

## ***When I Was a Little Girl***

by Lena-Nsomeka Gomes

Everyone had a name for me after I came out. Bulldagger, Butch, Dyke, Lesbian, Lesbo, Gay, Homosexual, Homo, Queer. My entire identity was defined by strangers and summed up in a single word, like an object. I managed to survive those confusing times by remembering the innocent years, when my love for women had no name.

I didn't have a name for myself when I was young. I thought it was just me. Sometimes I did think that God made a mistake. Maybe I was supposed to have been born a boy. I mean, how else could I explain all of my desires for girls?

When I was in third grade, I was completely in love with Ms. Sonnhalter. I used to bring her fresh-cut sunflowers, which I pulled out from a patch of grass on the way to school. She would smile lightly and tell me to get back in line. In class, I would watch her walk back and forth from the chalkboard to her desk. She was sexy and lovely. I wanted to kiss her in her mouth like the men did in the old-fashioned movies. I didn't think I could kiss her as a girl. Girls don't kiss girls. I didn't know why that was so.

After school, I would find a spot on top of her desk and she and I would talk for hours. She liked me. I was convinced that she was in love with me, too. I know it's crazy, I was just a kid, but I could tell by the way she looked at me.

One afternoon, a monitor came in our class and handed Ms. Sonnhalter a piece of white paper folded in the shape of an airplane. She opened it up as we were all taking our exams. I watched her from the top of my eyelids. She was smiling — a big, wide smile. The way I imagined her smiling for me one day.

After the exam was over, a big man walked in. He had a long pony tail and wore tiny glasses. His name was Mr. Henderson. As the class emptied out, he got closer and closer to Ms. Sonnhalter. I made my move and sat at my usual spot on her desk, but she told me I had to go home because she had a date with Mr. Henderson. "He teaches math in pod D. He's my boyfriend," she said.

He smiled and extended his rough hairy hands to me. Suddenly my head was on fire and my stomach was melting from all the warm blood gushing out of my heart like a waterfall.

From then on, I was Ms. Sonnhalter's worst nightmare.

I came into class late and interrupted her lesson plans. I cussed her out all the time and threw crumpled up pieces of paper at her. Each time she asked me to stay after class because she said she wanted to talk to me, I would yell at her in front of everybody. "I don't talk to white girls!" All the other kids — mostly black and Latino — laughed. Her beautiful face would get sad, but I didn't care. I was focused on punishing her for breaking my heart.

One afternoon, I called her a "prejudice white bitch!" That was it for her. She came over my parent's house that same night. In the living room, she sat with my dad. My mom was in the kitchen making tea.

My dad called me. I was terrified. My mom was behind me holding a silver tray filled with colorful cookies and beverages. "Hurry up and go answer your father," she said in a whisper.

They were all talking, but I was blinded by the sight of her. Can't you see my heart is aching? I sat there stupefied until my dad pushed my shoulder — "Answer me!" "Huh?" I mumbled, like someone in a stupor.

"Why are giving this nice lady a hard time?" he asked again. Then I got mad. She had betrayed me again. "Because...she's prejudice. She doesn't like me... cuz... I'm black." I was so ashamed after I said that because I knew it wasn't true, but what else was I supposed to say? That I was in love with her? That I dreamed about being her boyfriend?

Ms. Sonnhalter began asking me questions about racism and stuff like that. I couldn't hear her. I just watched her mouth coming at me and imagined our first kiss.

Then I felt a heavy, hot sensation on the side of my head. I guess my dad hit me, because the familiar sound of my mother pleading him to stop had begun. Ms. Sonnhalter looked upset and she asked my dad not to hit me, but suggested that he talk to me because she said I was smart. In fact, she said I was one of her smartest students.

She protected me! She thought I was smart? She does love me

after all!

Although I knew we could never be lovers, I took comfort in knowing that she loved me. At that moment, I promised everyone that I would behave myself, and I did. The rest of the school year I spent sitting on top of her desk, only this time we talked about Mr. Henderson and her other boyfriends. I was still in love with her and secretly hoped that one day she would tell me she wanted me and we would make passionate love all night long.

That day never came, but we were to remain friends for two decades later.

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I got into this strange habit around my eleventh birthday. When my parents were out, usually food shopping, I would empty out my father's closet. I used to watch him intently as he meticulously folded and knotted his ties into a perfect shape and place his silk handkerchiefs in his suit pocket. I also paid close attention to most of his mannerisms, how he walked and talked, held a glass in his hand and smoked cigarettes. I practiced the same things when he was gone.

When their car pulled out of the driveway, I was off into the bedroom looking for an outfit. I laid the clothes out carefully on top of the bed. The suit jacket, pants, white cotton shirt and the tie. Then I went through his dresser and found jockey shorts and socks. After a few minutes, I stood in front of the mirror completely transformed. Of course, all the clothes didn't fit, but you really couldn't tell because I wore it with such pride. His shoes were definitely too big, but with three pairs of socks on, my feet stayed inside and I could manage to strut around the house.

I wet my hair, brushed it back and greased it down with Vaseline. Then I pulled out one of his cigarettes from beneath a neatly folded tablecloth inside the kitchen cupboard. My mother hid them from him because, she complained, he smoked too much. Then I went to the living room, turned on the radio and sat back on the sofa, smoking and pretending to be at a party, where all the pretty women were dancing around and checking me out.

I got up to dance with a few of them. They loved me. My

name was Tito, I would tell them charmingly. I dragged for years that way, convinced that the only way that I could ever love a woman was to become a man.

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That was around the same time that the telephone calls began.

My brothers used to make prank calls at night while my parents were asleep. They sat by the phone with a telephone book, scouting for women's names. Then they dialed the numbers and waited. When a man answered, they hung up, but when a woman answered, they would call her dirty names and tell her, very graphically, how they wanted to fuck her. They would do this for hours until they grew tired and went off to bed.

They never seemed to run out of numbers. They asked me to join in and sometimes I did, but I always felt bad calling women those names and hurting their feelings, but I was very excited hearing their caring voices.

Something was awaking inside of my groin and I had no idea what it was, where it came from or what to call it. All I knew was that it felt incredible and I didn't want it to stop. So I started making my own telephone calls on their off nights.

Armed with the white pages in one hand and the telephone extended from the kitchen into the bathroom in the other, I leaned back on the toilet and made my calls. But my calls were different. I never offended the women; I just pretended to be a man who had the wrong number.

After I found a name I liked, I would dial her number and ask for another name. "Hi, can I speak with Lisa?" She would then tell me that I had the wrong number, but I would repeat her number back to her. "Really? Is this 282-5719?" Yes, she answered, "but there is no Lisa living here." Then I would say as charmingly as possible in a subtle, seductive tone, "I'm sorry. I was feeling a little lonely tonight. You sound very nice. Would you be interested in talking with me?" She would either hang up abruptly or say, "Alright, I have a few minutes."

If she agreed to talk with me, usually our conversations would last for several hours. I learned that most people have a lot in

common. We think that we can't relate because of our differences, but once we get beyond the superficial, we realize we're all looking for the same things: love and acceptance.

My name was always the same — Tito — and I was seventeen, in my senior year. Luckily, I was blessed with a deep baritone voice. They were always older, usually between 19 and 40. I think they were just as lonely as I was; just as in need of a friend. I made them feel beautiful and special and they made me feel loved.

I told no one about the uncharted territory I was traveling. Each night as I prepared for the evening's conversations, a flurry of unfamiliar emotions would sweep through my entire body like an orgasmic wave. I was completely enthralled, titillated and obsessed with desire. I had crossed boundaries of gender and social constructs that I was not yet aware of. I never even thought it was necessary to question my sexuality: I was beyond sex. I was transformed, transfixed. I had met the waves and I was riding high on pure innocence.

My phone life lasted over a year. Although I spoke to most of the women only once, I did develop a few lasting relationships. There was Tracy, a 19-year-old college student, and Marie, a 38-year-old secretary who worked at a nearby clinic. I had fallen in love with them both. I even shared a favorite song with Marie, "The Side Show" by Blue Magic. We often sang it together and each time it played on the radio, I fantasized that I was making love to her under a huge weeping willow tree.

Sometimes I felt guilty about lying that I was a man, but I couldn't imagine telling them that I was a woman. I didn't want to lose them. I feared their rejection; their horror and disgust at learning the truth. I wasn't doing anything wrong, nor were they. We were simply people sharing our lives with strangers we had come to know intimately.

The phone calls ended one night in April after Tracy expressed her eagerness to meet me. She asked me to send her a picture. She said she wanted to put my voice to a face. I pulled out our family photo album and searched for one. At last, I found a portrait of my cousin, Christian. He was about 20 and very handsome.

A week later, when I called her, she was suddenly mad over



me. We flirted all the time, but this was different. "Why didn't you tell me how fine you were? I can't believe it! I want to go out on a date with you. Will you come to my house and pick me up?" Oh shit, I thought. "Sure, baby. I'll pick you up on Friday." For the next three nights I alternated between states of deep contemplation and irrational consideration.

I almost convinced myself that I could wear my father's suit, my brother's shoes and pull it off. I fantasized over and over in my head about how Friday night would be. I would ring her doorbell and she would come out dancing in the wind in her long dress with love-stained eyes. I even imagined cutting my long braids and painting on a slight goatee like Christian wears.

I studied his picture obsessively, trying to reconstruct my femaleness. Eventually I came to the acceptance that even if I was to fool her, it would only be for one night, because when the moment of intimacy arrived, she would discover that her telephone man was a thirteen-year-old girl. I couldn't call her anymore. What would I tell her?

The game had ended at that moment of truth. I knew Marie would someday have the same desire to meet me and I would not be able to fulfill her needs, either. It was over. I never called them again.

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A few years later, at 15, I would find myself in a position of being forcibly pulled out of the closet, so to speak, by both my cousin Anna and my mother. Anna was an afro-wearing revolutionary social worker who counseled troubled youth in the community. She also participated in protests and marches and was always preaching about socialism and black politics. She was my hero.

One Sunday morning, at her kitchen table, she handed me my first adult book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. It was wrapped up in old newspaper. (She was heavily into recycling.) I flipped through it awkwardly. No one had ever given me a book before.

After a few minutes, the consciousness-raising moment came like rain out of a clear blue sky. She suggested that I turn to a

chapter titled "Sexuality." The subtitle, "Homosexuality." She sat back with a cup of coffee and a burning cigarette between her lips and said, "I think you're a lesbian. What do you think?"

I freaked out. I got up. I angrily told her that I didn't need her psychoanalysis. I denied being a lesbian.

I hated the sound of that word. It felt dirty and weird.

She listened calmly like a therapist who is more concerned with her ego than she is with my trauma. I slammed that dirty, shameful book down and walked out.

It was a hot summer day and the sun was cooking my back. Usually I take a bus when I visit her because she lives several miles away, but that morning I decided to walk back home. If I could have, I would have walked to the end of the earth than to name myself a lesbian.

Then it was my mother's turn. One cold winter night, my mother and I sat up watching television. There was no heat because my father had spent the money drinking. We were both cuddled together on the couch under an electric blanket. The TV show *Dallas* was on. That night's episode was about Steve Carrington, the gay son who came out to his father in a highly dramatic scene. Well, my mother decided to use this as her opportunity to coax me out. She searched my face and said, "You know, he's gay. That means he likes men."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's TV, ma. He's not real." I moved away from her slightly.

She went on to say, "I know his father must be heartbroken to know his only son is gay. I often wonder if my only daughter is gay, too." Then she looked at me for an answer.

I got up and angrily said, "I'm not gay. I'm not a TV character! I'm real!" I slammed the door and left the room.

She never asked me again, but I knew she was convinced that I was a lesbian because she never stopped watching me, especially when I was in the company of women.

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entire identity is now defined by strangers and summed up in a single word, like an object. But I remember the innocent years, when my love for women had no name.