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Not My Child

Disowning and Other Abuses of Transchildren

by Suzan Cook

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I was eleven, when my parents caught me wearing my mother's clothes. In an instant, I went from being a sissy to being a queer.

There is a platitude that says that parents always love their children. It is not always true. L.G.B.T. children are regularly disowned - and the streets of the big cities

are filled with these children. These kids don't just "all of a sudden" get kicked out for no reason. They are the children who were caught dressing up at young ages, and had their love and emotional support withdrawn. They are the children of "religious" families who get kicked out because "God hates queers." They are the children who have been abused by psychology, institutionalized with Gender Identity Disorder in institutions that try to make the boys act masculine and the girls act feminine ... at least until they max out the psychiatric insurance.

"You are not my child." "Get out you goddamned freak." "Get out and don't ever come back." "Go live with the rest of the fucking queers."

As a public service announcement of a few years ago said, "words can hurt as

badly as a fist, and cut as deeply as a knife."

All too often, kids who have been disowned and kicked out of their homes are told that they should strive to tame their parents' wrath: "Send books. Keep the channels open. Try harder to make your parents understand. After all, they are your parents, and deep down they love you."

You wouldn't tell an abused spouse to keep trying to mend the relationship with her/his abuser. Don't tell a disowned child to keep trying. Better advice would be to seek out the support and counselling needed to heal.

I know I probably sound cold beyond words, but some families are really toxic. One girl I knew moved here from Mexico with her family when she was three. After her parents became legal citizens, they legalized her brothers and sisters. Because she was a gender-queer, they wouldn't legalize her. They kicked her out instead. Another of my friends' family read Kaddish (a Jewish funeral service) over her and declared her dead.

Gender psychologists classify transsexuals as "primary" or "secondary" depending on whether they came-out (or were forced out) early in life, or later in adulthood, respectively. One of the main differences between these two groups is that Primary Transsexuals are far more likely to have been thrown out of their houses and disowned for being obvious gender-queers. Activist Riki Ann Wilchins calls this transparency - "the inability to pass as "gender-normal." Gender-queer kids never really enjoy the luxury of coming-out. Many biological "boys," unable to mask and hide their femininity, are out from day one, marked and labelled "sissies." Hiding their gender differences and being able to come-out in adolescence or adulthood are luxuries denied.

Sissy, Tomboy, roll the two words around in your head and ponder the weight of both those words; contemplate the discordance of the two images. Tomboys are cute. They play "boy" games, run around in "boy" clothes, and are generally considered okay. They are not stigmatized - at least, not until they hit puberty.

On the other hand, little boys who play with dolls and wear "girl" clothes are immediately stigmatized. Sissies are beaten and harassed at school. If they are discovered dressing up and learning to perform the gender of their identity at home, parental love is withdrawn. I was hit with the reality of what I was one day when I was eleven, when my parents caught me wearing my mother's clothes. In an instant, I went from being a sissy to being a queer. In that instant, my life was turned upside down. A wall of ice descended, and I immediately felt the loss of my parents' love. I realised I was no longer their child.

A few years ago, a woman who had thrown her gay son out because his queerness was against her religion publicly repented and wrote a really weepy book after her son did a half-gainer off an overpass in front of a semi-truck. I don't feel her pain. She was an asshole for disowning her son. Both she and her son would have been better off if she had found another church.

In late October 1998 the Georgian County Day School threw out "Alex" McLendon for adopting a female gender-identity. A newspaper photograph showed her wearing jeans, sports shoes, and a long-sleeved striped T-shirt; the accompanying caption said Alex was dressed as a female. Basically, the clothes were neutral; they took on the perceived gender of their wearer. Now, Alex will be home-

schooled because she identifies as female. She has already encountered the first reduction of her civil rights. Unfortunately, the chances are high that Alex will continue to encounter such reductions in her rights for the rest of her life.

In the highly accurate movie *Ma Vie en Rose*, a young transsexual child's family is hounded from their house, her father from his job.

Gender-queers are the most visible and least protected element of the L.G.B.T. community. They are the most likely to have suffered abuse, and to have emotional problems as a result of that abuse.

The persecution is real.

The very laws aimed at preventing the abuse of children in the labour market work against runaways and throwaway minors. To work as a minor legally, you usually need a work permit signed by your parents. If you don't have a high school diploma, obtaining even minimum wage positions becomes highly difficult.

I know about these things.

I have lived some of them. I have been a sex worker. I was a drug addict - speed, coke, and pills. I have seen friends overdose and die. I have seen a friend murdered because she was working the streets.

My Mexican friend ended up working the streets. She got busted, tested positive for H.I.V., and was deported to Mexico, where she had no one.

Sex work is, and has long been, a major source of income for throwaway kids. Aside from often being one of the only options available, it is also a powerful lure. To be paid for being desirable, to feel wanted and attractive when all their lives they've been told they are worthless. It's sort of an antithesis to being told, "No one will ever love you or want you. Not a woman. Not a man. Not even a queer man or woman."

Despite this fact of life, the trans community almost never mentions this disowned sector of itself. Support groups, journals (and more recently, the Internet) have been a major resource for communication within the TS/TG community, but within these forums, class differences often become apparent. Far too often, the poverty experienced by many transsexual women as a result of the stigma attached to their very being goes unacknowledged.

To judge the trans community by these forums, groups, and by the journals' targeted readerships, the majority of M.T.F. transsexuals appear to be middle-aged, currently or formerly married to women, and overwhelmingly attracted only to women. The idea of attraction to men is usually tacked on almost as an afterthought, applied to all except post-ops.

The transsexual community seems itself perpetually split between those who are protecting what security they have managed to accumulate, and those too busy just trying to get any at all, a divide which falls along predictable age and class lines. Where their money comes from is a question which largely goes unasked. The answers, when located in the back pages of urban papers, parts of Los Angeles' Santa Monica Boulevard, San Francisco's Tenderloin district, and parts elsewhere, are not different - they are a part of the trans community, and deserve a voice too.

What can we, as a larger queer community do? L.G.B.T. continuation schools are a good start. Teen shelters that are open to runaway/throwaway trans children would be great. Employment counselling and job placement would help. Sex workers need the same legal protections as non-sex workers, and the same right of dignity in profession. And for all transsexual and transgendered people, inclusion in civil rights legislation such as Employment Non-Discrimination Act, on a national level and in state-wide initiatives which protect employment rights, would be wonderful.

Trans childhoods don't have to be tragic. Having loving parents makes a difference. One child in San Diego was very fortunate, when she went to her mother and said, "Mom, I need to be a girl," her mother acted supportively, and even helped her get surgery as a teenager ^[1]. But for every child fortunate enough to have a mother like that, at least five others are out hooking on Santa Monica Boulevard.

The persecution is real.

[1]"Just Evelyn," Mom, I Want to Be a Girl". 1998 Walter Trook Publications, Imperial Beach, Ca. I.S.B.N.-13 978 0966327209.

Suzan Cooke

TranzGrrlla Suzan Cooke is a baby boomer who came-out as herself in the months before Stonewall, 1969. An openly sex-positive bisexual transwoman, she became politically active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and then in the trans/gay/lesbian/women's movements. She has now been post-op. over half her life, yet remains in her words, "many things and still emerging." She currently lives in Hollywood, California.



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