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Age: 21

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Unknown Gifts

I cried all the time. That much I remember. It was only at night, though. That was when I could cry without bein' hit or slapped, or made fun of. As long as I was quiet, and didn't wake nobody, that was when I could cry.

I cried because I was hungry.

I cried because I was tired.

I cried for my family. I would think of my mother, of how she was feelin' at that exact moment, and wonder if she was thinkin' of me too? I remember she used to braid my hair, so long and silky. I cried for that hair that I lost when they took me there. So savagely they just hacked at it, like it was a tree they needed to chop down, like they couldn't stand the sight of it.

I cried because it broke my heart to think of my father. He was always so kind to me, and it hurt him so much to see me go. I wanted so badly for him to come after me, to tell them, "No! You can't take her!" But I knew if he did he would only make them angry. None of us had a choice.

I would think of my baby sister. She was just barely walkin' when they took me away. I know they went back for her after a couple of years, but I never seen here. Maybe she went to the same place I did, but we would never have known each other anyway.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good because everything else hurt so bad.

I cried for the other children that were there with me. Some of them liked it, that was all they knew. They had been there since they were just barely able to speak. I cried for the ones who could never remember, because I could remember, and I still remember what life was like before I had to leave.

I cried for the ones who were like me, who knew what they were missin', who felt that emptiness day after day. Like somethin' should be there that wasn't. While we were actin' like the white folks, we felt guilty, because we knew that's not what we are. Like we were betrayin' our ancestors and our families. I cried because it was so hard pretendin' to be somethin' I wasn't I cried because it hurt to pretend.

I cried for my broken spirit.

I cried for the things I was learnin', because I didn't know if they were real or not. They're tellin' me this God person created everythin' in seven days or somethin' like that. I knew the Creator made the earth and all its creatures. I cried because I knew the Creator would never allow these horrible things to happen to us kids. I cried because I feared the creator didn't love me anymore. I guess I was confused, because I thought the Creator loved us all the same, and I couldn't think of anythin' I did to make him angry. I cried because I was afraid of this new God who was supposed to be kind and loving and protecting. We were supposed to love Him unconditionally, but it sure didn't feel like He loved me. I think the word is hypocrisy. That was how it felt, and for that, I cried.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to let out my anger at those hypocrites.

I cried because I was crying. I was a young woman. I should be happy, I should be in love, I should be having a baby of my own to love. But I couldn't do none of those things, not in there. I was Number 118. I was nobody. I was not happy. I knew I deserved to be happy, we all did. But there in those beds, night after night, that penguin's shoes clickin' down the hall, how could we be happy?

I cried because they made me feel stupid.

I cried because they hit us.

I cried because I was scared.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good because that was all I could do.

I cried because I knew that when I got out of that place it would be the happiest and the saddest day of my life. I would be free from those people, those penguin ladies, tellin' me my ways are sinful, and me and my parents are goin' to Hell. I cried for those penguin ladies, because I knew, when they died, they were the ones goin' straight to Hell for all the evil things they did to us kids. They couldn't see it, but I could.

I cried because I knew I couldn't go back to my family. I remember what life was like, but I don't remember how to do none of those things my family does. No more fishin', no more dancin' or singin'. No more bein' able to speak to my mother, or my father. I cried because I knew that when I left that place, I wouldn't even know how to say "Hello," to my family if I saw them. It's a hard thing to realize, that you can't even go back to just say, "Hi, I'm still alive, don't worry about me."

I cried the day I left that place. They just sent me out the door, my one little bag and "See you." That was all I got. I felt like screamin' at them, "Thanks for nothin'!" But I still had my pride, so I held my tongue.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to be free from their control.

I waited until I was out of sight of that building and I cried like I had never cried before. I dropped my bag, I fell to my knees. I screamed, I kicked, I ran and I gasped for breath. I cried for a long time, relief flooded over my body.

I cried for rage, for fear, and for regret. I cried for confusion, for love and for hate. Most of all I cried for myself. I could once again be myself. But still I cried because I didn't know who myself was anymore. I had no identity, they had taken that away.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to find my emotions again.

I stopped crying after a while. I lay there under the blanket of pink sky, the setting sun calming my mind, relaxing and enjoying the silence.

I closed my eyes.

I prayed.

For the first time in years, to the one I thought had forsaken me. I prayed to the Creator. I felt his warmth, his acceptance, and his love. He held me tight and I felt his strength, and his promise of a future for me. He told me he had never abandoned me. He said that every time I cried in that place, that was him, giving me the strength to be me. He was with me the whole time. He never forgot me, I had forgot about him.

Under that pink sky, he told me not to forget who I was, where I came from.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to know that I was still me, they could not take that away.

I sat up, took a deep breath, and so began my journey. I had a long road of self-discovery ahead of me. I had to find the true me: a person I feel good about, that is strong and capable, and able to love. I knew I was capable of love.

It took me years until I felt that I was me again. When I was ready for love to happen, it found me. I met my husband, I found love. I cried and thanked the Creator for this man, who made me feel so special. I cried on our wedding day, my parents were there. I cried because my sister wasn't there; she died in that place so long ago. I cried when my parents sang a song for me and my love.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to cry tears that were out of joy, not pain.

When the day was over, I stopped crying again.

I cried for the first time in years the other day. It was the day my son was born. I cried because I knew he will never be taken from me. I cried because he will never feel like no one loves him. I cried in thanks to the Creator for blessing me with such a gift. I cried for that crying newborn, who will never have to feel like he is worthless. I cried because that tiny, helpless child is the future, and he gives me hope.

I cried because it felt so good. It felt so good to know that that was the last time I would ever have to cry.