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- "Why Life?" by Cecilia Isaacs-Blundin first appeared in *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*, Oct. 1997.
- Cover design by B. Zinda.

many who is legion who blends in who sticks out who
speaks out bcuz I am often denied community i have no home
save this body n even that is under attack

grown-up

for Sapphire, who wrote me a permission slip

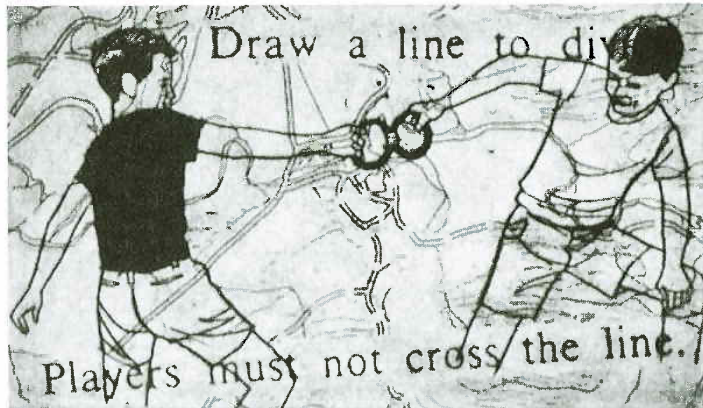
as a little boy growing up, i used ta sit in the bathtub, take the
little spikey thing u put soap on, n lay on it, press my little pre-
pubescent dick on it hard, impale myself, sometimes until i bled.
then i'd take it, bloodied n bruised, n tuck it between my legs,
standing in front of the mirror, pushing the fat that wuz my chest
together, seeing what it would b like ta have cleavage, thinking
perhaps i could escape my fate by becoming a woman, i won-
dered what it'd b like ta have a pussy, what it would b like ta cut
it off, ta simply not have it around no more.

as a little boy grow-
ing up, i starved myself. i remember doing over fours hours of
exercise each day, eating only watermelon n starkist tuna from a
can for weeks on end, trying ta puke but not being able ta stom-
ach the convulsions, being depressed/ashamed whenever we
had ta go shopping for school clothes, clothes that would not fit.
i hated the month of august for this very reason.

as a little boy
growing up, i spent my summers in the sun, laying out all day, try-
ing to b darker, wanting ta b whiter. i spent hours in the bathroom,
trying ta wash away my body, my skin color, my sex, contemplat-
ing suicide, homicide, genocide, that which i could bring about,
that which others were capable of.

as a little boy growing up, i

daryl vocat



Tug of War Grip, etching, 38 x 35.5 cm, 1999



A Process of Change, etching, 38 x 35.5 cm, 1999

Dancing in the Shadows, an interview

Minal is a young queer from India and has been a sex worker in the S/M scene for a year and a half. He has taken a break from sex work and lives in San Francisco. In this interview Minal talks about his journey into sex work as a way of uplifting his self-esteem around body-image issues, his feeling of empowerment doing sex work in drag, his experience coming to the United States from India, and being queer while coming to terms with identifying as being transgender.

Siobhan Brooks: How did your parents accept the fact that you're gay?

Minal: I told them I was gay and giving up religion at the same time, but they were most upset that I was giving up religion. They thought that without religion I would be lost and never come back to the "path of righteousness." But they were alright. I was living at home then, and they were accepting. The drag upset them a lot, more than the gay stuff. They were hoping that I would have an arranged marriage, and I told them if they could find me a husband, I'd be willing to settle down. *[Laughs]*

S: Are you in school?

M: I just finished law school and took the bar, and when I find out my results I'll look for a nonprofit job. I know I don't want to be a lawyer.

S: How did you get into sex work?

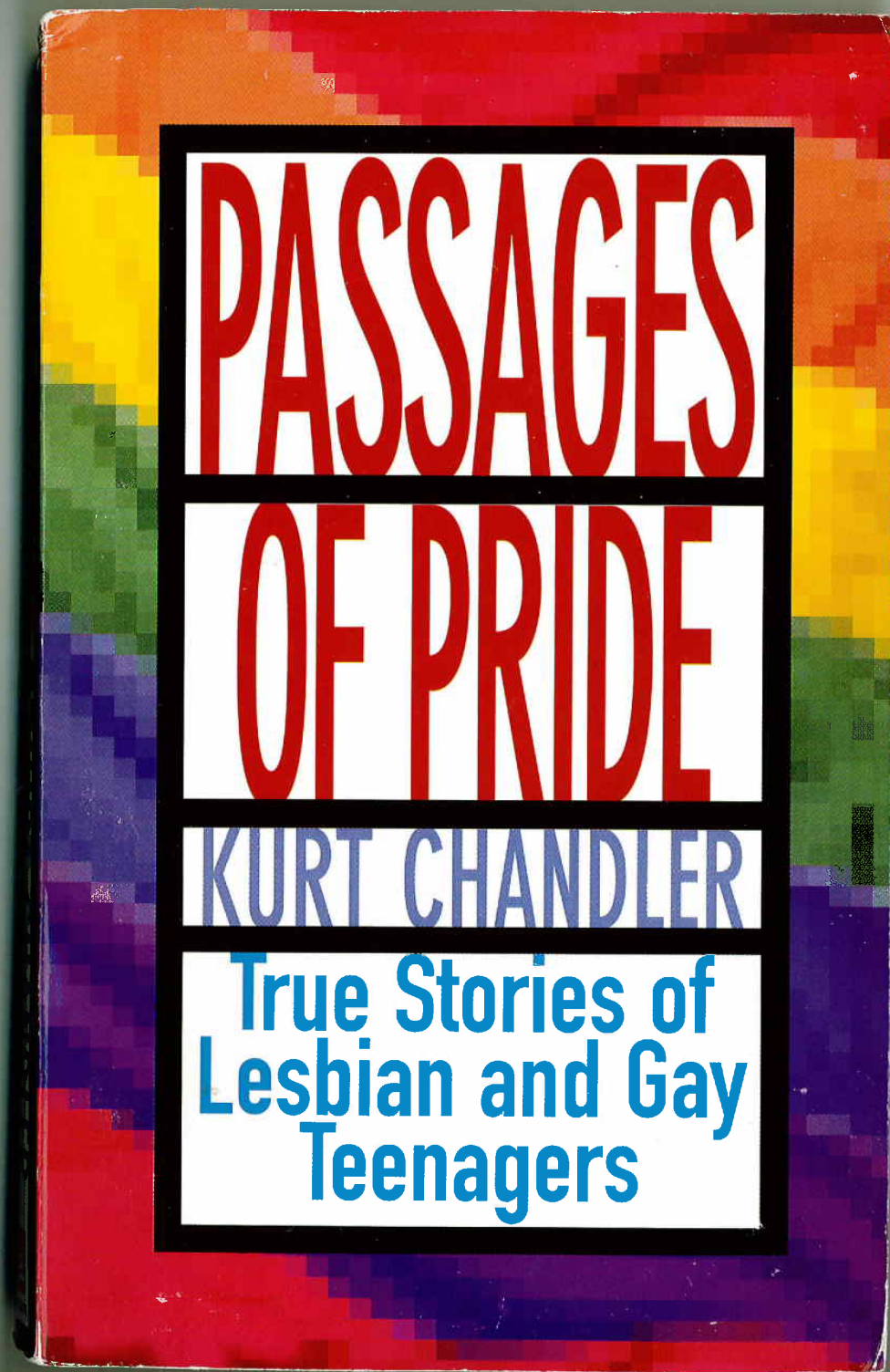
M: Well, before I get into that I have to tell you how I got into S/M generally, since I used to be a complete vanilla bottom. I'm gay, by the way; I'm exploring being transgendered, and I've been doing drag for about ten years, on and off. Drag was never a sexual thing for me, I've always had sex "as a guy." Around March of last year a friend asked me about rape fantasies—she wanted to know what my fantasies were. I realized I hadn't been fantasizing at all. When I did start thinking about it, my fantasies were all about whipping. I started reading up on S/M, and it was making me interested in sex for the first time. Before, I never knew what the big deal was with sex. I put a personal ad in the paper to do scenes with different people, and I realized that for what I was doing, I could be getting good money. I had a lot of friends in the sex industry who were asking me, "Why aren't you charging for what you're doing?"

So that summer I did it for free and learned what I needed to do, and by November I started putting out ads in the *Bay Area Reporter*. My ads were sort of genderfuck: my picture was taken from the neck down in a corset, fishnets and garter belt. It was a dom-type look. I realized there weren't that many guys into doing S/M professionally, and the ones that were were really butch—so I stood out a lot. It was great. It was the first time I had really good sex, I was getting paid for it, and I felt totally in control. It was good, but I was wondering how many people I was losing by advertising as a fem dom. I started putting ads online without the fem look and got a lot more response, so I switched to just having a nude picture in the paper as opposed to a girlish one. The responses were more than I could handle, which is a good thing. That's how I got into sex work, as a way of exploring my sexuality.

revolutionary voices

about feeling unsafe because these are issues that—stereotypically—women usually worry about in sex work and life in general. How has your self-image improved from doing sex work?

M: I feel a lot more confident and secure with myself. I think that has a lot to do with S/M and coming into my own power.



PASSAGES

OF PRIDE

KURT CHANDLER

**True Stories of
Lesbian and Gay
Teenagers**

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Cover design by Bruce Zinda.

"Immediately, I noticed my interest level was much higher than with the straight magazines."

Even in grade school, Derek's affectional "pull" was not toward the opposite sex. His friendships with girls were never sensual. There were none of the prepubescent games of "doctor," or the "I'll show you mine if you show me yours" explorations typical of young boys and girls. Instead, Derek's "experimentations," as he calls them, were with other boys. Throughout his childhood, from age five on, Derek would sneak off with a friend into someone's basement or the woods along the back alley, where they would take off their pants and play with each other, usually fondling each other's genitals. It became habitual.

"At that time, I didn't quite have a name for it," says Derek. "It was something that I liked doing, that felt good, that I wanted to do as often as I could. The other kids always recognized it as being something bad and dirty. And all I wanted to know was, When can we do it again?"

By the time he was fourteen, he began to put two and two together. Something clicked. Although he only had a murky sense of what it meant to be "gay," the label seemed to fit him.

"I was just thinking it through, analyzing the situation to death, asking myself, What does this mean? And I realized I might be gay," Derek says. "Once identifying that, I came to the conclusion that these were the cards I was dealt. I knew people didn't approve of it, so I decided to keep it to myself rather than open myself up to ridicule."

Though he felt sure he knew himself, he revealed nothing about his sexual identity to his mother or father. Until the day he was caught.

Derek grew up in St. Paul, in a large African-American family. He was the baby of the family, the last of six children—four boys and two girls—raised by Donald and Vernita Johnson. Theirs was a "blended" family; each parent had two children from a previous marriage.

A month before Derek was born, the Johnsons moved into a three-bedroom rambler in a multiracial, solidly working-class neighbor-

guys—and I wasn't some twisted pervert living in the middle of nowhere who was going to be condemned to hell.”

The calls also symbolized a kick at the walls of his closet. He did little to conceal the calls from his parents. So when the first monthly phone bill arrived after he began making the calls, it included hundreds of dollars in charges to 900 numbers around the country. His calls, Dan says, purposely provided his parents with “smoking gun” evidence of his homosexuality and quickly drew attention to his plea for help.

“They were mad that I had charged all these calls, and they were concerned,” he says. “My mom especially wanted to know why.”

So Dan tried to explain: “I think I might be gay,” he told them, “but I’m not really sure. I want to find out.”

“Well, what do you want us to do?” asked his mother.

“I need a book,” he said. “I’d just like to read something.”

“Fine, we can do something about that,” said his father.

“And that’s all I really wanted,” says Dan, looking back. “But that’s all he *didn’t* do. He completely ignored it.” Weeks later, when Dan asked his father about his promise of finding a book on homosexuality, his father told him he hadn’t gotten around to it and the subject was dropped. The long-distance phone calls, too, were ignored. “If you didn’t talk about it long enough, it didn’t happen,” was the typical reaction by his parents, Dan explains.

Near the end of summer, just before starting his sophomore year in high school, Dan picked up a weekly Twin Cities newspaper. Scanning the classifieds, he came upon an ad for a “Man-2-Man” massage. Home alone one day, he called the telephone number listed in the ad and set up an appointment to meet a man named Tom. Tom offered to drive to Zimmerman. So, over the phone, Dan directed him to a secluded road in his subdivision. “Stop where the pavement ends,” Dan told him.

A couple of nights later, Dan pulled the broken screen from his bedroom window and slipped out of the house while his parents slept. He hurried to the prearranged rendezvous spot, and there, in the dark of night, he met Tom for the first time, man-to-man. In the back of Tom’s van, the two had sex.

"He gave me a little shoulder rub and the next thing I knew his hands were all over me," Dan remembers. "It wasn't a bad thing. I didn't necessarily know it would turn into sex. But I kind of knew what I was doing."

Dan continued the liaisons with Tom throughout the summer and into the following school year, having sex—usually masturbation and oral sex—with Tom in his van or his Minneapolis apartment. Dan would leave his room just before midnight and return by dawn; his parents never knew he was gone. Or sometimes on weekends, he would tell his mother he was taking a long walk and disappear for hours with Tom. Twice, Tom took him to a stretch along the Mississippi River in St. Paul known as Bare Ass Beach, a wooded flats that for years had been claimed by gay men as a private cruising spot. But Dan was uncomfortable with the place. He remembers men wandering silently along the sandy trails along the river in the dark, searching for a companion, and then disappearing into the underbrush to have sex. It was too ritualistic and secretive, Dan says, and seemed dangerous. Two summers later, his misgivings were borne out when a gay man was shot to death and another seriously wounded in the woods near the beach.

Even though Tom was older, almost twice Dan's age, Dan felt unthreatened by him. Dan admits that Tom was a "troll" in every sense of the word—an older, closeted gay man seeking sex with a man much younger. But Dan says he was not intimidated by the discrepancy in their ages. "He kind of had me in a corner in that he knew I didn't have access to anything I wanted," says Dan. "But everything was consensual."

The encounters with Tom were "a mix of coercion and plain old hormones," Dan acknowledges. But he knew no other way, he adds defensively. He had no gay peers in school and no contact with the gay community in the city. In his isolation, he was left to his own devices, Dan says. Tom became a convenient way into the city and an available, albeit exploitative, link for Dan as he established his homosexual identity.

"He wasn't exactly a friend," Dan says of his relationship with Tom. "He wasn't exactly a lover. He wasn't exactly a role model. He wasn't

exactly *anything*. What I got out of it was sex, and someone who made me feel nice for once. Sex was a totally different way to feel good. It was a very easy way to get away from the pain. I was young. He brought me down to the city, where I wanted to be. And I was very young.”

By his junior year in high school, Dan’s life had become an emotional roller coaster. At home, his sexual orientation was ignored. He told his parents of a weekend support group in Minneapolis for gay youth that he had read about, but they were quick with excuses to keep him from joining. “That’s an hour’s drive to get to Minneapolis,” his father told him. “I drive into the city every day. I don’t want to do it on the weekends, too.”

In school, the harassment wore on, shaming him, turning him numb inside. Gym class was especially intimidating. In the locker room, Dan would remove his glasses to avoid being accused of staring at the naked bodies of other boys.

“I knew if my eyes lingered too long on somebody I was dead, because I knew they’d never let me live it down,” he says. “I looked at the floor, I looked at the lockers, I looked at the ceiling tiles. I tried to be as nonchalant about it as I could. But it was very humiliating, what I was putting myself through.”

Students, usually “the jocks and burnouts,” says Dan, confronted him at every turn—teasing him for the way he dressed or the way he talked or the way he walked. He couldn’t walk down the hallway without being laughed at. During the Persian Gulf War, Dan wore a black armband as a sign of protest. Immediately, he was labeled a “commie pinko” and a “traitor.” Dan decided to try out for the track team. With his long legs he might make a good sprinter, he thought. But his enemies wasted no time in hounding him off the team. On the first day of tryouts, they mockingly warned the other teammates to stay away from “the faggot” in the shower. No one came to Dan’s defense, not even the coaches. He quit after the first practice.

“I decided to do a little project for myself,” says Dan. “I wanted to

self or be a lesbian. I knew that I could not live the straight life and get married to some guy. I had absolutely no attraction to boys, and the thought of marrying one was terrifying. Everyone in my church was getting married at seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. My sister was getting married to a guy we'd grown up with."

While still in high school, she had an affair with a teacher. "She was forty-four and had a daughter who was a year younger than me, who went to my *school*. Needless to say, it was all very confusing, but exciting as well. The moment right after we kissed for the first time, I ran to the mirror and looked at myself. I was ecstatic. I thought I would look different. I said in a barely audible whisper, 'I'm a lesbian.' About six months later, we stopped being physically sexual, at my request. I was racked with guilt feelings and knew that it was out of control. I was terrified of someone finding out. . . .

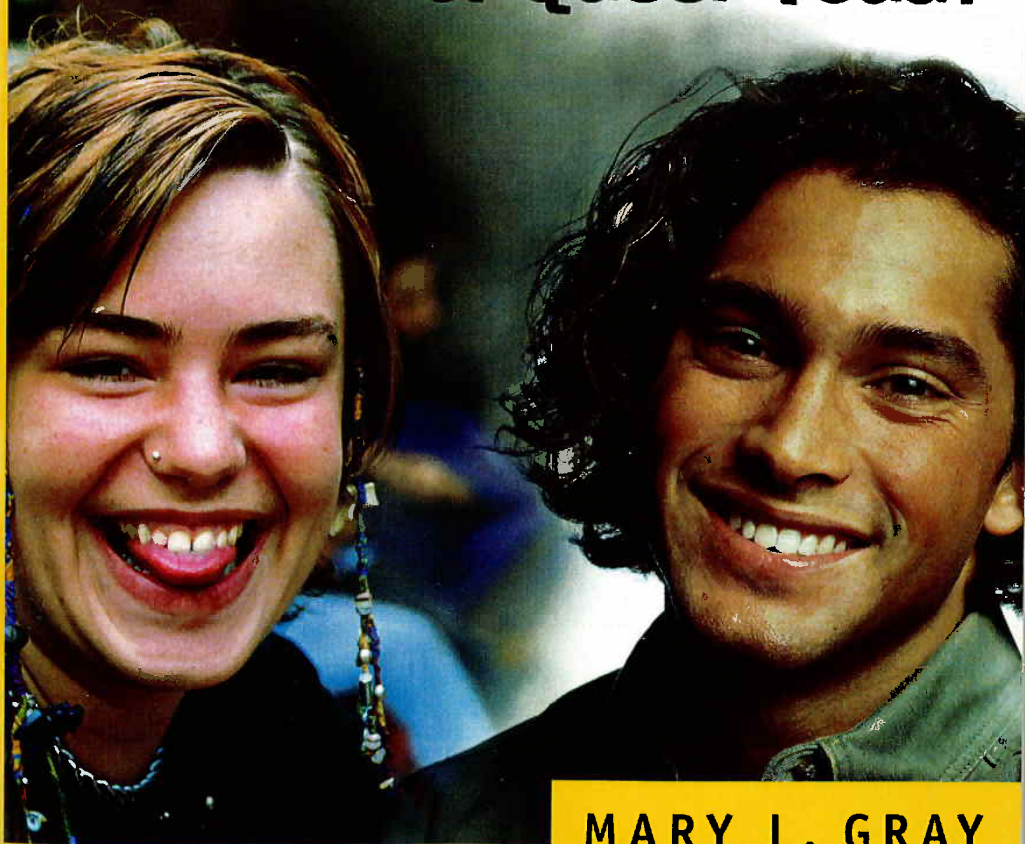
"I decided during the end of my freshman year in college that I would *not* kill myself, but that I would be a lesbian. The next step was coming out to my family. But I didn't have to, because my mother read my diary. I was finally having a relationship with a woman I'd been trying to seduce for months, and I'd written about our lovemaking in minute detail. My mother must have read it all because she looked like a ghost when she approached me. She said, 'I finally know who you really are.' But I was the same exact person she always knew and loved, only happier, stronger. It broke my heart. I had been very close to my mother, her favorite. . . . Nothing between us has ever been the same.

"It's been about seven years and my family still won't have anything to do with me, although my mother does call me about once a year (she only lives twenty-five minutes away) to see if I am okay. She won't hug or kiss me. It's really painful. I've let her go quite a bit since it happened, but it still hurts tremendously. My sister is the same, only she won't talk to me at all, and won't take my phone calls. . . .

"I never apologized for being a lesbian and never denied it after that night. And I'm thankful for that, for being strong enough at that point to avoid that shame."

IN YOUR FACE

**Stories from the Lives
of Queer Youth**



MARY L. GRAY

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calling me and seeing how I was doing, but they didn't call for about two and a half weeks after I came out to my mom. I called them, and they said, "Oh, we've been waiting to hear from you." I asked back, "Well, why didn't you call?" And my mom said, "Oh, we've been so busy." I moved out after that. I moved out with my friend and lived in Los Gatos.

I'd already dropped out of high school by this point. I just needed my space. I wasn't too motivated to do anything with my life, and so I decided to move out. I had some money saved up, and I lived with my friend's parents, while he was away at college. It was time for me just to be by myself and hang out. And that's what I needed, I think. It was less stressful for me 'cause I didn't have to deal with my parents. But I didn't go about it in such a graceful way. I went about it in a very destructive manner, which was something I regret now.

My relatives would flip if they knew I was gay. But the only family I really consider myself having is my mom's. I've pretty much disowned my dad's family. I haven't talked to them in going on seven years, except for a couple of ons and offs, you know, shouting matches. My dad is really cool; my mom is still kind of unhhhhhh. I said to her a couple of days ago, "I'm going over to my girlfriend's." She said, "Oh, whose house are you going to?" She does stuff like that, and I said, "I'm going to Heidi's house." And she's, like, "Who's Heidi?"

Todd Fay-Long

I don't remember exactly when I started coming out, but I joined this youth group called Positive Images; it's the Sonoma County gay/lesbian/bisexual youth group. I got a boyfriend instantly; he picked me up right away, right when I joined the group. He was older; he was twenty-five, I was sixteen. He was just really supportive of me. I went with him to this gay prom in Sonoma County called the Rainbow Prom in the middle of May. I had told my dad I was going to this high school prom. The day after the gay prom, I called my mom and I came out to her on the phone. And she was like, "I always knew . . . no big deal." Just like that, "No big deal." She was very supportive. And I said to her, "But I can't tell Dad, you know. . . . I just can't tell him." She agreed and said I shouldn't tell him.