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Through Hell and Back

Brandi Barbosa-Brown

I was fifteen when I first saw her, and I still remember it as if it were yesterday. It was the first day of my sophomore year in high school. I was standing on the risers in the choir room, and I was nervous as hell. I had never taken a choir class before, yet alone an advanced choir class. At first I regretted my decision of auditioning for a spot, but the moment I saw her I was excited to be there. She had dirty blonde hair, fair skin, blueish green eyes that would lean towards one color depending on the color shirt she was wearing. And to top it off she had the cutest smile. It was weird; I had never had feelings like this for a girl before. But there was something about her that awakened the butterflies in me. Her name was Emily; although we're no longer together, she gave me six years of unforgettable memories.

I was raised in a Catholic home and although we weren't religious, my family would refer to the bible when they had no other argument on why something was wrong. When I was eleven, I remember being at my grandmother's house listening to my mother and my aunts ranting about a cousin of mine. He was in the Santa Clara Vanguard Drum Corps, a marching band that I would later wish to be a part of. But instead of being in the horn line or the drumline, he was in the color guard. One of my aunts blurted, "Ugh, the color guard? Really? That's just so gay." I didn't think much of it. I mean, I used to call my friends gay all the time for shits and giggles. That's what everyone did, right? Wrong. They weren't saying this for shits and giggles; they were doing it out of disgust. They were ashamed that a Barbosa could be ever gay. But I didn't know that. It wasn't until a couple of hours later when my mother, my brother Brandon, and I were walking to our front door. My mother stopped dead in her tracks, turned around and said, "If I ever find out either one of you are gay, I'm kicking you out of the house."

I cried when I realized that I liked Emily. I kept repeating what my mother had said to my brother and me all those years back. Over and over and over again in my head. I didn't know what to do with

myself, I had no one to talk to. I was drowning in my own guilt, and I knew that if I were to come out to my family, I'd be the subject of the talk. I'd be looked down upon. I'd be rejected by my own family. I would go from being everyone's favorite niece to the outcast of the entire family. But...even with all of these thoughts going through my head, I didn't let it stop me from pursuing Emily.

I asked Emily to be my girlfriend on February 11, 2010 and I never expected her to say yes. In fact her exact words were, "I thought you'd never ask." We were able to keep our relationship a secret with the exception of a few friends. After a couple of months, my brother started to catch on. He started to ask me questions in front of my mom like, "Are those cupcakes for that girl you were hugging from behind the other day?" or "Who's that girl that you keep holding hands with?" I'm not quite sure when he found out we were dating but when he did, he caused some hell.

Before I continue on with my story, I want to go into some background about the relationship I had with my brother at this time. As a kid, I was very tomboyish. I mean, that's what happens when you're the only girl in a family full of boys. I always had my hair up in a ponytail, I always wore baggy clothes and I loved playing sports. I rarely had crushes on boys but when I did, I got teased for it and when I didn't, I still got teased for it. It was always a lose-lose situation for me: when I did have a crush, my brother told me that they would never like me back because of how boyish I was. When I didn't have a crush, he called me a lesbian. Either way, he loved telling all of my friends. My brother was my only bully growing up. He always picked fights with me and knew how to push my buttons. And it was like that from elementary school all the way up to high school. I was never able to escape it.

I felt like my brother made it his mission to expose my sexuality to my mother. I can recall multiple times when he tried to catch me in the act of talking to my girlfriend, but there is one specific time that will always stick with me. I was sitting on the couch in our spare bedroom, and I was direct messaging Emily on Twitter from my iPhone because I had gotten my phone taken away. At one point, my brother came into the room and asked to see my iPhone. I closed out the Twitter app and handed it to him. Minutes later my mother stormed into the room and shoved my iPhone in my face with the Twitter app open. I could hear

her yelling, but couldn't make out what she was saying. All I was thinking was, "Oh god... She's going to kick me out of the house... Where am I going to go? What am I going to do?" My heart dropped into my stomach and I could feel my blood rushing to my face. Finally I heard, "ARE YOU DATING THIS GIRL?!"

I stayed silent, so she repeated the question again. I took a deep breath and said "no." She stood up straight and looked at me with a burning rage in her eyes and said, "You don't talk this way with someone you're just friends with, Brandi." She left the room and my brother just stood in the doorway with his arms crossed, a disgusted look on his face. My blood was boiling and all I wanted to do was punch him until my knuckles started to bleed. Instead, I pushed him out of my way and left the house. Why was he doing this to me? Why did he want to see me in so much pain? Aren't your siblings supposed to have your back?

Weeks passed, and my brother and I were getting ready to see our biological father. I was excited I was going to be able to get away from all this madness. Boy was I wrong. Brandon was able to ruin this trip like he ruins everything else. All I wanted to do was get away from home and not think about all the crazy shit that I was going through. But when you have a brother who doesn't support you, that's close to impossible. I used to find ways to try and get a hold of Emily, and this time I used my half-sister's phone. Terrible idea. Brandon told my stepbrother Shawn about my sexuality, and it was like I was going through hell all over again. They took Shania's phone, read through all of our messages, prank-called Emily, and made fun of me.

After the third day of taking their bullshit, I couldn't deal with it anymore. I walked to the park that was just down the street from our house and Brandon and Shawn followed me. "Dude, get back home. There's a curfew here, you'll get us all in trouble!" But I didn't care, I wasn't going to put up with their bullying any longer. I just kept walking until they left me alone. Twenty minutes later, I found myself standing by a lake. I had no clue where I was, but what I did know was that I wasn't ready to stay in this world where no one accepted me for who I was. I felt my blood rushing to my face while tears ran down it. My entire body felt numb. I don't remember much of what was going through my head. But what I do remember is seeing the sunset and how beautiful it made the water look. The fiery sun cast shades of red,

orange, and yellow that clashed with hints of blue. I could hear the wind blowing across the water, making small ripples on top of my feet. The next thing I remember is feeling the ice cold water wrap around my body. It felt surprisingly nice. It felt like something I could get used to. My vision went dark. It was so peaceful.

Just when I thought I could stay in this peaceful place forever, I felt the water ripple and heard a voice screaming my name. It was my cousin Derek. I had no clue how he found me, I didn't even think he knew I was in town. He pulled me out of the water. The next thing I remember is him wrapping me up in a blanket that he pulled out of the trunk of his car. While my teeth chattered, I told him that I didn't want to go home. He took me to his place, made me dinner and asked me what I was doing at the lake. I answered his question with a question. "How did you find me? How did you know I was there?"

His answer still amazes me to this day, "Your dad called me. He called everyone. You scared him shitless. I didn't know you'd be there but I figured I'd check 'cause that's where I go whenever I need to get away from everyone."

We never mentioned that night to anyone, we didn't even bring it up when we saw each other, but his actions that night changed my life forever. I knew that I had someone who was willing to be there for me no matter what. No one in my family except for my cousin knew about that night. And I never intend on telling any of them.

When my dad took my brother and me back home, things were still the same. I felt like Rapunzel stuck in her tower and never able to leave. The only time I was ever allowed to leave was for school. I had to be home within fifteen minutes after school got out. I wasn't allowed to go out with friends and for a while, my stepfather wouldn't allow me to see my family. And what really bothered me was that I could tell my mother felt guilty for it. When they would leave to go see my family, she would give me this look of, "I'm so sorry that this is happening." But this wouldn't be happening if I had just felt safe within my own home, within my own family.

It took a long time for us to get where we are right now. My parents never apologized for how they treated me, but I'm okay with it. My brother, on the other hand, did apologize. He explained to me that if

my grandfather were still here, he wouldn't be happy with my sexuality. But I disagree; I was my grandfather's favorite grandchild, and he made that very clear. I'm not sure he would have understood me, but I know for damn sure that he would have loved me unconditionally. I wouldn't say that my family fully understands me, but they definitely accept me for who I am now.

Many people ask if I wish things had played out a different way. And my answer: Of course. No child should ever go through something like this. No child should ever feel lost and alone. But if I had the chance to go back in time to change anything, I wouldn't. This whole experience has shaped me to be the person that I am today. It's my story. I was dragged through hell only to be put back in a place that I can never take for granted.