

THE LEAKY CANTEEN

Early in my life I made decisions that simply seemed like *the next indicated step*. Rarely, if ever, did I consider the consequences of my choices. I certainly never thought of how my actions could affect my character or my personal identity.

I was a survivor. My parents had always implied that I would be on my own after high school. I was to fend for myself, regardless of whether or not I had at least one introspective tool in my belt. I'd make it, of that I was sure, but I would pay a price for my careless decision. The cost would be painful branding in my heart. It would read *Discrimination*. This lesson began thirteen years ago.

It's the early spring of 1990. I'm on a bus from Davenport, Iowa, to Omaha, Nebraska. Technically, I'm 18 years old. Internally, I'm still chewing bubble gum and playing hopscotch. Omaha is the home of the M. E. P. S. Center where I will do my enlistment, in-processing for the Air Force. I don't recall what the acronym stands for. At the time I didn't know much of anything, especially what M. E. P. S. stood for.

Earlier that morning the Air Force recruiter, whose name and rank I do not recall, had shuttled me from my middle-income home to the downtown Greyhound Bus station. We're in his green sedan. I don't think it's a military car, but I don't know. It seems weird that he is taking me and that my parents aren't. I don't feel enough like an adult to be riding in a car with a man I don't know. At some point I do a mental rationalization. *Okay, I'm safe with this guy. He's wearing the trusted military ensemble. The military wouldn't hurt me.* I take a deep breath and try to relax but still, I am nervous and the car ride is awkward for me. I'm not comfortable with long silences so I fill the space with a variety of unremarkable questions. I don't even care what the responses are. That's not the point.

We work our way into a seedy part of Davenport. The fences turn from boastful, tall, cedar to chain-link. Before today I'd never even realized that we have a bus station. The only time I can recall being in this part of town was when I was twelve and my dad had taken me to an Angels Baseball Game. They're our biggest sports team. They play "double A" ball.

A while later, I'm safely on the bus. I settle in to one of the red vinyl seats. Through my jeans it feels like I'm sitting on a bag of marbles, but I try to make the best of it. The bus sounds like an amplified bathroom fan as it labors forward. I rest my head against the cold, vibrating window. I doze. I dream of the security a military job will offer. When I wake, I find myself looking out on to a sea of endless, beaten down, cornfields. It's early spring so the crops haven't yet been planted. All that remain are the dried empty arms of the stalks. A patriotic song plays in my head, *above the fruited plains*. A second thought enters, *without fruit*.

Eventually, the cornfields turn to wheat. It's then that I know we have entered Nebraska. Segregation. In the Midwest, each state has an identifying crop. It's as if they've each drawn a line in the earth saying, "Please don't put your corn here, we are wheat people", and vice versa.

At dusk, we rumble into the gravel lot of a greasy spoon cafe. I order chicken fried steak and cherry pie. I am without the concept of health food. I leave a 50-cent tip, smoke a Marlboro Red, and climb back on the bus with the others. After arriving in Omaha I am put up in a no-tell motel with several other teens that are also military bound. The following morning we are transported via a blue school bus, to the M. E. P. S. Center.

At "O-dark-thirty hours," we pull up in front of a large, one-story-brick building. The interior of the building has a cold, sterile appearance. It is undefined with the exception of an American Flag posted proudly in the corner. It smells like whatever product my mother uses to clean the oven. The floor is covered in immaculate tile. Paralleling the floors are rows and rows of fluorescent lights. It isn't unlike a hospital. We wait to be given some direction. My eyes play detective. There's a young man in uniform sitting behind a high-countered reception desk. He looks stiff. He does not speak as he dutifully carries out whatever orders he's been given that morning. I'm searching for some sign of what to expect. The walls are naked. The building is holding her secrets. Anxiety fills my chest as I wait for instruction. Some thoughts enter, *Am I doing the right thing by joining the military? Does it fit who I am?* A man in uniform approaches us. My thought process is interrupted. The questions leave almost as quickly as they had entered.

I maintain my nervousness throughout the day. I have my first experience feeling like a cow among the herd. We spend the day being shuttled through a battery of tests, probes, papers and oaths. Unlike cattle, our inoculations are verbal, already preparing us for boot camp and “the enemy”. I don’t know who “the enemy” is. I press on. Afraid to say much of anything, I keep my thoughts to myself. I wonder when I will sign up for the college tuition program I had seen on the T.V. ad. It’s a “quid pro quo” for kids who needed college money. It’s my motivation for enlisting, *I think*.

Ten or twelve hours later, I’m seated at a Sergeant’s desk in a less than comfortable chair. He asks me a list of questions, which resembles a grocery list for a family of twenty. Like a good little soldier, I sit up straight. Like a good little soldier, I answer honestly. The list went something like this; *Are you a U. S. Citizen? Have you ever done drugs? Have you ever committed a crime? Have you ever been convicted of a felony? Are you a lesbian? Have you ever knowingly committed perjury? Have you ever transported or sold narcotics?* Metal exhaustion sets in. He starts to lose me. There are so many questions that they start to blend together. I get the idea that he just wants to know if I’m a bad person. I know I’m not. I answer quickly. We move on.

Flash forward two years. I am stationed in Okinawa, Japan. I’ve just had my first kiss from a woman. The building blocks of my life finally conform into a shape I can decipher. Lesbian. I have no shame in it. I am whole. I am delighted. I’ve been sitting in a dark room for years and this woman reached up and turned the lights on.

After my “awakening,” it didn’t take me long to figure out who the other lesbians were on base. They accept me unconditionally. I start hanging out with them constantly. I’m the orca who has found her pod. They don’t try to put me in a dress and make-up like the other girls in my dorm had done on countless occasions. That always left me feeling like I just didn’t get it. But now, like a governor’s pardon, I have been granted my freedom.

One afternoon a friend from my dorm approaches me. She is heterosexual. She motions with her hand for me to come closer. She seems secretive, like we are ten years old and she wants to give me the secret password to our club. She leans into my ear and whispers, “You had better be careful hanging out

with those girls or you'll get a bad reputation." I'm confused. I say, "What do you mean I'll get a bad reputation?" I am not whispering and this is apparently making her uncomfortable, like she will be labeled if she is seen with me. Guilty by association I think they call it. But I do not care. I continue as if my ears are deceiving me and I need to prove it. "Are you saying that because they are gay?" "Because I am gay too, so what?" Her face is red. She is a tortoise dying to pull her head into her shell. She wishes she never started this conversation. She doesn't make eye contact with me as she struggles to find the words, "Jessica, you aren't allowed to be gay and be in the military." I am truly shocked, and hurt.

It's a few days until I recall that I was asked a remarkable question upon my enlistment. I am lying in bed, searching my mind, trying to make sense of the newly found feelings of judgment and discrimination. And then, like the way algebra finally clicks, it comes to me. Clarity. The same man that had asked me if I was a felon, had, in the same breath, asked me if I was a lesbian. Innocently, honestly, and without hesitation I slipped into my answer, "no." I recall actually giggling like a schoolgirl when he asked me. I had been embarrassed by the question. Lesbian. It sounded like a dirty word.

To this day I am dumbfounded by the notion that being gay is an automatic ban from the U. S. Military. It had made me feel like a Vietnam Veteran who'd come home from a war he never wanted to fight, only to be spat on by his country and her self-righteous judgments. I had given myself to my country, yet I was not accepted as I was. It was, and continues to be, so flagrantly unfair.

Soldiers like myself were, and are, referred to as *G. I. 's*. The acronym stands for *government issued* and it means that while you are a G. I., you are technically government property. You're really no different than items in military surplus, a Hum-V, an M16 rifle, or a canteen. But I felt like a leaky canteen. I spent the rest of my enlistment working in vein to cover up the hole. I had become damaged goods. Not wanting to be discarded, I kept quiet about my sexuality.

My circumstance in the military brought to light a painful truth. Because of that experience, I ended up spending most of my adult life feeling like there was something wrong with me for being a lesbian. I had learned that people and institutions weren't necessarily going to like and accept me as I was. For many years

I wrestled with the same tumultuous question. *Was I less of a person for being gay?* Unfortunately, I had come out believing that I was.

Once I entered civilian life I became more acutely aware of the vastness of sexual-orientation discrimination. I encountered it everywhere. I wilted. I let myself be walked on by the sole of blatant privilege and prejudice. I relentlessly tried to appease the homophobes in order to feel accepted. As a result, I died an internal death.

Then something changed. Enough was enough. I could not look at myself in the mirror and respect who I saw. I had an epiphany. *When I stoop to the level of individual and societal ignorance, I am hurting myself and fueling the oppression fire, just as I did when I held my silence in the military.* Trying to patch the hole in the canteen never helped the problem. Letting the water run freely may have.

I cannot go back and change how I handled things in the past, how I'd internalized the prejudices of others. I did the best I could at the time, given my level of maturity and naiveté.

Today, with the support of my friends and family, I have become someone I can be proud of. The pride is not so much for being a lesbian, but for being a person who doesn't compromise her character based on what other people, and society, think. In each instance that I don't take the path of least resistance, I am creating an identity and a self-character that I can respect, and feel good about. Finally, I can know that by walking my truth, I am contributing to the inevitable fall of oppression. For so many others, and me that day cannot come too soon.