



Theresa Shanahan was raised in a loving, two-parent family. Despite that, she failed to thrive, and had to threaten violence to keep from dying at the hands of her abusive lover. This is the story of why she and other friends became embroiled in humiliating, controlling, and violent relationships, and what they did to break free.

SHAMEFUL

by Izzy Quinn

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abuse, support survivors' healing, and end this violence forever."

SHAMEFUL



IZZY QUINN

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PROLOGUE

I never should have laughed at him. Tony hates being laughed at.

I turn from him and his fury-blotched face, to start back to our apartment.

I don't get far down the long, dark, gravel driveway before hearing shoes racing towards me. Each furiously kicked pebble beats a warning message as it slaps and gouges the side of parked cars. Am I to be slapped and gouged as well?

Then I hear a pained, angry "Shit" behind me, as Tony stumbles in one of the many potholes our slumlord has failed to repair or illuminate.

His bulging arm reaches around my neck, and the crook of his elbow hugs my windpipe.

My clawing fingers are useless against the tight grasp of his sinewy arm. My legs dangle in the air as we struggle directly underneath the window of Eileen's apartment. I can see her through the open blinds, dancing, just a few feet away. I try to yell but it's a mere rasp, and then it's nothing. I'm running out of air.

My last thought before it all goes dark: "Is this how my life ends?"

CHAPTER ONE

1999, one year earlier

It's the last week of summer. I'm in the doghouse with my parents for quitting college after my second year. My current role is caregiver for my sick mother. I'm trying to cope not only with the reality of her terminal disease, but also with a recent trauma I've shared with no one. I'm not doing well.

"I wonder if finishing out the last two years at St. Adele would have been better than burrowing in this backwards town," I tell Lydia from my dad's garage workshop.

Our four-bedroom house has one landline for all six family members – Mom, Dad, me, my sisters Mary Margaret and Colleen, and my brother Patrick. The other extension is in the middle of familial grand central station - on a small telephone stand at the intersection of living and dining rooms. That won't work - not when I've shared with my best friend a secret withheld from my siblings, that Mom has bone marrow cancer.

Not only is the garage quiet and private while my father is at his office, but it's also a cool spot that wards off most of the summer's heat.

What my garage hideout can't do, unfortunately, is reduce upstate New York's August humidity, or prevent what our blossoming maple tree and hydrangea bushes are doing to my allergies. Adding respiratory insult to injury is the sawdust permeating the concrete floor as I sit, knees nearly to chin, on my makeshift cement block chair.

My only other resting option is Dad's standing-height work bench. However, that's strewn with paint, shellac, brushes, and a

myriad of tools Patrick has failed to return to their Dad-designated spots.

He's going to catch hell when Dad gets home.

I cough again, and sniff.

Why the hell do we have to have sinuses anyway?

“Are you crying?” Lydia asks.

“No, I’m just sniffing. Sorry. You know me, when I get around dust and pollen. Gotta make do without my air-conditioned dorm and my cute little yellow Nokia buddy. She’s sitting dead in my dresser drawer until I can afford the monthly fee again.”

“I tried emailing you several times, too, Theresa, but you never answered,” Lydia says.

“Yeah, well, under this crowded roof the chances of my dialing up to hear ‘You’ve got mail’ are slim to none. So, my laptop’s nearly useless too.”

“Oh, Theresa...”

I’m annoyed by her tone of maternal chastisement.

“Yeah, I know, Lydia. I’m whining. But you don’t have to sound like Mom after I’d run off to watch the horses. I’m not four-years-old, ya know?”

“What the hell are you talking about, T?”

“I know I told you – about how I used to run to Riverwalk Drive to watch the horses run around the corral? When I was four?”

“Uhhh, I don’t remember, if you did,” Lydia says. “But it sounds like a good story. Do tell.”

I know she’s just trying to get my mind off current crap, but I tell her anyway, about the hell I used to pay each time my little pre-school legs waddled stealthily from home; about how I loved to flee the minute Mom’s back was turned, as she tended to my little sister Mary Margaret or baby brother Patrick.

I’d run off to beautiful, tree-laden Riverwalk Drive. A mile from our house, the curving road was bordered by huge, pillar-fronted estates of senior executives, whose deep birch or aspen-framed backyards faced the calm, azure Susquenango River.

As I scampered under a spotty ceiling of branches that beckoned to each other from either side, I always felt like Gretel minus Hansel, headed for my gingerbread house.

My destination was a huge, red-brick colonial with a roof deck at each end. It had a small horse corral at the back and an exercise track to the right. How I loved to perch on the bottom rung of that rail fence to watch three or four stallions trot their way around the dusty, manure-laden circle!

Inevitably those trips got cut short when the local police arrived to return me to my panic-stricken mother.

“Did you catch hell from the pigs?”

I smile as I think about the cops’ reactions.

“Back home you go,” I remember one of my badged chauffeurs saying, on one of my many getaways. “Your poor mother is worried sick.”

The glorious adventure of the squad-car ride always devalued my mother’s tongue lashing, however. I’d rush back to the horses first chance I got.

“Wow, if I’d tried anything like that at that age my Mom would have skinned me alive, I think,” Lydia says. “But I sure didn’t mean to treat you like a four-year-old. Fourteen maybe.”

“Shut the hell up!” I say, with feigned offense.

“Well, you are awfully full of teenybopper ‘woe is me’ lately, I gotta tell ya, T. It ain’t pretty – and it’s so not like you. Where’s my cheery, adventurous friend?”

Oh boy, I’m in for it now. She’s about to verbally kick the whiny out of me.

Ever since Lydia and I became fast friends in first grade I’ve always been able to count on her to be a butt-kickin’ straight shooter. People that don’t know her take one look at the short, slight, freckle-faced Norwegian / Irish lass with straight, flaxen tresses, and they expect meek. When they view our Mutt and Jeffness - me so much taller, with curly dark brown hair, and far more pounds of bulbous breasts, child-bearing hips, tennis arms and runner legs, people assume that I’m in charge.

That's so not the case, however. I'm the one who's often meek and unsure. Lydia, on the other hand, is usually as outspoken as she is brilliant. My sensible, cerebral friend angers me at times, though in my honest moments I admit it's because she's often right, and I'm just not ready to hear it.

"Theresa, your mother's cancer is horrible - probably the most horrible of anything you've had to deal with. I think because so much that's going on seems shitty, you're putting rose-colored glasses on your time at St. Adele."

"Seems shitty, Lydia? Really? It IS shitty."

"Theresa, do you remember the first call you made to me when you started at St. A - when you were crying and homesick?"

"Yeah, I remember. Why?"

"Do you remember what you called the nuns?"

I can't help but laugh at the memory.

"Big Sister," I say.

"Then, by mid-semester you're bitching about chemistry and calculus."

"Yep. I was pissed off. I just wanted to learn to be a reporter, and I sure as hell didn't see how chemistry and calculus were going to help. Still don't."

Grrr. I hate when she does that - uses my own words to prove her point.

She's right, of course, and yes, I have very mixed feelings about the Catholic college I chose. Or rather, the college that I let my parents push me into. It was a strange mix of new and old, its original building - still the freshman dorm - a beautiful, though forbidding, mansion atop a long winding, tree-shaded hill. It had begun life as the estate of coal baron Walter Soames.

My mother had attended St. Adele for one year and had had to drop out when my grandfather got sick and the money ran out. Ever mournful of her deceased college life, and her long-ago dream of being a Physical Education teacher, I think Mom's hope was to be back there vicariously through me. When she had attended - 1971 - it was what they then called an "all-girls school", officially "run" by the Sisters of Charity, with strict curfews and dress code. During my

attendance, the Order's maternal presence and parochial attitude was pervasive, although the dress code and curfews were gone, and the nuns now made up less than half of the faculty and administrative staff.

On this former farm, my freshman life put me in mind of one of my favorite shows, *Star Trek Next Generation*, our lives Borg-like, assimilated by the Catholic Collective. We wandered dark, narrow halls - from small, shared cement-encased dorm rooms to huge, dank, echoing cathedral-ceilinged classrooms. In intemperate weather, angry winds howled outside, rattling our floor-to-ceiling single-pane dormered windows, making it difficult to concentrate on the lecture.

"Lydia, I understand what you're saying - I totally do - but there were things about St. Adele that I so miss. Well, not so much about St. A, but about college life away from here, I guess."

What I don't miss I'm not sharing with anyone.

"Such as?"

"The mega cool friends I made. My freshman roommate - I told you about her - Lee Nguyen, from Vietnam. Her partner was from Haiti, and my friend Marina Babic - the one I spent this summer with - was born in Croatia. No way I'd ever have met any of them here in same ol' same ol' Bimming."

"Well, yeah, I hear that," Lydia says. "In Bimming diversity means running into a Protestant."

"Ain't it the truth. A deluge of Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics. White-bread, boring and bigoted. Just like the shit we heard in school about the 60's in Alabama and Mississippi. Only difference is here they don't say the ugly crap out loud. That wouldn't be proper. They just think it.

"People at St. Adele were actually aware we were about to enter the 21st century, too," I add. "When I mention Y2K *here* everyone looks at me like I'm speaking another language. Sometimes I feel like Captain Janeway, thrown back in time by a distortion in the space-time continuum."

"I guess that makes me Tuvok, as I'm stuck here with you," Lydia says.

“Well, you’re certainly the logical one,” I say.

Her chuckle is momentary.

“Theresa, I get the feeling that your leaving school wasn’t just about Liberal Arts or Catholic restrictions,” she says. “I could be way off base here, but I sensed fear too.”

Having a mind-reading friend can be annoying as hell, though she’ll never know all of it.

“Okay, Sherlock, ya got me. But if you tell anyone...”

“Theresa, when have I ever?”

“You’re right. Sorry. It’s just so embarrassing, is all. I probably sound like such a baby, but, well, the thing is, I was going to have to take two semesters of Public Speaking to graduate - and I just couldn’t do it.”

“Public speaking? Why couldn’t you do public speaking?” Lydia asks.

“I never told you before – yeah, I shoulda. But I signed up for the class twice and both times dropped it when it came time to give my first speech. I just couldn’t bear to make a fool of myself again.”

“Again? What do you mean again? Why’d you think you’d make a fool of yourself?”

“Seriously, Lydia? You *do* remember Father O’Brien’s class, right?”

It’s obvious from the silence that she knows exactly what I am talking about – the most humiliating day of my senior year at Mother Seton High.

“Oh, Theresa, you gotta put that behind you - totally.” Captain Kirk-like, she paces her words. “You absolutely must. It was one day, one time. It doesn’t have to ever happen again.”

“No, it wasn’t just one day, Lydia. It wasn’t. I’m always saying the wrong thing.”

“Theresa, that’s just not true. What makes you say that? *Who* has made you think that?”

“Mom told me.”

When Lydia finally replies, she's not as much assuring as she is admonishing.

"Oh, Theresa, I don't think she said that."

"Yeah, well, you weren't there the day in ninth grade when Mom and I went to visit Patty and her mother."

"Why's that important?"

"If you had been, you'd know I'm right."

"So, tell me. I want to get it."

"Well, I don't remember exactly, but Patty, Mrs. Ryan, Mom and me - whoops, Mom and I."

"God, you're so grammar-anal. Just tell it, Theresa."

"Okay, well, we're sitting on the Ryan's front porch shooting the shit and drinking iced tea. Then Mrs. Ryan starts asking me stuff about what I want to do after school - you know, the usual 'what do you want to be when you grow up' bullshit grownups always ask - and I answer her."

"What did you say?"

"Hell, I don't know. Musta been about wanting to write, but musta been pretty dumb too."

"Dumb? Why dumb?"

"Because of Mom's scowl when I answered."

"Ahh, you mean the squinty-eyed, lined forehead, eyebrows-almost-meeting-in-the-middle Mrs. Shanahan-is-pissed-as-hell-look?"

I bust up laughing.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Go on."

"Well, we get in the car to go home and five seconds later Mom's badgering me - 'Why did you say that? Did you see the way she looked at you when you said that?' Man, all I could think was that Mrs. Ryan and Patty must think I'm a real dumbass now. And I still don't know what I said that was so bad."

"Jeez, Theresa, I'm sorry. That hadta hurt for you to remember it after all this time.

"Yeah, I know your mom can be less than diplomatic, but T, I also know she'd never deliberately set out to hurt you - or make you think you're a screw up."

“Well, maybe she never actually said that I *always* say the wrong thing, but that’s what she meant – and that’s what she thinks,” I insist.

As I recall that day in Father O’Brien’s English Composition class, I’m convinced that Mom was right about me embarrassing myself when I open my mouth.

It had been my favorite class, a literary island rescuing me daily from a storm-tossed sea of boring teachers, and humdrum curriculum. The bliss ended the day I had to give my speech, about my chosen career path, journalism.

My speech was written on three sheets of loose-leaf paper. I walked to the front of the class, terrified at the thought of everyone staring at me, listening to me. I was so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and totally embarrassing myself.

As I started speaking, I steadfastly looked down at the papers in my hand. Looking at the audience was just too much terror! I didn’t want to see on their faces what they were thinking about me.

Then my hands started to shake, which made the papers shake – and make a rattling noise as they did so. My audience might have wondered if the world’s largest flying insect were buzzing the room. I was having trouble seeing the words, and my voice started trembling. I knew from the heat on my cheeks that my face was beet red. Totally suffused in sweat, my whole body started shaking, like a wet dog after a bath. I was sure everyone thought I was a real wimp.

Lydia told me later that she and Father O’Brien whispered at the back of the room about it, and neither one could think of what to do. It was obvious I was terrified, but their concern was that I’d be humiliated if he asked me to stop midway.

I called a halt to it on my own, however – by throwing the papers on the floor halfway through my speech and stumbling from the room. I ran to the girls’ room, sat down on a toilet seat and sobbed. Lydia rushed in before the end-of-class bell rang, my bookbag and sweater in her hands.

“Come on, Theresa, let’s go home. Father O’Brien said we can skip homeroom today.”



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