Virgin

by Mike Handley

As soon as the cold metal bands snapped shut around Steven Weldon's wrists, all the fight and indignation left him, which was the point after all, and he glanced around the cavernous room full of eyes. That's all he saw. Not faces, arms, legs or steel-toed boots. Just eyes, like a bunch of lottery balls swimming in a sea of Dickies blue and Carhartt brown.

The plant grew mostly silent as coworkers gawked and whispered. Two or three of the guys might've had his back in a bar fight, but not here, not on the plant floor, not when the word “pervert” began wafting through the room like a stink. Steven wanted to cry out, wanted everyone to know that this — whatever this was — was complete bullshit.

But after the detective in a J.C. Penny's suit and too-wide tie said the word “queer,” Steven bit his tongue and closed his eyes. Nothing he could say, even if he could think of something, which he couldn't, would salvage the reputation he'd sown throughout adulthood. He'd pretended to be a regular Joe for so long, he knew damn well what the real Joes were thinking.

Steven relived that tortuous moment every night for the next two decades, and he thought of dozens of things he might've said, like “What in Sam Hell are y'all talking about?” or “This is some kind of mixup,” or even “I ain't no fucking queer.” And he wasn't, at least in practice.

He came no closer in prison either, despite what you hear. His stare was no more alive than a boarded-up storefront. Keep on walking, or don't, it said. There's nobody home. And nobody knocked.

He waived his right to an attorney, hoping the whole mess would just go away, like the prosecutor intimated. He pleaded not guilty to possession of child pornography, stunned actually to hear the charge read aloud, since he thought it had been reduced on account of his agreeing to plead guilty to harboring indecent material — not even a

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real goddamn charge. Nothing he said would've kept the people outside the courthouse from spitting at him afterward.

After he served his time, the maximum a god-fearin' judge could impose, Steven drove into the hinterlands and earned a little money clearing brush and selling fence posts, among myriad other odd jobs.

Steven was a hollow tree of a man — outwardly normal for a tired fortysomething, but empty inside. He lived alone in an old farmhouse that reeked of decomposition and Lysol, the previous tenant having left a dozen skinned raccoon carcasses in the attic when the man was finally evicted for being a year — a whole year — behind in rent.

That kind of sentiment, a landlord's accepting a man's promise to pay as soon as his ship comes in, is why Steven wound up in Steinauer, Nebraska, population 147, shortly after his release. Outside the cities, folks were more loosely strung. Handshakes and promises were legal tender in podunk. As long as you don't steal a neighbor's cow, shoot his dog, or fuck his wife, you can stay. Same if you manage not to do two out of three.

You don't have to eat fried fish or calf balls at the American Legion on Fridays. Don't have to attend “bologna night” at the auto parts store during deer season. Or attend church. You can get by with nodding to the clerks at the Thriftway Grocery and Casey's convenience stores. As long as you don't put up a pro-abortion sign in your yard, you can come and go as you goddamn please, no eyebrows raised. That suited Steven just fine.

If anybody noticed the sign in his yard, the one nearly hidden by the circle of weeds Steven never trimmed, they didn't say anything. It read:

PUBLIC NOTICE
Pursuant to N.E. 776.27
Steven Weldon
is a convicted
Sexual Predator

and lives at this location

They'd said Steven, then 27, was a molester of children, of at least one anyway. They'd come to his house with a warrant while he was working a shift at the tire plant, and they'd found a cache of Polaroids of a faceless, naked boy. There also were hundreds of jpegs of penises on his computer, too, which they'd somehow accessed without his password: 74Charger, his favorite ride.

The authorities had set up a sting operation, creating a website with boys of questionable age, and they kept tabs on the ISPs of those who wound up there, even those who came by accident, as well as those who left immediately upon seeing the baby-faced 20-year-olds hired to star in the soft porn. Steven had been surfing Google images and clicked the url by accident. He'd signed off immediately, which was too late.

They'd cuffed him in front of his stunned coworkers, called him a deviant piece of shit and a queer for good measure, the last pronouncement much louder than it needed to be. And he was convicted, even though he denied the charges. Even though he told the truth.

“De facto trumps flagrante delicto,” the district attorney told the dour-faced jury. The prosecutor smiled, locked thumbs and rested his hands over his turtle shell belly. He was proud of his choice of words, but only the nun in the jury box knew what he was saying: The photographs are enough to convict. She made sure the 11 others understood.

Truth be told: Steven had never touched a kid. He'd never even touched an adult. In his world, a man didn't walk up to another man and say, “Would you like to dance?” You didn't even glance sideways at a line of urinals, unless you were doing a three-point, zip-and-flush turn.

Steven might've ripped the digital images — all of cocks fully maned and ostensibly grown, to his eyes — off the Internet. But the damning Polaroids were of himself, and there was no way he could prove it. An aunt had given him a camera, several boxes of film and

flashcubes for his 14th Christmas. He took his first selfie, though they weren't called that in those days, within a week. And he was hooked.

He found a hiding place for the good pictures, the ones that made him appear bigger, whether flaccid or hard. He learned to wash himself with hot water to get the desired effect. The penis would expand, and the balls would droop. He liked lowhangers, which is what they called them on the Internet.

The pictures he didn't like, he burned. Not a day passed when he didn't think of a new way to pose and hold the camera (Polaroids didn't have self-timers). He was most proud of discovering large round makeup mirrors. Whenever these thoughts seized his brain at school or work, he sometimes had to run to a bathroom to jerk off, if he didn't want the whole world to know he wasn't thinking about long division or the multiplication tables.

Because of his thirst for seeing himself naked — images he pretended were of a nameless, faceless somebody else — he began working myriad odd jobs to pay for his film and flashcubes. His parents and their friends admired his work ethic; his schoolmates thought he was crazy for trading Saturdays at the river for shoveling shit at the veterinarian's kennels. And nobody knew why.

He was thankful Polaroid kept making film all the way up to the digital camera's appearance, since he would never dream of having someone else develop his 35mm film.

He couldn't have Internet now. But he had a laptop and a digital SLR with several lenses, a macro among them. He spent his days off at home, alone, and then he'd upload the photos to his laptop. When he was done, he erased them and joined his coon dog, the one he'd inherited with the house, on the sofa, where they'd fall asleep listening to the radio.

Steven was partial to old-school country music, since so few songs were about love in the present tense, a concept foreign to him. The dog was partial to Patsy Cline, or so it seemed.