

Lisa Clark

MODIFICATIONS

i) Hair

The first unsettling change in Claire's appearance came shortly after she ran away from home after her stepfather tried to rape her and she left him groaning and bug-eyed on the garage floor, clutching his hand to his left arm. She was sitting in the station, waiting for a bus to take her to the nearest big city, where she figured she might have a chance. There had to be agencies who helped kids like her, right?

"I've been watching you," said a guy with a Vandyke beard, smiling in a way that made Claire squirm. His leather cowboy hat and tinted glasses made him look sleazy. When he leaned toward her, the mingled scents of B.O., bad breath, and patchouli pushed her back into the molded orange bucket seat, which forced her into a slump. She turned her head away without responding.

He repositioned himself to catch her eye to ask what she needed, telling her he could take care of her.

"Hey, asshole, beat it." A man a few seats down leaned forward, his fist clenched. The first guy stood and, with palms held out toward the second, backed away.

Three hours later, after retrieving her backpack from the bus luggage compartment, Claire found a gas station and asked the check-out lady if she could borrow a pair of scissors.

"Hmm." The woman's eyes narrowed and her mouth pursed as she examined Claire from head to foot. Finally, she drew scissors from under the counter. "I guess there's no harm. Just bring 'em back when you're through."

In the restroom, after hunting for a clean spot for her backpack, Claire ended up hanging it from the

doorknob. Then, section after section, she lifted layers a stylist had spent an hour creating and snip-snip-snipped. Afterwards, uneven stubble poked out next to two-inch long neighbors that hung limply nearby.

The lady whistled low when Claire emerged. “Hope you’re not counting on winning any beauty contests.”

Claire gave her a miserable smile.

“Listen, honey. You need anything? I can give you a couple hotdogs. Those have been sitting there for hours. I gotta put fresh ones on, anyway.”

“Thanks.” Later that night in the branches of a tree, Claire’s eyes stung thinking about that lady.

2) Lips

After three nights and four times slipping off a branch and dangling by her belt, Claire found the soup kitchen a homeless woman directed her to. Claire knew that washing in the restrooms of gas stations was a poor substitute for a shower, but compared to a lot of the down-and-outers that shuffled around the charity’s food bar and tables, she figured she smelled like Chanel. Some of the people hadn’t bathed for months, maybe years. Besides that, several were on mental journeys into worlds a few light years away. In the end, Claire figured the price of hanging around them wasn’t worth a hot meal.

Her options, however, were limited.

She found out quickly that buying a cup of tea for ninety-nine cents at a fast-food restaurant doesn’t give a person the right to suck up the business’s heat or sit on a real chair for hours on end. “This isn’t your home away from home, kid. Get out and don’t bother coming back” or variations thereof slashed at Claire’s already low sense of worth.

Within a couple of days, she’d burned through \$20 of her \$105 with nothing to show for it. She’d be facing hunger, fear, loneliness, cold, and imminent sickness if she didn’t figure out how to survive soon. She tried a couple homeless shelters, only to find that kids who stayed there could be as short-fused as her stepfather had been and lots more violent. The street was no better, where people yelled at, veered away from, and insulted her. She didn’t need anyone else telling her what she already knew: that she was a waste of air, water, food, and space.

Then she found the Jboys.

The Jboys were started by three brothers, Jace, Jet, and Jay, after their mother died of an overdose.

That was maybe ten years earlier. No one knew what had happened to them, but kids had been joining and dropping out of the group for as long as current members could recall. The Jboys became Claire's new family. After she met Tricky, Ralph, Muffin, Sam, and a bunch of other homeless kids, Claire was still hungry and cold most of the time, but at least the Jboys didn't abuse her. In their company, she felt safe.

The group was composed of fifteen to twenty-one kids. A new kid found them every couple of months. Others left the group because of sickness, trouble with the law, death, mental illness, or departure to join pimps and drug dealers. To survive, the Jboys regularly begged, stole, and dumpster-dived. At night, when they huddled to sleep in abandoned buildings, under bridges, or in parks, various kids moaned and whimpered, and mumbled nonsense while others shouted in their sleep.

The Jboys were kids like Claire. More or less.

There was Monkey, the girl whose happiest finds were sheets of paper still blank on at least one side. Monkey also found an abundant supply of stubby pencils—no erasers, but she didn't care—in the backs of pews in a church where a couple of the girls would go and pretend to pray when they wanted to get out of the rain or snow or wind or cold. Monkey'd grab five or six mini-pencils and use them until they were an inch long (one of the boys sharpened them with a knife when they got dull). Then she'd return to the church, where her art supply had been restocked. Monkey's drawings weren't great, but Claire saw improvement over time. Folded in her backpack, she kept one of Monkey's drawings of a kid named Kermit, who spent hours each day playing marbles alone. She took it out whenever something reminded her of the way they'd found him one morning, stiff and lifeless.

Fourteen-year-old Ralphie—short for Raphael—slept with a raggedy stuffed lion, one of the only things he had left from his previous life as a suburban son. No one hassled him about this, including Joe and Sam, two of the older boys, who wore knives tucked into their boots.

Marissa, who seemed too sweet to be homeless, wore a necklace made of blue squares of Swarovski crystals hidden under a t-shirt she never changed the entire time Claire knew her. Marissa said she stole the necklace from her mom's jewelry box before she ran away. It cost \$300 and Marissa planned to pawn it if things ever got desperate. Claire wondered what "desperate" meant to her.

Then there was Tricky. "If you give me that scarf, I'll fix you up so people'll give you more when you beg," she told Claire. The scarf, a heavy wool knit Claire had wrapped around her neck before exiting a

department store, was no small price. Tricky was the only one in the Jboys who came with a marketable skill; Claire eventually agreed.

Tricky had learned the art of piercing from an aunt. This same aunt refused to take Tricky in when her mom abandoned her, but then you don't have to be generous and loving to be a body artist. Tricky knew how to pierce eyebrows, nipples, ears, cheeks, belly buttons, tongues, genitals (Claire passed on seeing those particular samples), and other body parts. "There are thirty-six separate piercings I can offer clients," Tricky explained. "Lip piercings would make you noticeable in an interesting way to people you beg from, and I'm not just talking about the type who want to wham, bam, and thank you. I'll doll you up with three pretty studs. Once people come close enough to check out your new jewelry, you can use your charm to get a buck or five or ten from them."

After numbing Claire's lips with ice and sterilizing a safety pin with mouthwash, Tricky punctured Claire's upper lip once and the lower one twice, then fed through silver ball studs with tiny red crystals in the center. Sure enough, people moved in closer to see. One guy even gave Claire a twenty, which she used to treat Tricky to a milkshake as thanks.

3) Tattoo #1

Even if you're part of a street family, you have to start looking ahead, asking yourself if you want to be homeless for the rest of your life and turn into that old woman with gray wire for hair who wears slippers over heavy socks and a dusty trench coat sans belt year-round and who's always chewing on her gums and muttering as she shuffles around the city pushing a shopping cart loaded with junk. Claire didn't.

When Enzo, the aspiring artist of all things discarded, with his sly smile, dreadlocks, and jeans with holes that gaped wider by the day, asked Claire if she wanted to move in with him, she agreed. A life that included a bed, a shower, and hot meals was too attractive to pass up. She was tired of snow and cold so profound she could think of nothing else. She tried not to let it bother her the first time—the night she moved in—Enzo wanted sex. "I like the way you say thank you," he said afterwards.

She continued to squelch her unease as Enzo begged, bribed, and bullied her into sex every day, sometimes a couple times a day, for the next few weeks. And when he began getting rougher. Then he forced himself on her even after she said no, when the only thing she wanted to do was curl up and have someone tell her everything would be okay and things would get better soon.

“Please, Enzo. I don’t feel like it.” “Please, Enzo. I’m sick.” Tears. “No, Enzo, I don’t want this.” Pushing him away. Pulling away from his grasp. “Stop it, Enzo. I’ll leave if you don’t.”

“That’s a laugh, you pathetic bitch. Like you have anyplace else to go. I’m doing you a favor letting you stay here.” She tried to run from him, literally, but he caught her. When she pummeled his chest with the sides of her fists, he backhanded her across the face, hurling her into the wall before yanking her up by the arm and holding her a couple inches from his face. “I’ll do whatever I fricking want, you ugly whore.” And, as though her struggles were nothing more than a mosquito’s whine, Enzo tore at her, slammed into her with grinding, pounding intensity, penetrating layer after layer of her remaining dignity with each thrust.

The tattoo on her stomach—the black and blue life-sized pistol pointed at her groin and paid for with money Claire stole from Enzo’s secret stash in the bottom of a dresser drawer—became Claire’s message to any guy who tried that shit on her again.

4) Tattoos #2 and 3

Other women at the Hope Battered Women’s Center tried to help Claire after she escaped from Enzo. They did their best to encourage, care for, and counsel her, but Claire descended physically and emotionally. At the depths of that mind space, she added her next tattoo, a mangled heart on her arm, followed soon after with one that looked like a toe tag on a corpse.

5) Three ear gauges on each ear in graduated sizes from smaller at the back and increasing in diameter as they moved to her lobes.

The time it took to stretch the holes in her ears marked the days, weeks, and months Claire needed to regain a small part of her self-respect and a modicum of confidence.

“You sure you want to have that done, Claire?” one of the counselors asked her when she heard about Claire’s plan. “It might limit your job options in the future.”

To which Claire answered, “It’s not like I’m looking to join a Fortune 500 company. They can deal with a few piercings at any job I’m likely to land.”

6) Bifurcated tongue

“You gotta try this,” said one of her coworkers at the diner where Claire washed dishes. “The sensation when you kiss—for you and for your partner—is out of this world. It’s also the ultimate way of

testing your limits and telling the world that you're the one who controls your body." Emily, one of the prettiest girls Claire ever met in person, stuck out her tongue, split in the middle, and made each side writhe and dance a weirdly erotic rumba. At that point, Claire wasn't interested in increasing a partner's enjoyment while kissing. The bruises Enzo had left on her psyche would take a long time to heal. To tell the world that she had control of her body, though? That was appealing. It was the kind of thing the Women's Center tried to instill in the minds of all the Claires who stumbled through their doors. She could do this.

Emily followed instructions from a YouTube video. Painful as the procedure was, it wasn't anything like the pain her mother and stepfather and Enzo had inflicted on Claire.

7) Two tiny pinpricks

"Claire, I'm trying to tell you that you're well enough to live on your own," one of the counselors from the women's shelter explained. The woman's brow furrowed as she held Claire's hand. "I know it sounds intimidating to search for a new job. It sucks that your boss fired you. But it's not your fault. That's what he told you, right?"

"Anyway, it opens up great new opportunities. You can go anywhere you want to look for a job now, not just in this part of the city." She squeezed Claire's hand and forced a wry smile. "We have ten or more others who need a safe place and protection from abusive people in their lives. We can't have capable, strong women like you depriving them of the chance for help, right?"

When Claire was little, she and a friend swore to keep a secret for the rest of their lives and never to speak of it to another soul under pain of death. They sealed their pact by pricking their thumbs with a safety pin and squishing them together. Claire couldn't remember the secret anymore, only the way they sealed the promise, and she wanted to make another pact, this time with herself, before she left the shelter.

A pinprick on the thumb is nothing after you've been pierced and tatted and your tongue's been bifurcated. She jabbed both thumbs, hard, so that a thick red bead appeared on each. Just when the bloody orbs grew heavy, ready to slide off, Claire jammed them together and twisted, whispering, "I, Claire Keller, promise to take back my life. I am no longer a victim. I call the shots. I'll never let another person hurt me again."

