

Essay & Memoir

ISSUE 28 / ESSAYS FROM THE EDGE

STORY BY MEGAN FOSS

SHARE



Fourteen Years in the Making

I guess if you look at it through the twisted lens through which men tend to view the world, you could make the argument that I started the conversation.

Standing outside the recovery center during the smoke break we always took at the one-hour mark, I noticed that Mike, who ran the group, had stepped away to speak with Karen in private. I was standing at the top of the wheelchair ramp, and when I looked at the seven or eight people lined up smoking, I noticed that I was the only female.

“We’re kind of heavy on the male side tonight.” Sometimes it was like that. Sometimes it was an even spread; sometimes, predominantly male. I hadn’t meant anything in particular other than to make conversation, but I apparently hit a nerve in Eric. It seems particularly ironic that, on that Tuesday night, the guys’ dialogue had drifted into conversations about how women could use their sexuality to get out of trouble.

I’d missed group twice and had only seen Eric one other time. He had the same T-shirt on both times: West Coast Choppers. He turned to look at me after I made my remark and, in all seriousness, said, “There are more guys here than girls ‘cause girls can work their way out of most stuff.”

Another voice chimed in, “Yeah, women get away with a lot more shit because of that.”

I ground my cigarette out on the flat, steel edge of the railing and looked directly at Eric. “You never know—next time you need to get out of trouble, bend over and drop your drawers. Maybe you’ll get lucky and get to go home. But make no mistake about what that is. it’s rape. You may not get that, but it is.”

Some 20 years earlier, when I was in my mid-20s, rape was a fact of life. Occupational hazard. Supporting a \$300-

a-day heroin habit doing \$20 and \$30 dates was a task done by rote. A spot on an assembly line.

But that summer, sometime in the early '80s, I was new to the stroll in Bella Vista, and for no other reason than that, I could charge \$50 a trick while the other girls were lucky to get more than \$20. Also, because I was new, I thought the difference in price had to do with me and not just that I was relatively untainted meat—at least on that stroll.

We didn't stay on our corners that summer. The heat melting the tar on the pavement kept us moving up one side of the stroll and back down the other. Didn't make any difference to business. The guys who came looking for us knew what to look for, and it didn't matter whether we were walking or standing still. They pulled over, and we got in—actually grateful for 20 minutes of air conditioning.

A strange assortment of girls walked the dust and gravel of Bella Vista that summer. Two were young—early 20s. Two had just finished doing five years and were out on parole, from which they had absconded after their first fix on the outside. Out of the pen at 10 and in the spoon by noon. I always figured that concept was gendered, but when Suzie and Ninna got out, I realized that heroin truly was an equal-opportunity employer.

The girls who weren't hooked up with some guy and supporting two habits usually partnered with another hooker and pooled their take at the end of the day. There were also two or three couples with the guys attempting to stay legally employed so they didn't lose their houses and their kids while their women made sure they didn't get sick and become unable to keep those jobs. There was a pair whose names I don't remember, but I do remember that he was a truck driver and that they had a drop spot underneath a billboard on U.S. Highway 4, where she made sure to leave him a loaded rig twice a day.

That summer, I was on my own, except for Cheryl, and I didn't have quite enough knowledge to make sure I could survive and save my habit. I'm still not sure I would have been able to pull that off if it hadn't been for Cheryl. She knew everything. She'd been walking that stroll since she was 12 years old and her mother found out that her new husband was molesting her daughter and, in a fit of drunken, toxic jealousy, dumped her on a freeway on-ramp when they were on vacation.

Though Cheryl was younger than most of the girls on the stroll, she'd booked more time on her feet than most of them would in a lifetime. She was 24 that summer and had spent half her life within a five-mile radius of that on-ramp. She was a bona fide outlaw, and nobody flicked with her.

She worked alone, but that summer, she decided to be with me, and I was completely protected from the dangers that newcomers face on the streets. She schooled me in Outlaw 101, and like her, I grew to be more feral than civilized. There was desperation in the air that summer. Cheryl knew it and understood.

Cops who'd always left us alone, except to make sure we were safe, were replaced with over-eager, anxious-to-prove-themselves baby cops, and vice started making Tuesday night roll-up a regular thing.

So we couldn't work Tuesdays unless we had prearranged dates. Vice would follow us, and the tricks wouldn't stop. They didn't want their names on the police blotters for soliciting a prostitute, but if you ask me, none of them would have even gotten a ticket. Those cops were trying to squeeze the life out of the working girls—and it was personal. Especially with the sergeant. I probably knew his name back then—it would have been on his uniform—but he wasn't significant enough to commit name to memory. It never occurred to me that, 20 years later, my experiences with him would become relevant to my thinking. Back then, all the girls knew about him but me, and Cheryl wasn't around to warn me that day he rolled up behind me.

I was walking away from the Taco Bell, where I'd just fixed in the bathroom, and was eating a taco, moving north on Bailey Road, taking enough time to eat my lunch before a date came around. Instead of a date, a county cruiser pulled up behind me on the shoulder, showering me with dust and spewing gravel at my bare legs. When he screeched his brakes, he stopped with barely five inches between his bumper and me. I knew it was going to be a cop before I turned around. I didn't know it was going to be the sergeant.

I knew to stop and turn around, to drop my pack on the dry and cracked dirt that passed for a shoulder on that stretch of Bailey Road, to put my hands on my mostly bare hips. That summer, the contrast between the white fringe of my cutoff Levi's and a tan so dark that the only makeup I needed was lipstick made me look healthy—even at 105 pounds. I was good at marketing. My legs were all muscle; I looked healthy, and I worked that. Tricks are big on healthy looks. Don't like to have it in their faces that they're contributing to larger crimes.

But this was no trick, and when he edged up behind me, I did a quick personal inventory. I had no warrants, and the only incriminating things in my possession were my works—and he didn't have any kind of probable cause to search my bag. Besides, I'd already done my dope, and nobody I ever knew got busted just for carrying paraphernalia. Other

than that, there was nothing more than a couple of pairs of cutoffs and my white Hanes tank-tops, which I wore pulled up and knotted on one side.

I walked around to the passenger side so I wouldn't be hanging out in the traffic—and so no one I knew would see me talking to a cop. That's edgy at the best of times, but most dangerous when you're new. There were times when the only things that kept me from getting a beat-down by the older girls was Cheryl and my man, who, although currently residing in San Quentin, had juice and enough of his crew left to enforce his protection if they had to. But even they couldn't do anything about the sergeant.

And I underestimated him, thinking I was smooth because I didn't have any legal baggage. Took about two minutes to know he was going to win that one.

I leaned in the window he'd put halfway down. "Am I in trouble?"

"That depends," he said, and I thought how much he looked like Snidely Whiplash, but the comparison was out of kilter because Snidely was always the bad guy to Dudley Do-Right's heroic rescues of fair Nell. Theoretically, the sergeant should have been Dudley.

I shifted my legs because even the dust on the side of the road was too hot to stand on in bare feet. "On what?"

"On whether or not you're under the influence of an illegal substance."

That was a new one for me. I understood the concept of not driving a vehicle while under the influence, but I didn't know he could nail me for being under the influence simply because I was in public in the middle of the day. I tried surreptitiously to pull down the hems of my shorts and keep my arms folded as close to me as I could because if he wanted to push it, he had a case. I had tracks that were old and scarred, running five and six inches on each arm. My hands had been operated on twice for cellulitis. I cocked my head to the left so my hair could fall over and hide my newest site—the vein on my neck.

"No, Officer, I'm just getting my lunch and going for a walk."

"Let me see your I.D."

I knew it was over then. Whatever he wanted, he was going to get. I didn't have an I.D. I wasn't even sure what alias I was using that month. "No, sir, I haven't got any."

He got out of his car at that point and walked around the front of it, pulling handcuffs from that neat little pouch cops have on their belts just for cuffs. Those belts have more nooks and crannies than English muffins.

“What did I do? Why are you taking me in?” I actually shed a few honest tears. If he took me in, I wouldn’t get out until the next morning, and I had just spent my last \$50 on the quarter I shot in the Taco Bell bathroom, which meant I’d get released sick and broke. That’s a real tough cycle to break.

“You’re being charged with being under the influence.” He smiled real snarky, and I couldn’t really wrap my instincts around the entire situation. It didn’t matter; he put the cuffs on me, and I listened as they made the clicking noise that didn’t stop until they were so tight they were pinching my wrists. And, unlike you see on television, he didn’t bother to make sure I didn’t bump my head on the roof of his car when he shoved me into the backseat.

He started his car then and turned around in the Park and Ride lot so that we were headed over the hill on Bailey Road. The opposite direction of the county jail. I guess that’s when I finally got it.

“OK, what’s the deal?” I asked, just wanting to finish whatever it was going to be soon enough that I could get back to work.

“Do you know that being under the influence is a mandatory 60 days?” His voice was oily.

“Yeah, fine. So what’s the deal? We’re not headed to the jail.” The west side of Bailey Road was a ground-zero nuclear site for something or another. The east side was the border of the badlands, where we sold our bodies and shot our dope, and there was a sweet spot at the apex where you could do a quick date on a turnaround. We even stopped there sometimes to shoot our dope. It was unincorporated county land, and for the most part, the sheriffs didn’t go up there because Concord city limits and its cops’ turf was just a mile ahead.

He got to the sweet spot, stopped his car and came around to let me out and uncuff me. “Sit up front with me.” It wasn’t a request.

I sat in the front and hoped he’d be quick. “Why don’t you just tell me what it is that’s gonna happen so we can go our happy ways.”

He didn’t like the sarcasm—you could see it in his eyes. They narrowed just the tiniest bit, and even with the sun shining directly on him through the windshield, they had no light. No spot or angle that showed life.

“You’re gonna suck my dick just the way I like it, or you’re going to jail.”

“Fine. They say I’m the best, so let’s do it.”

He sensed my impatience and commented. “You better

do a good job. I'm not talking about a three-minute job you'd do on a trick."

"Don't worry. You'll be happy. You got a rag or something?"

"What do we need a rag for?"

"Cause I can't swallow."

"Oh, sure you can," he said, as he untucked his shirt and began unbuckling his belt. I listened with a sick stomach to the zipper grinding down and the metal noise as the various accoutrements on his belt clanked while he squirmed and wiggled into a position and put his hand around his erection. He leaned back in the seat, and I told myself this was just like any other trick—only this time, I was bartering for my freedom, and I wasn't in a position where I could demand payment up front.

I shook my head and repeated what I had just said. "No—I really can't swallow, it gags me."

The only response I got was a laugh that was half-grunt and half-threat, so I got situated to do the job. In less than three minutes, it was almost over, and when I felt the first contraction of his orgasm, I tried to use my hand to finish the job, but a hand that felt like it was bigger than my neck held my head down, with a force I couldn't fight, until I gagged.

Then, with the lack of control that tends to happen in moments like that, he seemed to forget I existed. He didn't move to stop me from opening the door to spit the remains of the sticky, bitter fluid onto the dust. I waited only a couple of seconds before swinging myself so that I could step out of the car and onto that same dust, but when I was less than two inches from the safety of the street that was my home, he grabbed my left arm. I didn't struggle, but I didn't turn around to face him either. He still had to straighten his clothes, and I was already mapping out a way to run. But he didn't want anything more from me.

"You don't have to walk. I'll give you a ride back."

Like I really needed to be seen getting out of a cop car. Getting tossed in the back in cuffs was one thing. You don't have any control over a situation like that. But getting out of one raised aU kinds of questions.

So I turned around then and did look at him. "I'd rather eat hardware."

I only had one more run-in with the sergeant, and after that, he stayed away. Might have been his bruised feelings. Might have been that he didn't like girls he couldn't bully. The second time, we went through the same motions. I sat handcuffed in the backseat until we reached the sweet spot,

and things went exactly the same, except for the swallowing. I was ready for him that time: Just as he was coming, I ducked under his arm, and he shot all over himself and even managed to swallow some because he had bent down to hold my head and his mouth was wide open and moaning.

“There,” I said. “You got your protein for the day.”

I was lucky that day. He could have run me in, could have seriously hurt me. But I got out of the car, and our eyes locked. For a few seconds, we both thought of all the possible outcomes. Then I turned and walked back to my side of the hill and caught a ride with the second car that went by I saw the sergeant occasionally after that, but he wouldn't even look me in the eye if he passed me on the stroll in his quest to find a girl who wasn't quite as much trouble as I was.

In the years I worked the badlands, I got into the wrong car more than once, and the deal in those circumstances was real simple. The trick got sex, and I didn't get hurt. During one of my husband's perennially short times out of the joint, he got me a gun. One time, I had to draw it. One time, I actually cocked the hammer, and one time, I even took a shot with it. Fortunately, I was a bad shot, even in the confined space of a car. Strangely, the only time it really made a difference in whether or not I was going to walk away unharmed, it was the gun and not the bullets that assured my safety. It was in my pack, and there was no way I could get it out. So I swung my pack as hard as I could straight at the guy's temple. I didn't take the time to look at the damage, but it gave me enough time to run.

And it was a six-year run. Soon, my prices dropped because there were always new girls. By the end of that run, I couldn't even begin to imagine how many \$20 tricks I'd done, how many men had passed through my life like so much traffic during rush hour on the Bay Bridge. These nameless masses, in a strange kind of irony, were the only straight folks that would come into the badlands knowing they'd be safe. Knowing that our chemically based economy depended on them, they drove their nice cars down the stroll without a worry then returned to their suburban homes and, in the morning, crossed one of the many bridges to well-paying jobs in the city.

I could, if it mattered, probably do the math and come up with a fairly accurate estimate. I've thought about all the money I spent: $\$300 \times 365 \text{ days} \times 6 \text{ years}$. But I can't estimate the tricks that way because there were a bunch of times, especially near the end, when my body was so tired and torn that I developed skills which were far more risky but brought in almost the same amount I made on the

streets. Even at that, there were still times I had to go out and work the streets.

And then one day, it was over. I took one too many risks. Sometimes I think I did it on purpose. Sometimes I think if I had to feel one more anonymous hand on my body I could easily have taken a life.

Years later, when I developed a drinking problem—because sometimes it only takes one bad decision to derail success—I found myself with no family left alive and a 9-year-old child whom I had no means to support. I also found myself living in a basement in the South Park section of Seattle, and, as heroin had done all those years ago, alcohol pushed it all into the back of my mind.

Five years later, I lost my child. I went to outpatient treatment at the local recovery center, but the social workers didn't think I was progressing fast enough, and after four and a half months, the child who had been my reason for living was gone. The child who had been the center of my life, for whom I had sacrificed all social life—that child was taken and then, by her own choice, at the age of 14, went to live with a father she had never known.

The day she left, I drank a gallon of whisky, passed out on a freestanding radiator and got third-degree burns on my left forearm and my back and right calf. Three days later, when I woke up, I didn't even know I'd been burned until I looked at myself in the mirror. I suffered through nine weeks of debridement, and although it was no longer required, because Molly was no longer living with me, I kept going to the recovery program in the hopes that something—that anything—could make me want to save my life.

And I think I would have had a good shot at it if there hadn't been the one last trauma.

Because I live out in the country, even though the neighbors are separated by long stretches of highways and back roads, we know each other and feel relatively safe in our homes. When my car breaks down and torments me on an almost weekly basis, I never have to wait long for someone to stop and offer assistance. It makes you feel at peace, which is almost worth the 30 miles to the nearest town—in spite of gas prices that are now \$2.49 per gallon.

So, that Wednesday night when most of the world was asleep and I was awake, I answered the knock on the door. I didn't remember his name, and although he had given me a ride once, he wasn't really part of the local landscape. He was young and good-looking in the way men were whom my mother referred to as degenerate prison trash. She had always defined the kind of men I found attractive with that particular moniker.

He said his car had broken down about a quarter-mile up the road and he remembered where I lived because of the one ride he'd given me.

"When I saw your lights on, I was so glad. At 2 in the morning, just ain't too many folks will open their doors, and my car's broke down. You think I could use your phone?"

I thought for just a second or two then held the door wide open and nodded him inside. Any misgivings I had were related to property—and I didn't have much. If he was looking for something to steal, he was out of luck. Almost.

I handed him the phone and stepped back. At that point, my street smarts were alerted, and I counted how many numbers he hit on the phone keypad. Six. He faked a conversation then pretended to hang up and handed me the phone, but he didn't move to leave. "Hey," he said, "you think it would be OK if I hung out for a while? Maybe do some dope? I got enough for two."

I couldn't even imagine where he'd come up with the idea that that would be OK. Tattoos in a few visible places? The fact that I hitchhiked occasionally? Or just because I let him in? God knows he wouldn't have found me attractive at the old age of 47, in my stained flannel nightgown and red-and-grey logger socks—not to mention my weight, my hair and the fact that I had no top teeth.

"No, you can't hang out for a while, and you damn sure aren't gonna shoot any dope in my house. What makes you think that would be OK?"

Then he stepped closer. And closer. Even then I didn't know exactly what was going to happen. I've watched "Law & Order" enough times to know that women don't generally get raped because of their looks. I knew enough to know it was an act of violence. And for just a second or two, I thought maybe I could take him, but when he pushed me to the floor with a balled-up handful of my nightgown in his fist, he had enough of it to control physical movement. I was right back in the sergeant's car, back to every trick who'd ever raped me, and I did what I'd learned to do back then: I held my hands out, palms up.

"OK, OK. I'm not gonna fight. Whatever you want, you can take."

I was the almost that he could steal, and for me—in those moments when he dug his fingers into my thighs and tore at my body—it became a business deal. You give it up; you get to live.

I wasn't exactly sure why I did the rape kit or why I waited for two days to go to the hospital but didn't go to the police. I had no intention of legally pursuing it—one of those ethical things left over from a life lived in the dust and

from the secrets of the meandering journey of a lost child.

Anjala, a girl I had become close with at church, who had had a similar experience, took me to the hospital Saturday morning and waited while I went through triage and the rape kit. There were clear bruises in a formation that you'd have to be blind not to know were fingerprints. There was no DNA to be found because I had showered. I knew that was the wrong thing to do, but not having any plans to do more than gather evidence for my own personal reasons, I didn't really care. Between the handprints and the vaginal tearing, I was satisfied that I had preserved what I needed.

Then the strange questions started. And in another bizarre coincidence, the same doctor who had treated my burns in the Emergency Room back in December was the doctor who treated me in the ER for the rape kit. She took pictures, looked me over and then, when she was doing the internal exam, asked me a question that made me think the rape kit had not been a good idea.

"Megan, do you have someone at home who's hurting you?"

"God, no. Why?"

"Well, there's some vaginal tearing, but you're bruised all over, and the bruises are at varying stages of healing."

"Well, no one hits me or hurts me. I live alone, and I don't date."

After she removed the speculum, she rolled her little stool over to where she could look in my face when she spoke to me. Anjala just sat in the chair, taking it all in, hearing the same words I was hearing and having the strange sense that something weird was going on.

The doctor asked one of those questions they always ask for rape treatment, and I wish I had a snapshot of her face when I answered.

"How long has it been since you've had sex, Megan?"

I narrowed my eyes and rolled them upward, trying to make sure my answer was right. "About 14 years," I finally said.

There was a nurse in the room, and both of their faces and their jaws dropped just like you read about in books. There was no quick composure. I felt my eyes burning and my tear ducts swelling up. I sat up and started taking my gown off before either the nurse or the doctor finally said something. It was the doctor who finally spoke.

"Fourteen years?"

"Yeah, 14 years."

“Really,” she said. “You’ve really been celibate for 14 years?”

I know that many rape victims feel like they get raped all over again when they press charges and get on the witness stand. For me, it happened in those moments when trained medical staff made me feel like a freak show, and I was glad, then, that I hadn’t called the police. Prosecutors would be better off trying a man who had raped a whore than one who had raped a woman who had chosen not to have sex for 14 years. If somebody had actually had the balls to come out and ask me why, I wasn’t sure I would have known what to say. That particular epiphany was yet to come, and it would come from a person whose kind I had learned to hate and to fear.

On the night the guy at the recovery center made the comment about girls having it easier just because they were girls, I had met with Mike in his office. He was my counselor as well as the facilitator of that particular class. I told him about the rape, and he asked me why I didn’t go to the police.

I made a face: *Yuck—I couldn’t do that*. What I said was simple: “It’s against the rules.” All those years later, my basic worldview hadn’t changed much, but he caught me up short with his response.

“Do you know that I used to be a cop here in the valley?”

I couldn’t think of a thing to say. I wasn’t sure I hadn’t broken the biggest rule of all, didn’t know if rules still applied when they weren’t cops anymore. But Mike Catkin, ex-cop or not, was the nian God put in my path, and he believed me, and to the degree to which he could understand, he tried to help. What he asked next became the cornerstone I used to try and make peace with myself.

“So why’d you do the rape kit?”

I mumbled and searched for words because I couldn’t think of a rational response. Finally, I managed to string together enough words to make a sentence that made sense. “I guess I just wanted proof to exist and be saved to prove what he took from me.”

“What did he take?”

Duh. “Don’t play me. I know he took my ability to choose. I know he took the safety of my home away, but what he really took was 14 years of celibacy. I sold my body for what seems like half my life, and I don’t regret that. But when I made the choice to stay here in this world—to live amongst you straight folks—I had one relationship, and that relationship gave me a child. But my body is precious to me in ways that nobody can understand, and I was never going

in ways that nobody can understand, and I was never going to give it to anyone until, or if, I got married again. That's what he took, and if I could arrange to have him, burned on a stake, it still wouldn't give back what I lost."

I don't think I've ever seen a man look so angry and so helpless at the same time. But he tried to make me understand something— something he thought could help.

"You have to understand that you didn't give it away and that it doesn't change your 14 years."

I wanted to agree with him, to accept that rationalization because it would have made him feel better. "You're right. I didn't give it away, but that doesn't change the fact that all these years later—when I have been so committed to never again having to be touched if I don't want to be, to saving what was left of my sexuality for the right man or *no* man at all—all these years later, I had a stranger's hands on my body."

Tears that had been struggling their way to feel smooth skin beneath them, to release the pressure behind them, ran down my face. And then one of those really weird quirks in my personality popped out of a dead serious expression on my face. "And I didn't even get paid, and I'm really broke"

He smiled and handed me a tissue. "You really need to give yourself a break."

"Yeah, I guess I should be glad he didn't kill me. But I'm not sure that's a good thing."

He kept a protective eye on me in group that night. Finally, someone had listened to me speak about 14 years of celibacy without thinking I was either lying or a freak, which was of some small comfort, but I knew, sitting in that class, that I'd lost something integral to my existence. I was broken and convinced that people could see the places where I had been glued back together and knew that something was terribly wrong with me. It didn't matter whether or not there had been consent. Something incredibly precious was gone, and it didn't matter how or why. What took 14 years in the making took only 10 minutes in the taking. I had to start all over, like an alcoholic. Day 1, Day 2, Day 3. ...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MEGAN FOSS
CONTRIBUTOR