean everything. I included the hitting on thingy leaving out the tee shirt of course; although Triona had a hard time controlling her giggling. The ladies thought it quite humorous that girls were hitting on me. Triona went over several strategies for combatting my seemingly new popularity.

But all in all I found school to be a whole new experience for me and I actually looked forward to the next week. The ladies were thrilled and I was thrilled. I couldn't wait to write Owen and tell him about my week. I ran up to my room to change, wash up a bit, and settle into something

more comfortable. Upon returning downstairs, dinner was ready and I helped bring things to the table.

After dinner, I helped Triona with the cleanup. It wasn't a thing at all because she was never really viewed as 'help'. She's more like an older sister to me than anything else. So helping her out, even though helping with the house work quickly became a habit very soon after my arrival, was the time that she and I could share what was on our minds that perhaps we didn't care to have the ladies hear. It was our time for confidences.

The work went quickly and it was filled with our laughter and joy. When we went to the library to join in desserts, I got a wonderful surprise and shock. There against the wall and somewhat cattycornered to Cait's desk was another much smaller desk and upon it sat a brand new computer complete with monitor and printer.

I was so completely taken that I began to shed tears; something I seemed to be doing with a greater frequency. I hopped up and down on my toes with joy. I immediately went to Cait and then May and covered them in a barrage of grateful kisses and hugs. I never expected such a gift and even though more had been spent on my clothing and Doctors and therapists, this gift was uniquely special. This puter would truly become my gateway to the world.

Cait had taken the liberty of setting the thing up and arranging the desk top for me. The very first thing I did after turning it on was to e-mail Owen. Then I e-mailed Chrissie telling him all about my new...toy? Then I went onto the web and started surfing around. I was captivated. Triona pulled up a chair and joined me and we both quickly became wrapped up in our activities.

That Saturday Chrissie came to visit again and wound up staying for the better part of the day and we really got to know one another. When we got into talking about boyfriends, I showed him my picture of Owen, who he thought was uber cute, and he told me about growing up gay. He seemed to know at a very young age that he was attracted to boys. He told me about his first experience of having sex with another boy for the first time; an older boy.

"It was so clumsy and awkward." He said with a giggle and a very noticeable blush. "Neither one of us really knew what we were doing."

"I think I always liked boys to." What else could I say without getting into my very horrid and sordid past? "Owen kind of reminds me of my father. You know, big, strong, and very gentle?"

"He's really pretty cute." Chris laughed as he gazed again at the picture. "He looks older than us."

"Yeah...he's about nineteen or so; out of school anyway." I guess I sounded a bit...sentimental and dreamy? "He's very special to me. Is there anyone in your life now?"

“Well...” Chrissie looked down at his hands. I knew what that meant. “Sort of...” He looked up at me with sadness, and maybe longing, in his eyes? “But not really I guess.” I felt bad for him. I knew what loneliness was like and it was awful.

We went up to my room. I wanted to show him where my space was. I had, since coming, put up a few pictures and such that I liked. I really wanted to make this MY ROOM. May had also done some needle points especially for me and they were framed and hung about the room. Chris seemed to like my space and said so. But then he did something totally unexpected. He opened my closet door and walked into the closet; MY CLOSET.

“Wow...I can't believe how neat and organized you are.” Chrissie giggled as he gazed about the closet. “Nice space too.”

“Chrissie...!” I was just a bit perturbed at his...freeness?

“Wow...this one is neat!”

His face lighted up with delight as he pulled the hanger that held a gorgeous silk print skirt with tropical water colors as the field and tropical flowers in bold colors all around. He held it up against his waist as if to see if would fit.

“Chrissie!!!” I was a bit miffed...Hmmm...miffed...I like that word...but I had to laugh at poor Chrissie.

“Damn...I hate you...you have no waist.”

Chrissie reluctantly put the skirt back in its place and looked at several others.

“Why do you have only wrap skirts? You should get a few that are more form fitting; especially with your figure.”

“Why...so you can borrow them?”

I giggled as I teased him mercilessly. But I very well understood Chrissie's curiosity. He only wanted to perhaps see what he'd look like dressed as a girl. He has a very dominant femme side to his personality which is why we always seemed to get along. He does have excellent taste in fashion and he always volunteered to shop with me when I needed something special to wear.

Chrissie reluctantly went home although the ladies did invite him to stay over for the night. He did become a steady fixture in our home and, in his own little way, contributed greatly. He knew how to cook different things and how to clean as well; being left to his own devices frequently made him quite self-sufficient. As I rested in bed that night, I thought about all the good fortune that had befallen me and I was very thankful. I felt that it could end just as quickly as it began.

Monday morning as I got out of Chrissie's car and began to walk up the few steps to the school courtyard, I was yet again accosted by this really kind of cute girl. She hit on me and put a piece of paper into the outside zipped pocket of my book bag. She wrote her phone number and name and drew one of those smiley faced thingys. Chrissie simply stood off to the side being quite amused by the entire situation. He walked over to me with a stupid smirk on his face.

"I need to take care of this for you. I'll start spreading the word."

"And what word might that be?" I asked with a false look of anger.

"Oh...that you're only interested in threesomes." Chrissie chuckled.

I had to laugh. Chrissie could give as well as he received, and sometimes even better. He was quite smart and quite the student. When Jess and I would study for a test, if Chrissie was in our class he would always join us in the event we had trouble with something. Many a night I called to ask him a question and he never failed to provide an answer.

By lunch time the hitting on me had greatly dissipated although this one guy approached me stating that he and his girlfriend were be interested in a threesome. I had to laugh...after he left that is. I didn't see any point in embarrassing him without even knowing him.

Chrissie and I were sitting and just talking. It was mostly about fashion and design. He had this project he was working on for his design class. He wanted me to model it and allow him to photograph me wearing it. Then I hit him with a very big question.

"Did you ever wish you were born a girl?" My expression was quite solemn.

"Well..." Chrissie had this very thoughtful look on his face as if he was searching for the proper words or something. "No..." He laughed which kind of pissed me off because here I was asking a serious question and he derped me. "I can't image living with plumbing that was always leaking something."

"You mean you've never been with a girl?" Not that I would be shocked if he hadn't.

"Ewww... This girl I knew once played 'you show me and I'll show you' with me. Well, when she showed me hers, all that crossed my mind was that it looked like an open wound. And I can't image how barfo it must be when you're having your period."

I felt compelled to tell him that I didn't have a period and that I wouldn't know. But one thing would lead to another and truly there was no point in telling him other than to be totally honest and open. But I definitely wasn't there yet and, truth to tell, I'm still not.

"Well...did you ever try on women's clothing?"

Chrissie looked around to make sure nobody was listening to us.

“Yeah...” He smiled shyly and brushed a shade of red that I’d never seen before. Chrissie once again looked around. “Sometimes I try on my mom’s stuff. It’s kind of...exciting?”

“Well don’t get excited in my stuff.” I laughed.

We continued to talk about his adventures with women’s clothing. I even went so far as to offer to buy him something if he wanted me to. Chrissie was very grateful with my offer. I told him about my finger nail fetish and how I liked them to look perfectly polished at all times. He took hold of my hand and inspected my nails.

“Wow...that is so cool.” His eyes lit up and a huge grin crossed his lips.

“I can do yours one day if you’d like. I could use a clear polish with a slightly tinted base coat. Nobody would even think twice if they noticed. I mean the goths around here have theirs coated in black and nobody makes a big deal of it.”

“That would be gre...”

From virtually out of nowhere this massive arm reaches around Chrissie’s neck and tightened. Chrissie’s much thinner arms grasped at the arm of his attacker and tried to pull it off of him with no success. Meanwhile his attacker began to thump on Chrissie’s head with the knuckles of his free hand whilst shouting the most profane and vulgar insults.

I immediately...if not sooner...freaked. I had heard those words, those names before; ‘faggot, pussy, sissy, et al. Suddenly every horrid moment and emotion from that nightmarish time in my life came rushing up and out of the deepest hole in my psyche. That’s where I had buried them hoping and praying that they would remain buried and out of my life. I stood up and began to shout at this really huge guy.

“Stop it...stop it...leave him alone!!!” I wasn’t even thinking. That’s how upset I was.

“No...now that I have this mindless faaaaaahhhkn faggot...I’m gonna rub all his hair out.”

Chrissie’s face was turning red and now I was not only angry, but also scared that he was really being seriously hurt. So I did the only thing I could. I picked up my history book, all five pounds of it, and slammed it into the guy’s head as hard as I could. The truth be told...he may have even felt it.

The big guy let go of Chrissie and held the side of his head with a shocked and stunned expression on his face. Chrissie darted out from beneath the guy and he began to laugh hysterically?

“What did you do that for?” He had such a hurt look on his face as if someone actually dared to hit him.

“Hit him again.” Chrissie was hopping up and down on the balls of his feet. His grin was...spectacular.

Unfortunately I was still in the midst of a major league boogie-woogie which was rapidly turning into a panic attack of significant proportions. I felt I couldn't breathe and everything seemed to be falling away. I couldn't focus on where I was or what I was doing or even with whom I was doing it with. I simply had to get away. I turned and ran crying toward the rear of the courtyard where there was an athletic field. I left everything at the table; my bag, my book pack, my everything.

I wandered around for a wee bit until Chrissie caught up to me. I was walking in circles and he took hold of my arm. I screamed for him to let go which he did. He began to speak to me but I couldn't really hear what he was saying.

“Kerrie...Kerrie...” He kept calling my name until I finally was able to hear him. “Are you okay?” I was finally able to focus and noticed the very concerned look on his face. “I think we should go to the nurse's office.”

I finally stopped moving and simply stood there for a moment before I collapsed and sat on the grass. I couldn't stop crying but at least the world was coming back into focus. I felt so very tired and all I really wanted to do was to sleep.

“What happened back there?”

Chrissie spoke as he handed me several tissues. I wasn't quite ready to open up about my past so I simply shook my head. After dabbing the tears in my eyes and blowing my nose I was at least able to speak.

“I thought he was going to hurt you.” I took his hand in mine.

“No way...he's my best friend...or at least my best male friend. We kind of grew up together.”

“Then why was he doing that to you and calling you those horrid names?” I began to seriously cry again. Chrissie laughed.

“Last week I dumped a cup of ice down the back of his overalls when he wasn't looking.”

“What...?” I was mystified. I didn't realize that this is what guy friends do to one another.

“He was just getting even. He would never hurt me. In fact, when I was in lower and middle school, he would protect me from...well...let's just say he kept the guys who thought I was too different away from me. He still does.”

Suddenly I saw Chrissie's friend walking over and he was carrying my things. He also looked very concerned.

“You’re an ass hole!” I yelled at him.

“Who...me?” He gave me this oh so innocent look. “What did I do?”

“You freaked her out stupid.” Chrissie laughed. “She thought you were going to really hurt me or something.”

“She hit me in the head.” He had such a pained expression on his face and in his voice. “You hit me in the head. What would you have done if I was going to really hurt him?” He, whoever he was, still had a shocked expression on his face.

“I would have poked your eye out with my pencil. I don’t feel well.” I turned my head to the side and barfed. I was still a bit...out of it.

“Brian, why don’t you go and get the nurse.” Chrissie got down on his knees and held my hand as I fell back onto the grass.

I left school for the day shortly after being wheel chaired over to the nurse’s office. That is how I met the world’s biggest ass hole, Brian Nicholson. I am still in contact with him and I’m glad to say that some things in the universe are constants; Brian is still an ass hole.

May and Triona came to get me though Chrissie offered to drive me home. The nurse worked strictly by the rule book, which is understandable, and she would only allow listed people to take me out of school while it was still in session. As soon as I got home I went up to my room and fell asleep.

That evening the four of us talked about what had happened. What the therapist had said about triggers suddenly made sense. The violence and the taunting brought out my little demons from the secret hiding place I stored them. I also realized something even more important; I would never be a victim again. My striking Brian with that book taught me that indeed I could do something about an action I didn’t like.

Chrissie came over later that evening simply to see how I was doing and to give me the homework assignments for the next day. He brought his books with him as well and we both sat and studied. After a bit I told him what I had discovered without yet revealing the details of the abuses. He understood everything including the whole trigger thingy. Obviously he’d been there before in a way that he hasn’t told me. We both still had our little secrets.

The following week I had to really face one of my biggest fears; my peer group. It was one thing to be in class and to hang with my buds during lunch but it was quite another to actively seek out that kind of...companionship? Cait had mentioned that I should think about joining one or two of the student clubs or organizations. May and Triona also thought that joining something in school was a great idea.

Of course whatever Cait suggested became my gospel. Actually the choice was quite simple really. My fear of disappointing the ladies, now including Triona, was greater than my fear of my contemporaries. Knowing that Chrissie was a 'joiner', I consulted him. He immediately suggested joining the graphic arts club.

"But...but...I'm not an artist."

"We have enough genius"; especially since I joined." He laughed. Chrissie had such a high pitched laugh. I loved hearing it. "What we really need are gofers."

"Huh...?" Clue-less.

"We need people to do stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Well..." I hated when Chrissie would draw something out. I didn't like waiting or hearing all the details first. "We have the home coming dance next month and we need people to help make decorations ad stuff."

"Home coming dance...? We don't have any sports teams." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I mean I knew this school was...different? But I never realized how different.

"Yeah...but so what? Everybody else is having one so..." Chrissie let me draw my own conclusion. "Anyway, it's kind of a tradition and it's a great excuse to have a party." His smile absolutely beamed. "Trust me...you'll love it."

"What...the work?"

"Nooo...the party. Live music, food, all sorts of stuff and we get to make a huge fire across the street." The county fire department's training center was across from the school.

"Well...what do I wear...what do people wear?" Clue-less!

"Well...we get really dressed up...or at least I do."

"I'll need a dress...I guess."

"Great...we'll go shopping."

Somehow I knew that was coming. Now getting dressed up didn't mean what I thought it would. This wasn't like a formal prom or anything. But the guys wore suits or nice sports jackets and the girls wore the shortest dresses they could get away with. Well...almost all the girls anyway.

However, the graphic arts club didn't quite meet Cait's expectation of extra-curricular activities although she said nothing. But I noticed one of her...'Cait looks', a look of slight distaste, so the

following day I also joined the health sciences club. Having satisfied that self-imposed requirement, I felt as though I'd finally settled in to my new school life. How little I knew.

So...we're sitting eating lunch and I have my eyes focused on my history book when this girl comes over to the table and sits down. I didn't look at her. I was so focused in on what I was reading but Chrissie seemed to know her and they were talking.

When I did look up, finally, I was surprised because if it wasn't for her voice, one wouldn't have guessed her to be a 'her'. She wore black jean pants and a black tee shirt with 'I Rock' silk screened across the front. She had these heavy black leather steel capped shoes on that laced up above her ankles. Nothing she wore was femme in the slightest way; not even her skull and crossed bones earrings.

"So...I hear you're a pan."

There was a moment of silence and I looked up from my book. She was addressing me or at least looking at me rather intensely.

"The word around school is that you're a pan." She repeated with a look of curiosity on her face and a very crooked smile.

"Huh...?" Oh...let me guess...CLUELESS!

"You know..." She laughed. It was a nice kind of 'open' laugh? She knew I was clueless and was amused by my...innocence? If only she knew then what I told her later... "...anyone, anytime, anywhere? Everyone is saying that you have no preference."

"Not everyone is saying that." Chrissie came to my defense; yet again.

"Well..." She turned her head to look at Chrissie. "...you certainly didn't help."

"What...me...?" He was genuinely shocked at her statement.

"Well...if she's not straight and she's not gay and she's not bi...then what?"

"What...?"

"So...while you don't do boys, you don't do girls either?" She laughed again.

"I do have a boyfriend." I spoke in a tiny, hunched over manner but with a small trace of annoyance. It wasn't exactly the truth but it wasn't exactly a lie either.

I looked at her for a moment. I must admit that she did have amazing eyes; large, light brown doe eyes. I looked at her and exhaled... no...more like sighed.

"I guess that means I don't stand a chance...huh?"

“I’m afraid not. I am totally taken.” I blushed and giggled. That much was true.

“What...a...shame... By the way, I’m Elizabeth Castro...Lizzie the lezzie.”

Lizzie chuckled as she held out her hand. I took it and she grasped me with quite a firm grip. She was strong but she was careful not to grasp me too tightly.

“I’m called...”

“Oh...I know your name. I also heard you bashed that ass hole Brian in the head.” Lizzie and I held a very similar opinion regarding Brian.

“I don’t know why you guys don’t like him.” Chrissie almost sounded hurt. Lizzie and I looked at one another and spoke almost simultaneously.

“Because he’s an ass hole...”

I liked Lizzie. She always spoke exactly what was on her mind. She had a very cynical and sarcastic edge in the way she viewed her world. There was sadness in her eyes that couldn’t be disguised by her wit and her heart was enormous and full of empathy and caring. Both she and Chrissie became my closest friends. Eventually Brian would as well but that took time because...well...he’s an ass hole.

Lizzie did have one weakness; she loved to get high. She didn’t seem to care what substance took her away from her reality and she never got so blasted that she lost all control, but she was always high on something. She was so considerate and sensitive toward me that whenever she visited, which wasn’t all that infrequently, she never had more than maybe a beer or two and she never smoked or did whatever at my home.

The relationship between the three of us became so close that we would have sleep overs though the ladies wouldn’t permit me to stay at Chrissie’s if his parents weren’t home. In fact whenever Lizzie had a new girlfriend, she would bring her around for our ‘approval’. This did occur with a fair amount of frequency. Even Brian would stop by on occasion either with his ‘flavor of the week’ girlfriend or by himself.

Chrissie became such a steady fixture in our home that the ladies actually encouraged him to bring some clothing and personal items over. He often slept in our home and he so relished the company. He adored the ‘games’ web and often played on his lap top and he loved when I taught him how to apply cosmetics or when I would do his nails. I thought of him as kind of a cross between an older brother and a younger sister.

Meanwhile...back at the ranch...

At the end of my first two weeks at school I realized that I still had nearly sixty dollars remaining from the fifty dollars a week allowance. I was also feeling more than a wee bit guilty over my good fortune and my sisters' not so good fortune. I wanted to give them whatever money I had remaining because I knew they were getting very little, if any, from my mom and step-father.

But there was the very real problem of getting the money to her. If I mailed it, there was an excellent chance that my mom or step-father would intercept the letter and the money. My sisters would not receive it. I didn't know if my sister had a bank account so sending a check would not be an option.

Owen was the only way to go. I instinctively felt I could trust him. He certainly wouldn't need my money and I felt that he would understand what I was doing and forgo taking what I owed him at the moment. But I knew his address but he would gain knowledge of Cait's address. Cait's privacy was of the utmost importance to her...and also to her brother who tried to shield her from his business.

I would need to tell the ladies of what I wanted to do and seek their advice. But I also felt guilty in that the money, although it was given to me to do as I wished, still wasn't really mine. It's not as though I earned it. The money I saved and used for my escape was earned albeit in a horrid and torturous manner.

After dinner on Tuesday night, as we sat and ate dessert in the library, the ladies knew that something was on my mind. I was quiet and sullen during a dinner that consisted of my fav food; roasted duck with a wonderful fruit glaze and accompanying sauce.

"So..." Cait spoke from behind her desk in an imperious manner. "...what is on your mind sweet heart?" It was more a statement than a question. "You are definitely preoccupied with something."

"Well..." I looked down at my nails. This was something I tended to do when faced with a challenging situation...or an embarrassing one. "I have money remaining from the past two weeks." I looked up at her...into her eyes. "Can I do as I wish with it?"

The three ladies looked at me wide eyed, and then at one another, and then back at me.

"Have you not been buying lunch?" May gazed at me with a look of concern in her eyes; ever the mother.

"Chrissie usually brings food with him and Jess and Lizzie buy meals and also bring snacks. So we share?"

"Well...what do you bring, or buy." Triona, not wanting to be left out, simply had to ask something.

“I get the drinks. That usually runs about five dollars if everybody is there. And I get to try different things. Chrissie usually has something Italian and Lizzie always has something that’s a Latino thingy.”

“What do you have in mind to do?” Cait asked in a low tone of voice as she brought the digression full circle, her eyes watching me quite intently.

I felt even more color rush to my face and I felt tears welling up in my eyes. ‘Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea’ I thought. After all, it really wasn’t my money. I cleared my throat and looked up at Cait. I could tell she noticed I was becoming a bit emotional.

“I would like to send it to my...” I looked down at my hands for a moment and then at the other two ladies. “I would like to send it to my sisters.”

Cait and the other two ladies looked at me with pleasant surprise. Indeed Cait’s eyes seemed to be misting up a bit.

“Of course you can sweet heart. I think that is a wonderful idea. Do you need an envelope and postage?”

“Well, here’s the thing...” I took a deep breath. “I need to make sure that Carrie gets the money and it doesn’t fall into the hands of my mom or step-father.”

Cait’s eyebrows suddenly arched upward. “Well...what do you propose?”

“I want to send the money to Owen and have him deliver it for me.”

There...it was out. I gritted my teeth and waited for the objections. Cait stared at me for a moment and then she turned to gaze at May. May simply shrugged her shoulders. Cait looked back at me.

“I see no problem with you doing that. But...” She leaned forward and rested her elbows upon her desk top. “...I want you to give the envelope to me so that I may mail it from a different Zip code and address. And also I wish to make sure nobody can see that the envelope contains money.”

I certainly had no objections to what Cait ‘suggested’. I immediately wrote to Owen explaining what I wanted to do. I also let him know that I didn’t forget my debt to him. I received a reply from him within the hour. He must have been home and on-line.

Owen was more than happy to help in the effort. Unbeknownst to the ladies, I already had Owen’s address. I had been writing letters to Carrie and Owen had been the messenger. I wanted to respect Cait and May’s privacy so I would mail them from school.

Carrie would generally only write good news. I did have the feeling that she may have made some of those 'good things' up. But I accepted whatever she wrote. I was great to hear from her and to hear the latest news of the little ones. I could detect a bit of envy and maybe jealousy on her part and I understood that. After all, I'd fallen into an entirely new and wonderful life.

What I didn't know was that the ladies each were matching what I sent and, once the letter reached Owen, he added an equal amount to what was sent in the belief that all the money was mine. My sixty dollars became one hundred and twenty and with Owen's contribution it became two hundred and forty dollars. That was enough for them to get some new clothes and eat decently. I didn't find out about what the ladies, and Owen, were doing until years later when Carrie mentioned the letters and the amounts that she received.

My life really fell into a well regulated schedule by the start of the third week of school. I enjoyed the routine. I actually looked forward to it. I found myself being very comfortable with the regimentation because I was secure with the knowledge that everywhere I needed to be was safe' Nothing is more horrid than a child with no place to be safe.

Because I was now getting rides to and from school from Chrissie, I was able to put in time toward the homecoming thingy. Chrissie had an incredibly creative mind and he was able to come up with very inexpensive and thematic decoration designs. Of course me, and the other gofers, did the work putting it all together.

As the time grew closer to the home coming celebration, I became a bit nervous about what I was going to wear. I had discussed this with the ladies and all May could suggest were the major department stores. Anything decent, both in price and modesty were more than I was willing to pay. The way I saw things, I would wear the dress what...once...maybe twice?

Chrissie seemed to have doubts that we would find something in the 'majors'. We merely had to look in the proper places and the name brand stores were not the places. So we took the better part of a Saturday hunting for the right dress in the Salvation Army and Good Will shops. We even did a few lawn sales. And because the selections changed on a frequent basis, we repeated the exercise the following week.

We finally found the most amazing dress at Good Will. This was a knee length cocktail dress covered in lime green sequins. It had a halter neck and a keyhole back and the spandex made it quite form fitting. It was even silk lined. I can't say I loved it at first glance or even after trying it on once; but it did fit well and the price was very right at forty five dollars. Shoes would be a problem because Chrissie insisted upon at least a two and a half inch heel and I had that height, but not the color.

We found the nearly perfect pair of shoes on line, of all places. The shoe was a classic pump covered in Kelly green sequins. The only problem was the three inch heel. They had nothing

shorter and nobody else did either. In fact that three inch heel was just about the shortest in a dress pump.

Of course the moment the shoes arrived I called Chrissie. He rushed right over to see them and give is advice and consent. I put on the dress and the pumps whilst he turned his back. When he turned to look his enter face seemed to light up as he smiled broadly.

“That’s really hot.” Chrissie’s eye roamed all over the dress and he asked me to pirouette. “That is really hot. You look like you’re ready to go clubbing. It’s perfect. What are you going to accessorize with that dress?”

“Well...” I spoke as I tugged down the hem which had a tendency to ride up. “I could go with more green.” I went to my dresser and took out my jewelry box with the enclosed collection of beads and Brother’s gift. “We could go with the golden beads...or even the amber ones.”

“What’s in the small pouches?” Chrissie asked as he picked one up and opened it. He shook out the drop earrings with the single emerald in each. “Wow...these are exquisite.”

“I also have emerald studs.”

“You do?” Chrissie was stunned. “These are really nice stones. Would you wear both pairs?”

“Sure...but what about a necklace? I could wear the green beads?”

“Nopers...they would become lost in all the green. The amber beads wouldn’t be bad, or maybe something in silver.” Chrissie spoke softly almost as though he was speaking aloud to himself.

“Maybe I can borrow something from the ladies?”

I put one from each set in my ear lobe just to give us both an idea of what the look would be like. I wasn’t sure about the outfit. But Chrissie loved the look so that was good enough for me. I still needed a purse of some sort. If I could borrow something silver than I would have at least one other color option.

“Do you want to go with me?” Chrissie asked as he looked down at the floor, and then his hands.

“What do you mean...to the home coming?”

“Well...yeah... I could be your beard and you could be my bush.” He laughed.

“Huh...” Need I say it? Okay...I will...clueless!!!

“Yeah...a beard is a man who dates a lesbian if she’s in the closet and a bush is a girl who does the same for a gay guy.”

“Yeah...but you’re not exactly in the closet.” I giggled.

“True. I would normally either get a ride or pick up Brian. But lately he seems to be otherwise occupied with his slut of the month.”

“Chrissie...!!!” I couldn’t believe he actually spoke like that. I hadn’t heard he ever use such...judgmental language before.

“Yeah...I’m sorry. I really shouldn’t talk about her like that. It’s Brian who’s the slut.”

He laughed but I could hear it was forced. Of course I agreed to go with him provided that we didn’t need to do any after the party partying. We could go out to eat afterward or even have something at my home. I really didn’t want to drink, or get high or have sex. I simply wasn’t interested. I’d been there and done that and didn’t have really great memories of that time.

Speaking of which, I was still having nightmares but I usually woke to the dimly lighted room, Once I recognized where I was I could calm myself and go back to sleep. On occasion I would have a real bad one and I would be unable to even calm myself enough to lay in bed and rest.

When I had one of those I would still slip into the ladies bedroom and slip into bed between them. I would usually be asleep in no time at all. This would happen maybe once or twice a month. Cait wouldn’t stir at all. She was a very sound sleeper. May would notice. She would know what had happened and lean over to hug and kiss me and assure me all would be well.

I got a cell phone that week. I was so excited because now I could call home if I had something to do that would make me late. They could also reach me to let me know of any updates in our schedule. The biggest plus is that now Chrissie, who’s had a phone forever, and I could speak whenever we wanted.

I gave the number out to Jess and Lizzie as well. Eventually Brian would get it but I was still pissed off at him and I thought I would make him suffer a bit. When he couldn’t reach Chrissie for their weekly ‘boy’s night out’ he would call me to find out if I knew where Chrissie was. If Chrissie did happen to be with me but he didn’t want to deal with Brian for one reason or another, I could feign ignorance and add to his suffering a bit more. Okay...so I’m a wee bit evil.

I was, however, prohibited from calling Owen. Reading his amazing letters was one thing but I really wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to feel that wonderful sensation I would receive when he spoke in that very deep rich voice of his.

The ladies rational for this prohibition were twofold. The ladies, at least Cait, believed that he was too old for me. There was close to a five year difference between us. But then again, I wasn’t your average fifteen year old either. And the ladies often said so. They often forgot my

age and treated me as though I was a contemporary. Every once in a while they had remind themselves that I was still a kid. Anyway, I never felt an age difference between Owen and me.

The second reason they wanted me to keep a certain distance from Owen was because he worked for his uncle. I could not plead total ignorance to what his uncle did for a living. And though he did own a construction company, along with a number of other businesses, Owen never seemed to appear as if he just got off of work; at least not when I saw him those very few times back in Boston.

I did write him and give him the phone number 'for emergencies'? I also asked him to give it to my sister. The phone in the house was usually turned off because there was no money to pay that bill. The liquor store owner always got paid on time, but the phone and the electricity were often turned off; although the electricity usually got turned on the following day or so.

Owen and I were writing almost each day. My day couldn't begin or end without at least a few words from him. He seemed to feel the same way about my e-mail to him. I saved every e-mail I sent and every response from him. Sometimes I would sit and, whilst taking a rest from studying, reread some of correspondences. Some of them, the more romantic and sensitive ones would bring tears to my eyes; something that seemed to occur more and more lately.

The Dance...

The month went by quickly. We were in the midst of exams and I was spending almost too much time studying. The week of exams would culminate with the home coming dance. So in the very few spare minutes I had available, I would run over to cafeteria to begin putting up some of the decorations and banners.

I was becoming quite excited about the dance. Even though I wasn't going with the one person I would rather be with than anybody else, I still looked forward to my first school dance. We had them at the school in Boston but I never went. Going would have been an invitation to anyone who hadn't beaten me up to make their attempt. The very threat of receiving yet another blacken eye or cut lip was enough to bring me to tears.

I never had anyone to bring as a date anyway and nobody dared to ask. So this was an important first. Several different guys asked me. They knew me from classes and thought...well...Lord only knows what they thought. One thing was for sure, whatever they thought was not going to happen with Chrissie; he was a safe date.

With our exams over everyone could concentrate on the upcoming dance. The dance was being held on a teacher work day. That meant no school and the opportunity to do something really special without everyone knowing. And Chrissie, when it came to any project he worked on,

was all about special. He designed and painted a forty foot long poster of the beach and people enjoying beach activities.

The amazing thing is that people from the school could recognize themselves in caricature in the poster including me. I was shown playing in the surf with Chrissie, Lizzie, Jess, and of course Brian. I didn't understand that because Brian didn't hang out with us all that much and when he did it was mostly to see Chrissie.

The day of the dance was amazing; just simply frantic with activity. Chrissie came by early to take me so that we could finish up the decorating and add a few last details. We met Lizzie and Jess and a few others from the graphic arts club. We managed to do a lot of work in a very short time. Chrissie was so incredibly organized.

Afterward we all came back to my home and had lunch, courtesy of Triona and May. We ate by the pool in the shade of the gazebo and talked about how exciting the dance was going to be. Lizzie had a new girlfriend she was bringing and Jess was invited by this guy who lived nearby but went to another school.

"Who's Brian bringing?" I really didn't care but I asked because Chrissie was probably interested. His response really shocked me.

"I really don't care?" He almost sneered. "Probably some hooker or something."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Jess was shocked as well. Lizzie kind of just looked at him in a sad way.

"He always does something like that at the dances." Lizzie spat out. "It's kind of embarrassing actually. I mean they're cute and all but..." She didn't finish her thought. But then again, she didn't need to.

We finished our lunch in a more subdued mood. I didn't understand Chrissie's attitude about his friend Brian and it upset me that he was upset. But I wasn't going to let that spoil my evening. I took a nap after everyone left and slept well until about four. Chrissie was coming to get me at seven so I would have plenty of time to get ready.

I took out the dress and shoes. A few of the sequins needed a bit of help so May provided her very talented hands and eyes to affixing them securely. I took out my bra and panty set. May had managed to find a proper trainer for this dress. The bra was specifically designed for a halter dress and the keyhole just missed exposing the back strap. The lace design and comfy cups helped protect my uber sensitive boobs from the lining of the dress which wasn't quite as smooth as I would have wished.

I showered and washed my hair. I took my time and lingered a bit under the warm water. I let my mind wander a bit and I thought about Owen and whether he'd want to go to a high school

dance with me. I thought about how it might feel to do a slow dance with him. I thought about being held tightly against him and kind of melting into him.

Fortunately Triona came upstairs to see if I needed any help otherwise I might still be in that shower daydreaming. I wrapped a towel around myself, tucking the end in under my arm and asked if she would mind drying and combing out my hair.

We talked about the dance as she worked on my hair. Triona told me about her experiences in school and some of the events she went to. What was interesting is how much more the guise of modesty came into play in Ireland than here. Although the same sort of things went on there as here, sexually, there was much less mentioned about it and much less emphasis placed on it because, well, it is a very Catholic country, at least at that time.

She told me about this guy she was seeing just before she left to come here. Although they had 'done it', she did it more out of curiosity than out of love of him. Indeed she had no trouble saying goodbye to him. It was strictly a school thing and she was more than ready to move on.

I thought about what she said as I dressed. Was I merely in the midst of a school girl crush with Owen? I mean he was definitely not a kid. And I never had a loving experience with a guy, or a girl for that matter. I stared at myself in the mirror as I put on both sets of emerald earrings. The face looking back at me was definitely not that of a twelve year old boy. It was the face of a young woman readying herself for a night out. My entire body and soul tingled at the image gazing back at me.

I put on the shoes downstairs. I didn't feel quite comfortable enough to attempt the steps in three inch heels. Indeed, I had trouble with the two and two and a half inch heels. I definitely didn't want to miss this dance because of a sprained or broken ankle. The ladies all made a fuss over how amazingly wonderful I looked and that made me feel...adult? I wanted a picture taken so that I could send it to Owen.

Chrissie arrived just a few minutes late. He looked so handsome. He wore a shiny silver dinner jacket made of a silk and linen blend. The black pants bore a black silk strip down the outside of the legs that terminated at his belt line. His shirt was just as amazing. It was almost like a poet's shirt with ruffles on the front only it buttoned up to the collarless neck. His hand painted silk bow tie completed his outfit. Chrissie looked like he was ready for any formal occasion.

When he entered the house, Chrissie simply stood gawking at me. He couldn't believe how lovely I looked. He bought me a wrist corsage of tiny white tea roses that was exquisite. I blushed as he put it on my wrist. The aroma was lovely.

As we drove to the school, I could feel the butterflies build in my stomach. I was so very nervous that I was trembling by the time we arrived. The dance was scheduled to begin at seven and people were already milling about in the courtyard.

Chrissie took my hand and led me to the cafeteria door. Because we were on the decoration committee and Chrissie was the main force behind arranging the dance to begin with, we were granted early entry. The band, a group of musicians from the school, was still setting up and the other volunteers were setting out snacks and such. A drink counter was set up alongside the kitchen door and bottles of soft drinks were lined up.

I helped Chrissie set up a few last minute things just as Jess and her date walked in. He was definitely cute. Even Chrissie, who wasn't in his usual happy fun loving mood, took a quite glance and approved with a grin calling him 'terminally cute'. Well, as I said, he was kind of cute.

And Jess looked spectacular in simply designed cream colored sleeveless gown that fell to her ankles. She wore nothing beneath it but thankfully she has the bod for it. Everyone could see her nips poking but she really didn't seem to care. Her long blond hair was in an updo. I don't know how she managed in what had to be six inch heels.

Lizzie arrived just as the band started playing. She wore her usual black attire with the addition of a black sports jacket. Lizzie's sense of accessorizing was quite different than mine. She wore a spiked collar around her neck and weird spiked cuffs on her wrists.

Her girlfriend, a lovely girl named Maria, was dressed to definitely kill...probably Lizzie. Whilst Lizzie went for the butch look, Maria had to be the all-time greatest lipstick lesbian ever. She was dressed meticulously in a silk print top of bright tropical colored flowers on a white field. Her wide hemmed skirt was sea green and blue. Maria was definitely a tropical girl. Her hair and makeup were perfectly done. I don't know who I expected Lezzie to show up with but I never would have guessed it to be someone like Maria.

Brian was nowhere to be seen as Chrissie took my hand and led me out to the dance area. I was suddenly overcome with fear realizing that I'd never danced before...at least not with a guy and not in public. I danced with my sisters but that was more like fooling around and certainly Carrie could move to the music from the radio.

I think Chrissie must have guessed my fear from the look on my face. I couldn't hide those things very well and I still can't. And, to make matters more...difficult...he took me to the middle of the floor. Everybody would see me making a fool out of myself.

"Don't worry sweetie..." Chrissie smiled. "You look so hot that nobody will notice the fact that you can't dance." He laughed and started to move with the music.

Chrissie took hold of my hands and gently swayed to the beat. I tried following him and I did have modest success. However, after that one dance I realized something that was to change my life forever; I can't dance in three inch heels! So I quickly headed back to where the gang was

sitting and deposited my shoes. I felt bad that I could only wear them to be seen but not to do anything that required erratic movements.

Eventually Brian did show up and, I'm sad to say, Chrissie probably was correct. She had the vibes of a hooker. Her arms and chest were covered with very colorful tattoos and although she might have been of upper school age, there was nothing school girl about her. The dress she wore was almost nonexistent with portions of major league anatomy squeezing out of the sides.

The dead giveaway was the several moments it took her to remember which name she was using that evening. I felt bad for her. I could just as easily have been her. The girls kept their distance from her although Lizzie did make a few passes at her in spite of Maria being nearby.

Brian had taken off somewhere with Chrissie and feeling as bad for her being so out of place I began to talk to her.

"Where do you go to school?" I know that seems like a really lame question but I was going somewhere with it.

"I don't." Lilly, that's her name of the moment, said in a very bored voice. "Been there...done that. And there's no money in it."

"Yeah...but it's my way out." I smiled. "I love your ink. It's so colorful. And the designs are so neat."

Lilly looked at me for a long moment. She gazed around us for a minute and then looked at me. I could tell she was checking me out...carefully.

"What do you mean 'your way out'? You don't look like you need out honey. In fact you look gorgeous and...well taken care of?"

"I'm not from around here." I looked at my fingers as I spoke although I did blush at her compliment.

"I could tell that from your accent." She laughed.

"Truly...I'm from Boston..." I reverted for the moment. "...South Boston." Lilly looked at me differently now.

"So what's up with the accent?"

"My guardians are from Ireland. When I left Boston, I wanted to leave everything behind. There was nothing there for me and I felt like I had to wash myself clean of everything." I reverted to my brogue and shrugged my shoulders. "I had nobody else to copy except them so I began to speak like they do."

"Yeah...I can dig that. I guess you had it rough there?" Lilly had a hurt expression on her face.

“Yeah...you know how it is.” I dabbed at a tear with a tissue from my clutch purse. I didn’t think I would become emotional but...

“Listen...” Lilly grasped my hand in hers. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“My worst fear...” I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “...is fucking this up and having to go back. I would kill myself first.”

Lilly saw from my expression, and from the anger in my voice, that I wasn’t kidding...and I wasn’t. I began to tell her a little bit about my past. I don’t know why I did other than perhaps I needed to tell someone and perhaps she needed to hear it. I told her things that I hadn’t even told the ladies though I imagine that Cait and May might have guessed.

I don’t know how long we talked for but we kept moving closer to one another for fear that perhaps we might be over heard. I found out that her real name was Julie and indeed we did have a lot in common. Julie also told me that Brian wasn’t a ‘trick’. They lived in the same complex and sometimes, to escape the madness of her world, she would visit with him. He never pressured her into doing anything and she enjoyed his company. She thought it would be nice to see what an upper school dance was like. She’d never been to one before either.

I told Julie about my run and how Owen had helped me. She told me how she thought of getting out of the game and going somewhere...somewhere she wasn’t known. The only advice I could give her is to run to somewhere, not simply run away. If there was someone she knew who could harbour her so that she could do something or learn something to get her out of where she was mentally, that would be the way to go.

I totally lost track of where I was when Chrissie came up to us. He had a jacket which he handed to Julie. She thanked him and put it on evidently for modesty sake. Several of the chaperones had said something to Brian and Brian, having something more pressing on his mind, asked Chrissie to take care of it. And so he did.

“Where’s Brian?” I didn’t see him anywhere around though I must admit it was hard to see with all the kids dancing.

“He’s busy at the moment.” I detected more than a wee bit of anger in Chrissie’s voice.

“Want to dance?” Lilly asked Chrissie.

“Sure...” Poor Chrissie sounded almost resigned to some fate I wasn’t aware of.

Chrissie alternated dancing with Lilly and me. Even Lilly and I danced together. I really kind of liked her in spite of her...situation? She also made me rethink my opinion of Brian. I thought it was nice that he offered her somewhere safe if even for only a few hours.

And wonders of wonders...I actually was having an amazing time. I can't remember ever having that much fun since my father's departing. What was even more amazing is that I was having fun with my peers; something that never would have occurred back in Boston.

Eventually Brian returned from where ever. He looked a bit disheveled and wore an ear to ear grin. He walked up to us all smiles and turned to Lilly.

"Sorry...I got busy."

"That's okay hon...you're entitled." She laughed.

Brian held out his hand and she took it as she got up from her seat. They went onto the dance floor and began to dance a slow one. Chrissie asked me if I minded and of course I didn't. He was such a good dancer and he was very patient with me. I kind of draped my arms around his neck and put my head against his chest. I pretended it was Owen I was holding. I just closed my eyes and swayed with Chrissie.

"You know where he was?" Chrissie asked shaking me out of my dreams.

"Who..."

"Brian...he was outside somewhere doing Jessica." Chrissie practically spat the words out.

"Our Jessica...? But she's here with her boyfriend." I was surprised...to say the least.

"No...not her...Jessica from our psyche class. And she's such a derp."

I didn't understand Chrissie's anger. I mean, so what if your friend gets some. I would think he should be glad. Then again, I was the new kid on the block and I didn't know the entire back story; clueless as usual.

Sometime during the course of the evening Chrissie disappeared on me. Nobody seemed to know where he'd gone to. I was getting a bit concerned because he was my ride. Of course I had Jess and, as a last resort, Brian to drive me home. But Chrissie wasn't having the good time he should have had and that concerned me even more. This was his project, his baby, and he should have been happy and quite proud of his accomplishment.

I went outside to see if perhaps he didn't go out for some air. I looked around the courtyard near the cafeteria but I couldn't find him. Then I walked back to where we always sat for lunch. I found him at our table. His face was buried in his hands and as I approached I could hear him sobbing. I sat down catty-corner from him.

"What's up sweet heart?"

Chrissie simply shook his head and shrugged. I handed him tissues from my clutch purse. He took them and wiped his eyes and nose.

“Did someone say something to you?”

Again he shook his head and sniffled. I didn't get it. We usually told each other everything; well almost everything anyway. I felt so bad for him. I felt so useless. I should have been able to at least comfort him but I didn't know what the problem was.

“Would you like to leave?”

He looked at me and nodded his head. I smiled and patted his hand with mine.

“Give me a few minutes.”

I got up and went to say goodbye to everyone. It was nearly ten and the dance was scheduled to end at eleven. And to be truthful, I'd had just about enough of dancing and enjoying myself for the evening. Interestingly enough, Lilly hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. She looked into my eyes and smiled though I could swear I saw a tear forming.

“I hope you make it.” She said as she hugged me again.

“I hope you do as well.” I meant it and I believe she knew it. I even hugged Brian which I think surprised both of us but I was feeling so good about everything...except Chrissie. I walked back to get him and we went on to his car.

Somewhere between five ninety five and ninety five Chrissie asked if I wanted to go somewhere and get something to eat. The drive had been quite up till then and I was a bit hungry. So off we went to the all night dinner on Oakland Park Boulevard and Dixie Highway. Somewhere between sipping my coke and munching on an English muffin, I asked him why he didn't say goodnight to his friends.

“I...” Chrissie took a deep exasperated sounding breath. “He won't even notice I'm gone.”

Chrissie spoke in a voice so stunted that I could barely hear him. But I did hear him say 'he'. 'HE'... Oh my God...it suddenly struck me. He had a major league crush on Brian. Who would have thought? I mean...they'd been friends for so long that it never occurred to me that maybe...just maybe...something had changed.

We sat in silence as Chrissie drove me home. Now I really felt for him because that was something I could relate to in my own way. After all, my crush and I were separated by sixteen hundred miles. But really Chrissie's crush was worse. As far as I knew, Brian was straight. But then again, Owen thought one thing about me even if he didn't quite believe it. Could he see me for me?

I invited Chrissie in. It was still relatively early but he just wasn't in the mood and that I understood. I hugged him and kissed him on the lips when he walked me to the door. I also thanked him most profusely for everything he'd done to make this evening very special for me.

That forced a smile out of him...and a giggle. He'd enjoyed that I enjoyed the dance so much. I knew we were going to the beach tomorrow and I invited him along. He thanked me but didn't answer and I let it go. Somehow I knew he would be there.

As I stepped through the doorway, I heard my name being called from the library. I walked into the room with my shoes dangling from one hand and the clutch purse in my other hand. I must have looked exhausted but I felt spiritually refreshed. The ladies wanted to know every little detail and we stayed up past twelve thirty as I told them all the details, all the drama, and all the fun I'd had.

As I undressed and put my things away, I not only smiled but I hummed a tune that the band had played. After I washed the evening off of me, the cosmetics, the perspiration, the event, I looked at myself in the mirror and I looked for the twelve year old boy I was so accustomed to seeing. But suddenly he wasn't there anymore; at least not on that evening. I went to bed and don't even remember falling asleep. I slept quite soundly.



Epilogue...

As I sat on the sand at the beach the following day, I looked at all of my friends around me. Chrissie had evidently spread the word. Jess had come with her boyfriend. Lizzie had come with her new girlfriend. Chrissie had come and even Brian showed up for a while. The ladies made and packed, with my help of course, a variety of fruit, chips and assorted snacks for us all. Our guests brought various drinks and we partied and enjoyed the day.

I realized how incredibly blessed I was and how things could have been so much different. I thought of all of those who ran and ended up...not as well as I did. I felt so blessed with the ladies and my home, the school and the friends I made, and the person I saw in the mirror that morning.

I always felt guilty about my 'Cinderella' life until I read an absolutely heartwarming and heart breaking story on the net. It concerned a couple by the name of Billings. They were quite wealthy and had four children of their own (from different marriages). However, their hearts were so enormous, and giving, that they adopted twelve more children with very special needs; children who otherwise would have been institutionalized.

They attended to every need these adopted ones had and provided for them as if they were their own children. It was only then I realized that I wasn't the only one who was blessed with a miracle in this life. There are people out there who feel the hurt and pain of others less fortunate and these few seem to rise to the occasion as if controlled by a higher power so that they may ease the pain and suffering of others in a most unique way.

Being able to attend school as a 'new' me was a major part of my salvation. I never realized how desperately thirsty I was for friendships and knowledge and had I not run, that thirst never would have been quenched. I made friends back then who I still have to this day and will probably have for the remainder of my life. I was forced to face my greatest fears and learned that I could overcome them.

I still have issues stemming from my early childhood; the childhood that was stolen, ripped from me. And I probably always will. But I never really had an issue with being reborn. I never really considered myself to be a 'boy' or a 'girl'. I always thought of myself as...me.

The one thing I did know was that the image in my head finally matched the image in the mirror and I am brought to tears of joy even thinking about my rebirth and the two Saints that took me in and gave freely of everything they had to the complete stranger in their midst; and to accept someone else's child as a blessing and a child of their own.