

## SISSY

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### MARK D. SNYDER

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The sun’s summer rays and the shadows from the trees danced on the wooden floor of my parent’s bedroom. I stood in the doorway of my mother’s closet, which used to be a section of the hayloft when our house was still a barn. I carefully studied each dress, blouse, and of course the shoes. She is a hearty, countrified woman, so as I slid my scrawny little body into the world of clothing in front of me, I had to navigate through an endless array of disheveled tapered jeans, plad flannels, and sweatshirts.

In the dark, back corner of the closet, I found a flowered dress. And after a tireless search, I located a pair of matching heels. I threw the ensemble on the bed and headed towards her dresser for a bra and pantyhose. Soon I was dwarfed in a flowing summer dress and heels. I skated into the bathroom, without lifting a foot, so I could see myself in the mirror. I smiled. I danced in place. I lip-synced to New Kinds on The Block. I took off the heels, and twirled around so the air would blow the dress in every direction. I lifted the dress up to create skirts, tied belts around it, and transformed it into a variety of styles, modeling each one for the mirror.

That is when I heard the bellow of my name from downstairs. “Luuuuunch is reaaaddddy,” never sounded more terrifying. Within seconds, the outfit was returned, and I arrived at the table in my favorite pair of short purple shorts. Legs crossed, foot swinging up and down, I delicately ate and discussed the day with my mom. After lunch, I went outside to play with my animals and explore the woods.

I had to feed and take care of the chickens and pot-bellied pigs. The lamb needed bottle fed, and she cried so loudly for her meal you could hear her down the lane. My imaginative world involved quite a bit of responsibility! I had to give my imaginary “tourists” rides on my bicycle “tram” to show them the mountainside and the local “zoo.” I had to give them talent shows on my swing set, and introduce them to the delicious fresh watercress growing in the stream. The days flew by, each ending with a joyous skip through the yard and into the house for dinner.

And then fall would sweep across the countryside. It brought with it cool, crisp air touched with the scent of falling leaves. The fields turned brown, and the animals retreated to their warm stalls. School busses zoomed across the curvy roads slowing down only for the occasional horse-and-buggy, and the dust from the dirt roads swirled and dirtied everything.

In fall, brute men in orange, camouflage styled coats and hats would invade my quiet refuge on the mountain. I promised my animals I would do my best to protect them. My dog was grey, tan, and white, and I had always feared that he would be mistaken for a deer. We had school vacation for the first day of each hunting season – doe, buck, bear... Then, on my way down the mountain to wait for the school bus each morning after, my father and I would see the prized animals they killed, bloodily hanging from metal poles in front of hunting cabins.

I would sometimes tremble from the moment I left my house ‘till the moment I returned back home. I was always the first child on the bus, and as each student boarded I felt more isolated. They did not talk like me, or dress like me. While they showed off their hunting fashions and gadgets, and their sports gear I would try to sleep or finish my homework. Little spit balls

would hit the back of my head, occasionally accompanied with a “City boy!”, “Fag,” or “Sissy.”

I kept to myself most of the time, trying to both not read as particularly feminine while also not repressing it too deeply. I was surrounded by an aura of androgyny for much of my schooling – but that is enough to get you killed where I am from. As I grew older, I struggled to strike a balance between being myself and avoiding harassment. I tried some of the less aggressive sports, but failed miserably. I tried fishing, but I quit after one season. I took two kinds of karate, and quit once I knew how to defend myself.

My high school years began in seventh grade, and they were wrought with torment. My lockers and desks were defaced. I was spit on, kicked, punched, mock raped, choked, and – worst of all – excluded from the few friendships I had maintained throughout elementary school.

In the autumn of my ninth grade year things began to change. The day was like any other – a boy had been kicking the back of my heels between classes as I walked through the halls. Another had taken a gulp of water from the fountain and spit it into my hair. I sat with my head down during study hall, and finally the bell rang, giving us permission to board the bus. I sat in the middle so that I was close enough to the driver for safety, but far enough away not to be tagged as one of the dorks. I wasn’t one of the dorks, after all. I was the fag.

My dad forgot to pick me up at the bottom of the mountain, so I walked slowly uphill towards my house. I took the shortcut through the woods, and my dog greeted me halfway there. I walked into the house and found it was empty and quiet. As if a string was pulling me in the direction of my parent’s bedroom, I headed up the stairs. This time, my gaze was locked onto my father’s side of the closet. It was tidy. Each dress-shirt was perfectly ironed and organized by color. I reached above them and pulled a small wooden box from the shelf.

I sat on the edge of their bed and removed the black pistol from the box, along with a bullet. The gun was loaded and I held it to my head as tears streamed down my cheek. I could smell my mother’s scent on the bed, and

see my father’s ties hanging on his closet door. My mind ping ponged between a longing for nurturing and understanding from my parents, and the torment of my school life. I imagined my funeral, what my family would be doing – crying and praying. I imagined what might happen if I failed, relegated to a life in a florescent-filled hospital room.

I put the gun back. My animals were outside crying to be fed, and so I ran outside to tend to them like I would have any other day.

Weeks passed, and the mountain was soon covered in white. The trees hung over the lane. The icicles flirted dangerously with scratching our cars. I was allowed to skip school more often because of the dangerous driving conditions on the mountain, and one day I announced to my parents that I would quit at the end of ninth grade unless we could think of another option. My parents reacted as they did to everything – with no visible emotion whatsoever, but with support and logic in their tone. “The school doesn’t provide college preparation,” my mother quipped, “we should look for another school.” For the next few months, I toured other nearby schools with my parents. I was willing to try a Christian school, because I thought that maybe the kids would be nerdier, and therefore more accepting. In addition, I figured that their uniforms would help me to conceal my penchant for “city clothes.” However, I soon learned that the Christian schools were very strict about whom they let attend – and my Lutheran parents were interrogated about their liberal theological philosophy.

We decided the best choice would be for me to attend a public school about an hour’s drive from my home. Lewisburg High School was in a small, quaint college town. Heavily republican, but much more “refined.” The students knew what the GAP was, and there was even an active choir program. The board of my first school eagerly approved my departure, and the board of the new school welcomed my arrival (they were going to make about \$9,000 from the deal). So for the next two years, my parents paid their taxes to my first public school, and a fee to my second.

I kept to myself, and quietly formed friendships with my cousin and her friends. I had someone to eat lunch with for the first time in years. They even

let me talk about fashion and pop music with them! But the new school was not without its challenges. The jocks and the hunters were still there – ready to pounce if I was ever in a group of less than two people.

On Valentine’s Day, I was called to the office to receive my rose from a secret admirer. I knew when the boys started laughing that it was from them. When I returned to my desk there was a picture laying on it. A boy had drawn it just for me – a bloody deer head next to the words “Hunting is Life.” My friend Jenny helped me draw a retaliation picture, a humorous spoof of a PETA ad, and we put it in his locker. The next week there was a death threat on my car windshield.

Once I turned sixteen, I drove myself to and from school. I never went to any school dances, sporting events, or the likes. I preferred to get into my car, lock the doors, and turn on my music for the drive home to the seclusion of my mountain. At home, I devised a plan to “get out.” I took my SAT and wrote an essay to Emerson College in Boston explaining my need for the safety of a diverse city life. They accepted me into their school, and my parents accepted and supported my plan.

The first week of college in the “big city” was a total culture shock. The ruffling of leaves was replaced with sirens, and people screaming. The number of students in my dormitory rivaled the population of my hometown. Like many students, one of the first things I did was get wasted. I got drunk with some of the other students, and began to cry. I cried for four hours throughout the night. I mourned the trauma of my childhood, and I cried with joy for my escape. And by morning I was ready to create a new life for myself, one in which I would never return to live at home, and one in which I would keep my 8<sup>th</sup> grade promise to myself - that when I left our rural community, I would do everything I could to fight discrimination.

That Bostonian autumn was a beautiful one. It represented for me not just the onset of another season, but the potential for hope. I attended a local training about how to share your life as an LGBT person to others. At the training people shared stories not too different from mine. A boy behind

me told me about a support group in Boston for young LGBT People – BAGLY.

My first meeting at BAGLY was *terrifying*. It was the first time I had sat in a room filled with other gay people, not to mention gay people my own age. My self-imposed androgynous cover of my femininity reared its ugly head. I can’t say I tried to be masculine because I knew from my failed attempts at sports that would be more disastrous than just staying under the radar. I was afraid to cross my legs in the men’s meeting. I did not talk much. When I did, I lowered my voice a little.

I continued to attend their meetings each week, though, and -- ever so slowly – I began to let go of my gendered conditioning and allow my feminine spirit to shine through again. The more strength I drew from my femininity, the happier and more empowered I felt. I made real, true, long lasting friends at BAGLY and at my school. And I allowed my activist self to blossom. And so I completed my senior year of high school and freshmen year of college, returning home to graduate that summer.

In 2001, I launched QueerToday.com, which quickly became known as the prominent direct-action, outspoken queer activist group in Boston. We have received worldwide headlines for staging a protest at the Arch Diocese in Boston, and recently we formed the largest ever protest against James Dobson’s anti-gay Love Won Out Conference.

Today, I identify as genderqueer and I revel in my childhood memories of rebellious genderfuckery. Being a sissy, while obviously a source of great pain, also gave me strength to survive. It has brought me to where I am today, and will take me to where I go tomorrow. It has given me the gift of queerness that has brought me close to a community of friends, activists, and support. From my inner femininity I have always drawn my creativity, my strength, and my compassion. When I sit in stillness it is my femininity that holds my spirit together.

Like many other sissy’s and queers, I’ve developed a close bond with other gender variant and queer people – my chosen family. Together, we bring with us our histories of oppression, and our current struggles for

liberation. We reminisce about the good times in the 70s (even though we weren't around). We lay naked smoking weed on the beaches of Provincetown. We wear big sunglasses, and pretend to be famous. We listen to Pink Floyd and the Scissor Sisters. We believe in sexual liberation, and we are often quick to remind everyone so. We go dancing, and do our best to patronize every single gay restaurant and bar so we can at least say we tried it. We complain that the gay neighborhoods have lost their rainbows to high-end condos, and that the sissies are overlooked by the "muscle-marys." We take long bus trips to Washington DC to march against the war. And we're constantly planning our next protest, direct action, or campaign for social justice.

I like to think we prove that young people are not complacent. And every day, I show that being a sissy is not a sign of weakness but an endless well that I pull my strength and motivation from.

Life for me now, post-college, is at once exhilarating and exhausting, and there is nothing that can stop it. Not the shouts of "faggot" from car windows, or people pretending to throw-up when they see me and my boyfriend holding hands. Not the bigots protesting at the statehouse *against* gay marriage, or the upper-class gay elite fighting *for* gay marriage. Not the corporate warmongers... not even the hunters!

This fall in Boston I expect will be like most. I will return home to the orange, camouflage-invaded mountains and eat Thanksgiving tofurkey next to my loveable, hick of a brother. I will even take part in the target shooting competition. Then I will lift my shirt to reveal to the family my very first tattoo: *sissy*.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Mark Snyder is the founder of QueerToday.com, an organization of activists and bloggers that seeks to continue the legacy of queer resistance of our dominant culture through media campaigns and protests. Mark is a former employee of The Boston Alliance of LGBT Youth, and currently serves on the Board of Directors for Greater Boston PFLAG. Through BAGLY, PFLAG, and SpeakOut Boston, Mark has shared his childhood struggle to overcome homophobia and oppression with thousands of students, teachers, and community leaders.*