

Chapter 9: The Crash

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

Lucy had heard bits and pieces from Alan while he was living there, but had not had an opportunity to hear the story from my viewpoint. A number of friends had helped me move a bedroom's worth of stuff over to Lucy's, and when they left, we both sat down and looked at each other and Lucy said, "So, tell me what's been going on." Thus Lucy was the first Choir member (aside from Erin and Liza, who were far more than just Choir members to me) to hear the full story from my point of view. She was immediately supportive and my room became a haven for me.

Lucy lived much further north in Portland than I'd ever lived before, in a neighborhood that has been considered a war zone for years, with a reputation for a lot of drug sales and some gang activity. Portland is a fairly segregated city even today, and this particular neighborhood has been primarily African-American since shortly after WWII. Lucy is white, and was among the first white lesbians to recognize this area as one of the last affordable neighborhoods in the city. It took some getting used to, not living walking distance to downtown or to major grocery stores. I took to walking to the nearest mall, Lloyd Center, which was some 2-3 miles away, down a steep hill. I would buy some little thing or other and then walk back. I had nothing else to do all day.

During this summer, I visited the Bay Area three times. Prior to this crisis, I had never visited more than once in a year, unless there was some family emergency. During my 1995 visits, I stayed mostly with my sister Susan and her partner Rita, who had reacted very negatively to Alan's

revelation. Rita held the view (not uncommon among lesbians) that anyone transitioning from female to male was doing so at least in part to gain male privilege, and she resented this.

Now that I was questioning my own gender identity, I did not share this with anyone in my biological family. I did not want to experience their reactions to my own process. I was having enough negative reactions of my own and did not feel strong enough to handle anyone else's negativity or misunderstanding. Beyond that, it is typical of my family to question unpopular decisions, to disallow and disrespect family members' personal processes. I had no answers to give, and felt I would be attacked for asking questions with no answers in place. So I kept silence, using my visits more as a refuge from my sterile existence in Portland than as an opportunity to process what I was going through.

Another moment from that summer that I remember with crystal clarity is the day I found my new name. I was walking in Oakland, on my way back to Susan's house from the store. I was casting about in my mind for a name for myself, and the name "Reid" flashed into my mind. Immediately I felt at home with this name. (I have had the rather odd experience over the years since then of having grocery store clerks and the like compliment me on my first name, without their having the least idea that I chose it for myself!) I loved the images it brought to my mind – reeds bend with the strongest wind, rooted in earth and water simultaneously (homage to my Virgo sun and Pisces moon), able to withstand the stormiest weather because of their flexibility, when rigidity would cause another plant to break. I spelled it Reid just to be different.

Still fearful of family reaction, I casually

said to my sister Susan that I was thinking of changing my name (without telling her I'd already found "Reid) because I didn't think "Nancy" fit me very well. I wanted to gauge her reaction to this fairly innocuous step. Susan, bless her heart, said, "Your name hasn't fit you since you were five." I initiated the legal name change process shortly after I returned to Portland from that visit. This was one of the few positive incidents of that summer.

One of the three visits I made to the Bay Area that summer was a horrendous mistake. I was still clinging to Alan, in some odd way knowing our relationship was over, yet not allowing myself to begin the process of relating to him in a new way. I use male pronouns now in referring to Alan, but in the moment I was unable to do so without bitterness and anger. Because of this clinging, I could not say "No" when he asked me to go to the first FTM conference in San Francisco, held in August of 1995. Though I'm sure he did not really want to go this route, he agreed to stay at my mother's house with me. I knew he'd developed some on-line friendships, and that he intended to meet some of these folks at the conference. I was quite jealous and wanted him staying with me so I would know he was not having an affair with someone else.

I don't remember much about the content of that conference. At the initial gathering on Friday night, I could not take in the import of the occasion, the first time any official gathering of FTMs had ever happened, anywhere. There were about 400 people there, FTMs with friends, wives, lovers and family members, all grinning ear to ear at seeing so many of their own kind when they'd been isolated for so long. I just wanted to kill them all for shattering my old life so effectively and permanently.

I attended a few workshops on Saturday, I have no idea on what topic or who else was there. Saturday night was disastrous. My therapist had referred me to a psychiatric nurse who worked for the same agency, and he had prescribed a "mild" anti-depressant for me. The theory was, if I took this medication prior to going to bed, I should sleep through the night. If I could just establish a normal sleep pattern again, much of my depression would lift. So they thought.

I was supposed to take half a pill the first night, as the dosage was uncertain. I tried that, prior to leaving for the Bay Area, and still woke crying in the middle of the night. On Saturday night of the FTM conference, at my mother's house with Alan there, I took a whole pill, reasoning half a pill had been insufficient. Within about twenty minutes, I had a major depressive episode, worse than any I'd had to date, crying uncontrollably and feeling suicidal. Had Alan not been there, I don't know what I would have done. I had not been feeling this way prior to taking the pill. Four hours later, the length of time the pill was intended to work, the depressive episode ended. I felt it in my brain, as if someone had turned a switch "off." The impulse to cry and feel suicidal was just *gone*. I looked at the bottle of pills in absolute horror, and never again dared to try another psychotropic medication.

Next morning, I bottomed out emotionally, feeling flat and frozen. I went to the conference with Alan, but at the door, I said to him calmly, feeling like an automaton, "I'm starving. I'm going to go find some breakfast. I'll see you later." I thought he knew what I was going to do, but felt I had to fight this demon on my own and that either I would survive, or not. He couldn't help me. I have never forgotten this

feeling I'd had that he knew, and it's been an uphill battle to forgive him. I knew intellectually he was right – he couldn't help me, anymore than a spouse can help an alcoholic stop drinking. The impetus has to come from within, and all the outside agency in the world is not going to make a damn bit of difference if the alcoholic doesn't want to stop drinking. Alan could not give me the will to live. However, knowing this intellectually has not made it much easier to forgive him. In that moment, he *did* have the power to stop my leaving the conference, and did not do so.

Still an automaton, I went back to my mother's house to get my credit card, which I had neglected to bring with me that morning. I snuck in the house, intending to tell my mother that we'd forgotten the card and that I'd come back for it. But she was working in the backyard and never even heard me come in and leave again.

I went to three different stores, purchasing small bottles of sleeping pills in each, and threw in a few additional random items so no one would look oddly at my purchase. I bought a bottle of water. I went into a liquor store and bought a pint of 151 rum, thinking it had the highest alcohol content of any booze around and would therefore be the most effective. The water was to wash down the alcohol, so I would not throw up, since I was not a heavy drinker and was unused to the taste of hard liquor.

I planned all this in the moment, with total detachment and the numbness of one whose emotions have shut down due to overload. I didn't have the energy to feel anything anymore. I went to a remote corner of the Arboretum in Golden Gate Park and began methodically removing the sleeping pills from their individual foil pouches,

lining them up on a handkerchief next to me. I had the rum ready to go, and the bottle of water open next to it.

I sat there for four hours, unmoving, occasionally putting a sleeping capsule in my mouth, tasting the gelatin of the capsule. I had a paper napkin with me, and on it I wrote down all the reasons I could think of why I shouldn't do this. I don't remember any of them now, except the deciding factor, but I do remember there were eight of them. None had a thing to do with me or my life or any remote desire to live, but with other people. The deciding factor was the thought of the look on my mother's face when she had to identify my body. Despite my own pain, I knew hers would be greater yet in that moment, and I couldn't do that to her. I wrapped the sleeping pills in the handkerchief, capped the rum, and drank the water.

Still an automaton, I got on a bus and went back to the conference. The look of relief on Alan's face when he saw me simultaneously angered and gratified me. "How could he have let me go like that if he knew I was going to kill myself?" warred with "He must still care about me to look that relieved to see me." He came up to me and I told him what had happened. He was very shaken and said he wanted to spend some time with me. He was shocked when I returned and told him what I'd gone through and said he wanted to spend time with me. (Alan has told me since then that he did not realize what I was going to do when I left the conference, and only started worrying about me when I didn't come back.) He wanted me to get something out of this conference, which had obviously been very meaningful to him, and said he wanted to go to a workshop with me, any workshop I wanted to attend. I picked one, but have no

idea now what the topic was.

Though I had begun to face my true identity, obviously I was not ready to have its reality reflected back to me. Nor was I ready to have Alan's true identity shown to me so baldly. I looked at the roomful of 400 FTMs with a strange mixture of envy, jealousy, hatred, and nostalgia for my unconscious identity as a lesbian. I got nothing positive out of that first conference at all, and do not remember that time period fondly. When writing this book, I was already writing about the fall of 1995 before realizing I'd skipped writing about this conference experience altogether.

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