Pepper



Karen Baumgardner

A "Her TV" Novel

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“PEPPER”

By Karen Baumgardner

“Hi! Anybody home yet?”

Damn!

I slid the dresser drawers closed and tore down the hallway to the bathroom, my feet barely touching the carpet. I turned the lock too soon; the door bounced back toward me, refusing to close. Close to panic, I fumbled with the latch and tried again, this time successfully sealing myself in the bathroom.

“Denise? Are you up there?”

I almost lost my footing as I scurried to the tub and flung the shower curtain closed, then reached in and cranked the faucet with my right hand, grabbing at the wall as I started sliding on the slick tiles in my sister’s high-heeled shoes.

“Who’s home?”

My mom's voice was getting closer and I imagined her to be almost all the way up the stairs as I started undressing in full panic, not bothering to be too careful.

I tried to pull down my sister's black skirt without unzipping it. Having no luck, I pulled up on the blouse instead, getting it all the way up over my head and tugging furiously until I finally relented and came to the understanding that I would at least have to undo the collar button if I wanted to get it off.

Tap tap.

"Who's in the bathroom?"

"Umm... me, Mom. I'm taking a shower!" I yelled out over the noise of the water. I could feel her walking away as I steadied myself and sat on the side of the tub.

I slid the shoes off and stood to unzip the skirt, then grabbed all three waistbands: skirt, panties, and pantyhose, with both hands, and pulled down violently, hopping on one foot, then the other as I wrenched them off.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to check myself out before the mirror on the medicine cabinet steamed over completely.

It wasn't exactly what I had in mind. I would have preferred to have sashayed leisurely down the hallway to my parents' bedroom and posed, fully dressed, in front of the full-length mirror on their closet door, then gone back to my sister Denise's room, to try on another outfit, or two, before deciding that I had pushed my luck enough for one day.

Lately I had been terminating these dress-up sessions with my newly-discovered power of bringing myself to orgasm. It felt wonderful shortly before and during the time it was happening.

But, once I stopped to catch my breath and realized what I had just done, I would become overwhelmed with guilt.

"What the hell is the matter with me?" I'd wonder, full of self-loathing, as I carefully put Denise's clothes back where they'd come from and smoothed out her bedspread, not realizing that I was leaving tell-tale clues behind on her underwear and pantyhose. I'd stand in the shower and scrub at the makeup until the skin around my eyes sometimes felt raw, swearing I was never going to set foot inside my sister's room again.

It was a harsh resolution, one that I usually shattered into tiny pieces at the next opportunity.

But I hadn't gotten that far today and I posed in the mirror studying my reflection, pausing occasionally to wipe away the steam with a towel. At the bottom of the mirror I could just see the white bra, my black socks poking out the tops of the cups. I was more interested in my face though: the red lips, the blush, the eye makeup.

I really looked cute, I thought to myself. *I really do look like a girl. As cute as a lot of the girls I saw on the streets every day. Almost as pretty as Denise.*

I rubbed at the steam again and let my eyes wander upward.

Ugh. My hair. I wrapped the towel around my short, dark brown hair and started in on the litany

that I usually recited as I lay in bed at night waiting to fall asleep.

I wanted long, curly hair.

I wanted smooth, hairless legs.

I wanted a trim, tiny waist, with an oblong "innie" navel that flared out into wide, smooth hips and a nicely shaped derriere.

I wanted a nice, round, perky pair of breasts adorning my chest.

I had accidentally seen Denise admiring herself in her bedroom mirror once, braless, her blouse unbuttoned and tucked back, posing, cupping, hefting, checking her profile left and right. She didn't realize anybody else was upstairs until she saw my reflection in the background of the mirror. Quickly grabbing the lapels of her blouse, she drew it closed, spun around, and scowled at me.

I'm not sure which one of us was more embarrassed. I stepped into her room and quietly apologized.

We sat on her bed and she apologized herself for leaving the door open. She confessed that the same thing had happened several years ago with her twin brother, Jimmy and she should have learned her lesson then.

Please, God (every item in this ritual was anteceded by a "Please, God"), when I wake up in the morning, I'll have a vagina instead of a penis; I'll be sleeping across the room from my 18-year-old sister instead of Tommy, my 14-year-old brother; and my name will be Vanessa.

Vanessa, after a model I had seen in the annual swimwear issue of a national sports magazine Jimmy and I subscribed to. Vanessa Justice. I had cut out her photos (Jimmy had cut out several of the other models' photos for himself) and tucked them in a drawer before we handed down the rest of the magazine to Tommy.

Almost every night I'd fall asleep with the name Vanessa silently on my lips and every morning I'd wake up disappointed to find everything the way it always had been:

Tommy sleeping on the other side of the room, the now-worn magazine peeking out from under his pillow, our clothes strewn about the floor.

Wrong sibling, wrong room. Pajamas, no nightgown. Smooth flat chest, no breasts. Instead of a vagina, my penis usually at attention as it received its morning SOS from my kidneys and/or whatever un-remembered dream I had been in the middle of.

"Tony, are you going to be in there all day?"

"What, Mom?"

"You're using up all the hot water! What are you doing in there?"

"I'll be out in a minute!" I hollered back nervously, unhooking the bra and sliding into the shower as quietly as I could. I hurriedly ran the washcloth over my face and shut off the water, toweled off, and …

My clothes! I had left them in Denise's room!

"Oh well, I have to put all of her stuff back anyway," I thought as I wrapped the towel around my waist and poked my nose into the hall, making sure

the coast was clear. I gathered up everything in a bundle, looked out once more, and silently crept back down the hall.

"You left these in here." Denise stepped out from behind her door as I snuck into her room, holding my pants and underwear daintily in her fingertips at arm's length.

We stood there staring at each other, a sly smile on her face, certainly not on mine. Then she looked down at the bundle in my hands.

"I was just goofing around," I blurted out, tossing her clothes on the bed. "Denise, I was just ..." I stopped short, realizing that the more I volunteered the more I would wind up backing myself into a corner.

"Go on. You were saying?"

She pursed her lips, waiting for me to continue.

"Nothing. I was just goofing around. I just wanted to see what I looked like," I finished lamely.

"And?"

"What?"

"What did you look like?"

"I don't know," I lied. "Mom came home and I ran in the bathroom and took everything off. Denise, please don't tell. It was just this once, I'll never do it again," I lied some more, giving her my best sniveling whine.

"I'll think about it... Antoinette," she smirked, knowing how much I hated that name. My brothers used to throw it at me years ago; we had pounded on

each other more than once over it. “You know, I borrow your shirts and socks all the time, I guess I can’t get upset when you take something of mine. It’s only fair… Antoinette.”

She handed me my clothes and stepped over to the bed to put hers away, and I headed back to my room to get dressed.

“Hey!” she hissed as I was about to close my door. I looked back to see my socks come hurling at me. “Nice tits,” she giggled.

Two minutes later she was barging into my room. “Look what you did, you jerk!” She held up her blouse to my nose and I groaned. It looked like the Shroud of Turin, the front stained with foundation makeup, lipstick, blush, and mascara.

“Will it come out? Can you wash it?” I gulped.

She balled it up and threw it at me. “It’s silk,” she hissed. “Grandma gave me that blouse for Christmas. Either get it dry-cleaned for me or buy me another one. And stay out of my room!” With that she stomped off down the hall and closed her door noisily.

I shoved the rolled-up blouse in my backpack and tossed a couple of books in with it. And left it there.

Every morning I vowed to leave it at the cleaners and every time I walked by the shop I’d chicken out. What would they say when I gave it to them at the counter? They’d know right away that the makeup stains were mine. The whole neighborhood would know the next day. Or what if somebody saw me go in and then watched through the window? Same deal.

I figured my best chance was to wait and hope Denise forgot all about it. Yeah, right. At some point each day Denise would get me alone and ask me if "today was the day". I soon realized that she'd be standing over my grave nursing the loss of her white silk blouse. And that day might not be too far off.

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Two weeks later, she cornered me in the garage and let me have it.

"Listen, you little shithead, graduation is in three weeks and I want to wear my good blouse. Either come up with it or give me fifty bucks so I can buy a new one. And when I bring it home, everybody will know why I had to buy another one. Jimmy and Tommy would probably get a kick out of it ... Antoinette."

Fifty bucks for a shirt? I was at the cleaners twenty minutes later and two days after that I was knocking on the door of Denise's room, blouse in hand.

"Here. I'm sorry," I stammered.

"Thanks," she said nonchalantly, taking the opaque - thank God - plastic bag off and hanging it in her closet.

"Denise ... thanks for not telling."

"Don't worry about it. I'm still mad at you though. You owe me a couple."

"I know."

"Sit down." She sat on the bed, patting at the spot next to her, and I hesitantly crossed over and sat down, keeping my eyes on the floor.

"I don't like being mad at you. I'm sorry I called you 'Antoinette'. I was just teasing. You can come in here any time. Just be more careful with my things, huh?"

"Look, it was just the one time," I pretended to be angry, trying to bluff my way through.

"Yeah, okay," she said, making it clear that while she didn't believe me, she wouldn't make a big deal of it. "Tony .."

Too late, I was already half-way to the door. I didn't want to hear what she was going to say next. And she never got around to saying it. She said something else instead.

"You know, you're a real asshole, Tone. You're worse than those other two guys," she sneered and threw herself face-down on the bed.

I shrugged it off and kept going. I had to.

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Denise and I spent most of the summer avoiding each other. Hurting each other, really.

We had formed a close alliance over the years, sticking by each other against all attacks, real and imaginary, our brothers threw against us.

Jimmy always claimed his birthright as oldest son, lording it over us even though Denise was actually six minutes older than he was. Up until the time I en-

tered high school, I was dead meat as far as he was concerned. Any argument we got into would end up with me lying on the ground underneath him while he pummeled away at me. He never actually hurt me, and once in a while I'd get in a good sock or two myself. We were never close, but we seemed to grow out of our spirit of mutual loathing as we got older.

Tommy, the baby of the family, discovered by the time he was able to walk that if any of us so much as looked at him funny they'd be in hot water with Mom, Dad, or both. He started testing this theory on all three of us and, to his everlasting delight, found out that he could get away with just about anything. No matter who started it, no matter what he did, Denise, Jimmy, or I would take the fall. About the time he was six years old, he decided that the sun rose and set on Jimmy, who was highly flattered.

Of course, Jimmy didn't have to share a room with the little twerp.

That was kids' stuff, though. By the time we were all in our teens, we had pretty much gotten over most of the slings and arrows of sibling rivalry. But the sides held over. Denise and I on one side of the dinner table, on one side of any argument we might get into, always sticking together. Tommy and Jimmy always our tag-team former adversaries, always sticking together.

Even as we started looking at our parents as "the enemy" we were still going to war as two separate teams. Lucky for Mom and Dad.

Denise and I also shared interests in music, reading mostly for pleasure, and writing. She could sit down and write some of the loveliest poems I've ever read, and had several of them printed in almost every issue of her school newspaper.

I had started working for my school paper toward the end of my freshman year, sort of. I hung around the office a lot, ran errands, read copy, distributed, and spent a lot of hours going through old issues and photographs, just out of curiosity. I wasn't actually asked to write anything but I was told toward the end of my sophomore year that my contributions were appreciated, and probably next year ...

Okay. That was at least something to look forward to as the end of summer approached. My serious basketball days were over; I knew that as my playing time with the JV squad had diminished little by little the previous year. I had made the team mostly on hustle in the first place. The guys who had grown - really grown - between the ages of thirteen and sixteen were the ones who would be moving up to the varsity ranks. I had grown some myself during those years, but I seemed to be topping out at 5'8". Jimmy was the same height, and Tommy was already a tad taller than both of us, but they were both built like fire plugs, like our mom.

I was slim, like my Dad. Like Denise.

Which brings us to something else Denise and I had in common besides brown hair and blue eyes. I could fit into all of her clothes, from shoes to dresses to underwear. I took advantage of this happy coincidence as often as I could, unbeknownst to her or anybody else, I was sure. Even after she caught me "just goofing around". I'd just die if anybody ever found out what I was doing whenever I found myself alone in the house for any length of time, if someone was able to read my mind and know what sort of thoughts were running through it most of the time.

Denise was right, in a way. She was always borrowing my clothes, it would only be fair for me to dip into her things once in a while. Right. I could just see

myself trying to explain to the rest of the family why I had come to the dinner table wearing so much as her T-shirt, much less her underwear, or a dress.

Though I worked hard to hide it, I adored my sister the way Tommy worshipped Jimmy. I wished we could fall asleep at night giggling over some deep dark secret that we shared. I wished I could share her excitement over the prom dress Mom had bought her in April, wished I'd some day have it handed down to me. I wished I had her long brown hair, her smile, her wardrobe, her friends. I wished I was her sister.

Most of all, I wished I could tell her.

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Two days before Denise was going to leave for college I broke down and wandered over to her room, hands in my jeans pockets, eyes on my shoe tops.

"What do you want?" she asked gruffly, not even bothering to look up when I tapped on the door.

"I just wanted to talk to you a little," I mumbled, closing the door.

She was sitting at her dressing table, packing cosmetics and toiletries into a small carry-all bag. She turned around in the chair and we stared across the room at each other for the longest time.

"I'm sorry," we both choked out at the same time. In less than a second I was sitting on the floor next to her chair, my head in her lap, both of us crying softly.

"You're not so tough after all, huh?" she commented, not unkindly, running her fingers through my hair. "Here, you big baby."

She thrust a tissue in front of my nose and I reached up and took it from her.

I heard her pop another one from the box for herself and we sat as we were for a while, wiping at our eyes and noses.

"You know… Mom used to tell me I took a fit when you were born. 'Cause you were a boy. All the time she was pregnant she kept promising me I was going to have a little sister. I don't remember, I was only two." She paused to let me reflect on what she had just said.

"Get up, Tone," she said gently. We both rose, and she took my hand and led me over to the bed. Sitting down next to me, she looked deep into my eyes. "Would you do something for me? For both of us, really."

I don't know whether she realized it or not, but I'd do anything for her.

"Stay right here," she whispered, then got up and started rummaging through the bag she had just been filling, picking out an assortment of cosmetics and setting them on the table. Moving over to her dresser, she opened the top drawer and pulled out a strapless bra, and a pair of white nylon and lace panties and set them on top. Pulling the drawer all the way out, she dug in the back and took out a small white spandex brief and added it to the mix.

"Will you do this for me?" she turned around and asked, holding out the lingerie for me to take.

It was a scenario I had dreamed of for years, and now that it looked like my dream was finally coming true I found myself trying to get up the strength to tell her no. Denise sensed what I was about to say and came over and thrust the garments into my hands.

“Go in your room, put these on, and come back here, okay? Wait a second.” She reached into her bag and held out a maxi-pad, and my complexion went from ash-white to beet-red in a heartbeat.

“Use one of these from now on, huh? The stain is hard to wash out once it dries.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, not moving, my eyes glued to my feet again.

She dropped the pad on top of what I already had in my lap.

“Come on, Tony, we’ve got the house to ourselves for a few hours. It’s going to be a long time before we’re together like this again. Go change, and when you come back I’ll have a surprise waiting for you.”

I still didn’t move.

“This is your big chance, Tone. It’s getting awful lonely in there, isn’t it?” She lifted my chin and looked me in the eye. It’s just you and me. I promise."

I nodded again and slowly left the room. I locked myself in the bathroom, and ten minutes later came back to her wearing the bra and panties under my jeans and T-shirt.

Denise had laid out her fuchsia and black prom dress on the bed, along with a pair of black panty-hose. A pair of black and fuchsia high heels were on the floor next to the bed.

My heart started pounding heavily.

Denise gave me a funny smile. “You have to take off your clothes if we’re going to do this. I’ve seen you in your underwear before, you know. God knows you’ve seen me wearing less.”

I fumbled with the button on my jeans and let them slide down, then yanked the T-shirt over my head.

“You’ve got a nice body for a boy, but your legs would look a lot better without all that stupid hair. Oh well.” She pulled a pair of black tights from the dresser. “Try these instead, maybe it’ll help. Sit down on the chair. Do you know how to put them on?”

I got the tights on while she watched, and she handed me a short cotton wrap-around. She nudged me back down into the chair and combed my hair back, then started making up my face.

Denise panted softly as she worked, the sweetness of her breath filling my nostrils.

“I should have let you do this yourself, then I could find out how good you are at it. Do you usually do a full makeover?”

“Depends on how much time I’ve got,” I mumbled, letting the “I only tried it once” charade go by the boards.

“She speaks!” Denise chuckled. “Relax, Tone, I want us both to enjoy this. How do you turn out when you’re made-up? Do you look nice?”

“I think so. Not as pretty as you, but I think I look cute. Except my hair. I wish it was longer.”

"I'll do my best with what you've got. I know girls with hair shorter than yours. It's cut different, though. Maybe you should think about having it styled. You should let it grow out more, that would make things easier too."

"You know Mom and Dad would hit the roof. And Jimmy and Tommy would be all over me."

"Jimmy won't be here next week," she smiled, which only served to remind me that neither would she. "You're going to be seventeen in a few months, Tone, you have to start doing what makes you happy and quit worrying about what other people think. Except me. I think you're special. You try real hard to hide it, but we've been too close for you to fool me. We made each other miserable all summer, and it was mostly your fault," she scolded me, her voice rising.

She got up and stood over me, continuing her lecture.

"You have to cut out all this crap, Tone, or you're going to be miserable all your life. The tough-guy stuff might work on everybody else around here, but I never bought it. And I don't like it.

"You're a fraud, Tony. You're like a miser, a thief who's embezzling from himself. You take everything that's beautiful inside you and bury it away where nobody can see it."

I nodded, afraid that if I said anything out loud I'd start crying again. I was just barely holding in my tears as it was.

"You have all these wonderful things inside you, Tony, and you're afraid somebody's going to find out who you are. Quit trying to be one of the guys. You're too special for that. Stop being afraid of yourself."