

Chapter 10

I was Laura Ann Sykes, girl on the run. Suspended from school, fired from her job, turned out of her home. Acting like a wild Indian. I looked at Bobbo Joe; hanging out with a wild Indian.

Of course, the folks I was having problems with were looking at it in another way. Leroy Amos Sykes, boy, insists that he's a girl. Wears dresses. Suspended from school for fighting. Fired from his job for impersonating a woman. Kicked out of his house for attacking his poor Daddy.

I was smart enough to know that life wasn't fair. What I couldn't figure out is how to get out from under life's thumb. How to become one of the fortunate sons, or in my case, fortunate daughters.

I wonder a lot how things might have turned out if I had never taken that first hormone pill. I would have physically looked like any other boy. I would have been expected to date girls, go to college, get a job, get married, have kids, retire, die. If I had been born a girl, I would have been expected to date boys, and eventually to get married and bear babies. The long-term expectations that are on me now are neither those of a boy or those of a girl. They are limited, not seeming to go much beyond getting out of my dresses and into a pair of pants. The short-term expectations are very confusing. I'm expected not to date, 'cause they think it's sick if I'm with a boy, and just as sick if I'm with a girl. At home, I'm expected to do woman's work and answer to a boy's name. I'm expected to avoid trouble with that fat psycho-p a t h

it in a pair of pants.

I was never a psychic fit for my putative gender, anyway. My behavior got me in trouble from the earliest age. I was always being called a sissy, told to be a Man. "Boys don't cry." "Boys don't play with dolls."

The Problem

by Dallas Denny

"Boys are snips and snails and puppy dog tails. That's what boys are made of."

The fact is, despite what my parents think, the hormones didn't make me the way I am. I got on the pills because I was this way in the first place. The pills have just kept me from being a freak of nature like Doc Symmons.

I am definitely going to have to put Doc's peg in a new hole. That look he sneaked at my pocketbook told me a whole world about him. He's stuck with the body of a man. Perhaps, like me, he has the psyche of a woman. Perhaps he has had to learn to control and subdue his innermost feelings because his hormones have given him masculine features. If not for the estrogens, would something very much like that have happened to me? If he had put himself on hormones when he was thirteen, would he have been like me?

Thinking about such things made my head hurt.

Every time the drawers under my bed get really full, I clean them out and put the money in a CD account. But I couldn't touch the account without penalty. I needed money to run on, and all I had was thirty-five dollars. Then I remembered my savings account. I had opened it when I was twelve years old, with babysitting money, and had never taken the money out. I thought there might be a couple of hundred dollars in it.

The drive-in window at the bank stays open until five o'clock, and we got there just before it closed. I took all of the money out of the savings account. There was a bit more than three hundred dollars, and it would have to provide

Johnny Ray. I'm expected to be helped by a psychologist who has the same problem I do.

I want to do normal things: date, go to college, get a job, get married, have kids, retire, die. I just can't stand the thought of doing

me with clothes and gasoline and food and a place to stay until I could find a job. I had a check coming from the truck stop, and then there would be nothing. No work, no eat. Bobbo Joe had, perhaps, ten dollars. The man eats like a horse. I would have to feed him, at least until payday, for he seemed to be along for the duration.

After we left the bank, we drove by Mary June's house. Her truck was not in the drive. I needed to talk to her. She was the one spot of sanity left in a life that was falling apart. I couldn't phone her. Her parents wouldn't put my calls through. She had always called me, but now I wasn't at home, and my parents were unlikely to relay a message. And because of my suspension, I couldn't go on the school grounds and catch her there.

I guessed I would have to sneak up to her house that night and leave a message under the windshield wiper of the truck and hope that gawdawful alarm didn't go off and that she found the note before her parents did.

Bobbo Joe had been acting mysterious. There was somewhere he wanted me to go. Having nothing else to do, I indulged him.

Chapter 11

Bobbo Joe made me drive him to a convenience mart way out at Exit 266. We walked past the attendant and up to a bulletin board, which bristled with business cards and hand-lettered index cards: Alterations, General Contracting, Electrical Contracting, Plumbing, Septic Tanks Emptied, Backhoe for Rent, Yards Mowed, Firewood for Sale, Auto Body Work by Disabled Veteran, 1966 Volvo (Needs Work), Babysitting, Drummer and Lead Singer Looking For Band, Four-Family Yard Sale, Sculptured Nails, Dachshund Lost in Fair Park Neighborhood.

Bobbo laid his blunt finger on a blue business card. "I was in here about a month ago," he said. "Someone very strange-looking put this here."

The card read, "Support Group for Transsexual Persons. Discrete. Confidential. Dial (404) 693-8101 and ask for Alice." It was a long distance call. I bought a diet Fresca and got four dollars worth of change and headed for the pay phone at the front of the store. I dialed the number and put in the money when the operator told me to and a man answered.

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Alice, please?"

"This is Alice," he said, and I hung up.

"Alice is a man," I hissed at Bobbo.

He just grunted and shrugged. I stuck in a bunch more quarters and a dime and redialed the number.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you said you were Alice."

"I am," he said, and I hung up again.

The third time, I managed not to disconnect.

"It's me again," I said. "You don't sound like an Alice."

"I have trouble with my voice," she admitted. (He admitted?) "How can I help you?"

"My friend saw your card on a bulletin board and showed it to me. I'm in all sorts of trouble because I'm..." I swallow hard, because to my knowledge the word "transsexual" had never left my mouth.

"I'm... I'm not a boy. I'm a girl, but I've got a Problem." I left the exact nature of the Problem to her imagination.

"I've been kicked out of the house, and suspended from school, and fired from my job, all on account of they think I ought to be a boy. There's just me and Bobbo Joe. the Paiute Indian, who was fired because he flashed Mr. DiPoulo and Murray the manager in my defense. There would be three of us, but I can't locate my girlfriend, Mary June. We got nowhere to go, and not much money."

"Honey, we're not the Department of Social Services. We can't help you find work or a place to stay. But if you would like to come in, you would be welcome at any of our meetings. In fact, we're having a little party tomorrow night to celebrate one of the girls' surgery. She's leaving on Saturday. We would love to have you."

"Good," I said. "Where is the party?"

"It's at six o'clock in the evening, at the tenth house on the right from the corner of Virginia and Highland, on Highland," she told me. "In Atlanta."

"Atlanta?" I said, looking at the card. I hadn't noticed the address. "Atlanta is a long way from here."

"Well, if you can't make it, just you remember that we meet every other Saturday at the same place. You're welcome at any time."

"Maybe I'll come sometime," I muttered, and put the receiver back on the hook.

We went back in the store and bought a bunch of little cans of Vienna sausages and a box of saltines and sat on a retaining wall and ate them. Bobbo put a sausage in his mouth and then flipped it over with his tongue. I'd seen him do the same thing with a lit cigarette, so I wasn't that impressed, and I told him so. He said it was good practice, and before long he was doing three at once. It got me tickled, and I got him tickled and we just sat there laughing until we ran down and then I found that I wasn't laughing, but crying — and it wasn't a little cry, either, 'cause it was the outlet for all the pain and frustration I'd been feeling. Bobbo, who is rarely at a loss for words, was more perplexed than he was that time Murray tore all his dollar bills in half. He just sat there looking uncomfortable until the tears finally wound down and I could say, "Well, what are we going to do now?"

Bobbo looked at me with a peculiar expression on his face. "You could marry me."

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The Problem

"Bobbo!"

"We could get drunk."

"Bobbo!"

"We could go kick Johnny Ray's fat ass."

We talked some more about the first two suggestions, and then I let Bobbo Joe kiss me a couple of times, discovering to my surprise that he wasn't bad at it. He used a fake ID to get us a six-pack of Miller, and we drove around looking for Johnny Ray until the beer was all gone. I had Bobbo call Mary June's house twice and ask for her, but her mother didn't know where she was.

As there seemed to be nothing else to be done, we drove to the mall and played video games, and then saw a movie, and when the mall closed, we got in the car and drove by Mary June's house. She still wasn't home. Bobbo announced he was hungry, so we went to Pepe's and ordered a pizza, where I flirted with three college guys. They had a pitcher of beer, and wanted me to sit with them, but I couldn't, on account of I'm not of drinking age and Pepe would have kicked me out, and on account of I was with Bobbo Joe.

When we left Pepe's, we made one more pass by Mary June's house. Her truck still wasn't in the driveway, but all the lights were on, and there was a black-and-white county car in front of the house.

Well, I didn't think the Cunninghams were going to shoot me with the sheriff there, so I went up and knocked on the door. Justis, the deputy, opened the door. There was a ketchup stain on his blue uniform shirt. There was hair on his knuckles, and I wouldn't have been surprised if there was hair on his palms. He motioned me in.

The sheriff was sitting at the kitchen table with a big yellow pad and a number two yellow pencil, and I saw he had written "Mary June Cunningham" on the pad and underlined it three times. Police work.

"There she is!" shrieked Mrs. Cunningham, who ran across the floor and grabbed me and started shaking me. "What have you done with our daughter?"

"I'm looking for your daughter," I said, trying to keep my teeth from rattling. "I'm intendin' to marry her." It surprised me when I said it.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Mr. Cunningham snorted.

Sheriff Foster pried Mrs. C's hands from my shoulders, and motioned me to sit. "Are you saying that you don't know where Mary June is?"

"No sir," I told him. "I've been waiting for her to come home. I only came in because I saw your car."

"She's lying!" cried Mrs. Cunningham. "She's done something with Mary June. They've been sneaking around

together for the past three or four years, doing God knows what. She's hidden her away somewhere."

Justis was blushing at the thought of what Mary June and I had done in the truck, but only I noticed. Or maybe Sheriff Foster did, because he sent Justis outside to check my car. He came in shortly with Bobbo Joe, who confirmed my story.

Mr. Cunningham turned his wheelchair in my general direction. "Do you have any idea where Mary June could be?" he asked.

Something was bothering me — something Johnny Ray had said. "I hope I'm wrong," I ventured.

"She does know!" cried Mrs. Cunningham. "She does know where Mary June is!"

"Sheriff, I hate to say anything unless you have reason to believe that something has happened to Mary June. I don't want to make trouble."

The sheriff hesitated a minute, and then said, "Show her." Mr. Cunningham rolled to the counter and picked up a slip of notebook paper and put it about three inches from his face so he could read it, I suppose to make sure that it still said what it said. He thrust it out and Bobbo Joe took it and brought it to where I was sitting.

There was a message on the paper, written in a childish hand with a felt-tip pen. "I have your daughter," it read. "It's time she found out what a real man is like."

I knew the handwriting.

"Well?" asked the sheriff.

"Johnny Ray wrote this note," I told him.

Chapter 12

Everybody was talking at once, just like on television. Mrs. C. was accusing me of me of being in collusion with Johnny Ray. Mr. C. was giving explicit details about what he was going to do to Johnny. Justis was asking the sheriff what he wanted him to do, and Bobbo was feeding Mr. Cunningham suggestions about what he could do to Johnny Ray when he caught him. Sheriff Foster was hollering for everyone to shut up.

When everyone stopped talking, the silence seemed loud. Mrs. C. began sobbing silently, and the sheriff gave her reassurances that sounded false. "Don't you worry. It's just one of those teenage infatuations. He won't hurt her." He took a yellow Ticonderoga pencil from his breast pocket and underscored Mary June's name twice more.

He looked at me. "What made you think Johnny Ray was behind this?"

"He made some threats about Mary June. That's why we got in a fight and got suspended from school."

"Exactly what did he say?" the sheriff asked.

"He said she needed a real man to put the meat to her." Mr. Cunningham made a choking sound.

"And then she would forget me. He said that he was going to take her away from me. And then we got kicked out of school for fighting."

The sheriff was writing furiously. As fast as he could get it down, I told him all about the scuffle at school and all the times Johnny kept sneaking up on us at night. When I finished, Mrs. Cunningham had a grim look on her face. Mr. Cunningham was pacing and fuming—or rather, he was rolling his wheelchair back and forth, which was the closest he could come to pacing. Bobbo Joe sat there wearing his Indian face, revealing nothing. Justis, I could see, was remembering all those times he had watched us through the back window.

Sheriff Foster stopped writing. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"Would you have believed me?"

He thought for a moment. "No, probably not. Where do you think he would take her?"

I don't know," I told him.

"Go to the cruiser and get on the radio," the sheriff said to Justis. "Find out where the Ray boy lives. Have a stop-and-detain put on his car."

"His car isn't running," I said. Bobbo looked proud. "They'll probably be in Mary June's truck. Johnny always liked it." I had taken a pen and a note pad from my pocketbook. I wrote down Johnny's address and phone number and handed it to the sheriff. "This is where he lives."

The sheriff grunted as he pulled himself out of the chair. "We'll go directly to the boy's house," he said. He and Justis went out the door.

Mr. and Mrs. C., and Bobbo Joe and I just sat and looked at each other. After about fifteen minutes, something truly remarkable happened. The tension in the air suddenly evaporated, and Mrs. Cunningham said, "Laura Ann, perhaps we have misjudged you."

Mr. Cunningham started, as if he had been thinking the same thing. Mrs. Cunningham continued. "I know you care for Mary June, Laura. I know you would never hurt her, and I'm sorry I thought that you did. I suppose you were just someone convenient to lash out at. Poor dear, you must be as worried as we are."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"But I think you know why we haven't approved of you and Mary June seeing each other."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mary June needs to go with boys, not girls. Now, I know there's folks in this town who say you're not a girl, no matter what you look like on the outside. I don't go along with that. You never looked much like a boy anyway, and for the past three or four years now — well, no matter how hard I look at you, I just can't see a boy. If I did, then maybe I wouldn't mind you going with Mary June."

"No, ma'am."

"We've opposed the two of you being together for all these years, and it has bought us nothing. If — when — we get Mary June back, you're welcome to visit her and if the two of you want to go out together, we won't stop you. Right, Jason?"

Mr. Cunningham nodded in affirmation.

"Of course, we think it would be very nice if you and she would each find a nice young man. But no more difficulties between us. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and went over and hugged her. We were both blubbing, and Mr. C. and Bobbo looked a little misty.

We heard a car pull into the drive; it was the only thing that saved us all from a real crying spell.

Sheriff Foster came in with his notebook, and with Justis. He sank heavily into a chair and opened the notepad. "They're not there," he said. "He's packed his clothes and disappeared."

He closed his pad and turned to the Cunninghams. "I have no reason to suspect that Mary June went with Johnny voluntarily. I'm going to put it on the radio as a kidnapping," he said. "They'll be picked up by morning."

The problem was, they weren't picked up by morning. The police would have never found them. I wouldn't have either, if not for my little sister.

to be continued...

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