

## **Working for the Weakened**

Sherilyn Connelly

2006

Prologue: What Happened Yesterday

Shortly after I started working at CNET in January 1999, I came out to friends and family as transsexual.

The office remained an extension of the closet, however. Having been on hormones and undergoing electrolysis for less than six months, my appearance was still more male than female. As a result, it was easier to just let people interact with me as a boy, which beat having to constantly correct their pronoun errors and remind them to call me Sherilyn, not “Jeff.” Besides, some women get very territorial in the restroom and object to the presence of a genetic male, even if he does want to be a girl.

I may not have been out as a tranny or even necessarily queer, but I was a goth webmonkey, a collusion of two archetypes generally considered to be a tad on the offbeat side. Nobody gave me any static about wearing makeup, however garish. I was doing old-school *ubergoth*, stark white skin with dark, dark eyes. It was how I felt.

The tech industry prided itself on being freak-friendly in those heady days of the bubble. I later learned that, in addition to actually being qualified, one of the reasons I got the job was an official mandate to “hire interesting-looking people.” Considering that the only remotely girly thing about my appearance during the interview process was my hair, black Betty Page bangs tied in standard issue back-of-the-neck boy style, they unknowingly hit the jackpot with me.

On September 18, 2001, after nearly three years at CNET and making an obscene salary in the upper half of the five-digit range, I was given my two-week notice. It was the third major round of layoffs since the dot-com crash of '00. They'd originally intended to give me my walking papers on September 11, but Osama Bin Laden's brief stint as an air traffic controller bestowed up on me an extra week of employment. Thanks, pal. I owe you one.

Ironically, I'd been planning on officially coming out to the office at the end of the month. After two years of hormones and electrolysis, and my lifelong discomfort with the male role reaching something of a fever pitch, I was ready to take that next step. Well, *ready* is a strong word. It was really quite terrifying. But I knew it had to happen.

So, a bright side to having lost that job was being spared the stress of coming out at work. I immediately focused on changing my name legally, or at least on my driver's license and Social Security card, which is legal enough. By the end of October '01, I was living full-time as female. All fine and good, and there was a certain relief to the thought of starting a new job with a clean slate genderwise—if they don't know my birth name, they can't accidentally use it. Now, all I had to do was, you know, *find* a new job.

Being one of the underqualified webmonkeys recently set loose as the industry molted—and our name was Legion, for we were many--that was a hell of a lot easier said than done. I briefly considered going back to the video store I'd worked at in the late nineties, and the manager was more than happy to have me back, quite untroubled by the fact that I was a girl now. Vivid nightmares, subconscious amplifications of my unhappiness at the idea of going back to a retail job (even at the best video store in San Francisco, a haven for film geeks like me) after having worked at various web jobs over the past five years, convinced me to run the other direction.

CNET hired me as a temp in February '02. They'd moved into a new building in the meantime, so it wasn't *quite* like déjà vu. But it mostly the same people and I was doing the same kind of work, so it wasn't exactly a clean slate, either. More like returning home after a long trip and discovering your family has relocated.

Nobody openly objected to the fact that I was now wearing skirts and insisting on being referred to as a girl. There were a fair amount of pronoun errors, however, and some people had trouble remembering not to use my old name.

They employed me on and off, a few weeks here, a month or two there. After September, they stopped calling. I'd managed to save up a bit in the meantime, and between that and my unemployment insurance, I was sufficiently stocked for the lean months ahead.

The job market had not improved, and most of my resumes and applications went unacknowledged. (CNET certainly had me on ignore, even when I applied for positions which were identical to my old job.) Hell, staffing and temp agencies didn't return my calls. By June '02, my insurance was about to run out, so I applied for an extension. It would be even less than the already meager amount I'd been receiving, but greater than zero, and that was all I could hope for.

Monday, June 23, 2003 A friend told me her company in Sausalito was looking for an administrative assistant. I had no experience at it, but not for lack of trying; I'd long since expanded my job search beyond the webmonkey field. They wanted to hire somebody *now*, so she got me in for an interview with the President the next day.

She warned me, however, that the President was a bit of a "character." And that he smoked in the office. Chain-smoked, really. Oh, and he didn't pay much. Prided Himself on not paying much. But if I was okay with those things...

Being on the verge of having no income whatsoever, I decided I was okay with those things. Ports and storms and all that.

This port's harbormaster was Tom, a large Mick in his early seventies. (I'm half-Irish, so I can call him that.) His flabby neck was distended like a frog's. Both his hair and his eyebrows were dyed a yellow-blond which was meant to make him look younger, but only made his already unpleasantly bloated face all the more unsettling. Tom's primary extracurricular obsession was all things nautical; he lived on a houseboat and frequently talked about sailing, even when he was ostensibly interviewing me. I tried not to think too much about my father's fondness for sailing, nor the way Tom brought to mind a slightly less cadaverous version of my paternal grandfather.

His legendary nicotine habit was quite real. The smell of cigarette smoke was noticeable the moment you stepped in the building, and entering his office was like entering...well, exactly what it was: a smoke-filled room. I could feel my skin and teeth yellowing just watching him puff away.

Then there was the cough. I've lived with smokers on and off my entire life, from my parents on down, and I'm familiar with the hack. Usually it's a morning phenomenon: shit, shower and cough up a lung, not necessarily in that order. But this was someone who had been smoking regularly since the Kennedy administration, if not Truman. His hack had become as pervasive as a nervous tic, a phlegmy Tourette's. In the middle of a sentence he'd start to cough, a deep wet shotgun-rumble that made you want to cover your face with your arms. Sometimes he'd cover his mouth, but more often he'd just let it rip, never breaking eye contact. When he was finished, he kept talking as though nothing had happened. I suppose that to him, nothing *had*. This happened several times during a fifteen-minute interview.

I decided to break interview etiquette and bring up money. My unemployment checks averaged out to eight dollars an hour, which would have been perfect. Instead, I could only muster the courage to request “something a little bit above minimum wage.” Even then, I felt guilty and greedy. Asking for what I wanted was a skill I’d never properly developed.

Tom had the upper hand, and he knew it. He said the position was an internship, and he could get a college student to do the job for “next to nothing.” The message was clear: I could do it for minimum wage, or he’d get someone else—and I, in turn, would get nothing.

Thoroughly humbled and not wanting to return home jobless, I did what I believed to be the responsible thing: I accepted the position. Sure, it would involve driving to Marin every day, and a five dollar bridge toll--four dollars through FasTrak--plus fuel and the wear-and-tear on my already questionable car, but I needed a job, and nobody else was offering. A little income was better than none.

A week into the job, I received a call from the Unemployment Department. On my final Claim form, I reported my earnings from the new company. One slight problem: I was being underpaid. They were paying me six twenty-five an hour, fifty cents less than minimum wage.

Something *had* struck me as fishy when I received my first paycheck, but I wasn’t sure what minimum wage was, and I made a conscious decision not to look it up online. It certainly wasn’t posted in what passed for the breakroom, or anywhere else in the office. I was vaguely aware that California law required such things be posted, but I was also fairly certain that California law prohibited smoking in the office.

I didn't want to pursue it, to rock the boat. People who rock the boat get unceremoniously dumped over the side. (Or, if you're into piratical metaphors, they walk the plank.) I brought the discrepancy to the attention of the payroll person as innocuously as I could, making sure it was clear that it was an issue being raised by the government and not me. On my next check I received a fifty-cent raise, bringing me up to minimum wage. Tom never said a word. After that, neither did I.

## Part Two: Eleven Months Later

My days as the admin were almost over. I was moving away from the front desk, into a part of the building which wasn't irradiated with nicotine. Best of all, while he would still sign my checks, I would no longer work directly for him. There was light at the end of this particular tunnel.

There would be no accompanying raise in pay, so it wasn't exactly a promotion. Over the past year, I'd managed to talk myself up to a wage bordering on livable. These raises came grudgingly at best. Tom's oft-stated opinion was that if I felt he wasn't paying me enough, it was my own fault for living in San Francisco and not Marin. He also frequently reminded me that I was simply an intern, and he could get a college student to do my job for free in exchange for all the valuable knowledge. The only time he ever referred to me as an intern was when we were discussing money,

When we looked for someone to replace me as admin, however, he didn't want some "college kid" desperate for a foot in the door of the Search Marketing business, but demanded I find an Ivy League grad. This is not a category not known to settle for receptionist slash intern jobs at tiny Sausalito companies which paid next to nothing. Suffice it to say that the person who was eventually hired was no more of a Yalie than I am.

Being Tom's admin was always tough. His mood and disposition were unpredictable, and there was never any telling what he might get angry at me about. Ever since he started talking about moving me into a different department, however, he'd been riding me harder than ever.

At least once a week, he would call me into His office apropos of nothing in particular and chew me out for twenty or thirty minutes, telling me how worthless I was, how I'd never make it in the world with my attitude and that he was forever on the verge of firing me.

Often he would let me go, then call me back in and do it all over. When I was growing up we had a cat named Specky who used to do something similar, keeping captured birds and mice alive just enough to torment them some more.

Sometimes it just rolled off my back. Other times it really fucking hurt, especially since I was experiencing seismic stresses in my personal life and my nerves were already frayed. When he would finally let me go--and I was reasonably sure he wouldn't call me back in for seconds or thirds--I would walk calmly out of the office, go to the parking lot, get into my car, and cry. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Never once did he acknowledge that I was a tranny. I was never sure if he just didn't read me as trans, or he was savvy enough to avoid getting hit with a discrimination charge. Given his lack of concern about smoking or wage regulations, why he would care about harassment laws was uncertain.

There were plenty of other ways to hit close to home--like accusing me of "bad writing." He was confused and upset by an overly stylistic flourish in a report I'd rewritten at the request of the Vice President. If I may be so bold, it was not bad writing; it was, I fully admit, overly stylistic given the context. Sometimes I get bored with the standard boilerplate, and if I can liven it up a little without being

unprofessional or going off-topic, I will. When I attempted to explain my point of view, he told me to "get off my high horse." It was a surprising jab given that he was a self-styled erudite, who didn't hide that he felt himself more cultured than those around him.

When I disagreed with on something else in the report, he was flabbergasted. "How can you disagree?" he demanded.

Sometimes, all I can speak is the obvious truth: "Because I don't agree with you."

Later that day, I worked up the courage to say it was unfair of him to not let me defend my position, and that the "high horse" comment was insulting.

He agreed. "In the future, I should just say 'Calm down, calm down.'" That was not an improvement.

The VP liked what I'd done with the report, but that was neither here nor there. I was not *his* bitch.

Lest my imminent lateral promotion give me a glimmer of hope, Tom warned me that just because I was no longer going to work directly under him, that didn't mean I was getting *away* from him. On top of everything I'd be doing in the new position, he was going to continue to give me the kind of work I was doing now. Sure, why not? Considering how lousy an admin he was constantly telling me I was, it made perfect sense to keep giving me admin work.

The really clever abusers know that isolation is an important tactic. If their victim feels they have nobody to turn to, it makes them feel all the more helpless. During one particular rant, Tom told me that everyone in the company thought

that I was “lazy and easily confused.” My new supervisor was allegedly opposed to me being moved into his department, and it was happening against his will.

He also cited a complaint from the accountant regarding some paperwork she’d asked for which I supposedly never supplied. When I casually brought it up with her, she had no idea what he was talking about. I also later confirmed that my new supervisor had not at all been opposed to me moving into his department, and in fact was glad to get more help.

This was no great surprise; when the truth about me failed, Tom wasn’t afraid to lie. In addition to all the other reasons I sucked, he accused me of being a slob. “Sherilyn,” he railed, “You crumple up paper and throw it on the ground! It piles up for days!”

Um,no. I’m way too much of a hippie to do something like that. In fact, I was just about the only person in the office who made a point of recycling paper. I also had enough of a grasp of physics to know that you can fit more into a bag if you *don’t* crumple it. Not a paper crumpler. Never have been, never will be.

I was in my usual place, leaning in his doorway, arms folded. Before I could stop myself, I glanced back at my desk, as though expecting to see what I knew was not there. I didn’t say a word, but I didn’t have to.

In what may well have been his most mocking tone yet, he said, “Oh, just because you don’t see any there *now*, that means you’ve *never* done it, right?”

What can you say to that? When you’re being accused of something the other person knows you didn’t do, every protestation of innocence only digs you deeper. Besides, it’s entirely possible that in his world, I *\*did\** do everything he’d accused me of.

Or not. He would sometimes admit to being a “rough taskmaster” and acknowledged that working under him wasn’t easy. So, he was conscious of what he was doing. On some level, he probably thought he was doing what was best for me. They always do.

As bad as it got, even when I was sitting in my car crying, I never seriously considered quitting. Like asking for what I want, extracting myself from an unhealthy relationship was another skill I’d never properly developed.

--

Monday, May 3, 2004. One of the few points in Tom’s favor was that he seldom made me stay late. Come quitting time, I quit with a vengeance. I didn’t get paid overtime anyway; there was no real timekeeping system. The payroll person only visited the office a few times a week, and I never filled out timesheets or punched a clock. The assumption was made that I was there forty hours a week. I even got paid for the few days I left early or didn’t come in at all. It would have been considerably sweeter had I been getting remotely decent wages, but, like keeping my printer at home filled with toner because nobody paid attention to my Office Depot orders, every little perk helped.

That Tom was normally so laissez-faire about my hours made it all the more troubling that late on my final day as his admin, He took an interest in a project of the VP’s which Tom had previously left alone. It was for a different sort of potential client than the others. The VP gave me very specific instructions which I’d followed to the letter, and he liked what I’d done with it.

*Presently, our friend Poppy was in town, promoting her latest novel. She lives in New Orleans and doesn’t make it to the West Coast very often.*

Tom, on the other hand, decided that everything was wrong wrong WRONG. Though the proposal had been based on a template which He'd approved just a few weeks earlier, He now declared it poorly written and unusable, and that of course was *my* fault. It had to be fixed *now*, no matter how long it took.

When he wanted something changed, he couldn't just say so; it always had to be phrased as though I'd made an error, whether I'd actually screwed something up or not.

Yes, all right, I make the occasional (even frequent) honest-to-goodness errors and typos and whatnot. Rumors of my supernaturalness are greatly exaggerated, if not downright erroneous. I'm all kinds of human, lemme tell ya, both capable of and liable to make mistakes both big and small on a regular basis.

Tom's way of handling errors was a lifelong peeve of mine: asking me *why* I did it that way. I'm not sure if it's passive-aggressive or just plain aggressive.

Part of the VP's project involved rewriting a proposal we'd sent to a different company, a template Tom had approved the week before, using it as the basis for the new proposal. No point in reinventing the wheel--that's His job--and I was in a hurry, since this particular task had been dropped in my lap a few hours earlier with no small sense of urgency attached. Indeed, it was supposed to have been done and out the door by five. Both the search-n-replace and my own eyes missed one particular reference to the previous company. Naturally, Tom zeroed in on it.

"Sherilyn, why does it say Levi's? This proposal is for Petco. Why did you write Levi's here?"

I'd been kept a half an hour late at work for no good reason and with no end in sight, so I had somewhere I needed to be. so I was in a very literal mood. "It's a typo. It's supposed to say Petco, and I missed that particular instance when i was changing the company name. It's not intentional or deliberate. It's a mistake."

He closed His eyes, sighed, and replied in a practiced god-give-me-strength tone, "Sherilyn, I *know* it's not intentional."

As Tom always did when I'd made a good point or stated a fact he couldn't argue, he moved on to another topic. before I could scream,

Just as well, because I was on the verge of screaming, "Then why did you fucking *ask*?" At that moment, I resolved not to look in His eyes for the rest of the evening. He no longer deserved that respect.

Tom tended to use my name when talking down to me, like I'm a slow child who won't pay attention otherwise. "Sherilyn, does this make sense to you?" "Now, Sherilyn, isn't it reasonable that..."

Every time he did it, I got a little more agitated. As usual, whenever I spoke my mind--or, heaven forfend, defended myself--he brushed me off. "All Right, Sherilyn, all right, cut the chatter."

Though he may not have clocked me as a tranny, working under him was a constant reminder that when I transitioned, I forfeited the right to be taken seriously by certain people.

I would make a requested change to the proposal, print it out, take it into Tom's office. He'd find something else arbitrarily wrong, snark at me, tell me to fix it. Sometimes he would follow me out to my desk and stand over my shoulder,

pointing at my screen to make sure I knew where I should be typing. Like the majority of my fellow carbon-based meatbags, the amount of pressure I'm under can directly affect my accuracy. Which is to say, when someone is breathing down my neck to make sure I don't fuck up, the likelihood of me fucking up grows exponentially.

He finally let me go at half past six, an hour and a half late. It could have been a lot worse, and I know the only reason that we weren't there until eight or nine was because he got bored. But the fact that he did it for no other reason than *because he could* was eating at me away at me. It was his chance to wield direct power over me. I felt violated, and wondered if he would masturbate to it later.

By that point, his mood had made one of its frequent switcheroos into *you know I love you, baby* mode. He told me in a remarkably non-snarky voice how grateful he was that I'd stayed late, how important it was to get the proposals *just right*. In truth, all we did was render it useless.

Without looking up from my screen, I said, "For whatever it's worth, my friend is in town from New Orleans on tour for her latest novel. I'd hoped to be at her reading tonight in the Haight. It starts in half an hour."

He replied that it would probably still be going on when I arrived, and the fun generally begins afterwards. God, I *hated* it when He was right. Maybe even as much as *He* hated it when *I* was right. I added, "The novel is set in the New Orleans restaurant culture."

This was only relevant in that he was a traveler and a fancied himself a well-read foodie, so I knew that would pique His interest, if only a little. There was no point

in mentioning Poppy's name, as He didn't ask. I'd already gone far beyond his unsolicited information limit, and nothing more would make it past the first earwax deposit. Even if Tom *had* asked, it still would have died right around the third glop. Nothing worth knowing could come from me.

Since we were talking about such things anyway, I decided to bring up my in-the-works tour with Lynn Breedlove. Keeping my eyes on the screen, I said, "I'm going to be out of town for a week or two later this summer." My voice was flat, though there was a waver I hoped he wouldn't detect, like when someone calls you when you've been crying and you try to hide it.

"Okay," he replied. Approval. I wished I was recording the conversation.

"Not sure exactly when," I continued. "I'm still booking the gigs."

"Gigs?" he asked.

"Readings," I said.

"Poetry?"

"Spoken word, actually. Prose."

"Cool!"

Yeah, right. It's not that Tom cared about what I do, nor am I suggesting that I'm any more deserving of being treated with respect due to my exhibitionistic tendencies. But he always going on about how my half of the demographic spectrum is borderline illiterate, how none of us read books anymore and all we do is watch teevee or play video games, so it felt important to establish that some of us are fighting the good fight. Again, it's not that he cared, or ever would care,

which is why I didn't mind Him knowing about my extracurricular activities. He couldn't have given a shit. He ain't gonna show up at a reading or play or anything.

Talking about such things aloud in Tom's presence was a reminder to myself: no matter how much he tried to reduce me, grind me under his heel as he redirected his frustrations with the world towards the most convenient target, there was a part of me that He could not touch. No, more than just a part. The *majority* of me. What He got to fuck around with was just the barest fraction, and this was not my life. There was a bigger, better world waiting for me on the other side of the door.

The other side of the door wasn't ready for me, not just yet. I still had a lot a lot a *lot* of negative energy coursing through me, demanding some manner of release. I couldn't fathom driving into the City feeling like this. I'd hit the Rescue Remedy earlier at the onset of the ugliness, but sometimes a placebo is just a placebo, especially when you know it's a placebo--y'know? So. I needed something more, something real, something which wouldn't so much dull the pain as bring it to the surface where it could be reckoned with. I'd taken a couple swipes at my inner arm with a fingernail earlier, but that simply wouldn't do.

On the way to the car I stopped in the women's restroom, reliably deserted at that time of the evening. From my bag I produced my small pocketknife.

One of the perks of working the front desk is getting first crack at the mail. Unless someone is specifically looking for something, nobody pays a damn bit of attention. For xmas, Google had sent USB drives to everyone at the company except me. Anyway, a salesman had recently quit, so I took the one addressed to him. Maybe that's dishonest, I don't know. I *do* know I don't care.

The knife had been sent as a promotional item, an unsolicited tchotke. It had no real context or connection to the company from whence it came, except as evidence that they have a budget for useless gifting. No doubt some people would be impressed by this. To show they really cared, *our* company name and address was engraved into the side. The irony was too delicious.

The knife had been my constant companion, because things were not well on the homefront.

It's like this: on occasion the stress got to be too much, and I'd feel my conflicting emotions welling up, threatening to fill my mouth and drown me in my own anxieties, thick and oppressive and syrupy. For all their weight, my heart would be racing, straining, to burst out of my chest in a flash of screaming nerves. Almost involuntarily, I would swipe at myself, my right hand clawing and scratching at the pale underside of my left arm, sometimes in arcs like Pete Townshend bashing out power chords. Eventually I found this unsatisfying. The skin needed to open, not redden and chafe. It had to reveal its secrets in a line of plasma and corpuscles.

There had been outside concern over this. Maddy took it personally, not quite grasping that the fact that I cut when she was angry was a reflection on me, not her. In fact, I tried to hide it from her, and she often didn't see the cuts until hours or days later.

In an effort at prevention via confiscation, she took the knife away. There's no shortage of sharp objects in the world, though, and she ultimately opted for harm reduction, giving me back the knife on the condition that I only use it on my outer arm, given the risk of opening a vein on my inner arm.

My only personal objection to this compulsive self-mutilation was how downright clichéd it was. I mean, mopey goth girl cuts herself as a plea for help? Oooh,

how original. It made me think of some trannies I know try to compensate for their faux status by making lots of noise about their periods, or graphically describing troubles with their nonexistent vaginas—and even if they *had* gotten SRS, their body still wouldn't be bleeding monthly unless their cutting schedule was a lot more regular than mine. The bottom line is, I did it neither as a plea for help nor because it's what (a miniscule percentage) of genetic women do. I did it because I had no choice.

Sometimes I listen to the good advice I'm given, so I focused on my outer arm. The cuts were bloodless at first, so once I did a few, I had to do a few more, and then a few more after that. I stopped at about a dozen or so, mostly horizontal with the occasional few criss-crosses, reminding me vaguely of early drawings of the canals on Mars. I didn't stop out of a sense of *what the hell am I doing?* I knew exactly what I was doing, but because I knew that I'd probably want to really scar myself someday, and I didn't want it to look so random. Besides, that was plenty for now.

The canals began to bleed, and the rush of mild shakes hit. They felt good, as I knew they would, the first time I'd felt good all day long. I wished Tom was there, so I could touch my arm, then raise my blooded palm and say *you have not defeated me. i can take what you can dish out, what you try to do to me, and turn it into something beautiful, even if only i can appreciate it.* As my blood touched the air, the poisons he'd put into me evaporated.

I carry Neosporin in my bag, and when I finally got home that evening I used hydrogen peroxide. I'm not completely sans reck, after all. I also kept the arm covered for the rest of the week, until the cuts had healed up and started to fade. Nobody else needed to deal with my trip.

At least I was at work late enough to miss the worst of the evening commute traffic, so I arrived while Poppy was still reading. Maddy was already there, it

was standing room only, which was just as well since I was endorphinated and in no mood to sit still. Besides, I tend to stand during readings even when I *haven't* had a painfully bad day at work.

The evening ended with Maddy and I smoking grass with Poppy in her hotel room, feeling a million miles away from it all, where he could not touch me.

By the end of the week, I was in the new position. Though he did not continue to give me admin work as threatened, my new supervisor was under orders to keep a close eye on me, to make sure I didn't do anything personal. He admitted that it was pretty obvious that Tom had major issues with me, and that he himself had better things to do than to watch me.

I seldom crossed paths with Tom, and when I did, neither of us spoke. I had nothing to say to him, and he'd since found a new toy to break.

By early August, client work in my department had dwindled. My hours were reduced accordingly, eventually to zero. When my supervisor gave me my walking papers, I felt nothing—no relief, no sadness. I didn't even feel surprise that for all his bravado, Tom didn't have the balls to do the deed himself. The bully never has much courage as the victim.

This was two years ago, and it doesn't seem entirely real. As it turns out, I kinda wish scars had developed, but the marks have long since faded. In their place, I have at long last developed the skills to make sure it never happens again.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.