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Memoir of a Milk Carton Kid

by Tanya Nicole Kach with Lawrence H. Fisher

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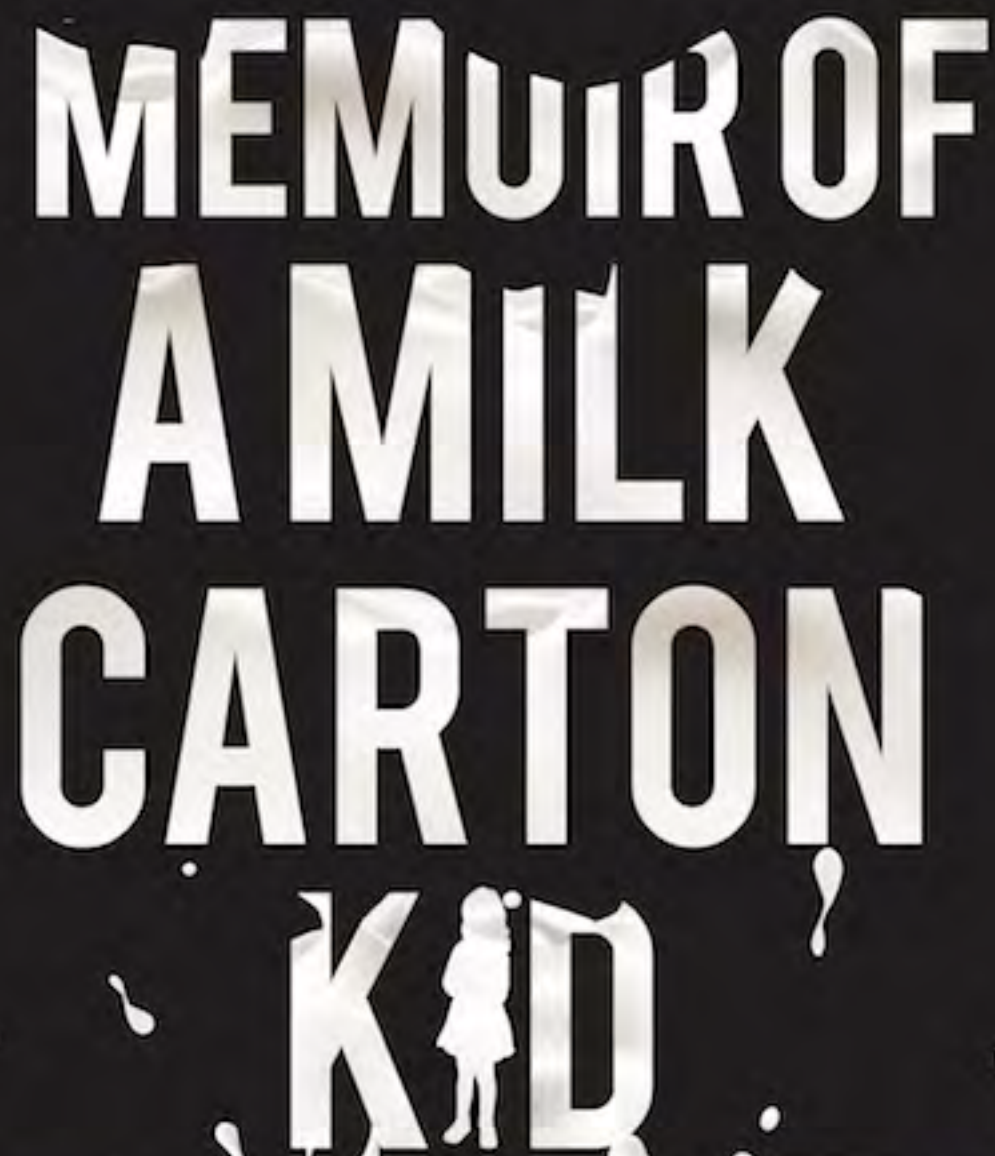
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE TANYA NICOLE KACH STORY

MEMUIR OF A MILK CARTON KID



TANYA NICOLE KACH WITH LAWRENCE FISHER

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“In the little world where children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived, or so finely felt, as an injustice.”

—*Charles Dickens*

FROM IDEAL TO ISOLATION AND ABUSE

My first memory of life is one of light. The closed door to my bedroom made me feel caged, imprisoned. I pulled myself up in my crib and cried. Then, one of my parents must have opened the door, and I glimpsed a crack of light that both fascinated and comforted me. In a way, that first memory is a metaphor for what kept me alive for the ten dark years of captivity I endured. Despite my abductor’s repeated message that no one cared about me, despite the threats of what would happen if I tried to escape, that glimmer of hope within me never died. It was the divine lifeboat I clung to at my most desperate

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moments. *One day I will leave here*, I promised myself. *One day, I will tell my story.*

Although writing it has not been easy, doing so has shown me how easily a child disappears and how simply a life is erased. That's what happened to me, but I'm back to tell you about it. Because of that, I look at the many photos on milk cartons differently than others do. Those buck-tooth smiles and blurry, black-ink images are real kids, real people. I know, because I was one. More than 55,000 children younger than eighteen are abducted by nonfamily members every year, yet we seldom hear what ultimately happened to them. My image appeared on approximately four hundred million cartons during the time I was held captive, yet the very people who might have suspected where I was being held did nothing.



I was born in the rural community of Monongahela, Pennsylvania. Located only about seventeen miles from Pittsburgh in southwestern Pennsylvania, this town could not be farther from the big city. Fewer than ten thousand people reside there, and it is barely two square miles. Park Avenue, a two-mile stretch of road in Monongahela, has fostered a remarkable number of notable people, most famous among them National Football League Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana. I spent the first twelve years of my life there. My mom, Sherri, and father, Jerry, were high-school sweethearts, and I'm an only child. Since his graduation, my father was a union butcher and earned a decent living. My mom worked at McDonald's, and I loved visiting her there. In sixth and seventh grade, I was thrilled that my school bus stop was located right in front of the Golden Arches where she worked.

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Mom and I loved to shop for clothes, makeup, and perfume, and my parents took me on many vacations to Florida. Before I turned thirteen, I had visited Disney World three times. Although I delighted in these trips, I couldn't understand why my parents were so serious. I was the only one who laughed, the only one not buried in silence I couldn't understand.

Our family frequently watched fireworks and attended carnival festivities at Monongahela's Aquatorium, a great park where we walked the banks of the river and fed the geese and ducks. On one of our visits when I was only four, a man motioned me toward him with a stuffed yellow banana. The bright color attracted me, and no one seemed to notice the man in the shadows of the people. At that moment, my father began playing a coin-toss game. Other than telling me not to wander off, he paid no attention to me as he began tossing coins. My mom ventured over to another part of the grounds to play bingo. The draw of the yellow banana was so irresistible that I walked toward the man I did not know.

Once I was at his side, he kneeled, handed me the yellow banana, and asked, "What is your favorite stuffed animal?"

"My kitties," I said, growing more comfortable with him.

"I have lots of kitties." He pointed to a car across the lot. "Would you like to go play with them?"

He extended his hand. I reached for it.

Just then, my father finally noticed that I was gone.

"Tanya Nicole," he shouted. "Where are you?"

His voice broke the stranger's spell. I darted away, terrified, and back to my father.

He did not notice the stuffed banana I was still carrying. Nor did he notice that I had been lured away from him. Instead, he scolded me for leaving his side.

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“Don’t you ever wander off again,” he said. “You stay by me or your mom. Understand?”

Only later that evening, when my paternal grandmother noticed the toy and questioned me about it, did the ominous events of the day become apparent. By then, it was too late to find the man who seemed ready to prey on a four-year-old girl. I had narrowly escaped one abductor, yet ten years later, I would fall prey to another.

For most of my first decade in Monongahela, I loved Bible school and Bible camp. Through crafts and stories, I discovered the Methodist faith I cherish today. At Bible camp one summer, we were encouraged to sign a contract to remain chaste until marriage. I signed it happily and never doubted that I would save my virginity for my future husband. I was wrong.

I was also a Girl Scout, and when it came to selling cookies, I was the best. Getting people to buy those delicacies, especially my favorite, lemon wafers, was easy for me, maybe because I liked them so much. At the time, I thought I had a happy childhood. Although something was a little off at home, I was involved with being a kid—taking dance and baton lessons, singing in the choir, and learning to play a musical instrument. Sure, my parents were probably too quiet, but I didn’t dwell on the dark spots in my life. I focused on the light.

Of my many friends in Monongahela, I was closest to Ricky Ashcraft, who lived with his parents, his sister, Leanne, and their Chinese War Dog, Kia. I had known Ricky long before we attended elementary and middle school together. His house was only two blocks from mine, and he had protected me from Timmy, the neighborhood bully. When not picnicking, we rode our bikes through the streets of Monongahela, often to the Aquatorium to feed the ducks. We also rode to the ancient Indian burial grounds. The rest of the time, we spent hours in each other’s homes listening to music, watching television, and playing checkers or Monopoly.

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When we played together at Ricky's house, however, Ricky's dog remained locked in the basement, because he could be vicious. God help the neighborhood when Kia got loose. Kids would jump up onto the hoods of cars when that happened. Still, one time, I asked to pet him, and Ricky's father held Kia so that I could. The dog was soft and beautiful.

When we were old enough to attend school, we ended up in the same grade and classroom. By the time we entered sixth grade, this close friendship had developed into my first-ever crush. In my eyes, Ricky was perfect, with his sandy-blond hair and sweet smile. His hazel eyes were the most beautiful I had ever seen. Besides, he always made me laugh. There was only one way to handle these new emotions of mine—tell Ricky.

I realize now that I was popular, outgoing, and extremely confident for my age. I had no trouble expressing my feelings to an unsuspecting Ricky.

"But you're my friend," he told me, looking puzzled and more than a little uncomfortable. "You'll always be my friend. Besides, you're really cute, Tanya. You can get any guy you want."

"You think so?"

"Sure. You're gorgeous."

So, there I was, happily back as Ricky's best friend. I didn't feel rejected, and I knew he wouldn't lie to me about anything, especially the part about getting any guy I wanted. All the way back when I was in kindergarten, coloring side-by-side with another student named Josh, he had asked if I liked his picture, and when I leaned over to look, he planted a kiss on me. Since then, other boys had expressed their interest in more subtle ways.

After Ricky pointed out what, to him, was obvious, I started noticing the attention I was receiving. I also began a diary reflecting my new boy-crazy state.

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“I love Pat.”

“I love Bryan.”

“I love Steve.”

“I love Justin.”

“I love Mike.”

“I love George.”

A typical passage in this diary shows the kind of innocence that enveloped my life up to that point, and it also reveals how early I began catching the lustful attention of boys.

“I met a boy named Joshua. He’s cute. We kiss each other’s hands once in a while, and we hold hands and sit close. Right now I can’t talk because I have no voice. I am sick and have a temperchor of 99°. Well Josh might come over this weekend. I hope he does. Today we separated the couch. He sat on one side, and I sat on another, but he crossed, so I picked up his hand and put it on his side. He started rubbing my pinky. So I moved. Well, gotta go bye.”

My early diary entries show a tendency for summary, as each entry ends with a characterization of the day: “*Boring day, nice day, pretty nice day, pretty half & half day, bad day, stupid day, great day, good day, dumb day, ok day, cool day, okay day, rad cool day, lousy day,*” and so on.

Near the end of this diary, on May 6, 1995 (when I was thirteen), I wrote, “*Sup. I ran away tonight + George is worried sick about me. He started crying. . . I’m home now. 2 hour lecture.*” Two days later, I

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wrote: *“Sup. George wants to do it (sex) with me. See I’m ready mentally, but not physically. Plus I’ll break a promise to God.”*

George Roberts was not all that cute, but I thought of him as a friend. Nevertheless, I was becoming more and more aware of my awakening femininity.

Unfortunately, a few years before this last diary entry, my parents began experiencing a widening strife in their marriage, which, in due course, separated me from Ricky, George, Josh, and my other friends. Aside from an affair my mom had when I was two years old, no signs of trouble in my parents’ marriage surfaced until about the time I was seven. At that time, my father suffered a bad case of pneumonia that put him out of work and into a hospital for a long period. This prolonged illness caused financial hardship for our family because my mom loved to shop, and my father had no income while he remained hospitalized.

Mom ran up huge debts, and the financial stress corresponded with what we would soon learn was her deteriorating mental health. Back then, I just thought of her behavior as “acting weird,” like when she insisted that someone at a Laundromat was stealing her clothes. In the following years, Mom began repeating words and phrases inanely. She burst into laughter for no apparent reason. Ultimately and inexplicably, she set fire to a coffee table inside our home.

She also engaged in sex with all sorts of men for money. In time, my mom’s mental illness tore me from the comfort of friendships and the life I knew in Monongahela. Before then, I endured family fights and breakdowns that challenged my belief in everything except God.

As my parents’ marriage slowly crumbled, I often found myself alone at home, with only my prayers for my mom’s attention. Although I begged her to spend time with me, hid her car keys and coat, and waited up until all hours of the night for her to return home, I

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could not stop what was happening. My father slept after long shifts at work, and my mom, when she did return home, was drunk.

In late 1994, I picked up a ringing phone and heard the voice of a man with whom I knew my mom was having an affair.

“You can’t talk to her,” I told him. “It’s wrong.”

“You little bitch,” he said.

I slammed down the phone.

After that, my mom became extremely abusive. Not knowing how to respond, I retaliated by calling her a whore and a slut.

As I turned the corner into my teenage years, my diary passages describe the parallel way my life in Monongahela was falling apart in the wake of my parents’ failing marriage. Instead of concluding my entries with summarizations about the day—good or bad—I scratched out entire entries. Suddenly, Brian H. is a “*Jack ass!!*” and “*Tiffany can be such a bitch.*” I started to worry about being “dead” and feared that my mom wanted to kill me.

Then came the traumatic court battles between my parents. Not only did I have to witness those battles, but I had to testify about my mom’s spiraling mental state, as well as the abuses I had suffered at her hands. In an old stone courthouse, the judge and the lawyers were kind and understanding, but anger drove my testimony. Bitterly, I described how my mom once slammed my head into the wall and, following the bloody aftermath, choked me. I testified about the time she raged while pulling my hair and kicking my legs so hard that she left bruises. I also detailed the time that, while waving a steak knife in my face, she screamed, “I’m going to fucking kill you, bitch.” Finally, I testified that I was afraid of my mom and that when I told my father about the abuse, his cold reaction was to initiate legal action. No other response. No comfort. No fatherly anything. All he wanted was to get rid of her.

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He never told me what was going on in the legal proceedings or even attempted to explain anything about my mom's mental illness. Instead, he made sure that I dressed appropriately for the court appearances against her. In an armoire where he kept my "good clothes" under lock and key, he selected what I would wear for court appearances.

In court, my childhood friend, Ricky Ashcraft, testified about one incident when we were talking on the phone, and my mom assaulted me. I had screamed for Ricky to call 911, but instead, he had told his parents, and they rushed over to our house.

The judge didn't seem all that interested in that story of my abuse. Instead, he asked Ricky if he were my boyfriend.

"No," Ricky said shyly. "Tanya's my best friend."

The legal warfare between my parents was more than I could handle. I wondered why God had made my life so unbearable. Ultimately, my mom was evicted from our home and briefly committed, involuntarily, to an institution for mental health treatment. Custody of me was awarded to my father several months before my thirteenth birthday. That was when my life changed for the worse.

Although the custody order seems to displace my mom, this did not save me from her madness. She attempted to break into our home and tossed a brick through our front window. She even parked her car on the street outside of the house and stalked my father and me constantly. Again, my father did not help me to deal with the situation. He sent me out to the car to ask my mom to leave.

Once, I wakened in the middle of the night and saw him changing the locks on the front door. When I asked him why he was doing that, he said only, "Go back to bed."

Another time, my mom followed me back to the house and tried to force her way inside. My father called the police. In the insanity that ensued, my mom lied to a magistrate and secured a court order that

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briefly allowed her back that night with my father and me in Monongahela. I was so scared that, on the night when she was allowed back in our home, I called George to come and stay with me in the basement. I really was afraid that my mom was going to try to kill me. George and I stayed up all night, talking and listening to my mom's movements as the floorboards creaked and scuffed above us. My father had the order allowing her back into our home rescinded the next day. My parents were divorced soon after.

Quickly after the divorce, my father and I moved to McKeesport, Pennsylvania. He had begun dating Jo-Ann McGuire, a divorced woman who lived there. They had met through a dating service, and my father was impulsive in his need for female companionship. Since Jo-Ann had a seven-year-old son, Kevin, her experience with children appealed to him. More important, Jo-Ann wanted us to move in and was willing to watch over me.

Almost immediately after we moved in with her and her son, Jo-Ann alienated me. She planned fun activities for herself, Kevin, and my father, while excluding me. She justified these exclusions because I had started smoking. When the family was out having a good time, I was usually home alone. As further punishment, Jo-Ann unplugged the only telephone in the house and took it with her when leaving me behind. She removed my bedroom door so that I had no privacy. Unless she and my father were lecturing or punishing me, I felt completely ignored and unimportant. My father gave me no comfort at all. Totally subservient to Jo-Ann, he abdicated all responsibilities to her, and I grew to despise both Jo-Ann and my new home in McKeesport.

Although McKeesport is also located on the Monongahela River, five miles downstream from the town of Monongahela, for me, it was a world away in more ways than one. The steel mill town had struggled after the demise of the steel industry, and the depressed

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people who lived there reflected the mood of the town itself. During the height of the steel industry, McKeesport boasted more than fifty-five thousand residents and boomed with commerce and culture. In its best days, it was the site of the first, now defunct, G. C. Murphy 5 and 10 Cents Store. When the entire American steel industry fell apart in the world market during the 1970s, the town lost more than half of its residents, the most qualified of whom moved in search of employment. The tremendous loss of jobs rippled out into expansive business failures and abandoned buildings, as well as the loss of tax revenue and the decline of city services. The performance of McKeesport schools languished well below national standards.

After my parents' separation, I transferred to the Cornell Intermediate School in McKeesport. From the start of eighth grade, in 1995, I was separated from my friends and the familiarity that had served me so well to that point. This upheaval in my world would have been difficult for any thirteen-year-old child, and I was more nervous than usual on my first day at Cornell. Although it was no larger than my previous school, I didn't know my way around the place. My homeroom teacher assigned a classmate, Monica Krimm, to show me. Unfortunately, Monica was a less-than-stellar student who bragged that she cut class and got into fights all the time.

At the end of the day, as she was leaving school, Monica asked me if I wanted to be friends.

"Yes," I said.

As days went by, Monica introduced me to other students, and I made some other new friends at Cornell. Still, the McKeesport students at this new school largely presented me with culture shock. There were black students, and I had never known anyone from that culture before. Some of the fourteen-year-old girls openly discussed sexual liaisons with older boys. I didn't know how to relate. I didn't fit in, and my interest in school waned.

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All the while, I still yearned for the attention that my mom could not and my father would not provide. I began skipping classes and running away from my father and Jo-Ann to—as strange as it may seem—my mom, who could not take care of me and who had abused me in the past. It was during this time, in the autumn of 1995, that I met the Churchfield family, who lived up the street from Jo-Ann McGuire. Kevin Churchfield was one of the typically deadbeat residents of the area, although he was married and had two children. He noticed me right away and asked me to babysit for his children. Almost immediately, he offered me marijuana. I didn't like it, but that didn't stop him.

He then began propositioning me for oral sex. He would ask me over and over again, "BJ when?"

On the one hand, being propositioned by a man in his forties repulsed me. On the other hand, I felt vulnerable and in need of affection. Although I never fully succumbed to Churchfield's lewd advances, he did force me to touch his genitals. Within days of this incident, Jo-Ann invaded the privacy of my diary, where I had recorded his inappropriate advances, and she told my father about it. He showed up at the Churchfield home with a baseball bat. The McKeesport police were called, but they did nothing consequential. The incident did seem to persuade Churchfield to keep away from me. My babysitting job was a lost cause. Later, when I was abducted, Churchfield was a prime suspect, but he passed a polygraph test while admitting his perverted advance. He was never prosecuted.

Despite that incident, I showed up at Churchfield's home weeks later, desperate once again to escape my father and Jo-Ann. At this point, Churchfield was wary. He figured that his house would be the first place the police would come looking for me. So, when I arrived there, he sent me to his cousin's home. Then, when his police scanner

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revealed that the authorities were looking for me, he forced me to call my father.

“Will you let me come back to you and Jo-Ann?” I asked.

“Why should I,” he replied, “after what you have done?”

I didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, my grandpap, Jerry Kach Sr., was staying with my father and Jo-Ann at the time and persuaded them to allow me to return. My father was obviously frustrated. When I came home, the first thing he did was instruct me to call my grandmother.

“She’s worried sick,” he said. In typical fashion, he did not bother to ask me about my feelings or why I ran away.

As if I did not have enough to deal with, I continually guarded myself against sexual predators. Once more in late 1995, I ran away from Jo-Ann McGuire’s McKeesport home. This time, no one would take me in, so I called my father and Jo-Ann. When no one answered the phone, I called Aunt Cindy, my mother’s sister, to ask for help. Aunt Cindy sent her husband, Uncle Greg. He must have weighed four hundred pounds. Tattoos festooned his body from limb to limb. A long, black beard and hair completed his biker appearance.

Once I entered his car, he told me that the passenger door did not open from the inside. I thought that was weird. Then, he showed me a loaded gun jammed into the waist of his pants. This terrified me. Next, he talked about his lack of sex with Aunt Cindy because she had multiple sclerosis. The conversation went downhill from there. Uncle Greg told me that he paid prostitutes for sex. He even claimed that he had paid my mom for a blowjob. Finally, he shocked me by saying that he used to masturbate while looking at a picture of me. He pulled off the road into a secluded area.

I’m going to die, I thought. All I could think to say was, “Uncle Greg, I don’t feel about you that way. I think of you as a father figure.”

Somehow this disarmed him.

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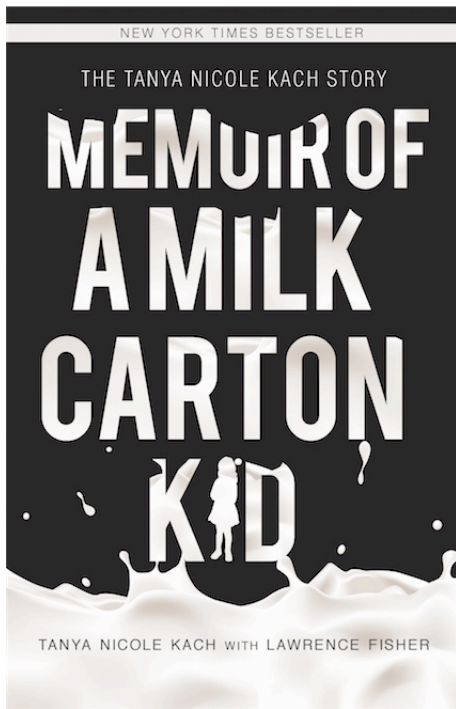
“Oh, okay,” he said and drove me the rest of the way home. Shaken from the incident, I exited the car from the driver’s side, believing I had just cheated death.

When I look back at all I had to endure as a teenager, I’m reminded of the cover to my diary, where I placed a sticker that looked something like this:

“EXCUSE NOTE
Please Excuse
Tanya
(name)
FOREVER!
Mr.
SCHOOL PRINCIPLE”

I now understand why I related to the idea of an “EXCUSE FOREVER!”

I hated my parents’ divorce, the relocation to a new school, Jo-Ann’s hostility, and the way men treated me as a sex object. My spirituality remained my only hope in life. I thought my prayers had been answered in late 1995, when Thomas Hose, a security guard at my new school, appeared interested in me. Before I truly understood the trap in which I was ensnared, I found myself held captive by Hose in February 1996. Salvation and comfort were more than a decade away.



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