

Christina

Look at Me

I am twenty-eight years old. I was born February 12, 1977, at the U.S. Naval air force base on Guam. I'm five feet four inches tall and weigh about 195 pounds. I have brown shoulder-length hair with blonde streaks and layers. I have brown eyes, clear complexion, and my nails are manicured. I wear one ring on each hand. I like to wear jeans and heels. I have a tattoo on my lower back. It's a barbed wire design and has my boyfriend's name. I am Puerto Rican, Acoma Indian, German, and Irish.

My Parents and Family

I have brothers, no sisters—Joseph, Timothy, Anthony, Robbie, and Brad. I'm the oldest.

My father's mother, my grandmother, lived in Acoma, New Mexico, at one time. She makes pottery and jewelry. She's well-known for her storyteller dolls and wedding vases. Her husband is German and Irish. He fought in the Korean War. I've only seen them when I was younger and don't remember much. My mother's people are from Puerto Rico. She was the oldest of eight children. When her father retired from the air force, he moved the family to Austin, Texas. She married my father, who was in the air force, to get out of the house. When she went on a date, she had to take all seven of her brothers and sisters. She

drove the big station wagon loaded with kids and her boyfriend.

My father went straight out of high school into the air force. My parents met on the air force base in Puerto Rico. Eventually they transferred to Guam, where I was born. My mother was nineteen, and my father was about twenty-two when they got married. My parents had some college, but neither graduated. My dad became an instructor in the military, and my mother worked in an office. My dad is very strict and organized. He's on top of his game; he's smart, has drive. He's a good man. My mom was great, too. She was in school making straight A's but dropped out of college when she became pregnant with me. She's done well for herself in the past.

Of what I remember, I had a great childhood. When I was really young, we went to Disneyworld and Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, and Pike's Peak. I was too young to remember. All I have are the pictures.

Shortly after my brother Tim was born in July 1980, my parents got divorced. I was about five years old.

The reason they divorced was because my dad was very abusive. He would beat up my mother. One day she came home from work and said, "Where's the baby? Where's Chrissy?" When she found me and picked me up, she said I looked like I was dead. I had no life in me. Half of my face was purple. My dad had slapped me so hard because I had spit up on his

uniform. They were married maybe six, seven years. My mother was single for a while. She was abused and saw me abused. My father teased my brother a lot. He was very mean. Maybe it was because he was young and air force. I don't know.

My Early Childhood

My mom was wild. She would go out all of the time and leave us home alone. She would wait until we were sleeping. I was about six, and my brother is two years younger than me. She would leave us at night. One night I awoke with an earache from swimmer's ear, and I called my grandmother. My grandmother and all my uncles came to the house to try to help me. They were very upset with her. From then on, my grandmother made sure my mother was home every night. The type of woman my mother is...she is very dependent. She needed someone to make her feel whole. She jumped into the first relationship she found. Shortly after she met someone, she got pregnant. She told him, "You have to marry me, I'm pregnant." My stepfather, he didn't want to marry her. He was a year younger than my mother, in the army, and had wild oats to sow. They got married after she begged him. They had my first half-brother, then another one came, and then another one came.

It was good at first. We were living in Austin, Texas. My mom and I had a great relationship. I could tell her anything. My girlfriends would come over and stay the night. It was a good thing, so relaxing. I have good memories.

My dad also remarried and had another kid.

Drugs, Parties, and Kids

Home life changed when I was ten. My mom and stepdad were doing drugs behind our backs, and I came across something. It was a little vial on top of the refrigerator in the fruit basket. I didn't know exactly what it was, and I poured it down the sink. I crunched up the vial and threw it away. It didn't look right to me.

When my mom gets home she says, "Chrissy, where's the little vial? That wasn't mine." I told her I threw it away. She said, "How could you do that? It wasn't mine. I was holding it for a friend." I didn't know. It didn't look right, and I felt it needed to go in the trash. She was mad at me. When she was angry, she would throw glasses and knives, anything she could. She was very destructive when she got mad.

Time goes on, and she's having parties in the house. She used to sleep around with men. Before she married Mike, my stepdad, there were a whole bunch of things that went on. I'd wake up to my mom having sex in the same bed as me with different men. I'd be, "What in the world is going on?" I'm bouncing around with all this noise. She'd stay out all night, and I'd miss her. So, I'd go in her room and lay on the bed and wait for her to come to bed. She'd be in there doing her thing. I would pretend to sleep until they would finish. It was humiliating, embarrassing, I was young and didn't know what was going on.

My mother married Mike, and we moved a lot. We called each house by the street name. There was the Huntley house with the parties and the drugs. Then the kids started coming. Once the three kids were there, we moved into the Picket Fence house. That was right before they got divorced. They met this couple, and they were swingers who dabbled in

drugs, too. Something went down, and my stepdad and mom were caught stealing from the pawn shop where they worked. I guess they switched partners or something because after that they got divorced.

My stepdad approached me one day when my mother was working. He said, "Chrissy, do you know what this is?" He held a joint in his hand and said, "This is marijuana. Out there is a lotta peer pressure, and I want you to smoke this with me. Then you'll know how you'll feel if someone approaches you and says, 'Do you want to try it?' I want you to try it with me so you'll know how you're gonna feel."

I didn't know what to do. So, I did it! I think I was eleven or twelve. I got so sick to my stomach, so sick. I was in the bathroom forever, sick on both ends. Then he sat me down a couple of years later, and it was even more hard. He said, "Chrissy, here's coke." I was sixteen. He wanted to show me what it was and how it tasted, and what it would make me feel like. He tells me that it will make me feel all sexual, and this, that, and the other.

I'm like, I won't do this. I know this is wrong, and I won't go there. After begging me and coercing me, he's trying to get me to try coke. I finally told him, "No, and don't ask me again. I'm not going there. I'm not doing it!" He begged me not to tell my mom, but I told her. My mom got so mad and that's when their divorce started.

Elementary School

I was in Austin, Texas at Sunset Valley

School. My teacher, her name was Miss Smith, and I loved her! I think my elementary was good. I had a lot of fun. For kindergarten and first grade, I had to walk to school. We had a major intersection, and I was afraid to cross the street. Even though we had safety guard walkers, I was afraid. A block before I'd get to school all these men were there. I was afraid that the men were going to try to take me and do something to me. They were probably getting ready for work, putting tools in their trucks, but I'm a young child walking by myself. I just felt they were looking at me and wanted to come steal me. My mom always said, "Don't talk to strangers. Somebody could grab you." That was my biggest fear, walking to school. I would cry in the morning. I did not want to walk to school. I lived close to the light where I crossed and walked a block to the school. I was so afraid.

After Sunset Valley, I went to Boone Elementary. We moved every year and that was hard. Boone was a more up-class school, and the education got a little better. I was teased a lot, maybe embarrassed, because of the way my mom dressed me. My grandmother and mom would buy what wasn't in style for kids. I'd get these hand-me-downs, or they would make my clothes. I always had my head down and wore a jacket. I just didn't want to be seen.

In the sixth grade, I went to Betachek Middle School. I had a good time there. I had good grades and I fit in. Then we moved, and I went to Covington. That's where a lot of stuff started happening. I didn't like moving, and I hated it when my mom took me out of a school that I felt comfortable in. She'd take me out and put me into a totally different school. The neighborhood she took me out of was, I'd say, lower- to middle-class. The

people didn't have a lot of money. I felt more comfortable with those people. She took me out because my family has money, and they didn't want us going to a school like that. They wanted my mom get out of that area and come to Covington, right next to this huge Baptist church—beautiful houses, and the kids were preppy. I didn't fit into their crowd.

We moved because the lease would be up. We rented, and then we didn't own a house. When we finally did, it was a mess.

When I went to Covington, I tried to get along with the kids. The kids were brats. They knew my mom smoked and drank. They asked me to bring cigarettes, and one day I took a joint to school. After school we went under the bridge and smoked it. We'd smoke Merit cigarettes, and I wondered why I was so dizzy walking home. I was held back in seventh grade, and I just wanted to give up, but I realized it was my fault. I tried hard, and I got out of seventh. I got out of eighth, too. I passed with B's and C's.

High School

For high school I went to the neighborhood of Betacheck, Crockett, and Sunset Valley. All of my friends from Betacheck were there, and I felt comfortable. This is where I got into trouble. I wasn't supplying the marijuana. It was all over. At Crockett it was selling for three joints for five dollars or two dollars a piece.

My girlfriends would say, "Bring some liquor from home. Bring some liquor." I'd say, "Okay." I got one of those Rubbermaid cups with the sealed lid, and I'd fill it up. We could leave campus for lunch. We'd go to Comet Pizza across the street and order Dr.

Pepper's and a big ol' slice of pizza. We'd put a little liquor into each of our cups and get a little tipsy at lunch.

We wouldn't go back to school after lunch. We would go out to Garrison Park. Our high school was right next to the park, which is huge. A lot of the guys would take pounds of weed out there and bury them under the bushes. They'd go back and forth to get weed to sell the kids at school. I skipped school. I remember drinking Strawberry Hill, smoking weed, and drinking those forty-ounce malt liquors.

My mother had no idea until later, when I got busted. The truancy officer came to my house and asked, "Where's Christina? She's not at school." My mom got a ticket, got in trouble. She took me out of that school quick and put me into Bowie. I didn't like Bowie because I was with the preppy kids again, and I just didn't fit in there for some reason. I felt like the education was way above me. I didn't understand. The teachers would say, "Here, do this," and leave me to do it. I wouldn't know how to do the assignment.

I had algebra. I took a photography class, which I enjoyed. I was in choir. I hated gym. I didn't like changing in front of the girls. The math was hard, and I had problems. Finally, after begging my teacher, he had a tutor come in and show me how to do algebra. I took off from there! It was the only class I ever had an A+ in. Reading and language arts I always failed. I just couldn't get the punctuation or the grammar right. The teachers sounded like Charlie Brown's teachers, "Grmmmmmp grmmmp, grmmmmmp." I didn't know what they were saying, and the work was too difficult. I always did well in science and social studies because they were interesting subjects.

The Evil Grandfather

As a child I loved my mother most. She was my every thing until a certain incident, and everything fell apart. I was fifteen and kinda having some problems at school with peer pressure. I had taken liquor to school but didn't know that my mom had marked the bottle. One day when I came back from Comet Pizza my mom asked, "What in the world is going on? Where did you take this? Did you drink it at home? My God, I hope you didn't take it to school." Of course, I did, so I was on strict groundation. This was in October right at Halloween.

I took the liquor on the twenty-ninth and was grounded when we went to my grandfather's house on Halloween. My grandfather gave us treats and stuff. I always loved my grandma and grandpa. The minute I walked in the door, I'd jump into his arms and give him a big ol' hug and kiss. My grandma came second, always.

It was Friday night and he said, "Why don't you stay the night?"

I said, "I can't hang out with you guys. I'm grounded."

"Grounded? For what?" he asked. He's a very bad alcoholic, a life or death alcoholic.

"Okay. Let me talk to your mom. I'll handle this."

Grandma asked if I could stay the night. My mom said no. Mike, my stepfather, said, "No, she's grounded. She stole liquor from us and took it to school. She can't stay over."

My grandma said, "Don't worry. Leave her here with me, and I'll have a good long talk with her."

After my grandfather begged and insisted on my staying the night, my

mother said okay. Mike had to deal with it and shut up.

That night my grandfather and I took a long walk around the neighborhood. I told him that I lost my virginity not too long ago. I did steal the liquor. My mom was just not happy with me. I was confessing all of my sins to my grandfather. He lectured me about not taking liquor to school and waiting until I was married. It was almost midnight when we got back to the house. I went into the kitchen and talked to my grandma for a little while. We always drink decaf coffee at night, and after that I went back into the room where I always sleep when I stay the night.

It is my uncle's room. He has one of these really big desks that has the little compartments and a top that rolls up. All of his awards from the air force and certificates are in there. I always go through his stuff, and it got to be about one o'clock. My grandfather comes into the room and says, "Okay, niña loca," which means crazy girl, "it's time for bed. Lights out, right now."

I jump into bed and go to sleep. Later that night he comes in my room. My grandma and grandpa don't sleep together. He sleeps in the master, and my grandma sleeps down the hall. My aunt also has a bedroom, but she wasn't in the house. I leave my door open just a crack so I know what's going on out there.

My grandfather comes in my room and starts messing around with me. He didn't penetrate me, but he was touching me everywhere. I didn't know what to do. I would move like I was going to wake up, and as soon as I moved, he would run out of the room quickly.

I thought, maybe I'm dreaming, because I'm a heavy sleeper. Maybe I needed a minute to get coherent again. I fall back to sleep, and he comes in again.

The same thing happens again, so I move. He jumps out of the room again. This went on two or three more times. I'd hear him make smacking noises by my door. I didn't know what to do. I was so scared. This is my grandfather. I loved him so much. For him to even go there with me was, like, I couldn't believe it! I was in dead shock. I didn't know if I was going to tell my grandmother. Would she believe me?

As soon as I got up in the morning, I felt dead, like there was no life in me. I felt betrayed and scared. It was Sunday and time to go to church. My grandmother is a die-hard Roman Catholic. We get ready to go to church, and I don't say a word to anybody. I got my clothes on, and all I wanted to do was get the heck out of that house! I wanted to go home. I didn't want to go to church. I didn't know how to tell my grandmother that because I always go with her. Always, always, always.

So we go to church. I see my cousin. She's younger, and I tried to tell her in the bathroom. I bursted out in tears. I was just sick. I didn't know what do. My cousin was so young. I wound up staying in the bathroom the whole mass, crying and crying. When I came out, my grandmother was by the door blessing herself with holy water. I could not wait to get home even though my grandmother was with me.

The minute I walked in the door, my mom took one look at me and said, "What happened?" She knew something terrible had happened. I cried and cried. I couldn't face my grandmother, and after a while she left. The easiest person to talk to was my mother. I could tell her anything. She was like my best friend at that time.

"What's wrong, Chrissy? You're as white as a ghost. Talk to me."

"Grandpa came into my room last night, and he touched me."

"Where did he touch you?"

"On my breasts, in between my legs."

She was, like, what? She couldn't wait for my grandmother to get home. She told her father, "You have grandma call me as soon as she gets home. Immediately!"

My grandmother came right back to our house. My mom said, "Chrissy, tell your grandmother what you told me." I had to say it again, and it was so hard for me to look at her. I was crying and could barely speak, but I told her. She said, "Ay! Dios mio. Yo no creo. There's no way. Why didn't you wake me last night? I was in the other room. Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you scream?"

"Grandma, I don't know. I was so scared." I was fifteen years old when this happened. Everyone is thinking that I had something to do with it. I'm telling them this man came into my room! I love my grandfather, number one, and I would never say anything that wasn't true. That's not the way I was brought up.

My grandmother was, like, "Don't tell anyone about this, Chrissy. Leave it right here in our house. Don't say a word. I'll go home, and I will handle this."

It was hard for my grandmother to believe it. She went right home and asked Vincent, my grandfather, about it. He's like, "No! What are you talking about? Are you crazy?" To this day, he will still say no.

Nothing happened. We were not allowed to go over to their house anymore. The family didn't want to talk to us. My grandmother has got eight kids, and they thought I was a liar. I lost my whole family. They would come around and ask me, but then they would say, "There's no way." My family lives in denial.

Staying Focused

I'm in school, and I'm trying to focus. I'm trying to do right, but I can't take it anymore. My science teacher, Ms. Della Rosa, is my favorite. She was so sweet and patient with me. I loved her to death. I cussed her out on a bad day. I cussed her out in front of the class and called her a fucking bitch. I was built up with so much inside. I didn't know how to release it. Finally it came out.

After I cussed her, I went to the principal's office. The principal was like "Okay, Christina. What's going on? We don't have problems with you.

You're one of the good students here."

I break down in tears and tell my principal what happened to me. Immediately after I told him, Child Protective Services arrived. I blinked my eyes and they were there. I said, "I wasn't supposed to say anything. My grandmother, I promised her. I promised her, but I can't take it anymore. It's, like, eating me up inside. I'm about to explode, and I didn't mean to cuss out Ms. Della Rosa. Please don't say anything, because my grandma is going to get mad at me."

The Child Protective people took over. My parents had to come to the school. I was put in a room and questioned. They let my parents know that the case was in their hands and that my parents should have spoken out a long time ago. We were given a court-appointed attorney. I went into counseling immediately. I went on medication. I was fifteen years old and was taking one-milligram Valiums.

I was a trembling, shaking wreck. I went to counseling three times a week. I had nightmares and more medication.

Child Protective Services called my grandparents and said, "You better get an

attorney. We're coming to get you for what you did to Christina." My whole family said, "No more. We are through." They wouldn't take our calls; they wouldn't come see me because I spilled the beans, and I was not supposed to spill the beans. My grandmother wanted to sweep it under the carpet. She has a beautiful heart. She works her hardest to make everything work out and go smoothly.

My grandfather was an alcoholic, and that's no excuse. My counselor said that I could sit there naked, and he could be drunk, but he cannot touch me. It's against the law. They had to make me understand that it wasn't my fault. I felt it was my fault that the family didn't want anything to do with me. Even my mom, after that, I didn't get support from her or my stepfather. I didn't get support from my real father. Nobody believed me. My counselor and my lawyer were the only ones that believed me.

Yeah, my mom was there, but she always had that doubt in the back of her mind. They all have doubts that it didn't happen. We went through the court process. It came down to the ruling. The jury said he was not guilty. One juror had a reasonable doubt because I ran away after the incident happened. I didn't run away to nowhere. I ran away to my aunt and uncle's house. I ran to family. I had to get out of my home. My mom, my stepdad, my brothers—I wasn't getting what I needed. I was lost. I was alone. No one was helping me. My aunt and uncle made me feel wanted. I went to school and was only at their house for two weeks.

My Day in Court

Let me picture the courtroom. My side: my best friend, Kate, from Colorado

Springs, my lawyers, my counselor, my mom, and my stepdad. One row with people on my side. My grandfather's side—there was only a row that was empty. The whole side was filled. My aunt and uncle came from North Carolina to sit on his side of the room. I had to face my whole family against me.

When the judge said, "Not guilty," I bursted out of my seat and screamed, "What? No!" How could they let this mother fucker go? (Excuse my French.) I told them on the stand that I love my grandfather even after he's done this to me. I love my grandfather, I just don't love what he did to me.

I ran screaming straight to the bathroom and hid in the furthest stall. I was crying and crying. My aunts came into the bathroom. They were all, "I can't believe Chrissy. She's such a liar." They were saying terrible things, and I pushed open the door. "How could you abandon me? How could you do this?"

There was no one there for me, except my friend. And my mom, she should have been sitting on his side. After that, I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to go to school. I stayed in school but did terribly. I was a B and C student as it was, but I became a C and D student.

Divorce Number Two

After that, my mom and stepfather got divorced. With all the other things that went on with the drugs, the swingers, and my grandfather, everything went downhill. My mom had my four brothers and me to take care of. We moved out of our four-bedroom house with a big back yard into a three-bedroom apartment. My mom started going out and partying again. She left me at home to take care of the kids. I was fifteen, Tim was thirteen,

Anthony was six, Robbie was four, and the youngest was two.

One night she didn't come home, and I'm thinking, "Where the heck is this woman? I have to go to school." So everybody stays home from school. The next night, she didn't come home again. She finally comes home that day with this weird-looking guy. He's driving her blue Camero T-top. I'm like, "Who is this guy, and why is he driving your car?"

He was the devil in disguise, a severe crackhead with a capital C. My mom didn't know crack. She knew coke and pot and maybe speed. She and her friends would pop something in a piece of tissue paper and take it before they went to work. He put a piece of rock in front of her and she got turned on. "What do I do with that, chew it?" He showed her how to do it. She smoked and smoked.

Even though she did drugs, she had her own housecleaning business for twelve years and was successful. She had about seventy-five houses and cleaned them with a friend and me. Me and my mother, we would do five or six houses a day. That's good money because each house is \$200 a pop. We went every week, and the houses stayed clean, and we'd knock them out quick.

She lost her cleaning business. She'd call in, "I can't make it in to clean your house." Eventually, all the customers let her go.

She went out with this man again, and he wrecked her car. She has no job, no car. She's leaving me home with the kids. When Mike, my stepfather, comes to pick up the kids on the weekend, she told me, "Don't answer the door when he comes to drop them off. Let him keep the boys." Mike's banging and banging at the door. I can't do this, so I open the door. Those are my brothers. How could my mother

say that? Mike's like, "What the heck is going on?"

"Well, my mom said not to let you in, and for you to keep the boys." Of course, I have a big mouth, but come on! He's like, "That fucking woman. I'm going to get custody of these boys. Watch! I have to go to work, Chrissy, and I need you to watch the kids for me now."

Dropping Out

Sure enough, he got the kids. That's when I dropped out of school. My mom wasn't there. She would leave for days at a time. This was going on for a month-and-a-half, disappearing with this guy and coming back whenever. She would leave and we'd have a couple of things to eat for the first few days, but she wouldn't come back. We didn't have any food, and I had to go ask the neighbor for food to feed my brothers. I had no money, I had no car, but I had to get my brothers back and forth to school. I couldn't go to school. I made sure they were in school, but mentally, with all that happened to me, I wasn't ready to go back to school. I was afraid that someone could see something was wrong with me.

I was over sixteen and the school system didn't come looking for me no more. My brother drifted away, staying at his friend's. It was just me and the boys. Mike rented a house. I moved in to help him take care of the kids. I'm thinking, "Okay, I don't want to go to school anymore." I stopped going to school, I stopped going to church. I just stopped everything that I did before. I was like a dead person walking the earth. I just wanted a little bit of food and a place to sleep.

I babysat for Mike, and he still worked at the pawn shop. Don't ask me

how that happened, but he was still working there. My mom was making ugly remarks that I was having an affair with my stepfather. I told her, "No! I'm there, taking care of your kids because you're incapable of doing that yourself. If you don't believe me, swing through."

I had my own room and my freedom. I could hang out with my friends at night. As long as I was there with my brothers while Mike was at work, I could do what I wanted. I did the laundry, cooked, and cleaned the kitchen, plus I got paid. He gave me fifty dollars a week.

Bad Vibes

One night Mike said, "Chrissy, do you mind? I'm going out to the bar and have a drink. I'll be home." He comes home kind of tipsy, I guess. I was watching TV and he asks me, "Chrissy, can you give me a nice, little massage?"

"Oh, my God," I said to myself.

"I'm kind of tired right now. I don't want to."

Every since he's been around, I've popped his back for him. He lays on the floor and I walk on his back. I started giving him a little massage anyway, and I didn't like the way I felt. After that night, I left and never looked back. I took off. I went to my best friend's house and stayed with her. From there I met her brother, who was twenty-four. We hooked up, and I ended up moving in with him.

Earning a Few Bucks

When I was sixteen, I worked at a barbecue restaurant for a while. A lot of the men were trying to sleep with the female workers. There was touchy-

grabby stuff going on. I didn't like it too much. I served food on the drive-through side, and sometimes I worked on the inside.

I worked at Denny's, IHOP, and Jim's, a truck stop. I lied on all of my applications about my education. At Jim's I met Paulina's father. He got me a job in an electronics company. I was an assembly-line supervisor. That was my last job in Austin. I moved to Dallas and worked as a receptionist in a flooring company. I laid tile, I pulled up old tile and cleaned floors. I mixed cement and grout. I worked hard—really hard.

I didn't have much money, but I always had someone there to help me. I was blessed that way. Although it was hard and I struggled, at least I made it through. Now when I look back, I wish I had gone back to school when I was a teenager. The difference it would have made: I wouldn't have to lie and be worried. Instead of doing my GED now, I could have had some college. I could have started a career. If I would have had a GED, I could have done so much more at the electronics company. I probably could have done the engineering part of it. They had classes. I totally see the opportunities that I missed.

Drugs, Lies, and a Rescuer

When I was working at Denny's, I met Pete, Paulina's father. He pursued me. He lied to me about his age. He was thirty-eight, and I was almost eighteen. He told me he was twenty-eight, like that's going to make a big difference? We talked and talked, and he asked me out on a date after I served his food. He was well dressed, a buttoned-up shirt with a nice little tie and a vest, Stacy Adams shoes, and nice slacks. He looked great there,

sitting and sipping his coffee. He was just a little old.

"I'll let you take me out. I'll go out and have a nice dinner with ya." So we go out to eat and, he seems like a nice guy. I get on the subject of telling him about some of the things I've been going through. I don't like everybody to know all of my business. You could tell by looking at me that something was troubling me. I get that a lot from guys. They say, "I can look into your eyes and tell that you are troubled."

I kinda let him know that I was not happy with my living situation. The three of us are living in a motel. My mom's strung out on drugs, and this devil guy with veins that pop out of his skin gets ugly and mean.

Pete says, "I have this friend, and she's a counselor. Maybe there are some things out there that might help you. She might get you into some kind of program where you can go to school or get you a decent place to live. There might be something out there for you. I'll talk to her about you."

I thought that would be nice. It sounds good. Thank you. I could talk to the lady myself after he lets her know. We had that date, and he wants to hook up again. He's, like, so persistent in pursuing me. The next time he came around for a date, I said, "I really don't want to go with you." Something was not there. I have really good instincts sometimes. He was in his car, and he had a rose. Alright, he gives me the rose, and I get in the car. We go back to his house, and I'm smoking pot. I was a big pothead at this time, okay?

I started smoking pot with my stepdad. Then I smoked with Margaret's brother, who was a big-time pothead. Pete said he tried pot but didn't care for it. He said, "I have a friend who has some

really good stuff. Let's go over there." He buys me a quarter bag of weed, and we go back to his place and smoke it. He smokes it with me. After hanging out with him more and more, I felt, well, since we're smoking together, and he's going to help me, maybe it's okay. He says, "Why don't you come live with me. I can't stand to see you living with your mom with those conditions."

When I got my paycheck and tips from Denny's, my mom would take it from me to buy crack and pay the room for another night. I'm supporting their habit. They were taking their money and my money, too. Pete didn't want me to pay rent right away. I could save up some money and get help. I met some of his friends, and I felt comfortable with them.

My mom said, "You don't even know this guy!"

"I don't know you any more, either, so what's the difference? You used to be the best mom in the world, and now look at ya."

I ended up moving in with Pete, and from then on it was just terrible. I found out that he did coke. He smoked crack. He retired from IBM early. He took his \$30,000 retirement and smoked it all up in the crack houses. After he smoked away his boat, his house, and his money, he had a nervous breakdown. He went into an institution for people that have depression and mental problems. Then he lived in an apartment complex where they come and check on you. My God! It was, like, ya take me away from a crackhead just to come back and live with one again.

He turned me on to coke. I started doing coke. I did coke with him every day for a year- and- a half. I was snorting the stuff. I never, ever smoked crack, never went there. It was ugly to me. My mom did it, and I saw what it did to her. I

didn't want that for me. It gave me a rush. My heart would beat fast, but my whole body was numb. It was so weird, like vegging. I did it at night, then got up and went to work. I stayed up late, especially the weekends. Sometimes I'd take coke to work and do a little bump in the bathroom on my way out. I never went to work under the influence.

I used to get really good checks, especially when I worked overtime. We put our money together, split the bills, and divided the rest. Either one of us would pay for the coke, but he would go get it. When I got pregnant with Paulina, I stopped smoking. I stopped drinking and stopped doing the coke immediately. I call her my lifesaver. If it wasn't for her, who knows what I would have turned out to be like. If I had continued on that lifestyle of drugs, the road I was going down, I don't know what would have happened.

Her father begged me to have an abortion. Pete did not want another kid. He had two or three other kids that he didn't pay for, didn't see them. He didn't care for them at all. I'm telling this guy, "I'm nineteen years old, and you're not telling me what I'm going to do with my body." It was kind of tough, but I had her. We lived together, and it was really bad. Since I wasn't doing drugs with him, he had to go look for other people. He was cheating. He'd come home smelling ugly, like from other women and drugs. He would bring his friends over, and they'd be smoking crack, and I'm in this same little one-bedroom apartment.

I was pregnant again after Paulina, and I had an abortion. Paulina was six-months old when I found out that I'm four months pregnant. I came home from the clinic and Pete was gone. He packed his stuff and left.

The Move to Dallas

I ended up moving to Dallas, and that's where I met Abby's father. I was working in a window tint and alarm shop. Juan comes in for an alarm, and something goes off between us. He was older, like forty-one, forty-two. I was almost twenty-one. I was in a bad situation once again, and he put me in an apartment, gave me his truck, gave me money, and let me work with him to earn it all. He was a contractor and paid me \$400 to \$500 a week.

He was already married but separated. The way Mexicans are, they don't believe in divorce. Him and his wife have been separated for ten years. Since they were married in Mexico, they would have to go back to Mexico to get a divorce, so they've left it alone. It was okay for me because his wife was in Mexico and he was here. He took care of his other four daughters. He was very loving toward me. I felt good! Finally, I felt something nice inside. He didn't do drugs. He was a Christian and tried to get me to go back to church. I can't bring myself to go to church. Every Halloween, it's too hard for me. I stayed with him for four years. In that time, I had three miscarriages. I could have had six kids by now.

He's too old for me. We talk all the time. He's a great man, but he's too old. He was the best thing that ever happened to me. I began to see things more clearly, like what I wanted for myself and my children. He brought the good and the motivation out of me.

It was hard for me to live in Dallas. The city was clouding my vision. I had people pulling me from every direction. My mother was living in Dallas. She was totally bringing me down. Every time I let her into my life, she's destructive. She

wants to destroy my relationship with my kids.

Juan, Abby's father, would sit at my door saying, "I love you. I love you." I had to get away from everybody.

I met my current boyfriend before I met Juan. Curtis worked at the tint and alarm shop. He was with somebody, and we were just friends. Of course, we did date and did the mattress mambo once, but when I found out that he had a girlfriend, I was like, "No! You can't do this. I don't like that type of thing. You lied to me. You lied to her."

We kept in touch throughout the whole time I was with Juan. When I broke up with Juan, I called Curtis, really for a booty call, somebody to keep me warm for a minute. From that moment, we were inseparable.

Getting Along in Tucson

Curtis has family in Phoenix, and he brought me here. I like Tucson. Phoenix is too big. I like the weather in Tucson. I love the mountains. It's small, and there's a college on every corner. Something's telling me something. Someday I'll go back to Texas and confront it all. I'm away from all the distractions, all my friends, and all the evilness that Texas has. I feel that Texas has sucked me dry. In March, I'll be in Tucson three years.

My boyfriend had money from his business, and that's what we were living on. Abby's father would send me money. I was doing okay, but trying to find a job in Tucson is really difficult. A friend told me about the Department of Economic Security. She said, "Go over there. They've got so many things to offer you. Maybe you could go back to school."

A Little Help from the State

I don't like to take help from the state unless it is absolutely necessary. I'd get into a conversation with somebody, and they'd say, "Yeah. DES has got a jobs program. They'll pay your child care. They'll let you go to school."

I went in one day, and it was the hardest thing I had to do. I said, "I'm here for the medical, and maybe some food stamps if I'm eligible. I also want to know about education." I filled out an application. During my interview I broke down in tears to the lady who interviewed me. I let her know that this was the most difficult time of my life. I'm broke. I have no family. I'm trying to make something for myself, and I don't know where to start. I have no medical insurance. She said, "Don't worry. We're going to get you all covered." She got me everything I needed.

I'm in a GED program and have to set career goals. I also do volunteer work. My caseworker is so proud of me because my reviews are great. He said, "You're the best! You are doing better than any one of my clients. The doors are

really going to open for you once you get your GED. I can't wait to see all of the things you are capable of doing."

DES was a major turning point. I was scared to go. I was shaking in my interview. They have a motivational workshop, and even though I knew a lot, it made me feel great inside. The result I got was totally opposite of what I expected. I think that's why I cried. All the pressure was taken away, and I felt relief. Everything is changing for the best!

Looking Back and Ahead

It's really hard to tell a teenager to stay in school, because they don't listen. We're very stubborn. You know what? I would tell them totally to wait to have a kid. Please, for you and your child's sake, wait until you have more patience, more time, more money, and more stability. As far as the drugs go, stay away from them! Weed makes you lazy. Coke gets you numb. They're going to cloud your vision. I was stupid, but I'm clean and clear now.