

# SHAME

*by* Melissa Ann Chadburn

My people come from what is often referred to by banks as LDC's (least developed countries), little brown tropical countries, drenched with religious fanatics, stalks of sugar like magic wands picked for five cents an hour sold for 3.00 a box. My people come from generational recycled 40 oz. bottles of beer and shit and cigarettes smoked backwards (the lit end in your mouth), and cassava, and ube, pickled duck fetus', and piss, and mah jong, gambling lots of gambling and child sex workers boys and girls. Untold numbers of pretty pretty boys. My people are light bulb eaters, bed-of-nail walkers, fire eaters, every day is a circus in their jungles, alive with naked intent. By the time we got here we would be happy at any swap meet, all of us hollowed out like empty mango shells. My people rested naked sandwiches on the arms of chairs, and always had an open saucer with half melted butter, a block of Velveeta cheese in the freezer, an open rice cooker. Every kitchen with brown and white diamond checkered floors lined with ants, and every top drawer with little boxes of broken chalk to try to fight the ants and roaches, my people have big rubber fly swatters, and eat with their teeth floating in glasses of water at the dinner table. My people live their lives tending to things. And if you told them the city was cruel with budget cuts they would scoff at you and your American budget cuts. They lived half their lives in city dumps. Here the trash bins behind restaurants are caged and locked to keep homeless out. "Why do they lock it up?" we ask. "So the homeless don't eat the trash." "Oh."

But it still makes no sense. Is food-trash only for throwing away? My people think it's our greatest responsibility to be good ancestors. My people drink coffee for dinner. Kills the appetite. Little empty bellies always round. I guess because of that I fall in love with small terse women I see from a distance. Like this morning in yoga

the woman next to me rolled on her side, I noticed she had skin the color of antique lace a perfect porcelain bob and freckles. I thought about how beautiful she was and for that brief pose I loved her for being so pretty.

My brother Ken was effeminate a sort of *ma vie en rose*... He painted his nails and wore my mom's dresses but still when it came to running and sports he was uncatchable.

The world was filled with things he was not supposed to wear. But it seemed that's all he cared about were the not-supposed-tos.

I wanted to start this story by saying I have a secret to life that I know you don't know. Mostly to induce the excitement of a revealed thing. The secret is this that there is only one surefire way to get to authenticity and that is grief. The story I am about to tell you, well when this happened, if I was a building two of my windows would have broken. Another lesson I learned from this was what a crock of shit it is what my family said about being good ancestors. The final lesson in all of this is something we all know but like to forget some of the time, it's that death is non-negotiable, as much as we would like to think that it is.

As Ken got older he got leaner, even more feminine long wavy hair but there were elements of the uncomplicated boy in his eyes and smile. He developed an oral fixation, like a puppy only happy with things in his mouth. As he got older his step mom would walk around the house and call him bakla. He said if he wanted to be called a fag he would just go back to school. She read his diary. All she really had to do was listen to his music or look at his well manicured nails. He got kicked out of their small house in Maryland and started making money dancing as a stripper. I guess this is ironic. You'll find out why. He got AIDS. Up until then he had been a living rebuke to maintaining moderation. I started stripping so I could get money quick to go see him. See the irony?

It was raining I was coming home from getting dumped by my girlfriend in Chinatown to Oakland. I didn't know then that relationships take time and are filled with conversations about nothing. I had been stripping for three months. On the way home I

got robbed at the ATM. I still had some cash in my bag. Not much. My knees, hips, thighs, were bruised. Everything ached. Including my head. I was probably hung over. I couldn't get naked without being drunk.

On the way I saw this guy get on the train with a black shirt and neon pink writing that said, "feminism is the radical notion that women are people." I immediately thought he wore that shirt hoping to get laid. Walking down the street were two mod korean girls one wearing plastic black glasses frames without lenses- her lips a perfect matte red. At the BART station a girl got out of a car. Her boyfriend in the driver's seat. She was wearing too short shorts. She did a hair flip. A real full hair flip. Two teenage guys were jostling each other by the turnstile "Hey man, for-real smell my fingers!" He shoves his index and middle finger up against his friend's nose. His friend bats the hand away. " I 'aint gonna smell your fingers, Nigga."

There were ads everywhere; for hair dye and Queen Helene make-up products, and beer, and Cognac, and Newport. It made me feel there were people out there in the world of product development and merchandising who understood the nature of my little nagging needs. I passed a motel with a weekly rate and remembered all those hard nights with my girlfriend I would quietly slip out of bed, get dressed, and comb the streets looking for somewhere anywhere I was appreciated.

I saw a prostitute-she gazed at me and it was one of those gazes that was like a trap. I knew if I gazed back too long she would've taken it as some sort of transaction. Like when you stare back at someone at a bar and they ask you if they could give you a drink. Before people do these things they survey their options their eyes rest on people that might be a yes. Because everyone hates rejection, even a prostitute. Actually I read in an article recently that sex workers probably under go the most rejection. So I wonder what makes me look like a possible yes. I found it to be a dissimilitude (part compliment part diss) like if a smoker asks me if I have a light. I'm ashamed I still look like a smoker, but am glad that I still have a

chance at passing and stealing peoples secrets. Do I look like a pro-connoseiur? Ultimately, I felt annoyed with how personally I took everything.

I saw a guy I knew and he was wearing one of those knit hats with fake dreads attached to them. He's a white guy. I wondered what he was thinking. Was he serious or just joking? Do people think they could get away with that? I decided I couldn't pull off a conversation without addressing the hat so I acted like I didn't see him and kept on walking.

I had to stop at the bank. It was getting bright out and I was still a little hung over. My mind was patchy. At the ATM a woman with an oversized T-shirt with colorful writing on it, (I think it said "Lake Tahoe"), and jeans came up to me. She had a check. She said she just got paid with a check and doesn't have a bank account can she endorse it to me and I give her the cash for it. I think I saw her talking to someone else and knew it was a scam but for an instant it made sense. I looked at her face. She had a car waiting for her with a man and some kids. All I knew was that I had enough cash in my bag to go see my brother and the rest was to be deposited and it was over. All the dancing and shaking my butt and gyrating on poles. It really did have a beginning middle and end and this was the end. I gave her the cash and immediately regretted it. The light bulb switched on. IT WASNT TRUE! I didn't know what to do but my instincts made me believe we were all here for a connection. That people want to connect. For some reason I thought this woman was interested in our similarities. So even though I looked like a stone butch dyke with short platinum blonde hair and a wallet with a chain connected tucked in my back pocket I ran after her and said "But I got kids at home!" She just got in her car and rode off.

When I got home the house was disheveled. No one else was there. I lived with a foster brother and sister but they were both in love constantly. My sister's jewelry box was missing. My television was missing. When I got to my room all of my stripping and sex-affiliated accoutrements were slung about, latex clothing, corsets, a couple of strap-on dildos. It turned out we had been robbed, but at

the first moment I saw my room I felt like it was personal. There was just one tiny thread holding me together. I had three hundred bucks in my bag. Enough money for me to get to D.C. The whole reason I started dancing in the first place. To see my Ken. He was dying of AIDS. I called him to tell him I was coming. As I sat on the line listening to the rings I thought of two things: 1) I love the way it sounds on the radio or old TV shows when they mock phone calls. It goes baliining balliiiiiiing blliiiiing for the phone and then there is a muffled voice on the other end of the line wah wah wah wah... and 2) the silence of the wait reminded me of walking into a church. Finally his roommate picked up. He informed me my Ken had died a month before. I cracked. I sat on the kitchen floor and cried a howling relentless could no longer breathe sort of cry. I put my hands in my hair, holding in my brains. I whimpered. I asked the air, "Why?" I banged on the floor. I scratched my face. But better than all that I surrendered. I ran out of ideas. I was always so resourceful and so full of ideas and could always look decent doing it. But today I know that that desperate moment on that kitchen floor on 53rd and San Pablo saved my life. That small moment when I saw my room for the first time after being robbed I felt so exposed so full of shame. In the moment I found out my brother died I played everything back. Everything I had done to get the crumpled money that was in my bag. Lot's of bad choices ran through my mind like a photo montage in a bad movie. Me doing a girl on girl show without protection on stage, me desperately eyeing every customer in the club and quickly getting undressed after dressing to see if I could seduce that one last guy out of twenty bucks, me bartering with guys over the price of a lap dance (which is apparently prostitution), me losing my girlfriend, me drunk everyday by 3:00 pm with cum stained dresses, having those tiny little liquor bottles fall out of my bag on the muni. When I look back at pictures of me then I was chubby with a giant septum piercing and the look on my face was always "get the fuck away from me!" I don't know how I ever made a dime. Anyhow there's still a piercing that happens in my heart and my throat. I still fear the gynecologists

office more than doing taxes. It's like the end of a really codependent relationship when you say you have lost parts of yourself you couldn't get back.

I cried after my first dance. It was like something in me shifted that I could never get back. But I shouldn't have. You shouldn't. The shame that I had all these years has never served me. It's only in telling you to let go of any that you might have acquired that I truly believe to let go of my own. So thank you. I love you.

